

INTRODUCTION

By Adelina von Fürstenberg

Modern India is not just a postcolonial, developing country, the destination of young pilgrims in search of a different way of life in the unspoiled land of the Third World. Indian cities are now experiencing vigorous modernization and, cheek by jowl with the local premodern society, a postmodern urban society is coming into being. Nonetheless, the primitive, superstitious, ancient India has not disappeared. *Bollywood* is an important example of this mix of lifestyles at popular level, with its colourful productions that blend conventional images of the mythologies of ancient India with dynamic musicals whose scores and plots imitate Hollywood.

In the same way, but at a higher and subtler level, Indian postmodern art is a reply to the basic contradiction that pits North India against South India, the city against the countryside, and, above all, modernity against tradition. This art, which accepts and absorbs every contradiction and which today is common to many artists around the world, without distinction of race or nationality, could only have found its natural home in the India of extraordinary development of recent years, supported by the growth in the software industry, in which the country is becoming a leader. And in this particular context, artists are both spectators and actors involved in this change. This background is made manifest in the works in this exhibition, in which we discover, from the viewpoint of each artist, the contrasts that make today's India a very special setting.

Winged Pilgrims: A Chronicle from Asia (2006-2007) by Sheba Chhachhi is an installation composed of eight Chinese light boxes similar to those sold on the streets of India, whose moving images often illustrate utopian landscapes. The artist has modified these images to transform them into metaphors of the situation in India today.

The intention of Subodh Gupta, who grew up in the countryside of Bihar, is more social in character, in that his work alludes to the contrast between the ancient life of the rural villages and the returning emigrants with visions of the consumer goods offered by the cities, but it also reflects the aspirations of a well-educated middle class. Thus his works include objects from the collective imagination, such as a dented scooter loaded with shiny cans, or a taxi half-submerged in the floor and loaded with baggage, or heaps of new stainless-steel kitchen instruments set out in an ordered manner on shelves and clearly confronted by the begging bowl of the *sannyasin*, the person in the Hindu tradition who renounces worldly goods and therefore contrasts Western consumer society. The installation *The Way Home* (1998–1999), in which plates, forks, knives and guns, all polished to a mirror-like shine, are placed on the floor around a lotus flower, in a certain sense stands in opposition to the other work, *Fly with Me* (2006), in which fifteen aluminium suitcases are arranged on shelves, indicating a compulsion to leave.

Deeper inside the cybernetic reality of the new India, from the local standpoint of the Sarai Media Lab, which is situated in Delhi but with a global address, the Raqs Media Collective group (Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Jeebesh Bagchi and Monica Narula) represents a very advanced stage in the attempt to conform to the new postmodern reality, reconciling the local and the global, and tackling the flow of information that this entails. Their three-screen installation *They Called It the XXth Century* (2005) – which is part of the work *The Impostor in the Waiting Room* – is an examination of what happens when modernity meets its shadow in a transitory, temporary and indifferent space inhabited by obscure existences during a period of waiting.

The recent installation *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain* (2005) by artist Nalini Malani refers to the partitioning of India and Pakistan in 1946, a period of unprecedented collective violence, especially against women. Inspired by the essay by Veena Das titled *Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain*, it is an accusation against the abuse of male power over women in wartime or periods of political struggle. As Das says, “The bodies of women were metaphors for the nation, they had to bear the signs of their possession by the enemy”.¹

¹ Veena Das, “Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain”, in *Social Suffering*, Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das and Margaret Lock (eds.). Oxford University Press, Delhi, Calcutta, Chennai, Mumbai 1998, p.67.

The same discourse on the use of media is true for Ranbir Kaleka, whose work integrates the painted image with that of the video. In *Man with Cockerel* (2001–2002) a figure unexpectedly appears in the foreground with a cockerel under his arm. First his image splits, and then he vanishes on the left as he is pulled off screen by the escaping cockerel. The violent contrast between the action in the foreground and the background formed by a white wall framed by a leafy vine is based on two perceptions of time: the slow, pictorial one of the background, and the high-speed, electronic one of the man in the foreground.

In *Public Notice–2* (2007) Jitish Kallat has recreated the historical speech that Mahatma Gandhi gave on the eve of his “Dandi March”, 400 kilometres and 24 days long. The artist remarks, “In today’s world of terror, where wars against terror are fought at prime television time, voices such as Gandhi’s stare back at us like discarded relics”. The entire speech has been recreated using approximately fifty thousand fibreglass bones to create the letters of the words, thereby reflecting the images of violence and abandonment.

Reena Saini Kallat produces paintings and constructions in mixed media that deal with the continuous cycle of the nature and fragility of humanity. Her paintings and installations represent the human body and, by extension, also the political body, obsessed by demons and unknown viruses. She paints objects as propitiatory offerings that reveal a need for exorcism, manifesting anxieties about human precariousness and hopes of reducing this state through the creation of talismans. In *Walls of the Womb* (2007), twelve saris are tinted different shades of red, with some areas left colourless to form a Braille text with annotations that her mother (who died when the artist was eight years old) had written in her recipe book. The work verges towards notions of nostalgia and memory, but also towards those of affection and nutrition. Reena Kallat has said, “With my recent role as a mother I find myself come full circle, inadvertently re-establishing contact with a past I’d tried hard to put behind me”.

Like the other contemporary Indian artists, Bharti Kher also reflects on the postmodern sensibility, for which globalisation has either erased the borders or made them permeable to products, ideas and images. For example, in her 2006 work *The Skin Speaks a Language Not its Own*, a fibreglass elephant, shot and lying on the floor of the gallery, represents the corpse of the past.

Hema Upadhyay’s work is to a large extent autobiographic. It recounts her move south from Baroda to the city of Mumbai. Thus the observer may see a gigantic mouth open with teeth covered with foam: this is a metaphor of the advertisements for toothpaste and the obsession with cleanliness typical of modern society. Upadhyay’s works often pull in different directions, reflecting how we feel if we find ourselves rootless in a fragmented epoch. In her site-specific work *Loco-Foco-Motto* (2004–2007), which is a sculpture of a chandelier made from matches, the two opposites of construction and destruction are represented. The matches used to construct the work are capable of being lit and going up in smoke.

In 1999 Atul Dodiya devoted a series of watercolours to Mahatma Gandhi. Dodiya was struck by the contrast between the simplicity and austerity typical of Gandhi and the lifestyle of the consumer society. He said, “The series changed my life. My concerns shifted to the social arena. My latest series is a pretty dark reflection of contemporary India”.² In this exhibition, his work *Broken Branches* (2003) is composed of a series of windows – exact copies of those in the museum dedicated to Gandhi in Porbandar – filled with everyday objects such as photographs, paintings, tools and used artificial limbs.

The setting chosen by Anita Dube, an artist who freely experiments with different media and artistic languages, ranging from photography to installation, is more intimate. In *Phantoms of Liberty* (2006–2007) a series of objects (a strongbox, a bed, a sewing machine, an oven, a painting and a refrigerator) is covered in camouflage fabric. The installation is based on the concepts of the recycling, reappropriation and transformation of everyday articles, but reference is also made to a world of war and destruction through the allusion to military uniforms.

Probir Gupta invites us to read his work and reflect on the interweaving of aesthetics and politics inherent in it. In *The White Man’s Paranoia* (2005) the artist’s accusation is cutting and inevitable. The image of Christ, who is clearly weakened, is pushed behind other images that seem to be almost cinematic presences, and then columns of power that testify

² Atul Dodiya, “Portrait of Nonviolence”, in *Life Positive Plus*, Oct-Dec 2002.

to the triumphal expansion of the institutionalized churches. The figures displayed suggest an epic dimension and attest to the power of the Church, the cities of Europe, industrial progress, and financial and sexual control.

In the recent works of Vivan Sundaram the use of photographs, objects, video and three-dimensional objects prevails. Although he has moved away from painting, there remains a trace of pictorialism in his three-dimensional works. In *Re-take of Amrita* (2001) Sundaram reinterprets the figure of his grandmother, Amrita Sher-Gil, a famous painter who was referred to as the Indian Frida Kahlo, in a series of elegant photomontages that explore the personal relationships within the family. *Twelve Bed Ward* (2005) has twelve beds aligned in a room, whose frames are made of the soles of used shoes illuminated by weak lamps. The work is a comment on the marginalized members of society and the recycling of rubbish.

In *I Love My India* (2002) Avinash Veeraraghavan, who lives in Bangalore (the city where India's leading scientific centres are located), has collected photographs from various sources to build a generic, imaginary city. The result is a journey through the cities of India: kitsch and mass culture combine to offer a cross-section of life on the street. The artist says, "My starting point was that the borderline between real and fantasy is quite blurred".³

Included among all the artists in this exhibition is a tribute to the great photographer Raghubir Singh, who died at the age of 57 in New York. Singh began his career as a photographer in 1965, having been strongly influenced by Henri Cartier-Bresson and his principle of attempting to capture the fleeting moment. In 14 books of colour photography, he recorded the life and people of his country.

What emerge from the exhibition *Urban Manners* at the Hangar Bicocca in Milan are the contradictions between globalization and tradition in today's world. In India, they are more extreme than anywhere else, given the country's very ancient knowledge and wisdom and, at the same time, its burgeoning development represented by the high-technology sector. In this context, the work *Neelkhant: Poison/Nectar* by the artist Sheba Chhachhi becomes emblematic. *Neelkhant* means "Blue Throat" and is one of the names given to Shiva. When the god stirred the cosmic ocean to extract the elixir of immortality, the ocean became transformed into poison and the universe may have been destroyed. So Shiva opened his mouth and swallowed the poison, and his throat turned blue.

The question, then, is this: are we able, without destroying the world, to transform into nectar (i.e., knowledge) all the poison we produce and which pollutes the four elements, the five senses and even our power of speech?

³ Hemangini Gupta, "Cut-'n'-paste a city", in *The Hindu, Metro Plus Bangalore*, 13 January 2005.