

NEWS AND FEATURES

The Ghost of Souza

The Ghost of Souza, the inaugural exhibition at Aicon Gallery's large new space in New York, is both pleasingly auspicious and grand in its scope. On extended view till November 2nd, the exhibition displays contemporary works in correlation with those of the classic modernist, F. N. Souza. For certain artists the inspiration is clear, while some of the other works on display are more beguiling in their connection to Souza with a few exceptions that seem to stretch the limits of the show's theme. Yet, all are given full leeway in exploring Souza the man, his life, his beliefs and his art.

Two works by Chintan Upadhyay, both titled *Lost Childhood*, 2008, dominate the main gallery space. The claim is made that they are in the vein of Souza's portraiture – savage and misshapen. Yet where Souza's figures are direct in their frontality and heavily textured in treatment, Upadhyay's large portraits of children are slick, almost too endearing in their candy colored luridness.

Some of the sculptures on view require even more of a leap of faith, as the connections they draw with Souza's two-dimensional oeuvre are more conceptual than formal. For instance, G. R. Iranna's *The Boat on Hunger Strike*, 2008, is a wracked tribute to Souza's angst ridden journey as an artist that spilled across several continents. As the curator of the show, Alexander Keefe, notes in the catalogue that accompanies the show, "The ship's bandaged prow reinforces a sense of its surrogate value as a stand-in for the anxious artist setting out with his vulnerable, precious cargo, but it also points at the possibility of repair, and survival."

In *New Old Beliefs and Unclaimed Bodies*, 2008, Riyas Komu seizes on Souza's torrid affair with the Roman Catholic Church and its dogmas. The austerity of the wooden cross and five discs with skulls carved in profile ties into Souza's issues with the sweet promise of the Eucharist in the face of the grim reality of death. However, it is Adip Dutta who is the most combative in his sculptural interpretation and response to Souza. *From a Paintbrush Holder to a Bottlebrush Holder*, 2008, is as Keefe states, "his sculptural retake on Souza's naked self-portrait" and "directly addresses what he sees as the macho sexuality and sexual braggadocio of the original. Dutta's figure is castrated, frozen, still and ascetic." Dutta is unequivocal in his condemnation of Souza; most biting is the sculptor's parting shot of replacing the paintbrush in Souza's hand with a bottlebrush, a veiled reference, perhaps, to Souza's troubles with alcoholism.

The balance of the artists in the show are more reassuringly literal in their responses to their forerunner. Baiju Parthan appropriates the image of Souza as elder statesman, filtering it through his usual technical processes. Neeraj Goswami's *Woman in a Trance*, 2008, though cool in outlook and palette, bears the same modernist antecedents that

shaped Souza's work – in particular, his 1964 *Portrait of a Furred Woman*, also on display. However, it is Debnath Basu who has emerged as Souza's kindred spirit. Basu's work on paper, *The Ghost of an Artist*, 2008, as an interpretation of Souza's landmark early work, *Self-portrait on a Tile Floor*, 1949, eschews Souza's blocky expressionist style of the time, yet reflects the artist's humour and deep seated fascination for all things sexual, as evidenced by the erotica etched in the mushroom cloud that has replaced the subject's head.

It is left to Muhammad Zeeshan to expel the ghost of Souza. As Keefe explains, "...his two highly accomplished and gorgeous gouache paintings on handmade paper emerge as reactions to Souza's habit of placing the eyes in his portraits at the very top of his subjects' foreheads." Zeeshan, playing the unapologetic contemporary artist, does not offer a sickly homage but instead engages Souza as an equal. His precocious *trompe l'oeil* props address the staggering mass that is Souza at a refreshing angle and quip that Souza's life and body of work will always remain a fertile ground for future generations of artists to stand on.