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visual arts

A window on modern India

ARTISTS DRAW ON TRADITIONS, POLITICS TO FORGE A NEW GLOBAL SENSIBILITY

By Jack Fischer

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One of the telltale signs that a nation is emerging as an economic powerhouse seems to be the emergence of its artists on the international scene. Last year, it was China ("On the Edge: Contemporary Chinese Artists Encounter the West" at Stanford University's Cantor Center). Now it's India's turn.

In "Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India," which just opened on two fronts -- mostly at the Berkeley Art Museum but also in the project space at Montalvo Arts Center in Saratoga -- 40-odd contemporary artists across a range of backgrounds, from folk art to new media, go a long way toward banishing our Bollywood-driven stereotypes about the country's culture.

In fact, they do a such a good job that they raise the same question the China show raised: Is there anything intrinsically Indian about contemporary Indian art, or is it mostly the product of a global sensibility, by artists who just happen to hang their hats in India?

The answer, as suggested in both the Indian and Chinese shows, is that an international sensibility about how to make art does seem to be emerging (the use of common "strategies," as they say in art school). But, more than its predecessor, the Indian show demonstrates a continuity with traditional arts that makes it seem balanced on the cusp of two worlds. Some edges are edgier than others.

Among other things, that means the Indian show -- which is in its only West Coast venues after opening last year at the Queens Museum and the Asia Society in New York City -- demands a bit more study than the China show to be fully appreciated.

Politics a common theme

In Berkeley, instead of the whiz-bang of a Chinese guy strolling the streets of New York in a suit crafted of sirloin steaks (Zhang Huan's ``My New York"), Santosh Kumar Das uses a folk-drawing idiom to recount the rioting in 2002 between Hindus and Muslims in the state of Gujarat that left 1,000 people dead.

The meaning of the Zhang Huan work can be surmised with no outside knowledge; the second requires background to be understood fully. That's true for much of what is on exhibit here.

Which isn't to say that ``Edge of Desire" lacks works with immediate visual appeal. Raj Kumar Koram's ``The Pillars of My Life," twin hand-carved wooden pillars that recount the artist's autobiography, sucks you right in. So does Nilima Sheikh's vastly different floor-to-ceiling quartet of stenciled canvas banners which recount the difficult history of the contested Kashmir. Both pieces are in Berkeley, along with most of those discussed here.

Equally hard to resist (and also in Berkeley) is Sonadhar Viswakarma's ``Babri Masjid -- Ramjanmabhoomi," a gracefully wrought iron screen by a craftsman who uses the medium to recount discreetly the story of the destruction of Babri Mosque by Hindu activists in 1992.

As all the forgoing suggests, one crucial difference between many Indian artists and their Western counterparts is in the degree to which they take politics seriously.

Like the Middle East and the United States, differing only in degree, India has for the past decade been roiled by a growing religious fundamentalism that has tested the resilience of its democracy. Whether the artists are less inhibited about earnest statements of belief, or more confident that it can make a difference, political themes are a common thread through this show.

With approximately 70 works (the exhibit has virtually taken over the Berkeley museum, sprawling into its hallways and basement), ``Edge of Desire" is broader than last year's Chinese survey. And it's not just the numbers.

The show's organizer, Chaitanya Sambrani, a lecturer in art theory at the Australian National University in Canberra, chose to cast a wider net, including not just artists of all ages but self-taught and folk artists as well as those who knowingly engage international post-modern practices.

At the mentor end of things are K.G. Subramanyan, born in 1924, whose lively conflating of modernist technique with Indian folkloric drawing find the artist as vital as ever, and Gulammohammed Sheikh, whose clever traveling shrines connect a traditional form with contemporary subject matter. Sheikh was one of several Indian artists who spent time at Montalvo in the past year.

In the self-taught category is Ganga Devi Bhatt, whose dozens of small colorful acrylics recount her own life experiences and whose originality and savvy use of color demonstrate the universality of the art-making urge.

Lacking money to buy many sheets of paper, Bhatt painted on both sides of each precious one. The show's installers have accommodated her work deftly with a series of frames mounted at 90 degree angles from the wall, so both sides of each piece can be seen.

Those many artists in "Edge of Desire" who do engage what's happening in the international art world suggest that its methods work quite well across cultures. There is the unconventional use of materials, particularly materials appropriated from commerce, as in Sharmila Samant's "A Handmade Saree," constructed entirely from Coca-Cola bottle caps from various countries to acknowledge how much multi-national corporations have changed traditional culture.

Another favorite post-modern art subject is identity and how it both hides and defines people. A number of artists here ply this ground, notably Pushpamala N and Clare Arni, whose staged photographs of women in historical, mythical and current cultural roles explore how difficult it is to see the women themselves.

At Montalvo -- which offers five new media pieces in its little gallery space, three of which are elsewhere at Montalvo in slightly different presentations -- some of the exhibit's most cutting-edge work is center stage. Sonia Khurana offers an unself-conscious look at how the human body limits us in "Bird," which finds the full-figured artist nude and attempting various pirouettes and balancing acts.

Growing artistic presence

The Raqs Media -- a trio of artists (Monica Narula, Shuddhabrata Sengupta and Jeebesh Bagchi), here working with a fourth, Mritynjay Chatterjee -- offers "The Global Village Health Manual," an HTML-based CD that mimics a traditional Indian health pamphlet but features information culled from the Internet.

(The collective, which has been in residence at Montalvo, was among several Indian artists whom Montalvo residency director Gordon Knox led to the most recent Venice Biennial; it was the first contemporary Indian presence at that important showcase in years.)

Broad as "Edge" is, it's important to remember that no survey of this sort can tell the whole story, or claim to be representative of all the people in a country as diverse as India (where the population exceeds one billion).

For another face of contemporary Indian art you also might visit the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, where "Pilgrimage: A Selection of Paintings by Anjolie Ela Menon" continues through Dec. 17. Menon uses a contemporary figurative style to explore a well known Indian pilgrimage called "Yatra."

Lest there be any doubt about how broad a presence Indian art is gaining in this country, Menon also shows at Palo Alto's Arts India West, which represents Indian artists exclusively.

I'd like to think that the artists in "Edge of Desire" are right and that art can make a difference in matters of politics and culture. But if I were betting on whose influence is likely to be the greatest, it would be Cyrus Oshidar.

Oshidar is a vice president of MTV India (who knew?), and his kiosk is in the hallway outside the galleries at the Berkeley museum. Tricked out to look like a small roadside stand selling gum and cigarettes, it features a monitor that offers a 30-minute loop of some of the . . . well, loopy content that MTV India offers.

And, I'd have to say, some of that goofy claymation is as compulsively watchable as anything you'll find within the galleries themselves. Maybe the problem is that artists haven't gone far enough in embracing international styles.

'Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India'

Where: Montalvo Arts Center, 15400 Montalvo Road, Saratoga

When: Wednesdays through Saturdays, 1 to 4 p.m.; Sundays, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Through: Sept. 17

Admission: free

Information: (408) 961-5800, www.villamontalvo.org/visualarts.html

Also: Berkeley Art Museum, 2626 Bancroft Way, Berkeley, Wednesdays, Fridays through Sundays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m; Thursdays 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. through September 17; adults, \$8; students ages 12-18 and seniors, \$5; UC Berkeley students, faculty and staff, children under 12 and museum members, free; (510) 642-0808, www.bampfa.berkeley.edu

'Pilgrimage'

A Selection of Paintings by Anjolie Ela Menon

Where: Asian Art Museum's Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture, 200 Larkin St., San Francisco

When: Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays through Sundays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Thursdays 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Through: Dec. 17

Tickets: adults, \$10; seniors, \$7; ages 12-17, \$6; children under 12, free (prices includes a complimentary audio tour if requested); (415) 581-3500, www.asianart.org

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