



A view of the *Throne of Frost* installation at the Durbar Hall, Laxmi Vilas Palace, Baroda.

THE SEDUCTIONS OF HORROR



A view of the Laxmi Vilas Palace, Baroda.

Tasneem Mehta responds to the traumas played out by Anju Dodiya's embattled protagonists at a spectacularly mounted exhibition.

PEERING THROUGH THE GAPS OF ANJU DODIYA'S SITE-SPECIFIC installation, *Throne of Frost*, at the Durbar Hall of the Laxmi Vilas Palace in Baroda and trying to absorb from a distance the sombre charcoal images of warrior women-like emblems on a shield, I was struck by the artist's inventiveness. Good art always pushes the boundaries, challenging accepted conventions of form and surface. Dodiya's work, in which large enigmatic representations of women stand solidly framed in metal, the reverse of each painting plumped and padded with beautiful embroideries and textured fabrics, facing each other in a grand rectangular formation over an expanse of mirror shards, was not only visually spectacular but successfully brought together the varied impulses that have informed her work to date.

The opulence of the Baroda palace, with its richly coloured and intricately wrought designs on the walls and the ceiling, its marble floors and stained glass windows, and soaring sense of space, was a perfect foil for a work that involved a range of dramatis personae drawn from heraldic traditions. However, even as you stood in awe of the surroundings, the installation held the fractured reflections of the Durbar hall in the broken mirror shards that formed a carpet between the artworks, thus challenging the domination of the space and the idea of the heroic that it represented.

Dodiya's extraordinary visual layering in the *Throne of Frost* installation is a metaphor for the mind and its many deceptions and conceits. Her protagonists are the various selves she battles. The violence is almost palpable - not just in the imagery of the swords, the sharp-edged mirrors, and the soldier-like steel frames, but also in the hard feminist gaze of her characters. The charcoal women, finely chiselled yet uncompromising and cold, skilfully mock-accept notions of beauty and the heroic that traditional art and myth have valorised. Like the ice queen, to whom the title of the show obliquely refers, these are not women one would easily joust with. Mindscapes, mystery, and myth merge into a grim commentary of human frailty, desire, and greed.

The artist also combines a skilful juxtaposition of materials and mediums - the soft sharpness of charcoal, a medium almost ephemeral in its consistency; the sensuous transparency of watercolour; the sculptural hardness of the slate-grey metal; and the textiles with its history of enduring feminine engagement. Charcoal, for Dodiya, has a special significance, as does the colour black. Charcoal is a product of carbon and so are diamonds. Diamonds and jewels are an important part of Dodiya's iconography, underscoring the artist's concern for the human preoccupation with wealth. The colour black is both ominous and defining. It contains even as it negates. Its harshness disrupts the precious beauty of the watercolours so skilfully deployed by the artist.

The drawings recall and mix images from various traditions. For example, the image on the invitation card, called, *Barge*, brings to mind

Vishnu reclining on Sesha. But unlike the original image, which suggests harmony and order, the image we are confronted with is disturbing and almost sinister. The protagonist's gaze is not towards the audience but turned inwards in a reflexive attitude. A star insignia and a crown announce wealth and status. But the monster on which the lady lounges suggests otherwise.



Anju Dodiya. *Barge*. Watercolour and charcoal on paper (Front); Embroidery on cushioned fabric (Back). 45" X 96". 2007.



Anju Dodiya. *The Shame of Greed*. Watercolour and charcoal on paper (Front); Embroidery on cushioned fabric (Back). 84" X 45". 2006.

In the title image, the artist plays with the classical representation of women as odalisques, as presented by male artists for the male gaze in traditional European painting. She strips her character of sexual/sensual associations, subverting the original intention of the pose and extending the challenge of Manet's famous *Olympia*. She foregrounds instead the elaborate sensuality of a necklace. Is this a

comment on greed and lust? Is it a comment about the flip side of the heroic? Is the necklace a talisman or a clue? Much of Dodiya's iconography is drawn from Renaissance art traditions. Even the titles recall the lofty Biblical themes that formed the subject matter of Renaissance art. In *Shame of Greed* and *Sheath of the Impossible*, the careful attention to form and drapery in the former and to the elaborate furls of angel wings and rope in the latter, illustrate this influence. Skulls, candleabra, armour, chains, coils, dramatic headwear, ferocious beasts, spears, and cutlasses form a macabre language of condemnation, beautifully rendered so that the horror itself becomes a form of seduction.

As the story of each painting unfolds, you find inter-connections and linkages between the works. The artist is teasing a response from you. When you think you have decoded a painting, the iconography on the reverse suggests another meaning. As I tried to negotiate the interstices of the installation, intrigued and mesmerized by the sheer scale and the skilful ordering and distancing of the works, it occurred to me that I was now a participant and not just an observer, that I was mediating the meanings of the works and entering into their enchanted spaces.

Mounted by Bodhi Art at Baroda from March 14th to 21st, it was installed at its Mumbai gallery from 9th April to 31st May.