

A Labyrinth of Overlapping Concerns

Peter Nagy evaluates the curatorial choices of Gulammohammed Sheikh and Dr. Jyotindra Jain in putting together an exhibition which blurs the visual boundaries between home, street, shrine, bazaar and museum.



(Left to right) Hrithik Roshan cutout, visitor, Indrani Rahman cutout and visitor.



Ram Rahman. Photo Studio 2002.
Manchester Art Gallery.

How does one even begin to represent the visual diversity of contemporary India through the narrow parameters of an exhibition for an art museum? To address this question is to open dialogues concerning post-colonial and post-modern situations, the dynamics of markets and audiences on the production of culture, and the relationship between indigenous, traditional forms and self-consciously internationalised ones. The curators, Professor Gulammohammed Sheikh and Dr. Jyotindra Jain, brought together a group of artworks attempting to wrestle with these weighty issues. Creating, in the process, an exhibition celebrating a joyous cacophony.

Organised by SHISHA, *New Indian Art: Home-Street-Shrine-Bazaar-Museum*, was one of four shows of contemporary art from South Asia held at the newly expanded Manchester Art Gallery. This is SHISHA's first international programme of visual culture from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The Indian show presented works by more than twenty-five practitioners of artistic creation from the diverse positions possible within India today. It is one thing to acknowledge the interface of visual cultures, yet quite another to actually juxtapose major works into a daring labyrinth of overlapping concerns and ricocheting references.



Atul Dodiya. Broken Branches. Assemblage: cupboards & photographs. 2002.

On the whole, squeezed a bit too tightly into its space, for the uninitiated the exhibition may have seemed polymorphously confusing. Yet, in the end, it was an accurate simulation of what it feels like to move through 'Art' and its multiple manifestations in India today and how this was achieved.

With long careers and encyclopaedic knowledge behind them, the curators astutely chose not only important artists, but often their most provocative works. Their selections, which breached boundaries of economics, education, language and inherited contexts, were also trans-generational – no mean feat in an international culture industry which continues to place prime importance on the youngest-of-the-young. In this regard, the large paintings on glass by K.G. Subramanyan commanded a central position, evidence of his

pioneering efforts to transgress painterly discourses and illustrating the ease with which Indian culture has accommodated diversity and hybridity (and, by extension, post-modernity). Flanking Subramanyan's works on this long wall of images were new paintings by Surendran Nair and contemporary *patua* scrolls by Tapan Chitrakar and Montu Chitrakar. Within this extended triptych could be found Sheikh's exhibition premise: to lay evident the "free and open trade zones of culture which are oblivious to distinctions of visual/verbal cultural paradigms" and to celebrate the "individual interpretations of collective heritage and the interface between the secular and the communal" (as stated in his lecture during the two-day conference which accompanied the exhibitions). Iconic subjects (both public and private), local and global references, contemporary



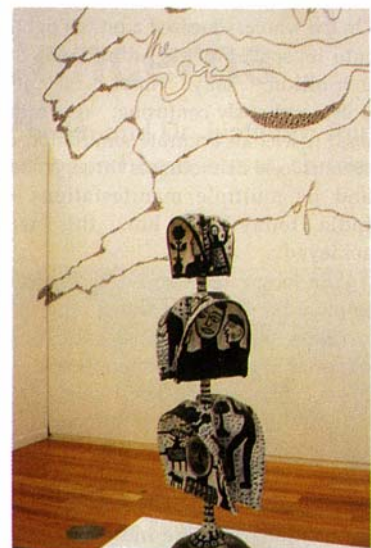
(Top of frame) Subodh Gupta. High Life II. 2002.
(Foreground) Sundaribai. Karama Festival. 2002.
(Background) Tripura Devi, Kumudini Devi, Yashoda Devi etc. Kadamb Tree. 2002.



(Left wall) Paintings by K. G. Subramanyan.
Ageless Combat 1. Reverse on acrylic.
(Right wall) Tapan Chitrakar /
Montu Chitrakar. Patua Scrolls.
(Foreground) Sundaribai.
Karama Festival. 2002.



(Background) Madhvi Parekh. *Constructions*. 1998. (Left wall) Anita Dube. *The Sleep of Reason Creates Monsters*. Wall drawing with eyes. 2001. (Foreground) N. N. Rimzon. *Speaking Stones*. 1998. (Right wall) Surendran Nair. *Left: Hopscotch (cuckoonebulopolis)*. *Right: Melancholy of the 12th Man (cuckoonebulopolis)*. 2002.



(Detail) Madhvi Parekh. *Constructions*. 1998. All photos courtesy Ram Rahman.

events and timeless themes, and the multiple styles of painting, both Indian and not, jostled triumphantly along this central spine of the exhibition.

This strategy was repeated in numerous juxtapositions of works throughout the show. Photographic and installation works by Anita Dube, employing the ceramic eyes of idol statuary, shared space with the sculptures of Madhvi Parekh's abstract forms painted with cryptic figurative narratives and the neo-Madhubani paintings of Ganga Devi, relating her own personal history. This grouping, severely reductive in its eschewal of colour, seemed to snub its nose at all the Orientalist, chromatic clichés which, as Sheikh put it, "reinforce the un-modern stereotypes of India abroad". A group of sculptures centrally placed included N.N. Rimzon's *Speaking Stones* (a traumatised figure surrounded by the mute photographic records of history's horrors), Sundaribai and Kendu Ram's architectonic tower representing the gaiety of a village festival, Subodh Gupta's giant disco ball made of steel milk pails, and a spectacular tree complete with birds and monkeys, made of dyed *sikki* grass by a collective of artists headed by Kumudini Devi, Tripura Devi and Yashoda Devi. With both of these tableaux, the curators

achieved a stunning synergy which effectively dismantled any preconceived hierarchies and proprieties within the visual arts. This effect was then echoed in the installations by Ram Rahman (an interactive photo studio which playfully juggled the positions of imperial and mass media subjects), Atul Dodiya (his poignant and riveting suite of cabinets containing carefully composed objects and ephemera) and the film made for the exhibition by Madhusree Dutta, documenting all manner of Indian popular and ritualistic cultural forms.

Conversely, these expansive and ambitious installations were balanced by the more private spaces and concerns of Nilima Sheikh, Shilpa Gupta, Pushpamala N. and Anandajit Ray. Taking, respectively, the subjects of poetry and landscape, pilgrimage and obeisance, portraiture and prestige, and personalised exchange values as their starting points, each of these artists created entirely new works which powerfully summarised their previous endeavours. The small, studious scale of these works provided a welcome foil to the larger, vociferous displays and further complicated the curators' programme.

With such an exhilarating and ambitious exhibition its weak points,

though few, were perhaps more noticeable. One colossal head by Ravinder Reddy was placed on the museum's front steps while a similarly scaled horse and rider by the Bastar iron workers Sanat Ram Lohar and Ramji Ram Mandavi commanded the lobby. Both, however, would have benefited by being positioned in dialogue with the other artists' works had they been integrated into the main exhibition hall. Subodh Gupta's giant disco ball, hovering high above the exhibition, certainly took on new meanings in the context of Manchester, the birthplace of rave culture, but it alone failed to do justice to the artist's multiple concerns. And a large side gallery, immediately adjacent to the Indian show, featured a rather lacklustre exhibition of works by a British artist which had no relevance at all to the South Asian programme. Had this gallery also been available for *Home-Street-Shrine-Bazaar-Museum*, Sheikh would have had space to include works by Mrinalini Mukherjee, Sheba Chhachhi, Sonia Jabba, Navjot and Shantibai, all of which were on his original wish-list and would have brought in powerful feminist polemics. More space would, perhaps, also have enabled some examples from the rich fields of textiles, ceramics and architecture to be represented.

