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Date:20/01/2006 URL:

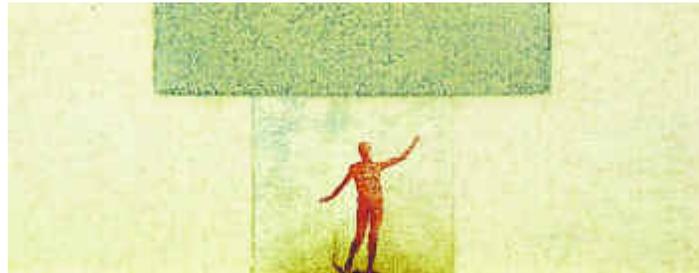
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Some smoke, some strokes, some self

GAYATRI SINHA

While Gallery Espace has doubled its space, some Biblically resonant and erotic images find their way to Delhi galleries.



SPACE FOR ALL An image from Lino Mannocci's *Let There Be Smoke*.

Perhaps it is time someone measured the wall and floor space now dedicated to the gallery displays. Last week, Gallery Espace marked the 16th year of its existence with a coming of age expansion that in a sense is a barometer of the Indian gallery of the 21st Century. On a large double level space now, the Espace is geared towards new media display, photography and installation art. What the exhibition on view - *Back to the Future* - affirms, however, is that the conventional medium of painting is likely to grow in commensuration with the wall space. Within this laterally generous scale, several tendencies in the contemporary art production that the gallery owner Renu Modi has identified with are on view, and in fact, mark some of the prevailing tendencies that have coincided with the expanded notion of the gallery since the early 1990s. Artists have passed on, but who were actively associated with the gallery such as Swaminathan, Barwe and Bhupen Khakhar are re-invoked through quotations and their works. A large component on abstract painting in different media is on view, fulfilling at least in part Swaminathan's belief that the modern art movement in India would "take off from the spatial concepts evolved in traditional Indian painting."

The exhibition also has on display a particularly interesting selection of small and medium scale sculptures that pack a surprise with their wit such as Rajendra Tiku's *Blue Rosary*, Himmat Shah's bronze piece, Madan Lal's serendipitous, wheel like cosmos and Laxma Gaud's terracotta diptych. What is of particular interest are the

elements of surprise introduced in the Bollywood photographs of Sheena Sippy, Tarun Khiwal's minimalist body forms, Bharti Kher's agitated, bindi construction, and Manjunath Kamath's unexpected and rewarding painting Restless Man on Pink Elephant in the old city.

Biblical resonance

Lino Mannocci, whose inspirations come from Titian, Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin may not be among Italy's cutting edge artists. Nevertheless he has in abundance the gift of an evocative universalism that makes his work immediately communicative. Let There be Smoke - the title of his exhibition (Gallery Nature Morte) - has an immediate Biblical resonance. The solitary miniature classical figure which appears to negotiate the grid induced landscape may well be the figure at the revelatory edge of Genesis, awaiting the dawning of light. A Christ-like image wanders in the wilderness negotiates his own existential minefield of doubt and despair. Or else a contemporary postulate, which honours the philosophical tradition of doubt as an honourable state. Mannocci's near monochromatic colours appear to lie on the surface, allowing the raw canvas to create its own landscape of suggestion. The grid, that seems to cohere to form an accidental cross, bears the suggestion of floating clouds, evanescent and moving. Smoke becomes a condition for time, and for the dematerialisation of human experience.

Such eroticism!

Queen's Gallery at the British Council receives Mithu Sen's images not only on the walls but on the floor, the steps and frequently beyond the frame of each work. This is a Drawing Room that draws in a multitude of feminist imagery - a saccharine over abundance of floral pinks, associations of dripping menstrual blood, sharp instruments that savage and contain the human flesh, hair that lines objects like boxes - the material of feminine contexts, to enclose feminine fantasies. One can argue that the element of excess is both decorative and ennui inducing. That the conjunction of unexpected elements such as a blood dripping banana encased in leopard skin, penile forms bursting out of floral decoration, or a sofa that bares its teeth and invites you to sit with a lapping tongue - all point to an erotic transference that is both earnest and critical.

Having said that - and in effect assuming the trajectory that extends from Judy Chicago's vaginal forms to Françoise Quadron's abundant use of female hair - Sen doesn't push any further for a conceptual frame.

What she does is to distribute the images from Indian popular culture and long-tongued ladies to Chinese figurines, appliqué forms, and fairy tale fantasies, to create a register of multiples of erotic mirroring and desire, rather than a singular cogent view of the sexualised self.

By this, one means the critical step from image to concept is held in abeyance or simply dissipated.

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