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Portrait of an artist as an actress

What's real? What isn't? The borderlines flex, curve, and snap to the tune of Pushpamala's imagination as she plays with stereotypical images and alters them. ADITI DE is struck by how the artist's photo narratives question the given frameworks from within.



IT'S THE titles that fox you at first. *Sunhere Sapne, Golden Dreams, Dard-e-Dil, Bombay Photo Studio*, they read. How do they link into the current mindset of Bangalore-based Pushpamala N.? Her three-in-one show at Gallery Sumukha, on from December 7 to 24, presents the artist in multiple roles - as an actress, an auteur, an architect toying with history and memory.

Viewed through the lens of wit that has always been her signature note, these photo-

romances follow in the trail of *Phantom Lady or Kismet*, the 1998 essay that had the artist in the central role - masked and holstered, in shorts and derring-do mode - caught up in adventures in site-specific Bombay, even encountering a long-lost twin, who's a vamp. Or was it a *filmi*-style double? Parallel narratives, commentaries on women as social beings, concerns about artistic trends appear at different depths in each performance-presentation. Even as the artwork pays homage to Bombay as the Great Modern Metropolis, the producer of magnificent fantasies, as glimpsed through the lens of Meenal Agarwal. That's sleight of angle, Pushpamala style.

"The creativity is in conceiving and directing; it's a collaborative effort," Pushpamala says. "I'm just following my instinct as an artist. I'm on a hot trail!"

Perhaps her take on the artistic life is best reflected in a seemingly spoofy interview with herself, doubling as the imaginary N. Rajyalakshmi, Chief Reporter of Ideal Times, in the catalogue for the current show, through dead serious answers to stereotypical media queries (*see box*). "I was supposed to be born on Rajyotsava Day, so my mother was all set to name me Rajyalakshmi, but I arrived later," Pushpamala laughs over the phone. "You know, I love playing on words. It was fun to design the catalogue. And I often rearrange the sequence of each photo-narrative, so that can be a surprise. But basically, I'm still dealing with the representation of women as images through different genres of narration. That's a very serious intention."

Moving away from sculpture, for which she won the National Award, this Baroda postgraduate transferred her focus from its narrative movement of the 1980s to alternative artistic adventures. For each sequence, Pushpamala has chosen a novel entry point, a new photographer, a flexible narrative, and cast herself in a challenging role. Each is laced through with pathos and bathos alike, each mingles serio-comic fantasy with hardcore truths, almost as in Chaplin's cinematic oeuvre.

Take *Dard-e-Dil*, which plays out its open-ended sequence within the crumbling Raina Haveli in Delhi's Chawri Bazaar. Conceived during a 2001 Khoj artists' residency at Modinagar, this largely handpainted black-and-white photo romance - shot by fellow Egyptian artist-in-residence Hany El-Gowily - unspools the tale of a mother and her daughters living in genteel poverty. A stranger intrudes, romance blossoms. But the mother forbids its fulfilment. And so, in the style of art cinema, melodramatic moments are frozen for posterity. However, the artist often interchanges frames with each exposition, thus rendering the narrative infinitely flexible, injecting mystery into the modern myth. Similarly, *Sunhere Sapne* stems from Pushpamala's participation at the 1998 Khoj international workshop at Modinagar. Its hand-tinted frames, each 7-by-9 inches, capture the fantasy of an average middle-class housewife, dressed in the urban uniform of housecoat and petticoat, and her alter ego, a girl in a golden frock with a bouffant hairdo. This glamorous creature climbs out of the boot of a blue-tinted Ambassador in one frame. In another, the rose-adorned dreamer-original languishes under the boughs by the lakeside, spinning daydreams. "When I was 11, I recall these older cousins with bouffant hairdos, who seemed infinitely sophisticated,"

Pushpamala recalls.



"The work is enigmatic, there's no real story, though each scene is evocative and together the pictures give rise to a certain feeling," Pushpamala explains to her fictional interviewer. "I've used different kinds of references: the thriller, the fairy tale, the honeymoon snapshot... They have a sweet, old-world, intimate look, though in fact the content is quite dark and the period is con-temporary."

What's real? What isn't? The borderlines flex, curve and snap to the tune of Pushpamala's imagination as she plays with stereotypical and archetypal images from cinema, theatre, literature and photography, altering them and provoking re-visioning through her personalised inter-ventions. "These scenes and situations are like found objects; they are so recognisable and common," she explains. "I like to mix up genres and alter them, to interject my own point of view."

Consciously venturing into unexplored realms, Pushpamala uses the vehicle of laughter as an entry point to move the ground from beneath our feet, to alter accepted notions of popular images, to provoke alternate ways of seeing and art-making. Each photo essay was meticulously detailed and notched out by the artist before others were introduced into its execution, the directorial control reflected in the technical finesse of the final photographs, the emotions latent in the dramatic tableaux, the intent behind the backdrops. Self-questioning underlines the self-portraiture, perhaps a symptom of our turbulent times. "I like working as an outsider," Pushpamala comments. "You can break all the rules!"

As rendered in the third sepia-toned sequence, *Bombay Photo Studio*, the artist as actress takes on another life. Shot in his studio by J.H. Thakker, who did still photography for the Hindi films of the 1950s and 1960s, these capture the fleeting moods of nayikas - one pining for her beloved, one caught in a web of deceit, one lost in a musical trance. And high on the wall, in a reference to ancestral homes (or star photographs in a movie hall lobby), are three veiled brides - a Muslim, a Hindu and a Christian - each posed conventionally, as in a studio portrait.

In each of these three sequences by Pushpamala, exhibited together for the first time, after the initial delight at recognising the artist in each frame, issues of social comment surge to the fore. "It's difficult to get people to understand," stresses the artist, "that it's not a real performance. By putting myself into these narratives or generic stories, perhaps my autobiography is intermingled with the stories of others, thus overturning the established narrative."

Underlining each sequence, between the frames, lurks a certain provocative, perhaps subversive, commentary - about the situation of womankind, about the intertwining strands of vulnerability and strength, about access to contemporary art, about old media viewed through fresh lenses. As the artist as auteur continues her ongoing explorations of photography with a grant from the India Foundation for the Arts, she offers us surprises, engagements, unexpected parables for our time. Even as the shadow falls between the real and the imagined, between the artistic and the actual, it's impossible not to join in, as Pushpamala has the last laugh.

Some questions



N. Rajyalakshmi, Chief Reporter of Ideal Times, interviews the artist Pushpamala N.

Here's a sample encounter:

NR: Miss Pushpamala, for the last few years, you have been getting photographs taken of yourself and exhibiting them. Are you a narcissist?

PN: No, I'm a humourist. (laughs). Bhupen Khakkar in an early 1972 catalogue had photographs of himself posing as James Bond, Mr. Universe, and a Man with a Headache - it was delightful! In fact, it was turning artistic narcissism on its head! I always felt it was a lost moment in Indian art because nobody really followed it up...

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NR: Miss Pushpamala, earlier you worked mainly with poor materials like terracotta, waste paper, etc. why are you now working with an expensive medium like photography?

PN: Earlier, I believed that India was a poor rural country and so artists should use poor or humble materials to talk about our reality. But in fact here I am, a very metropolitan person who is a citizen of one of the highly industrialised countries of the world with a long history of modern technology. We are falling into an Orientalist stereotype if we seek reality only in the pre-industrial, Miss Rajyalakshmi. The art critic Hans Mathews made an observation which I like - that because photography and filmmaking entered India almost as soon as they were invented, they don't carry an oppressive colonial burden for us. We have our own history of photographic image-making - for instance, the early photographs painted like miniatures, ignoring Western perspective, the manorathas or pilgrim souvenirs made in Nathdwara in Rajasthan using painting and collage. What interests me about the photograph is its documentary aspect - it's I was there part, and the possibilities of overturning and questioning this factuality.

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