

An Evening In Paris

Pushpamala N. turns detective in her new film, set in the winding streets of the city of lights.
Zehra Jumabhoy looks on.

A WOMAN LIVES IN AN APARTMENT IN A PRETTILY CRUMBLING quarter of Paris. One day (to the accompaniment of scary music) she notices a strange presence - a fragile middle-aged woman appears outside her window. So spooked out is our heroine, that she rushes to the Louvre, where she discovers an erotic portrait of Gabrielle d'Estrées (circa 1594, by an unknown artist). For the uninitiated, Gabrielle was King Henri IV's favourite mistress, whose untimely death in 1599 was allegedly the result of poisoning. Lo and behold, we notice (after many close-ups), that the luscious nude of Gabrielle is clutching a bejewelled ring; the same one, in fact, that our protagonist's ghostly visitor had been fingering. What *could* this mean?

We don't wait with bated breath, however. Our resourceful lead soon discovers (with a little help from Scooby-gang of friends) that the apparition is an omen: she appears just as Paris erupts in violence.

Welcome to the world of *Paris Autumn* (2005), a 35-minute black-and-white film by Bangalore-based Pushpamala N. The work was produced during Pushpamala's 3-month artist residency in Paris, which unhappily coincided with the racial riots caused by the accidental death of two teenagers in the city in October 2005. The fraught situation induced Pushpamala to tie fact with fiction and autobiography with history in the form of a "gothic thriller".

Instead of constructing a story through deliberately-staged photographs of herself (as is her wont), Pushpamala used still photographs to conjure up a faux-cinematic experience: *Paris Autumn* was screened at Nature Morte gallery, Delhi, from 24th March to 19th April, in a darkened room separated from the rest of the gallery with a plush velvet curtain. Also on view (and sale) were 'posters' of the horror flick: black-and-white blow-ups that beckoned from blood-red walls.

Paris Autumn could have crystallized Pushpamala's past adventures with photography. Like her Cindy Sherman-

esque role-playing in her previous photographs, it also seemed concerned with exploring the kernel of fantasy that nestles at the centre of so-called historical fact. Life was forever masquerading as art - and vice versa - in Pushpamala's clever use of doubles and mirror-images. For instance, the film started with a close-up of Caravaggio's painting, *The Fortune Teller*. Inserted slyly in the middle of a series of images of paintings was a mock-tableau of Pushpamala in the sari-clad guise of Caravaggio's dewy-eyed oriental damsel. Elsewhere in *Paris Autumn* too, Pushpamala playfully posed as artworks - pretending to be dead in one shot, raising her arm menacingly in another as she aped the postures of the statues in the Chapelle des Petits-Augustin.

Phantom Lady, or *Kismet: A Phot Romance* (1996-98), a series of black-and-white photographs of Pushpamala as a masked figure, convincingly whisked us into its fabrication of Bombay's shadowy and seductive underworld. Given the similarity in subject matter, it seemed inevitable that *Paris Autumn* would be equally engaging. Undoubtedly, the 'movie' was stuffed with all the elements a Romantic thriller set in the by-lanes of Paris might deem mandatory - quotes from Baudelaire and Hofmannsthal; close-ups of paintings at the Louvre; endless shots of labyrinthine streets; references to Film Noir and contemporary Hollywood thrillers as well as lilting (appropriately haunting) melodies. If *Paris Autumn* had followed this up with a series of beautifully shot pictures, it might have been a hit.

Unaccountably, though, the film's line-up of stills generally lacked poetry. And this was particularly evident in the way it drew parallels between the Wars of Religion in 16th Century France and the 2005 racial tensions. After dreamy sequences of galleries and ghosts, the introduction of footage gleaned from newspapers and the Internet of blown-up cars and slogan-totting Parisians formed awkward connecting points between historical turmoil and current strife.



Pushpamala N. *Paris Autumn*. Installation view at Nature Morte, Delhi. 2008.
IMAGE COURTESY NATURE MORTE.