
ART IN REVIEW

Pushpamala N.

Bose Pacia Modern
508 West 26th Street, Chelsea
Through May 29

Photography and filmmaking arrived in India immediately after their invention in Europe, which is one reason South Asia has such a long history of sophisticated work in both media. Pushpamala N., a contemporary artist working in Bangalore, takes account of that history and makes it her own in a strong New York solo debut.

The four photographic series in the show have links to South Asian cinematic conventions. "Phantom Lady, or Kismet" (1996-98) is a takeoff on Indian pop films about the exploits of a superheroin named Nadia, who here wears

Zorro-esque attire to rescue a vampy younger sister from underworld embroilment. Shot mostly in nighttime Mumbai, the series has a rich, film-noir atmosphere and a surreal, Bollywood-style narrative structure that can be reshuffled for different showings.

As in all her work, Pushpamala N. is chief actor as well as director, and she is a charismatic on-camera presence. She plays both sisters in "Phantom Lady" with aplomb, and brings the same qualities to "Golden Dreams" (1998), a kind of woman-having-a-nervous-breakdown tale of romance and entrapment that concludes with the heroine holding an invisible opponent at gunpoint. Here the original black-and-white prints have been hand colored, giving them a slightly antique look, as is true of the 10 pictures in "The Anguished Heart" (2002), a story of lost love that might have come straight from Satyajit Ray.

The melancholic tone of this last series is also distilled in a single portrait of Pushpamala N., one of a group shot by J. H. Thakker, famed for his studio photographs of Indian film stars of the 1950's and 60's. In this group of photos she represents the seven moods traditionally associated with women in northern Indian poetry and painting — sad, erotic, happy, angry and so on — and plays each role with a confounding mix of self-consciousness and conviction.

It is precisely this mix that sets her work apart from other implicitly feminist artists like Cindy Sherman and Eleanor Antin. They make their distance from their cinematic models clear; she, selectively and daringly, keeps the connection alive.

HOLLAND COTTER