

Freedom of Interpretation

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After a brief period of slumber, Delhi is once again abuzz with art activities. Some shows happen without giving any clue to the onlooker. Locating the subjectivity of the artist and the critic within the field of interpretation **Aakansha Rastogi** tries to save the art viewers from the limbo of cluelessness.

Have to start from somewhere, so let's begin with a warm-up session just like any artist sketching passionately until he stoops over some image and ponders to draw it fresh; navigating his thoughts as he visually assembles them through his medium of creation.

O' shining glass that defines the contours of the art work,
Show me my face, each time I see thee, the work.
I see the work, I see my image.
A work of art.

Sometimes a dreadful site, I am here to see the artist's work and not me. These sudden encounters annoy me a great deal, for I am not the one who can happily bear surprises. I can smash them on face for the unexpected is always evil, I believe. I can change my belief whenever I wish without any prior public notice because I am a practitioner of freedom of expression at all costs. Question me not when it's written in a language you do not understand. Accept it heartedly because you do not understand. Help me because I do not understand.

I call it legibly unknown, and I have my reasons for doing so. Hear me; the art-season in the capital has freshly begun after slumbering holidays whence everybody was out on vacation. You won't get any art-dealer, buyer or a meeting with a gallery-owner because everybody is oouuu...t. And if you are insistent, you can stumble upon great one-liners that will make film like 'Sholay' a terrific success, for instance----- "Art is PASSION for you... its Fashion for them. And FASHION isn't so cool in 44 degree Celsius."

Move on from these IONS; I recently visited Nature Morte that showcased works by Seher Shah, Samit Das, Anita Dube and Raqs Media Collective. A prerequisite for putting up an art exhibition includes an easy bracketing of the artists and their genre – a definitive "this is 'this'". Holding a show where the loose ends of the exhibits drain out the heaviness of 'meaning' and forge connections that one never intended, is commendable. The exhibition invite for the show at Nature Morte just read "New works

by...and so on”, with neither an allocated title nor any curatorial intervention, and no catalogue even. Thanks! It does make my work a challenging one. I read a minute ago, “...insertion of a subject” is “fictitious”.

Where is the insertion happening? The above reading presupposes an inherent structure without a doer i.e. without a subject. An array of activities exists already independent of the subject or to say it more provocatively insertion of the subject within the given structure is the job of an outside force which is both beyond and above the subject that is being inserted and the structure where it is to be inserted. And, it is the nature of this external will that makes the process of insertion and the subject fictitious. Who/ What is that outside force? Is that the artist? However, I would like to bracket the endeavors of the artists in the show into two - Seher Shah and Samit Das excavating the city through its stratified and fragmented representation in their digitally manipulated works, Anita Dube and Raqs Media Collective searching validation by employing metaphors.

What matches the eyes is not a single surface. Seher Shah is engrossed in the city, its historical monuments in particular the emblems of Muslim identity - the masjid, the maqbara, the Persian myth, geometric or decorative patterns, tracery common in Mughal-Persian Art juxtaposed with Muslim women on march, soldiers, guns and explosions. It is interesting to see how he searches for an iconic representation of a community which is rigidly non-iconic, and visually explores Jihad in Pop. To add, the Pop art/tradition is also icon-centric. In his photo-montages as he overlaps and dissolves image upon an image, they split manifold into individual elements trying to scatter and assemble in new ways. Seher Shah prepares graffiti of unlearning. His experiments with the architectural parts/ elements suspended in the dark are insertions; framing the relation between ‘a part’ and ‘the whole’ that isn’t a linear relationship despite its simple presentation and seemingly simpler implication. Shah is traversing the city that is legibly unknown.

The city in the canvas works of Samit Das is composed of monochromatic swatches. The remoteness of these hollow spaces with air and life pumped out echo an uncanny feeling. His long cherished interest in constructed (man-made) spaces dependent on external factors such as the light beaming in from above, also where the little wars of routine life are fought and lost, still very much engages him. Undoubtedly his long alleys, staircase, windows pouring light and shadow remind one of the partly illuminated city streets where the uncanny and murderous events happen in Noir Films. In his paper and photographic collages Samit Das himself builds blocks, increasing the opaqueness of the seemingly simple white Paper by providing it with layered structures. Here also he cuts windows that expose the surface below. Samit’s city is a grid like traceable maze.

Anita Dube’s photographic-performance resembles the Thousand eyed Goddess of esoteric Buddhism. The artist’s own body in this case becomes the site translating the horrific and uncanny. In her various gestural mudras the fear of unknown manifests itself visibly. Eyes staring at you and You return the gaze. An immediate need arises to question this insertion/ metaphor of ‘seeing’ as a process, a becoming channelized by the will of the artist whose skin underneath is hidden, as she performs the divine. Raqs Media Collective performs another act of insertion/ power, posting out letters and breaking the

observed silence. When they say 'there has been a change of Plan' and modification in itineraries after witnessing a sinking aircraft, the remoteness of the chosen land devoid of human presence to whom the change of plan would matter except for the image-maker behind the lens, is reminiscent of the unknown whose fidelity is permissible.

I keep my mouth wet always. The dryness makes me awry. And when the shining glass of these nicely hung digital works reflects my self, I insert my subject[ivity] and exercise the power of interpretation.