

artasiapacific
MAR/APR 2009
ISSUE 62

reviews

EXHIBITION REVIEWS: 114 NEW DELHI / 116 YARRA VALLEY / 117 SHANGHAI / 118 BEIJING / 119 SEOUL / 120 SEOUL / 121 MUMBAI
122 MANCHESTER / 123 LONDON / 124 BIRMINGHAM / 125 NEW YORK / 126 NEW YORK / BOOK REVIEW: 128 BOOKS ON CHINA



PUSHPAMALA N. *Yogini* from the series "The Native Types," 2004, from "Still Moving Image" at Devi Art Foundation, Gurgaon.

exhibitions | aapmag.com |

Still Moving Image



NALINI MALANI,
Remembering Toba
Tek Singh, 1998, video
installation, dimensions
variable. Installation
view at Devi Art
Foundation, Gurgaon,
2008.

When the Devi Art Foundation opened its exhibition space in the New Delhi suburb of Gurgaon on August 30, 2008, it felt as if India's very own Super Collider had finally become operational. The entire Indian art world turned up, along with a smattering of international figures who have become involved with Indian art in the past few years. The brainchild of the mother-and-son team of Lekha and Anupam Poddar, the not-for-profit foundation grew organically from their many years of passionate collecting and advocacy for contemporary art. Before opening this dedicated space—several years in the making and postponed twice—the family ran what amounted to India's unofficial *kunsthalle* in their sprawling New Delhi home, displaying their adventurous collection of treasures by major Indian artists including Bharti Kher, Subodh Gupta, Anita Dube and Sudarshan Shetty.

The building, designed by Ahmedabad-based contemporary architect Aniket Bhagwat, was not complete on the inaugural night. The upper floors that will house the offices of the Poddar's family businesses, including the Sirpur Paper Mills, were still under construction. Returning two weeks later to properly assess the exhibition, I found a full-on construction site again, the noise and commotion distracting yet strangely sympathetic to the edgy, anxiety-

filled works on display. Bhagwat has designed an extremely sculptural edifice. Angled exterior walls rise to the height of the multi-story building, and the architect exploits the brutalist characteristics of rusted steel and custom-made bricks in a rich tapestry of textures and colors. The building stands worlds apart from the pretentious glass-and-steel architecture dominating this satellite township, which has been built in the past 15 years and is a prominent symbol of the so-called "New India" economy of information technology and international business outsourcing.

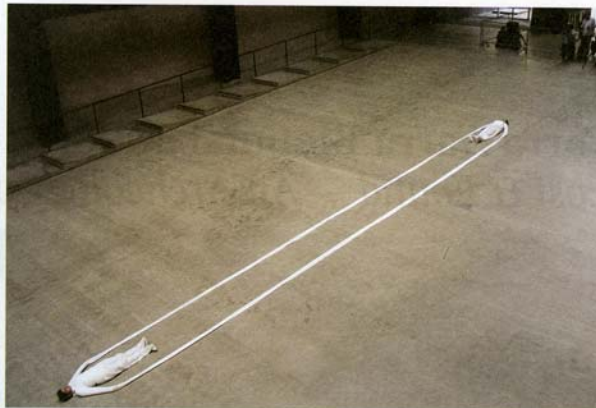
Delhi-based independent curator, critic and *ArtAsiaPacific* desk editor Deeksha Nath was called in as early as 2005 to create the inaugural exhibition from the Poddar Collection. Her only mandate was that all of the works in the show had to come from the family's collection, which now comprises more than 2,000 contemporary artworks and twice that number of folk and tribal objects. Upon Nath's decision to put together a show concentrating solely on photography and video, representing the newest developments in Indian art, it became obvious to both her and the Poddars that the collection had some serious gaps in these areas. Many additional works were then acquired. The resulting exhibition of 25 artists, "Still Moving Image," surveyed the vigorous experimentation taking place in India

today in regard to photography and its off-shoots, much of which receives scant exposure within India's recently booming commercial art market and are more usually shown in international venues.

Nath's exhibition favored the theoretical and the kinetic, as does Anupam's taste, touching on many of the primary subjects—notably identity, gender, cultural hybridity, migration, technological manipulation and ecological degradation—that are prominent within the discourse of contemporary art today. That most of the works have been made in the last ten years by Indian artists supplies a cohesiveness to the show that it otherwise lacked. Overall, the works in the exhibition communicate the palpable sense of anxiety that has been prevalent in recent years as the profound changes taking place in Indian society exacerbate existing social and political dilemmas.

Many of the works were beautifully displayed. Sheba Chhachhi's enigmatic *The Mermaid's Mirror* (2005) is a room-sized installation of 36 hand-fashioned toy televisions found on Delhi streets and set on pedestals arranged in a spiral that curled through the gallery. The translucent screens, which traditionally display devotional images, are lit by a single bulb and show black-and-white, hand-tinted stills from films starring the prominent mid-century actress Meena Kumari, the movie star replacing gods and goddesses as a figure of worship.

But as with any inaugural effort, a few kinks remain in the system. Some works seemed shoe-horned into inconvenient spaces, particularly Nalini Malani's *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* (1998), an installation of tin trunks containing bedding materials and televisions playing footage of refugees and surrounded by three adjacent wall projections. The central video shows a layered animation of



Malani's drawings over archival footage of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear bombings and is flanked by two projections of two women attempting to fold a sari. The complex, multi-part work, which addresses the legacy of Partition and the confrontational nuclear tests in 1998 by both India and Pakistan, required much more space than it was allotted to be properly appreciated.

Other pieces were unfairly eclipsed by the grandeur of building. Ranbir Kaleka's *Man with Cockerel 2* (2004), a video projected onto a painted screen of a figure wading in water with a bird in his hands, was lost in a soaring gallery space and at odds with the rusted steel and concrete walls.

Large video installations or suites of photos dominated the show to the detriment of smaller, quieter works. Ram Rahman's black-and-white portraits from 1983 capture Bhavai actors posed in character and dressed in their Indian folk theater costumes. Also easily missed were Tejal Shah and Varsha Nair's performance documents *Encounter(s)* (2006), showing the duo wearing embroidered, white straightjackets conjoined by absurdly long arms and posed in architectural spaces, including the Tate Modern's cavernous Turbine Hall.

The Devi Art Foundation's future plans are to commission site-specific works for spaces throughout the building, including the offices, cafeteria and subterranean parking levels. These will surely be more suitable venues than the display during "Still Moving Image" using the car park for a group of works—Sundarshan Shetty's installation of a milk pail with projected images of hearts, *Love* (2006), and Ravi Agarwal's video *Polluted Waters* (2006) of ink dispersing in water—that felt too isolated from each other and the rest of the show.

The Devi Art Foundation could easily be a venue for the Poddars as tastemakers who have brought experimental artwork into India's contemporary art mainstream, to show off the many trophy works in their collection and an opportunity to gloat over their escalated values since acquiring them. Instead, the family has created a context for inquiry and analysis in the form of the country's first private museum for contemporary art. This is a generous gift to the art community of India, where government-run museums have become synonymous with apathy, lethargy and ineptitude. ●

Peter Nagy

**TEJAL SHAH AND
VARSHA NAIR,**
*Exquisite Crisis and
Encounters 2a Tate,*
2007. archival digital
photograph, 16 x 24 in.

RANBIR KALEKA,
Man With Cockerel,
2002. single-channel
video projection with
sound on suspended
plexi glass,
dimensions variable.
Installation view at
Devi Art Foundation,
Gurgaon, 2008.