

ArtAsiaPacific

TODAY'S ART FROM TOMORROW'S WORLD

INDIA'S NEW PROGRESSIVES

Indian artists, like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, have worked in the shadow of a Euro-American art history that makes a claim to universality. The morphing of this Euro-American program on impact with South Asia's multiple histories of image-making and context-framing provides the basis for much contemporary Indian art, especially the work of India's women artists.

This situation demands scrutiny from a "critical regionalist" position, which insists that an art-historical account of a region must be true to the particularities of interweaving international and local tendencies. A fine balance is required, with criticality and regionalism holding one another in check., so that the former does not become a universal program while the latter does not degenerate into parochialism.

In the absence of a manifesto of Indian women's art or a codified canon of feminist art, I would propose a dialectical argument: Women artists of earlier generations, including Nalini Malani, Navjot Altaf, Rekha Rowittiya, and Anita Dube required an ideology that would allow them to escape the prevailing dogmas of art. On the other hand, new-generation women artists such as Vidya Kamat, Mithu Sen, Tejal Shah and Shilpa Gupta face the opposite task: framing a position to escape the newly sanctified feminist dogmas concerning women's art.

The emergence of a self-consciously political women's art in India dates to the early 1980s, when women artists attempted to shape an art informed by feminist ideology, asserted against an orthodox Marxist revolutionary viewpoint that refused to concede the claims of gender over class as a ground of protest against institutionalized oppression. In the vision that orthodox Marxism had for Indian artists, an avant-garde agenda translated into a heroic socialist realism that exalted the peasant and the worker. There was no space in such a vision for a separate women's art: introducing trans-class issues such as patriarchy and gender oppression would "dilute the common agenda." Although most women artists belonged to the upper and middle classes and never faced blatant discrimination, they felt a discreet constraint of their agency within the family, the academy and the gallery system.

Over the next 15 years, women artists explored a variety of themes and forms centered on the experience of being a woman in a male-dominated world. The climate of opinion produced by Indian women activists fighting discriminatory social practices such as dowry and female infanticide provoked the representation of issues related to gender inequality in art. Western feminist critical approaches of the 1970s and 1908s also seeped into the consciousness of Indian women artists, allowing them to situate their work within larger social and political contexts. One encounters a range of work by women artists, from those in which the feminist impulse is inchoate, to others

where it is dramatically amplified, to yet others in which it melds with other idioms of resistance to the point of becoming post-feminist.

Nalini Malani, painter and new-media artist born in Karachi, Pakistan in 1946, is a child of the Partition. Dyed in the palettes of feminism and psychoanalysis, her art is a record of inscriptions that history makes upon the self, especially the oozing, distorted female self. She has adapted as the focus of her figuration the sexualized yet also the de-gendered woman. In her recent watercolor and acrylic reverse paintings, *Living in Alicetime* (2005), Malani deploys Lewis Carroll's Alice to share with her viewers 21st-century tales of ecological disaster and national crises. The artist implies that we inhabit "Alice time," an ethos of illusion and delusion in which human beings are reduced or magnified by the machinations of State authority or religious fundamentalism. Alice represented here as a turnkey doll or a war victim in calipers is the latest addition to Malani's repertoire which includes *Mother India*, Brecht's *Mother Courage*, Euripides and Heiner Mueller's *Medea*, as well as a science-fiction mutant struck by bullets or meteorite dust.

The painter Rekha Rodwittiya was extremely vocal about her feminist art practice in the 1980s. She has rendered the self through pictorial allegory and iconic form: her practice is an interplay between the artist's specific locus and a more generalizing notion of gendered subjectivity. For instance, the iconic female figure is both the ascetic practicing self-restraint, painted in monochrome (*Subtexts*, 2001) and the overwhelming mother goddess on a bike painted in earthy colors, redolent of folk art (*Bye Bye baby*, 2002).

On the other hand, Nilima Sheikh, who would be uncomfortable with the feminist label, displays concerns that are quietly feminist. Drawing upon the traditions of Mughal and Rajput miniatures, Sheikh looked for "a feminization of painting," which she found in the cellular and additive structure of the miniatures, as opposed to "the masculinization of modernism," with its accent on the "definitive" singular image. She works with narratives of the lives of women and idiosyncratic saint-poets, not the grand epic narratives of national modernity. She has used indigenous materials (temperas painted with a squirrel hair brush), experimented with children's book illustrations (the "When Champa Grew Up" series of the 1980s, based on the true story of a young girl harassed and killed for dowry), and worked with hanging scrolls fabricated as nomadic tent-like structures.

Navjot Altaf, a sculptor and new-media artist, puts a new spin on the notion of artistic intervention in the public sphere. She outgrew her orthodox Marxist orientation in the 1980s and began to explore the relationship between caste, ethnicity, and gender. Her engagement with rural reality and artists of rural subaltern background in the 1990s marks yet another interrogation of her early Marxist position. Navjot has facilitated workshops for her artist-colleagues (especially women) in rural areas to enable them to make their own sculptures. She has also initiated site-specific community projects such as Pilla Gudis, "temples for children" functioning as interactive spaces for youth, and Nalpar, the redesigning of public utility spaces for women at hand-pump sites. Her own video installations are charged with the poetics of abstraction, even as they play witness to religious pogroms and social and economic asymmetries.

Anita Dube's sculpture installations juxtapose the official mythologies of the establishment with those of everyday life, her aim being not to make monumental sculpture, but rather to assemble a concatenation of details that exposes the innermost psychic impulses and political motivations that the epoch wires into the individual. In her breakthrough 13-piece installation, *Silence (Blood Wedding)* (1997), human bones are refashioned into beaded and sequined necklaces and fans, blood-red feminine accessories that take on "patriarchal cocksureness" related to issues of gender and sexuality. This "blood wedding" hints at a deviant fertility rite, a lesbian marriage or even incest.

Anju Dodiya occupies the midpoint between generations. Her painterly project of self-dramatization reflects a retreat into the kingdom of the private self. Avoiding both the constrictions of the male gaze and the demands of the feminist-activist position, she articulates the creative anxieties of an artist embattled by contradictory expectations. Consider her in the curious roles of magician (in an eponymous painting, 1991); martyr (*Joan-I, After Carl Dreyer*, 1997) seductress and renunciate (*Leda*, 1996 and *Embrace/Vigil*, 2005); and hypnotist (*Two Orioles*, 1996).

By the late 1990s, the struggle for articulation fought by women artists in the early 1980s empowered a new generation. Ironically perhaps, many young artists felt free to decline the strictly feminist mandate, and addressed themselves to other engagements. The experience of this generation is informed by events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Communism, the liberalization of the Indian economy and resurgent hopes for a world without borders. Their experiences of radicalization have to do with the asymmetric politics of the globalization era: the resurgence of multinational corporations in postcolonial countries, organ-trafficking, labor outsourcing, the availability of digital media and so on.

Notably, 31-year-old new-media artist Shilpa Gupta does not express a single ideology. She endorses ideologies and identities tactically, depending on the particular situation she happens to be addressing: unequal global labor flows, questions of ethnicity and religious identity or virtuality. In Gupta's interactive installation, *Kidney Supermarket* (2002), viewers, seduced into playing the role of privileged customers, are offered takeaways- sugar gelatin kidneys- accompanied by quirky games and posters that advertise access routes to order kidneys from black, brown and white donors. The global ramifications of body piracy are revealed to viewer-customers through "fun and games" in a bizarre, phantasmagoric setting.

Gupta represents the new generation of women artists in India, which includes Vidya Kamat, Mithu Sen and Tejal Shah, all of whom use diverse media to express the politics of the female body inscribed with ritual mandates, social expectations and runaway private desires. These artists search for new positions, rather than guard old ideological bridgeheads. And perhaps this is a positive development, since ideologies can become ossified, while positions are always open to questioning and renewal.

-Nancy Adajania

[Go back to features](#)

[home](#) | [subscribe](#) | [where to find](#) | [back issues](#) | [advertising](#) | [links](#) | [about](#)

© Copyright 2006. Art Asia Pacific Publishing, LLC.