

The Art of Humour

Abhay Sardesai examines the various ways in which humour has been produced and the diverse uses Indian artists have put it to.



(Above and facing page top right)
Gaganendranath Tagore. Realm of the Absurd (Adbhut Lok). From a portfolio of fifteen satirical lithographs. 43.2 x 29.2 cms. Published by Vichitra Press, Kolkata. 1917.



George Grosz.
A detail from
Pillars of Society.
Oil on canvas.
78 ¼" x 42 ½".
1926.

1.

One of the ways in which modern art in Europe expressed its difference – its adversarial contestation of the principles of post-Renaissance perspectival art (which had got progressively academicised) – was by inventing ways of re-appropriating the human figure: from the turn of the 19th century well into the first three decades of the 20th century, you had various initiatives which tried to re-envision the human form. Where the Impressionists captured the figure, anchored as it was, in a force-field of everyday occasionalities, the Cubists went ahead and tried to re-invent the human figure by de-constructing it and re-configuring it along axes that confirmed its fractural and caricatural possibilities.¹

The satirical impulse in art (which informed the caricatural impulse)² already had a long history stretching back to various traditions: Hogarth and his vivid depictions of excesses in the 18th century and even Brueghel and his panoptical townscapes peopled by 'characters' in the 16th century, for instance, come readily to mind. The changing modes of capturing and producing visuality brought about by photography and the cinema; the influence of the graphic arts (comic-books which took off in Europe in the 19th century and the presence of influential graphic-caricaturists like Daumier, for instance); arts of Asian and African vintage, which had different conventions of figuration; and the socio-economic alienations produced by the Industrial revolution and the 1st World War, all together and separately influenced the modern imperatives to remodel the human figure. More than many others, the satirical modes of addressing the image, of undressing and redressing it as well, (with their determining principles anchored in tropes like irony and sarcasm)

became some of the more attractive and convincing modes to capture and question life, to inspire mockery and provoke contemplative laughter at the expense of a world that was changing dangerously and disturbingly.³

These modes, in many ways generated critiques of the idealised condition of normality. In their production therefore, they managed to foreground the abnormality of trait and feature as an operational ethic. The anomalous and the aberrant could at the same time be perceived as comical and grotesque. In fact, the grotesque itself could be delivered through the agencies of the comical. As the façade of civilisational propriety crumbled all around, the caricatural modes afforded some of the more creative options for artists who strove to critique the grotesque charade that modern life had itself turned into.

Though the visual environment of the cartoon and the painting are quite distinct, the function of the caricatural enthusiasm in both is not very dissimilar. Verism, an art movement in Germany, for instance, sought to 'hold a mirror to the ugliness of society'⁴, by using the creative energies of caricatural practices to discuss the

contaminations that had overtaken public life. The caricatural register, as used by artists like George Grosz (1893-1959) and Otto Dix (1891-1969) thus satirised with stunning efficacy the compromises that hypocritical public figures, bloated on their own self-importance, made to protect their own selfish interests.

2.

In India, Gaganendranath Tagore (1867–1938) in his *Birup Bajra* and *Adbhut Lok* litho-series (both came out in 1917) took a swipe at the convenient moralities of figures in power. Satirically presenting socio-political issues, he drew on diverse traditions, some of them performative like the Jatra and the Swang and other more painterly like the work of the Kalighat patuas. The graphic-caricatural mode was employed by him to expose the deformities of spirit so rampant in society: among others, the over-fed, salivating, lascivious brahmin, the rapacious zamindar and the westernised Indian gentleman were the main personages who became a part of his gallery of rogues.⁵ Derided for his complete self-absorption, his lack of social conscience and his lack of political will, the Bengali Babu came in for a sustained flaying, especially as the epitome of the so-called 'modern and westernised' graces of manner, dress and speech.⁶ Complementing Gaganendranath's angry rebukes of these 'mimic men' were his critiques of bhadralok Bengali society's blind acceptance of Western-style education which negatively influenced middle-class attitudes to indigenous traditions as well as to political initiatives that were anti-establishment like the nationalist movement. Gaganendranath's later caricatures which came out in the volume *Reform Screams* (1921) were even more self-consciously political in their scope, targeting new political projects and specific public figures like the Maharaja of Burdhaman, Chelmsford, the Governor-General, Montague, the Secretary of State and even Rabindranath Tagore himself.

In 19th century Calcutta, as the market for art started expanding thanks to the processes of urbanisation, the rural folk traditions of *pat* painting transformed in the hands of the migrant artists to produce water-colours (they used gouache and tempera on board earlier) of Hindu gods and goddesses as well as to address the unprecedented diversity of urban life. As a result, many of these Kalighat paintings (as the art-practice came to be known) described, using their signature bold lines and colorations, some of the city's most popular scandals. Most importantly, they took satirical pot-shots at the sanctimoniousness of the city's middle-classes. One can, in fact, trace the obsession with the dandyish and dissolute Babu-figure in early 20th century art (in Gaganendranath, as we have seen) to many of the searing images produced by these patuas. The Bat-tala prints and wood-cuts also explored the same themes, targeting the lascivious courtesan and the effeminate Babu with equal ardour.⁷

One of the early graphicists from the '40s was Chittoprosad (1915 – 78). Better known for his linocuts and drawings which graphically documented events like the Tebhaga and the Telangana revolts as well as natural calamities like the great Bengal famine of '43, his *Independence* caricature series harshly indicted political parties for their complete apathy towards the rights of the poor and the wretched. There is an attempt in his work at uncovering the dangerous nexus that exists between bureaucrats, politicians, industrialists, the so-called nationalists and British imperialists. Caught at the cross-roads of a politically uncertain future, the seasonal worker, the landless labourer, the migrant mill-hand are seen suffering thanks to the machinations of powerful Capitalist lobbies that have ganged up against any and every vision of genuine institutional egalitarianism.



Victim of a Charmer. Kalighat painting, 19th century. Watercolour on paper. 43 x 28 cms. Collection: Herwitz.



Chittoprosad. On the Eve of Independence. Brush and ink on paper. 28.6 x 39.4 cms. 1947.



Paritosh Sen. Man trying to hop into a Ladies Special. Acrylic on canvas. 60" x 54". 1992.

Paritosh Sen (b.1918), one of Chittoprosad's contemporaries, painted largish figures with a distinct Cubist emphasis: his image, rendered geometrically and invested with a considerable volume provided him with an opportunity to represent characters, once again from public life, in a humorous light. Sen was at the forefront of the Calcutta Group ('43), arguably the earliest modernist art movement in the country, and apart from a brief period in the late '60s when he dabbled in semi-abstractness, he has consistently explored the figurative tradition. Interestingly enough, the butts of ridicule and contempt that one sees caricatured, say, in the works of Gaganendranath continue being lavished attention on, by Sen as well. (In many of these post-Gaganendranath artists, one can see an obsession with tried and tested typologies, which at times, can prove to be quite tiresome and limiting). Spanning work done for over three decades, his burly, self-contented *Politicians* come together to form a series (from the smoking cherubic *Politician on the Promenade* – oil on plywood in '56 to the nervous but dangerous *Rabble Rouser* – water colour on paper in '79). Not taking into consideration his crudely sexist paintings of fat women (*Through the Revolving Doors* triptych in '82 with men gazing at a woman's ample backside to the *Woman under Shower* series in '99) which evoke humour through rude and repetitive descriptions, one of his more successful series was the one in the mid '80s involving 24 acrylics on board, interpreting Ramakrishna's teachings. Pitted against the solemnity of the saint's utterances, the desperate angler, the hedonistic zamindar and the hemp-smoking sadhus come across as creatures of extravagant excess. Sen has most redeemingly also made himself the target of his jibes: his later *Self-portraits* many of which in the '80s carried 'dignified' self-assessments transformed from the '90s to showcase a spindly, scare-crowy figure, lost in thought, desperately and often comically battling the onset of age.⁵

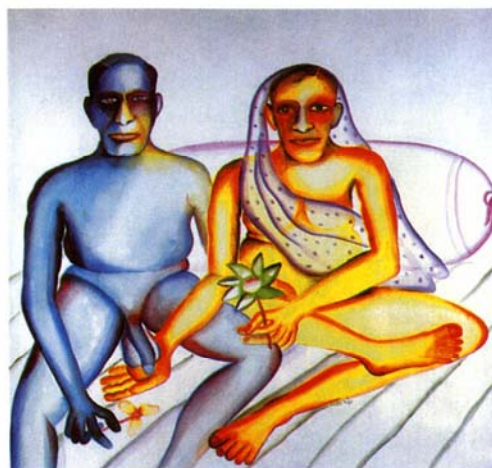
Jogen Chaudhuri's (b. 1939) works incorporate an obsessive re-interpretation of human corporeality: his bonelessly ripe figures with cross-hatchy skin-textures remind you once again of the compulsively fleshy, almost orotund characters from earlier Bengali folk *pat* traditions. Assembled singly or in twos or threes, most of his figures seem to lend themselves to a humorous self-production, in terms that are not only lineamental but also situational (from the *Man on Sofa* ('76) with curled lips, bloated as much on excessive self-regard to *The Man on a Blue Platform* ('88), who is none other than the friendly neighbourhood politician on the make). His *Couples*, produced consistently over the last thirty-five years, are arranged with gestural guile by the artist to dwell on an erotic tension that is comical in many cases – bald, old men with paunches and flagging passions cohabiting with young, attractive women, for instance.

In most of K G Subramanyan's (b. 1924) work, the figures are assembled in different poses that have been ambiguously declared: a proposition that allows for the production of a visual environment of high theatricality. The figures, that have been "drawn with colour", as R Siva Kumar puts it, have a kind of a proto- caricatural character and look like as if they have been composed out of kneaded flesh and bone that has been whimsically slapped up. Their constitution allows them to inhabit a world that is neither entirely populated by this-worldly human beings nor by netherworldly cartoons: it is this appreciation of liminality that gives Subramanyan the initiative to provoke a sentiment that is comic (almost hilarious on occasion) and distinctly solemn at one and the same time. There is a deliberate carelessness with which the pictorial space is complementarily massed with colours and shapes: the animated gestures that these figures slip into helps the artist evoke a space that is half-imagined and half-real (*The Inayat Khan Series* from the late '80s for instance): it is also a space which assembles several incongruent imageries simultaneously. The constant interplay between the panellised spaces, between the two sides in the case of the reverse-paintings, for instance, provoke rich interior conversations between images that grow into each other in several special chaotic capacities.⁹



Jogen Chowdhury. Couple in Blue. Oil on canvas. 121.5 x 121.5 cms. 1994.

The humour in Bhupen Khakhar's (1934 – 2003) works stems from a kind of an anti-orthodox, anti-establishment attitude which contests middle-class pieties, shocks upper-class sensitivities and upturns the high-art expectations of the avant-garde. Influenced by the loud charms of Pop Art, Khakhar uses popular kitschy visual registers to parody colonial ethnographic documentation (in his *Trades* series in '72, for instance), to mock the societal codes of normative heterosexuality (paintings from the '80s onwards continuing well into the late '90s) and to disturb the rigid codes of morality with his celebratory explorations of so-called 'deviant' sexual practices including transvestism (*In a Boat* from '84 and *Sakhibhav* from '95 for instance). Many of his works are marked by a conjuring up of 'lurid' fantasies which involve, among others, beasts, 'freaks' and 'normal men' (*An Old Man from Valsad who had five penises suffered from a runny nose*, '95, *The Picture of their 30th Wedding Anniversary*, '98 for instance) engaging in subversive, sometimes explicit displays of affection with a certain gleeful disregard for the world at large.¹⁰



Bhupen Khakhar. *Picture Taken on Their 30th Wedding Anniversary*. Watercolour on paper. 110 x 110 cms. 1998.

Amit Ambalal's (b.1943) works display an unbridled celebration of the mischievous impulse: his paintings (gouaches on paper and acrylics on canvas or paper) generally build up an improbable narrative with men, women, cows, tigers, mosquitoes caught in the throes of 'performing' acts with and 'doing' things to each other, more often than not, simultaneously. Animals french-kiss each other, a lone insect terrorises a sleeping figure, a foetoid, tube-locked man sucks on a cow's udders from inside its body even as a calf sucks on its udders from the outside: locked in different kinds of intense mutualities, these figures come together in images which can well claim for themselves the status of modern-day fables, referring as they do to characters we have already met in parables or discussing, as they do, certain bewilderingly ridiculous states of being and becoming. (See the *Profile of Amit Ambalal* by Esther David in this issue.)

3.

One of the defining features of a lot of art produced over the last twenty years by a new generation of artists has been the almost categorical summoning up of the element of play. Setting up a series of disturbances which unsettle the codified acts of confrontation that we find a lot of 'serious' art in the throes of, the persiflagic component inherent in their art-strategies plumbs deep the resources of critical ambiguity, to name just one of the key tropological inspirations, helping such imaging-initiatives to battle allusively, allegorically against the guile and double-speak of socio-political issues and institutions that they seek to critique, helping also to devise ruses to outmanoeuvre especially the dangerously attractive imagologies born out of the rapacious relationship between the cultures of Globalization (the font of new imperialistic processes) and the cultures that are indigenously traditional and modern. A lot of such art is far from being irresponsible therefore. On the contrary, it acquires a spin that is distinctly political recovering a spirit that is resistant to status-quoisms of all kinds.

Atul Dodiya (b.1959), easily one of the finest painters of our times, uses the resources of anachronism to carry forward a subversive dialogue with history (in the case of a painting like *Gangavataran: After Raja Ravi Varma*, Oil, acrylic and marble dust on canvas, 1998 for example, the humour is produced at the expense of the history of art itself.) He paints himself into his works in several capacities, once again unfixing the givens of a chronologically constructed past and present. Quoting tellingly from the works of other artists, writers and film-makers gives him the initiative to create paintings that are amusingly polymorphic; at the same time, it allows him to discuss the elusive continuities and discontinuities between the various socio-political image-worlds that we simultaneously cohabit. Kausik Mukhopadhyay's (b.1960) assisted ready-mades (Mixed media, 2000)

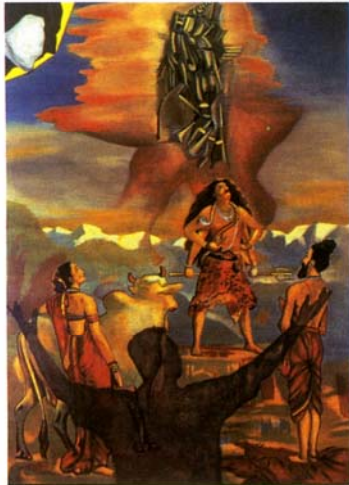


K. G. Subramanyan. *The Beast below the Skin*. 2002.



Amit Ambalal. *Fruits of Fear*. Gouache on paper. 75 x 52 cms. 2000.

LEAD ESSAY



Atul Dodiya. *Gangavataran: After Raja Ravi Varma*. Oil, acrylic and marble dust on canvas. 1998.

parody in a delightfully Dadaistic manner, the extravagant fulsomeness of designer chairs: as anti-commodities, they gleefully expose the inane flourishes that the fashion industry packages as expensive, marketable designs. In a similar key, some of Sudarshan Shetty's (b.1961) giant toy-like sculptural assemblages are ironic meditations on the seductions of the modern-day market-place.

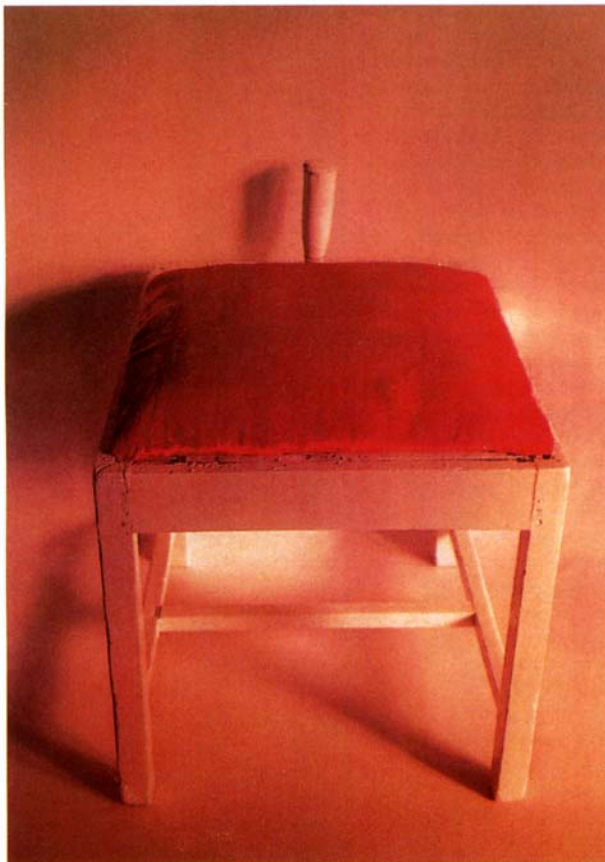
In many of his later works, Surendran Nair (b.1956) de-iconicises real and mythological figures like the Buddha, Priapus, Icarus and Mephistopheles by distributing their signature gestures, their definitional features in each other or by re-contextualising them in mixed mythico-historical contexts. This complementary process of re-iconicisation is wickedly managed, the profoundly pun-happy titles contributing significantly: a Bahubali-figure becomes a sports shoe-clad, earphone-strapped, polythene-bag shopper listening to the music coursing out of his own navel even as in another work, a lean-framed Priapus stares into the middle-distance, arms akimbo as his extraordinarily notorious genitals get transformed into the flaccid neck of a swan (from the *cuckooonebulopolis* series, oil on canvas, 2003)¹¹ Some of Chintan Upadhyay's (b.1974) early works also problematise the sexual experience through the act of assembling male and female sexual organs in hilariously construed poses, modern-day lingas and yonis, so to say, made out of a diversity of recycled materials.¹²

Quite a few contemporary artists have drawn liberally from the image-bag of popular culture. N. Pushpamala's (b.1956) photo-installations have her participating in a masquerade where she slips into stereotypical roles that we find actresses performing in Hindi films – the vamp and the holier-than-thou

hausfrau, among others. She also enters sleekly into the stock matrimonial photograph to mock the conventions of image-making that package women, preparing and readying them for an arranged marriage. Bringing to mind some of Bhupen Khakhar's impersonations in the 70s, her works create counter- clichés through humorous role-play, to unsettle the airtight character-constructions that filmic and photographic texts help proliferate.¹³

In the absence of any 'underground art initiatives' which aim at challenging the absolutes of our everyday lives and the conservatism of our art practices, Shilpa Gupta's (b.1976) art activism comes as a breath of fresh air. She has critiqued the art market (put hair-waxing strips for 'sale' in '98), commented on the organ trade (the *Kidney Supermarket* in '02, which had sugar-cast kidneys hung in plastic boxes) and set up confrontations that interrogate the processes of racism and sexism (the green and red buttoned robotic installation, which shouted slogans and passed comments of a sexist and racist nature at the recently opened *subTerrain* show.) In fact, if interactive art has to hit its point home and hit it hard, it has to learn to package its message humorously, so that the viewer gets drawn in readily to then get involved in the to-and-fro of signification.

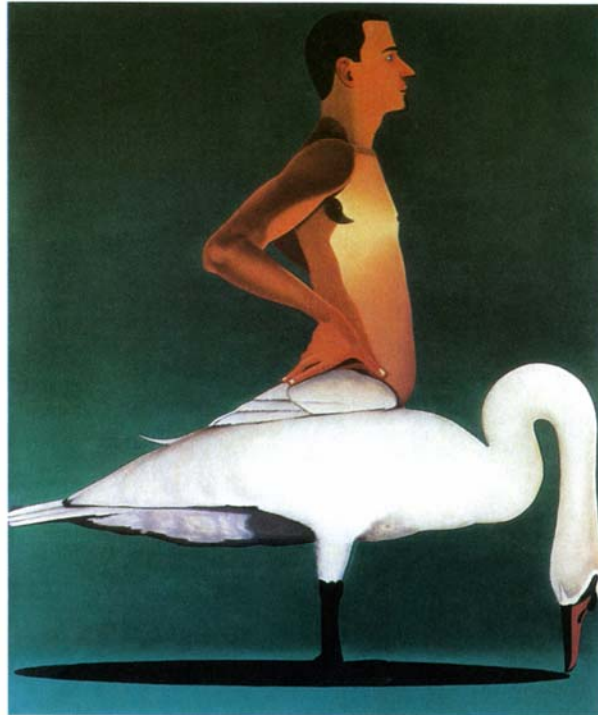
It is at times like these, when one finds very few artists in the field who are willing to radically shock the viewer out of his or her complacency, that one remembers and misses Bhupen Khakhar, who for over thirty years, continued to outrage the comfortable fixities of the art world, continued to produce images that upset several orthodoxies: mocking most tellingly, the sacrosancties of our collective moral universe to arrive at and explore the serious impulse that dwells deep within the humorous.



Kausik Mukhopadhyay. *Assisted Ready-mades*. Wood and velvet. 25" x 18" x 17". 2000.

Notes:

- 1 The Abstractionists, for instance, totally evacuated the figure layering the image-space with diverse colorations and texturalities. The critique of the modes of representation implied, among other things, a critique also of the act of viewing that privileged the integrity of the figure, of the body produced in painting – a reverence born out of the post-Renaissance re-instatement of the human being at the centre of the natural world, which considered man as the chosen heir, who played host to ever-crystallising civilisational processes that were obviously European.
- 2 The Caricatural impulse invokes caricatural modes which involve sets of interventions, both formal and substantial that not only draw on the enthusiasms of the actual cartoon but also go much beyond, to create newer conventions of articulating the derisive and the hyperbolic.
- 3 One must however not forget the contribution of movements like Dadaism and Surrealism as far as the production of humour in 20th century art is concerned. Questioning the heritage of early Modernism, Dadaism cocked a snook at established notions of what art was supposed to be and how it was supposed to be created. Born out of a sense of betrayal that artists like Arp, Tzara, Duchamp felt at the progressive bourgeoisisation of most early Modern art movements and their tacit involvement in the 1st World War, Dadaism deliberately produced art that was anarchic and provisional. Interestingly therefore, the humour that these artists generated through their works was thus also born as much out of a sense of outrage and hurt as from the desire to rebel against ossified conventions of image-making. Surrealism, in some ways, took the subversive programme of the Dadaists further: using art to plumb the depths of the Unconscious, to explore the structures of dreams, artists like Ernst, Miro, Magritte, De Chirico and Dali sought to capture and even celebrate the unreal, the fantastic and the irrational. The extended interface between the world of reality and the world of illusion helped produce art (and one must admit that all the Surrealists are quite distinct in their approaches) that tugged at the limits of everyday logic rendering it amusing and sometimes shocking as well.
- 4 Quoted partially from *Art-isms* by Arp and Lissitzky which includes a kind of a survey of modern art from 1914 – 24. See *The Story of Modern Art* by Norbert Lynton, Phaidon, 1980.
- 5 See Ratan Parimoo's chapter on *The Pictorial World of Gaganendranath* from the book *The Art of the Three Tagores: Abanindranath, Gaganendranath, Rabindranath: From Revivalism to Modernity* (to be published soon.)
- 6 Cartoon series like the Hogarthian *Baboo's Progress* in 1877 and plays like Jyotirindranath Tagore's *The False Baboo* in 1900 were some of the other satirical productions which conducted critical appraisals of the Babu figure.
- 7 See *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art – Artists, aesthetics and nationalism in Bengal 1850 – 1920* by Tapati Guha-Thakurta, CUP, 1992. Also, see *Kalighat Painting – Images from a Changing World* by Jyotindra Jain, Mapin, 1999.
- 8 'Full of Chaplinesque pathos' is a phrase the painter uses elsewhere but it could well apply to his Self-portraits. See *Paritosh Sen: In Retrospect* (Mapin, Ahmedabad, 2001) with essays by Manasij Majumdar, Ella Dutta, Kunal Chakrabarti and Sen himself. See especially Dutta's *The Comic Muse*.
- 9 As Geeta Kapur says in *Mid-Century Ironies* in *When was Modernism*, Tulika, 2000 " He will use wit as a way of amending the conservative system of signs that is a feature of all art inheritances; he will use it also to introduce sheer comedy after the rout. Like the modernists, Subramanyan uses wit with the desire to remake the world in play."
- 10 See Geeta Kapur's essay *View from the Teashop* from her *Contemporary Indian Artists*, Vikas, New Delhi, 1978. Also see Timothy Hyman's *Bhupen Khakhar*, Chemould, Bombay 1997.
- 11 Interestingly enough, one finds artists like the Singh twins, who are involved in modernising the miniature also taking recourse to the act of re-imagining various modern-day icons (David Beckham, Bill Clinton, et al) in situations, roles and settings that are anachronistic and sometimes deliberately absurd. The process of critical re-iconicisation here is less allusive: it is more direct and literal.)
- 12 Here, one remembers Bharti Kher's (b.1969) installation made last year. Called *You are what you see*, it had two sperm-bindi covered, copulating fibreglass dogs placed at the red-carpeted entrance of a building and made a strong case for an un-self-conscious display of the sexual act mocking at the same time the voyeuristic mind-set of gawking Indians.
- 13 Some of the other artists who have produced humour consistently in their works include Anandjit Ray (b.1965) who plans surreal gambits in many of his paintings and water colours which result in inventive and comic juxtapositions and Naina Kanodia (b.1950) who fields stiff, awkward and deadpan figures in a variety of formal and informal situations (family get-togethers, charity auctions and business lunches, for instance): using the resources of naive art, Kanodia explores in her own limited way, the kitschiness of our city life as well. 1,7



Surendran Nair. *Priapus at his wits end (cuckooonebulopolis)*.
Oil on canvas. 180 x 150 cms.



Naina Kanodia. *The Art of Charity*.
Oil on canvas. 36" x 42".