

DEAD-END NARRATIVES OR OPEN-ENDED STORIES?

Deirdre King separates myth from reality at an exhibition of contemporary Indian art in Chicago.

INDIAN ART'S LONG-STANDING PREOCCUPATION WITH narrative has grown in contemporary times to accommodate the interrogation of the anti-narrative impulse one finds quite often in Modernism. This stance has helped contest certain intellectual, cultural, and ideological constructs, while privileging certain others. Instead of looking closely at the complexity of the narrative tradition in contemporary Indian art, *New Narratives: Contemporary Art from India*, a touring exhibition at The Chicago Cultural Centre, USA, mounted from July 21st to September 23rd, treated the debate between narrative and non-narrative modes of art-making as irrelevant. The show offered a reductive idea of narrative as a simple, plotted telling of a story through pictures.

Curated by Betty Seid with Johan Pijnappel as consulting curator, *New Narratives* aimed to "celebrate India's artistic independence" in the context of her rising global presence.¹ The work of 21 artists in various media was arranged in three sections: 'Looking Inward: Narratives of the Self' dealt with subjective narratives, 'Looking Outward: Contemporary Observations' related to daily and political life, while 'Looking Backward: Interpreting Texts' added to existing tales. Undeniably, the works in the exhibition could be read through these descriptive categories. However, these categories also led to the closure of meaning, thinning the debate instead of thickening it, simplifying artists' works, and exposing their weaknesses.

At the start of the show, we encountered Jayashree Chakravarty's huge painted paper scrolls, *Personal Space* (2003), alongside Anju Dodiya's three iconic paintings, *The Path of Berries* (2005), *Cloud Hunter* (2005), and *Island of Greed* (2005). Also nearby, was Gulammohammed Sheikh's *Book of Journeys* (1996), which was a diaristic presentation of images on a circular paper accordion. The placement of these works foregrounded a Jungian idea of narrative. Taken together, their intense inwardness, circular structures suggestive



Anju Dodiya. *The Path of Berries*. Acrylic on mattress. 78" x 46" x 7". 2005. FROM THE SHUMITA AND ARANI BOSE COLLECTION, NEW YORK. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY BOSE PACIA GALLERY AND THE ARTIST

of mandalas, and their mythic ambience, set up an overly unified reading, which was hard to shake off, as you moved through the rest of the show. In this context, Sheba Chhachhi's *Neelkanth (Blue Throat): poison/nectar* (2002) and Atul Dodiya's *Devoured Darkness, I, III, V* (2006) in the third section proved to be great casualties. Messier relationships between pieces could have stimulated unexpected dialogues and thrown up less familiar themes.

The notion of myth, which underwrote *New Narratives*, was particularly problematic. In her catalogue, Seid contextualised the majority of the artists in the show as working within an Indian narrative tradition, in which, time is cyclical: "measured in unfathomable rotating eons in which events recur infinitely. Every myth repeats...mocking the transience of time with the permanence of repetition." Put alongside Seid's view that narrative "manufactures a cultural identity on a macro-level and an individual identity on a micro-level" and her attempt to



Gulammohammed Sheikh. *Book of Journeys*. Digitally reproduced. 36-page bound book in an accordion format; inkjet facsimile images on Arches 300 GSM watercolour paper (printing supervised by the artist). 9.76" x 10.55" (fully extended). 1996 onwards. Printed by Sukhdev Rathod. COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST.

isolate India's "artistic independence", *New Narratives* came dangerously close to suggesting that India is artistically remote from international discourse, mired in reactionary mythopoeiac thinking, and incapable of 'looking forward'.

Myth is a difficult subject. On the one hand, it is the province of colourful iconographies of demons and gods - the fantastic, the poetic, and the oneiric - a treasure-trove of psychological metaphors; on the other, it is the province of totalitarianism and conservative ideologies of oppression. It harbours essentialist obsessions and fixes idealised values in a hypostatic past (experiences of Post-War Fascism in Germany, Spain, Italy, and Soviet Communism bear this out). In art, such atemporality is often equated with Modernism's aesthetics of 'presence'.

In fact, despite their one-dimensional contextualisations, a significant number of the works in *New Narratives* critically engaged with structures of mythical thought. Valay Shende's video, *Scrolls* (2002), superimposed

'breaking news' broadcasts (including announcements concerning missing and found persons) over scenes from the TV serialisation of the *Mababarata*. Shende's work, like Vasudha Thozhur's paintings, which were also made in response to the 2002 Gujarat violence, insisted on questioning art's translation of reality into rarefied epic-texts. In Tushar Joag's *Jataka Trilogy* (2004), a new Utopia, born of the butchery of war and popular cartoons, was projected as a form of art. As the video told us, it was like "a gob of spittle, languorously sliding down the tiles of some ravaged museum, carrying the germ of new cultures or a culture of new germs."

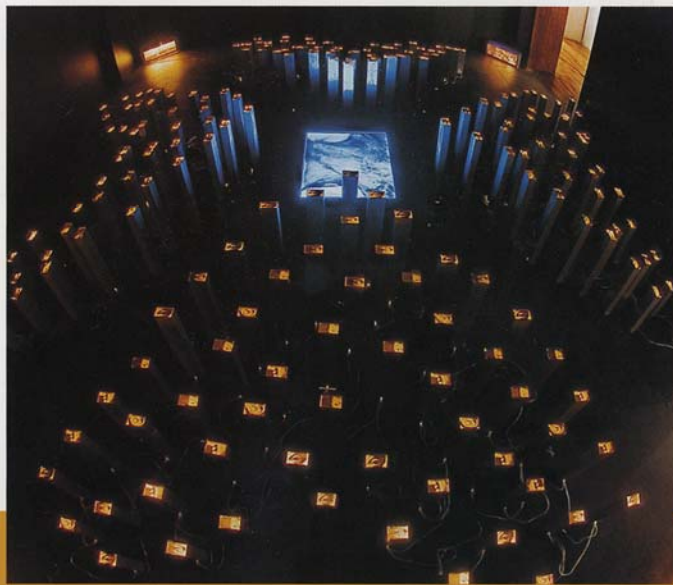
Shilpa Gupta's interactive game-cum-video installation, *Untitled* (2004), encapsulated the dangers of pre-ordained meaning. The viewer's seeming freedom to direct the drills - making them "kill" or "shop" - of seven women in camouflage gear was an illusion: the women acted according to a repetitive, pre-set programme, whatever the apparent variations. The artist's voice, mildly repeating "Terror, Terror, War on

Terror" in the background suggested that contemporary society sees violent acts as nothing more than a game.

Other artists tried to shock viewers out of their alienation - whether gender-based or migration-determined. Interesting formal strategies mined the disjunctions between different narratives and narrative forms - this helped explore the fluidity of signification even as signs were released from their habituated systems.

Both Ranbir Kaleka and Nalini Malani overlaid paintings with projections. In Malani's *Unity in Diversity* (2003), flickering projections of real facial expressions 'woke up' the painted musicians of Raja Ravi Varma's 19th Century *Galaxy of Musicians* from their sleep of harmony. The work questioned political complacency and provided the viewer with the means to explore two different conflicting moments in time. Kaleka's four-panel *Crossings* (2005) dealt with a coming-of-age ceremony and a homeless group's

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Sheba Chhachhi. *Neelkanth (Blue Throat): poison/nectar.* Installation with flat screen, 240 aluminum towers each with photograph and light, four translite boxes, 5.5-minute video loop. Installation size variable. 2002.

COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY THE ARTIST.



Ranbir Kaleka. *Crossings.* Four-channel video installation with four acrylic paintings on canvas, sound. 15 minutes. 2005. FROM THE SHUMITA AND ARANI BOSE COLLECTION, NEW YORK. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY BOSE PACIA GALLERY AND THE ARTIST.

migration. Projections originally congruent with the painting moved around to inhabit different screens, weaving new narratives, blurring boundaries. Unfortunately, there was an over-reliance on seductive effects.

Palimpsestic techniques were used by Nalini Malani and Tejal Shah to explode constructed notions of sexuality. In Shah's video, *Chingari Chumma* (2000), a take on a Bollywood kidnapping story, the male dacoit and the heroine were played by characters who undermined Bollywood stereotyping, thus overturning idealised gender roles. Anju Dodiya's artworks created a dialogue between intricate layers of painted imagery (scuffed or thickly applied) and the patterns on underlying mattresses. The viewer was drawn into the works to peruse their formal and conceptual enigmas and then thrust out again

to experience the reverie of the central female figures: in all three of Dodiya's paintings, women gazed introspectively – they seemed to occupy some extraordinary, twilight zone.

Instead of allowing us the comfort of stories with their loose ends tied up, our era of instability forces us to make sense of seeming insanity, even as we search for new meanings. The works of some of the artists nonetheless revealed the intricacies of signification that were denied by the simplistic curatorial project. Works by these artists emphasised the tension involved in the effort to find an open-ended narrative that encompassed conflict and contradiction. This was apparent in N.S. Harsha's series of paintings, *Charming Nation* (2006) and Subodh Gupta's *Three Cows* (2003). Jitish Kallat's *Death of Distance* (2006) had superimposed two accounts across five

lenticular prints, one from the UN and one from the Indo-Asian News Service, which 'evaluated' the worth of a rupee. One account talked of a child who had committed suicide because its family could not afford the rupee necessary for a school meal while the other celebrated the fact that the one rupee cost of a STD call from one end of the country to the other marked the death of distance. The two stories could not be read simultaneously; viewers had to adopt different positions to read either of them. Yet, each flickered in the background of the other – neither fully integrated nor dissolved. Between sense and nonsense, coherence is neither simple nor absolute.

END-NOTE

¹ The quote is from **Betty Seid's** introduction in the exhibition catalogue.