



Anju Dodiya. *Orbit*. Screen print on fabric and on stencil-washed pigment-stained STPI cotton paper with magazine paper inclusions, acrylic, gold leaf, watercolour and abaca pulp. 72" x 87.75". 2007.

The Looking Glass World

Doe-eyed damsels, aristocratic gentlemen and prancing animals make a come-back at Anju Dodiya's latest show, but **Zehra Jumabhoy** is bored by their company.

ALL THAT GLITTERS ISN'T GOLD, CLEVER PEOPLE ARE ALWAYS telling us. In one case, at least, they might have a point. At Anju Dodiya's latest exhibition, *All Night I Shall Gallop* (which over-ran Bodhi Space and Bodhi Kalaghoda in Bombay from February the 15th to March the 5th), shiny, silvery things didn't arrest our attention for long.

Dodiya used gold foil, broken mirrors and tinsel fabric in her last show, *Throne of Frost* (2007), to better effect. There, painting-installations were spread out along the edges of a rectangle of shattered mirrors, set in the Durbar Hall of Laxmi Vilas Palace at Baroda, much like an army gingerly lining-up on a battlefield. But, if Dodiya's painted and embroidered figures

managed to march across themes like power, pomp and the evanescence of life in 2007 with great aplomb, they fell flat on their face in her latest solo's attempts to make them stride across similar territory.

Dodiya's recent mixed media offerings were the product of an Artist Residency at The Singapore Print Tyler Institute. Here, she worked under the tutelage of Master Papermaker Richard Hungerford and Chief Printmaker Eitaro Ogawa to make 55 works that deliberately subverted the way we generally treat prints in India - i.e. as a means of reproducing artworks en masse. Her collage-like concoctions (of fabric, thread, magazine cut-outs and paper-pulp) functioned as individual artworks in their own right.

[Review]

Dodiya has always been interested in the overlaps between art and everyday artifice. She is less concerned with telling a story than with depicting the similar ways in which identity - especially female identity - is performed in both art and life. In *All Night...*, feminine role-playing retained centre-stage. In *Waterfall*, scenes from domestic and private life were contrasted with those from the great outdoors: a woman in a riding habit perched side-saddle on a horse as she trotted onto the edge of a filigreed doily that Dodiya had pasted over the page. Allusions to freedom and entrapment danced around each other in other images in *Waterfall* too: lovers gleaned from Japanese prints had long pieces of black thread stitched over them - from a distance these strands resembled the bars of a cage.

With this show, though, Dodiya's cast of characters - self-portraits, slit-eyed beauties from the pleasure quarters of Edo (copied from the Japanese wood-block prints known as Ukiyo-e) as well as miniature versions of Victorian aristocrats acted on a gloomy stage. Dodiya relied heavily on Sylvia Plath's painfully poignant poetry, and the activities of her avatars mingled with fragmented quotations. In *Orbit*, a flouncy lady rushed towards a looming orb, in the centre of which glinted multi-hued jewels: blood-red rubies, deep-green emeralds and sparkly diamonds. Nearby, a delicate female hand swirled an over-large ring. Marriage and our desire for material tokens of affection were discussed - and the futility of both was underscored by Plath's prophecy of doom: "Lies. Lies and a grief."

The catalogue to the show argues that Dodiya's image-packed artworks are impossible to de-code, that they only hint at resolutions. While this might be true of Dodiya's imagery in general, there were enough clues in *All Night...* that pointed in the direction of maudlin self-indulgence. In *Throne...*, visual and literary quotations stayed on the right side of mystery to leave something to our imaginations, at Dodiya's latest venture in Bombay they didn't. At the palace, shattered mirrors prevented us from walking up-close to the work and functioned as distancing mechanisms - befuddling our attempts at straightforward interpretations. Here, splintered mirrors and gleaming, reflective surfaces became all-too-obvious reminders of death and danger. In *Rain II*, the downpour consisted of flying fragments of glass veering perilously close to a melancholy woman. A menacing pair of shears lurked close to her visage. "I am the magician's girl who does not flinch," read the accompanying text - in case we were about to dispute her bravery. In *Mirrors Can Kill and Kill - Deer*, a join-the-dot drawing of a deer, a self-portrait of the artist and faint



Anju Dodiya. *Mirrors Can Kill and Talk - Deer*. Screen print and lithograph on pigment-stained STPI cotton paper with watercolour, acrylic, molding paste, carborundum grit and glass mirrors. 66" x 51.75". 2007.

sketches of sad-eyed women faced an onslaught of sharp-edged silvery metal. The mirrors reflected both the people in the print and those of us peering into it - vanity, pain and fractured identity were all par for the course.

Perhaps, Dodiya would have done better to concentrate on fewer works where she could have exercised her considerable talents for staging the different roles people play to more subtle effect. Also, justifications in the catalogue notwithstanding, there is a difference between drawing from a familiar pool of imagery that artist and viewer alike can develop affection for, and utilizing motifs so similar to a previous show that they come across looking tired. To extend Dodiya's own metaphor - perhaps, her latest project galloped too close on the heels of the last one to give her time to catch her breath?