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ART, CRAFT & CRITIQUE

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VISUAL ARTS



Analytical Engine (Bose Pacia, Jan 24-Feb 20) is that creature too scarcely and fleetingly glimpsed in India: an intelligently curated show, bringing together, under a single but complex idea, the very diverse work of ten contemporary artists. It is a difficult show, and Heidi Fichtner's curatorial note does not make it any easier. But this is the right kind of difficulty — compelling us to look, think and connect, and then keep looking and thinking. And perhaps to go back home, do some more thinking, reading and connecting, and then allow ourselves to look at the world a little differently — the one 'out there' as well as inside our heads, and the one that we call, or hesitate to call, art.

The eponymous Analytical Engine, like the mysterious engine in Milton's *Lycidas*, is "two-handed". Each work in the show mediates between maker and viewer to trigger analysis in both, running the critical into the creative. We enter the gallery and are immediately confronted with a cacophony of talk and laughter coming out of three, comic-looking *momo*-steamers placed on pink, wooden stools. Next to these is a beautifully complicated rope-and-bamboo structure, casting a lattice of shadows on the wall, with an unfinished and unclothed Saraswati placed inside, nestling a single marigold in her hand. In front is a large canvas with shimmering gold and green patches stuck on to it in layers, and the idea of stuck-on layers rendered literal by a Fevicol bottle-seal stuck on the canvas. On the right is a large print of what looks like a huge ball of hair or fibre, with other little prints next to it that resemble boxes of grains, pulses and spice from far, but become prints of foliage and of natural textures on a closer look. Hanging above these, from the high beams, is a large, patterned, rug-like piece.

We are only given the artists' names on the walls (Navin Thomas, Asim Waqif, Mona Rai, Rohini Devasher and Sophie Christopher respectively), and no titles or descriptions. So we simply look, listen and imagine the textures of what we must not touch, and even before we start thinking about what each work might 'mean', we start figuring out that the curator has juxtaposed two kinds of art in this show. First, art that looks obviously contemporary and installed, as if produced by machines or computers, and therefore readily identifiable by most people as 'postmodern'. Second, art that looks just as obviously handmade, woven, printed, glued on or stitched, as if by an artisan or craftsman who puts traditional materials together with nothing but a pair of skilled hands. Yet, this distinction between the installed and the crafted becomes difficult to sustain as we begin to notice that both halves of the show are informed alike by a sensibility that is essentially modern and critical. *Analytical Engine* opens up, and also attempts to bridge, the divide between art and craft, manual and digital, word and image, original and reproduced, theory and practice, thinking and making.

Curatorially, this is done by presenting the works untitled and undescribed, but keeping the titles, descriptions and notes as separate hand-outs that can be used optionally by viewers to add more layers to their response, with information regarding medium and process or conceptual frameworks afforded by titles like *bid for beyond* (Christopher), *Iteration II* (Devasher) or *USE_ME.EXE* (Kiran Subbaiah).

In their different ways, Abhishek Hazra, Anita Dube and Rakhi Peswani stimulate both the senses and the intellect by refusing to let the viewer rest securely on either side of looking and thinking (or even looking and listening), by giving him too much to do with his senses, mind and memory all at once. Hazra's video takes us through a long sequence of index-cards-cum-currency-notes, with textual fragments from the Acknowledgements sections of South Asian academic books printed on them. His soundtrack continually plays extracts from a lively and engaging interview with members of an organization that supports the arts,

and with which Hazra was doing a residency while making this video. *Index of Debt* is not only about art and academia, but also about the globally muddled relationships between making, viewing, showing, selling, buying and travelling that inevitably make up the “circuits of capital and [the] conditions that enable artistic production”. (The curator tells us that part of the cacophony coming out of Thomas’s *momo*-steamers is Geeta Kapur reading out from her *When Was Modernism?*)

Anita Dube’s profoundly naughty *I-word Jali* (picture) mixes lush decorativeness, verbal wit and self-parodying intensity to confront us with a series of cut-out words: *intense, image, idea, instinct, immediacy, imagination*. Only when we physically distance ourselves from the work can we read its flamboyant patterns as words. But the velvety texture of Dube’s materials draws us closer, as we are compelled to feel the work furtively with our fingertips (as I did), meaning turning into texture as reading gives way to looking and touching. And the word *nowhere* forlornly threads itself into the embroidered and time-worn layers of Peswani’s Louise Bourgeoisque (and mildly Tracey Eminian) framed fabrics. To learn later that they are called *Body Echoes (locating craft)* both does, and does not, matter.