

Modern Marks . India

By Pamela Auchincloss



India is capturing the attention of entrepreneurs, investors, arbitrators of culture and journalists from around the world.



A recent *New York Times* Sunday magazine featured a seven-page article on Mumbai (formerly Bombay), focusing on its stylish and moneyed upper class. Recent auctions of Indian art at Sotheby's and Christie's made strong showings, despite the fact that the neighboring Chinese art auctions carried estimates many times that of their Indian counterparts. The wealthy, assimilated expatriate communities of Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) in New York, London, Hong Kong and beyond are influential in directing the gaze of western culture towards the exotic, and often unknown, east.

In keeping with this growing interest, there are a number of exhibitions that are bringing the contemporary art scene to audiences in the U.S. and Europe. "Gateway Bombay" [www.pem.org] at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts (through December 7, 2007), is curated by Susan Bean and draws exclusively from a single-family collection of Indian art, providing an insightful viewpoint on the evolution of the Indian aesthetic from the mid-20th century to the present. "Tiger by the Tail! Women Artists of India Transforming Culture" [www.brandeis.edu] at the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts (through December 14, 2007), curated by Elinor Gadon, Roobina Karode and Wendy Tarlow Kaplan, challenges social oppression and gender discrimination and provides new models for the empowerment of women. India's strong tradition of figurative, narrative painting goes back several decades. In the exhibition "Horn Please: The Narrative in Contemporary Indian Art" [www.kunstmuseumbern.ch], curated by Bernhard Fibicher and Suman Gopinath at the Kunstmuseum Bern, Switzerland (through January 6, 2008), the journey of the narrative tradition from the 1980s to the present traces certain critical moments in Indian art—moments of assimilation and intervention—through which a particular kind of narrative was constructed.

"India: Public Places/Private Spaces" [www.newarkmuseum.org] at the Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey (through December 6, 2007), co-curated by Gayatri Sinha and Paul Sternberger, examines the roles of photojournalism, portraiture and street photography in contemporary Indian art. In his catalogue essay "Clouding the Mirror," Sternberger notes: "Through a variety of

Pushpamala N. Hasya (laughter), 2000-03, from "The Navarasa Suite"



“Pushpamala N. builds ambiguous narratives with contexts that recall the vernacular studio photography, the kitschy charm of Raja Ravi Varma paintings and the melodrama of Bollywood film stills.”



— Surekha, *The Other Self*, 2005



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strategies ranging from photojournalistic reportage to poetically elusive narratives, artists in this exhibition reveal many contentious layers of meaning in their images. They exploit the tension between an objective reality of the world that is recorded and their use of photography and video as tools of self-conscious subjective expression.”

For Sheba Chhachhi (APT Mumbai), photography began as a tool for straightforward documentation of The Women’s Movement in India. As her photographic career evolved, she began not only to acknowledge her own activist stance, but also to facilitate the active participation of her subjects in the picture-making process. The spontaneous shifted to posed portraiture, which further articulates her feminist narrative.

“Curating an exhibition of contemporary Indian photography and video calls into question the reading of Indian society itself,” Sinha says in her catalogue essay “Pursuit of Dreams.” She continues: “As photography progresses from the sphere of the ‘other’ to the ‘self,’ what becomes apparent is the instrumentality of the camera as a tool of historical documentation.” Sinha makes a striking point about the evolution of this medium and in doing so contextualizes the contemporary practice of photography and video in Indian art.

“Postcolonial photography alters the gaze from confrontation to complicit observer,” Sternberger says. “Many artists use a performance element in the photographs and videos to analyze and critique the construction of Indian identity in contemporary culture.” Artists Pushpamala N. (APT Mumbai) and Tejal Shah, among others, work with both media, incorporating the performative as a reflection on the influence of Bollywood on Indian culture. “Pushpamala N. builds ambiguous narratives with contexts that recall the vernacular studio photography, the kitschy charm of Raja Ravi Varma paintings and the melodrama of

Bollywood film stills," Sternberger adds. "Her work can create even deeper associations than the shared experience of popular culture." And in Shah's work, the viewer is directly confronted by the sensitive issues of moral and social acceptance of homosexuality and erotic desire. "Shah mocks at the tropes of heterosexual love fantasies as envisioned in cinema and popular aesthetics to present desire outside the bounds of compulsory heterosexuality," says Sinha.

It is the Indian diaspora, spurred on by the desire for a Western education, which has given broader reach to Indian contemporary culture and art. "The aspiration of the immigrant held in tenuous balance against the memory of the homeland is petrified in the work of Gauri Gill (APT Mumbai)," says Sinha. Gill observed Indian families on the West Coast of the U.S. "with the marks of Indianness and the new diaspora identity that they bear." This nostalgia has produced a growing expatriate patronage that supports cultural institutions and their Indian art programming.

At this charged juncture of social and economic change and growing disparity between the upward and downward mobility of India's society, the comments of video artist and photographer Surekha reveal the critical issues of contemporary Indian art, that "a creative tension lies between private, subjective values and social concerns." Without question each exhibition examines the importance of Indian society, shaped and laden with complex social, religious, mythological, imposed moral, literary and invented strata.

As artists' mobility allows them to move freely around the world experiencing and interacting with other art scenes and cultures, the cross-pollination will soon blur the ethnic bias around which so many exhibitions are organized. In Shah's words, "I do not think my audience as primarily Indian or sub-continent." Indeed, it is not.