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Heroic or the mock heroic

This week, GAYATRI SINHA takes you through Pushpamala N's performative works with a rather Brechtian interjection, and Anju Dodiya's painted figures, which are both literary and heroic.



'IN THE picture she appears as a religious mendicant, or yogini, her body smeared with ash, endowed with special powers resulting from severe austerities. Her magical rather than her saintly qualities are stressed. She is a sorceress, wearing extravagant jewels, secretly communicating with a bird. Her face is strange and exotic, Ibrahim Adil Shah, himself immersed in unorthodox rites, must have been intrigued by the pictures dark ambiguities... '

This is how Mark Zebrowski describes this 17th century Bijapur painting of the

Yogini by the enigmatically titled Dublin painter in his book, Deccan Painting. The details of the distant city, the ash smeared intensely enigmatic face of the Yogini who bears a bird, become transformed in Pushpamala's performative work as an elaborate masquerade. It is one that draws upon the possibilities of self portraiture, but only as a ruse to deflect from rather than define the self.

It is an interesting coincidence that the works of Pushpamala N. and Claire Arni (Nature Morte, till March 12) and Anju Dodiya (Vadehra Art Gallery till March 15) virtually show back to back in the city. Both these bodies of work present the artist as subject, virtually in the mould of the heroic or the mock heroic, even as they draw on the conventions of self portraiture. Both of these bodies of work deal in an ongoing engagement with mimesis and masquerade as both sites of revelation and disguise. Inevitably, they confront the gaze, with differing degrees of openness. And perhaps both these artists encourage a way of looking at the self not as a vertical investigation but as a movement into plural possibilities which actually deflect from straight and somewhat boring psychological readings.

Literary and mythic

Anju Dodiya actually demonstrates the tension between the painter and the painting, and arrives at the figure in the masquerade through sources that are literary and mythic. Her choice of figures has been in a series of works in the heroic scale - Daphne, Joan of Arc, Shiva, Artaud, Rajasthani princelings, who through the act of mimesis, confer on their interpreter a visible and ennobling heroism. Thus, the paper in her work appears as both magic mirror that redefines time, place and location and as a site for confrontation. By replacing the original image with her own, she actually sets up a tense confrontation between the visible and the implied presences - the self and the other, one that blurs gender identity. One moves through the works with a sense of Dodiya making quick silver transitions from the self to the other, to become her own subject. And one comes away with a sense of impatience for the enactment of the costume drama, one that is probably an act of exorcism, but also of dissemblance. Not all the references are transparent. Dodiya speaks in the catalogue of the intense physical difficulty of painting, which recalls the affliction of the mercury poisoning suffered by English hat makers in the 19th century - and suggesting thereby the phrase from Alice in Wonderland's, mad as a hatter's. And so a procession of hatted women appear, each loaded with the heroic gesture. Not all of these evoke a response, and perhaps her more interesting works.

Pushpamala's exactitude

In Pushpamala's provocatively titled Native Women of South India - Manners and Customs, which evokes the coloniser's 19th Century ethnographic project for western eyes, the terms of reference run up and down the scale like a mocking echo. Elevated and popular art, the studio and the street, the original and its mocking facsimile become the sites of engagement. For, in the choice of subjects and their rendition - the number of pearl strings around the Yogini's neck for example or the exact way in

which the nayika modestly holds up her sari in Ravi Varma's *Lady in the Moonlight*, Pushpamala often works for near Xerox like exactitude. That she carries off the project with panache is only a part of its success.



Pushpamala enters the area of Walter Benjamin's concerns around the art of mechanical reproduction, of the original and kitsch and by making her own prints available for sale in cheap plastic frames, climbs out of the gallery paradigm into the popular space.

The project, as a whole, also investigates the larger issues around representation in the 19th Century of the subject races, studio portraiture, the ideas of decoration and the gaze. This she does by moving through several types - the toda tribal, Ravi Varma's heroine, the prototypical heroine of South Indian cinema, the petty criminal.

In their article *Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture* (1978), Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff make an elaborate study of what define hierarchy and value in art. They list the words that are markers of moral superiority and are identified with low art : Africans, Orientals, Persians, Slovaks, peasants, the lower classes, women, children, savages, pagans, sensuality, pleasure, decadence, exotica, decoration, tattoos, artifice and so on. Pushpamala works these concepts into her body of work albeit with a lightness that avoids any form of didacticism. The interrogation of these usages underscores a body of work that mimics the art projects, colonial or contemporary in today's radically altered political and social climate. The small images which are like a Brechtian interjection, revealing the behind-the-scenes shots

of the filming process are delightful

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