

ARCHITECTURE IS JOINING HANDS WITH CONTEMPORARY VISUAL art in more ways than one in Bombay – and I'm not just talking about the marriage of one of Bombay's bright young artists to a bright young architect (no points for guessing who).

Artists, galleries, and curators are trying to affect an alliance between the two disciplines: after all, the architecture of a gallery influences the artwork within it. Which isn't as superficial a comment as it sounds. My purpose in this write-up is *not* to give readers a low-down on the cosmetic changes taking place in the scene – with gallery-owners lavishing more attention on their shows by hiring talented 'exhibition designers' or sprucing up their act by opening more and bigger 'white cubes'. Instead, I want to explore the recent spate of exhibitions in which artwork was meant to have a symbiotic relationship with the gallery in which it resided: i.e. where the architecture of its location was absorbed as integral to the art.

Naturally – well-meanings intentions aside – not all the exhibitions that attempted to facilitate liaisons between art and architecture proved to be successful matchmakers. Three shows are worth singling out for comment because of the way they tried to connect the two disciplines: Gayatri Sinha's curated group show, *Frame/Grid/Room/Cell*, at Bodhi Art in November 2007; Nataraj Sharma's site-specific installation, *Air Show*, at Project 88 in October 2007; and Nikhil Chopra's site-orientated performance, *Yog Raj Chitrakar: Memory Drawing II*, in December 2007, sponsored by Chatterjee & Lal Gallery.

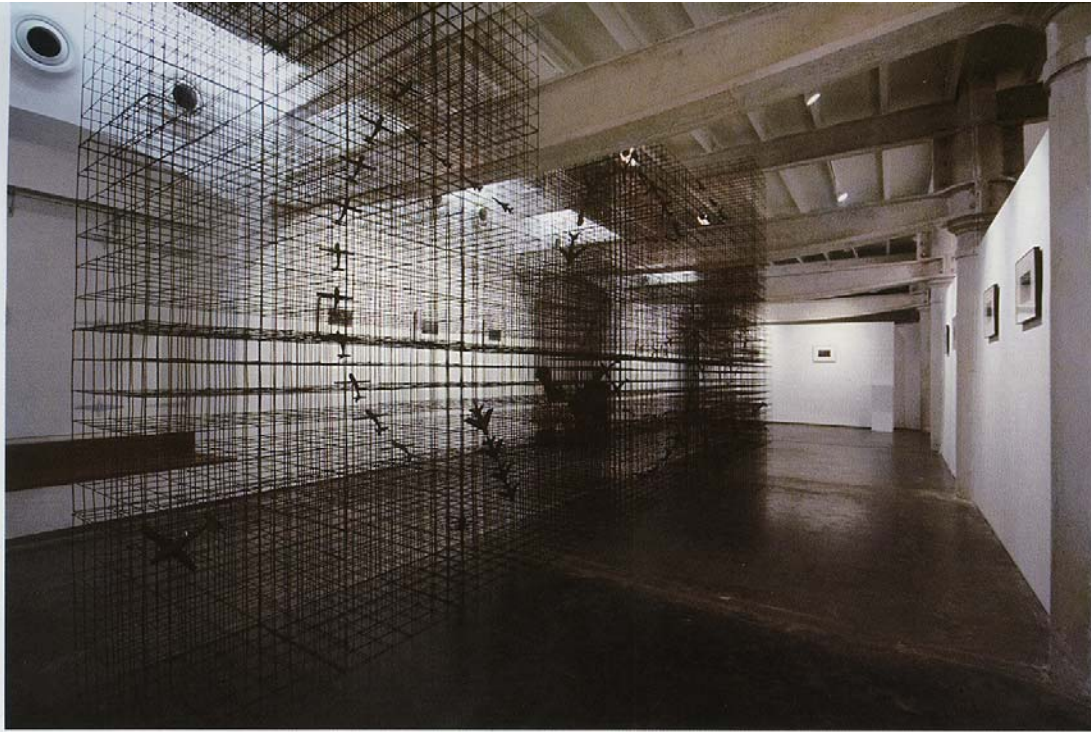
Sinha's show tried to spearhead an exciting dialogue between art and architecture. Architect Rahul Mehrotra was asked to re-design the interior of Bodhi, Kalaghoda, creating mini-white cubes, each of which was given to an artist to occupy as he/she saw fit. Surekha, Anita Dube, and Sunil Gawde were installed on the first floor, while Riyas Komu, Nalini Malani, Shilpa Gupta, and Jagannath Panda were slotted into the upper-regions of the gallery.

Changing Places

Zehra Jumabhoy goes on a gallery-hop to examine the way architecture can be put to effective use in visual art.



Nikhil Chopra. Performance at Kamal Mansion. 2007.



Nataraj Sharma. *Air Show* installed at Project 88. 2007.

Frame/Grid... could have served as a springboard for analyzing the way privacy occupies an especially tenuous (and hence precious) place in Indian cities. "Like urban corridors or a chawl, the artist has complete control over his own room/cell, but does not intervene in the neighbouring spaces," read Sinha's concept note. Instead, Mehrotra's cordoned-off, grid-ed spaces invented a new way to avoid having to curate a group show. So effective was the lack of 'intervention', that viewers had difficulty discovering why these selected artists and artworks were placed in proximity to each other. What, for instance, did Panda's glistening golden orb, *The Feral Sphere*, share with Surekha's kitchen-like 'cell'? Panda's five-foot fibreglass globe (its shiny fabric embroidered with map-like veins and creepy-crawly insects) seemed to embody a radically different world-view (pun intended) from Surekha's peaceful meditation on domesticity. The latter included a video which extolled the sticky pleasures of kneading dough into strange shapes.

Nor did the chosen few – with the exception of Shilpa Gupta's illicitly acquired photographs of the *Big Brother* studio, which analyzed the media's obsession with prying into personal spaces – have anything to add to the concept of the grid/frame etc. (And no one is going to convince me that Sunil Gawde's pink, bum-shaped balloons provided a multi-layered analysis of privacy – whatever their connection with private parts.)

If Sinha wanted to examine the way grids (and their gang of associated concepts) function in cities, surely artists who deal explicitly with this theme could have been included?

Ironically, the idea of the grid – both actual and metaphorical – was more deftly explored in Nataraj Sharma's installation at Project 88 (that was hosted by Bodhi Art).

With its vast rectangular space with high ceilings and heavy metal beams, Project 88 tends to dwarf the artworks it is meant to be showcasing. But, *Air Show* turned the gallery's dominating architecture to its own advantage. The sculpture's rusty metal grids, composed of cubes stacked over each other, contained tiny sculptures within their inter-meshing prison-like grills. These miniature metal objects seemed to be trapped in mid-air: were they airplanes zooming purposefully into buildings or careless pigeons who'd inadvertently flown into the scaffolding of a construction site?

Sharma made the installation after he saw the Indian Air Force Surya Kiran team show off its aerial abilities when it came to his hometown, Baroda, in 2001. Especially pertinent thanks to post-9/11 paranoia, *Air Show* was meant to underline the dual reality of flight – both a metaphor for freedom as well as a symbol of mechanized warfare.

In Beijing, where Sharma presented the installation at Arario Gallery in 2006, *Air Show* was stage-lit within the gallery-space so that it cast shuddering shadows on walls, making the captured 'creatures' look especially fragile as viewers realized the disturbing reality of their entrapment. But, at Project 88 empathy gave way to fear.

Air Show was dismantled and re-fitted to suit the architecture of the gallery. This new arrangement turned it into a sinister political comment: the idea of flight became enmeshed with that of militarism and terror. 9/11 ensures that we invest airplanes with deadly intentions anyway, but Sharma played this up by deliberately creating an unsettling, suffocating atmosphere.

Sharma's paintings tend to merge man, machine, and India's

industrialized landscapes into each other. Like in the mixed media painting, *Nightwatch* (2002), where a man sitting at a railway station next to a huffing-and-puffing train seems to be in sympathy with its exertions (since Sharma shows him emanating blue-tinged fumes of his own). However, with the site-sensitive *Air Show* at Project 88, the artist re-created the physical experience of such an amalgamation for the viewer. Walking into the display, we were surrounded by rusty metal structures. Stacked one on top of the other and grazing the high ceilings, they seemed to multiply endlessly around us. We felt both a sense of exhilaration at being part of a pattern bigger than our tiny selves, as well as claustrophobia: like the little planes (which resembled little birds) were we also ensnared in this malevolent-looking maze?

Nikhil Chopra's performance, which took place in a warehouse-like space on the third floor of Kamal Mansion – rented out especially for the art project – explored the nature of architecture from the opposite angle. If Sharma's *Air Show* manipulated the architecture of the gallery to shake the foundations of our identities as viewers, Chopra used the setting of his 72-hour performance to explore his own.

Chopra's 'quarters' resembled a spacious cardboard box – with pale beige flooring and cream-coloured walls – filled with carefully nondescript (if slightly old-fashioned) furniture: a bed, a cordoned off washing area, a table, and a chair. The three days saw Chopra assuming – and discarding – a number of roles. He morphed from a half-naked, bearded caveman (frenetically scribbling on walls) into an early-20th century gent in plus fours – a.k.a. Yog Raj Chitrakar, meant to be a 're-incarnation' of his aristocratic grandfather. In the last couple of hours, he donned an ivory-hued, silk gown (festooned with flounce-y lace) to assume the elaborately coiffed persona of a haughty (and oh-so-beautiful) Empress.

Architecture served as a launching pad for our imaginations in Chopra's performance. The artist set himself the task of re-creating a panoramic view of the city on the four walls of his 'home'. A spy-camera ensconced on the roof of Kamal Mansion captured an aerial view of Colaba's architecture; this record was then projected onto a wall of Chopra's lodgings. The artist used this image as the basis for a gigantic charcoal drawing, made over a three-day period to cover every inch of wall-space available. By the end of the performance, Colaba's higgledy-piggledy architecture had made in-roads in-doors: a sooty Gateway of India on one partition, faced that of a vast, dilapidated rooftop on another.

We had little access to the 'real' built forms outside the enclosed room, only their representations: from a facsimile of the city



Jagannath Panda. *The Feral Sphere* installed at Bodhi, Kalaghoda. 2007.

projected through the grainy film of a video projection to its transformation into a gritty wall-drawing. And as Chopra slipped from one costume into another, we noticed that the aerial view also shifted in significance. Under the practised hand of the sleekly dressed Yog Raj Chitrakar (modelled on an aristocratic ancestor who painted dreamy landscapes heavily brushed with Romanticism), this spindly depiction of Colaba's old-fashioned buildings made them appear as if they had emerged from a 19th century etching. When, Chopra turned into an (admittedly hairy) housemaid – complete with hooped skirts and a broom that demurely displaced dirt – the 'landscape' began to take on the impression of a domestic interior; a slightly bizarre type of wallpaper.

It is possible to argue that Chopra's roles – requiring elaborate clothes and stage-y make-up designed by Tabasheer Zutshi – were merely theatrical distractions. Perhaps, they did not mean to reference contemporary life and the real (or symbolic) architecture of cities at all? After all, what does a faux-historical drawing of Colaba contribute to the way we navigate its streets? But, such criticism misses the point.

With each of Chopra's disguises, the city – and its architecture – performed a different symbolic function: dependent on the costume Chopra donned for its relevance. Was it a model for a genteel landscape in charcoal or the sunset-tinged backdrop for a melancholy monarch? Was it part of a video projection for a New Media event or did its historical buildings remind us of our Colonial past? Whatever Chopra's intention, he revealed something about the way we see the city. A precarious stage, its architecture is constructed for (and through) the different social roles that we adopt. It serves as a projection of what it suits us to see – or ignore. Fittingly, the performance ended with Chopra decked up as a brooding Empress, regally oblivious to the grubby-looking section of Colaba that was visible (to us) from her bedside window.