

The New York Times

Nalini Malani

Bose Pacia

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Thanks to the presidential campaigns, political art is suddenly cool in New York, though after Nov. 2, it will probably all go away again. But in much of the rest of the world -- Asia, Africa, Latin America -- artists make political art all the time. They live political lives. They have an encompassing sense of what political means.

Nalini Malani, based in Mumbai, is such an artist. Now in mid-career, she has been seen here only sporadically, with paintings in museum group shows and an intensely theatrical video installation at the New Museum two years ago. Both media play a role in her strong first Manhattan gallery solo, which draws on mythology, religion and history, both Western and Indian, particularly as they shape the lives of women.

In paintings, she dovetails the figures of Sita from the "Ramayana" and Euripedes' Medea -- the one an ideal of submissive self-sacrifice, the other an emblem of destructive fury -- to propose a complex female persona beyond controlling stereotypes. The conflicts implicit in their stories are also embodied in "Game Pieces," an installation of mylar cylinders painted with animals and deities. As the cylinders rotate, the shadows of the figures travel across images of mushroom-shaped clouds projected on the wall, as if heaven and earth alike were trying to escape devastation.

For the installation "Unity in Diversity," we are invited to sit in a parlor with blood-red walls and a short video. The video opens with an image of a 19th-century painting of smiling Indian female musicians. The original picture was exhibited at the World Congress of Religions in Chicago in 1893, where the spiritual leader Vivekananda spoke against the dangers of religious orthodoxy. Those dangers have been realized many times since, in India and elsewhere, and are dramatized in the video, as the women come to life in an account of the mass killing of Muslims by Hindus in Gujurat two years ago. Like everything here, this piece is subtler and sharper than a description may suggest. Ms. Malani is a political artist of impressive visual range, now at the height of her power.

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