



IS THE MESSAGE IN THE MEDIUM...?

Enquires Hemant Morparia, following Pushpamala N.'s exploratory photo-romance which highlighted the fact that photography is, indeed, being viewed as an effective medium for artistic inquiry. ►



Phantom Lady or Kismet

Chemould Art Gallery, Mumbai

The process of still photography came before the next logical development — cinema— which is, after all photography in motion. Pushpamala N, in an interesting experiment, retraced the route. The retrograde journey was, in some way, a journey back to the origins — still photography, using cinema as a point of departure. This was an adventure undertaken in partnership with the photographer, Meenal Agarwal. (See pg 71 for additional review).

Something old was used to try out something new. The inspiration, nay, role model, is the stunt-film star of yesteryears — Fearless Nadia. Nadia is herself intrinsically over-the-top. Mere imitation achieves instant high camp. The exhibition was titled, *Phantom Lady or Kismet*, and a narrative is evident. The photographs are linked and a story is being told. The feeling one gets is not unlike the impression of standing outside a theatre, having bought the tickets, watching with curious interest the stills of the movie one is going to see.

Agarwal's photography is to be assessed in the light of knowing that it is in some way secondary to the direction of Pushpamala. Shot entirely in black and white, the photographer has striven to create mystery, suspense action adventure Bollywood style. This is chiefly by use of high contrast imagery, long, dark shadows and spot illuminations. Pushpamala, in the eponymous role, seems to be enacting a fantasy.

The entire show has a mock serious quality, a reminder of the nature of all popular films. Photography, on the other hand, has roots that run deep in realism — a photograph never lies — it is said. The role of photography in the exploration of a private fantasy has thus, been underutilised. Pushpamala and Agarwal achieve a competent synthesis between performance and production in this adventurous effort.

If one was to find fault with this exhibition, it would have to do with it not being over-the-top enough; Nadia's "fearlessness" is not reached at all. They have not gone 'all the way'. One often hears of 'art' film directors expressing a desire to make a mainstream commercial Hindi "fillum", some actually do, but the effort/tribute never matches the original in veracity or conviction. The imitation is a pale one. This is because they are, after all outsiders in this territory. An attitude of subtle condescension makes the transition difficult. The bridge between high ground and low ground is at a difficult incline, and a certain balance, if reached at all, seems a compromise.

Pushpamala and Agarwal could be called high-brow tourists in Nadialand. They do not belong there and probably won't visit it again. ▶



Photos courtesy Pushpamala/Meenal Agarwal/Chemould Art Gallery

VIGNETTES

Virtual Perspectives

Third Eye, a photography club of Calcutta, has exhibited some of their photographs on the Internet. It is the first time in India, perhaps, in the world, that anybody has organised a virtual photo gallery on the net. The site can be visited at <http://www.media-software.com/thirdeye/index.html>

Third Eye, was founded by photographer Atanu Paul fifteen years ago. Today, the club boasts of a membership of almost 200 young photographers, many of them working in the local press, in ad agencies and in the electronic media. The club has been regularly taking part in national and international photography exhibitions. Besides, the club is the first to launch a Bengali monthly magazine on photography.