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Exploring the boundaries

At the crux of this novel initiative is an attempt to explore the boundaries between identities and to expose photography as a tool for creating and perpetuating a stereotypes, says SHUBA SRIKANTH.

When artist Pushpamala N and photographer Clare Arni came together, the result was a visual discourse, drastically different from the mainstream.

Titled "Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs", a corpus of over 200 photographs critically portraying stereotypical representations of South Indian women, was showcased recently at the Sumukha Art Gallery. The photographs were recreations of images from sources as wide-ranging as classical Indian paintings, film stills, newspaper clippings and ethnographic studies.

Funded by a India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) grant, the series of Performance Photographs was modelled after the 'Zenana' - the all women's studios that flourished in cities like Hyderabad and Kolkata and run by British female photographers, where purdah-clad women would get themselves photographed. "My studio transformed into a Zenana, where Clare and I played the protagonists," says Pushpamala, the national award winning sculptor, who had experimented with this art form before.

But for Clare, the idea germinated when she along with her family had posed with her model sister for photographs. Besides, her acute interest in the identity of South Indian women, cemented the genre and the subject for this project.

(Incidentally, she grew up in Madurai and spent a large part of her life in India.) "The artifice of the posed studio photograph, with its elaborately created sets and costumes, becomes a site for fantasy to look at representations of South Indian women in the Indian imagination," claim the duo.

Central to the exhibition are tableaux of ten main photographs, with Pushpamala playing the protagonist. Typifying South Indian women in various prescribed roles, she views them as a 'Dashavatara'. These comprise replications of three Ravi Varma's paintings - Lady in Moonlight, Lakshmi, and Returning from the Tank; a 1960s still of Jayalalitha in action gear; a coquettish couple from a 1990s Kannada film; a mythical yogini or sorceress from a 16 Century Bijapur miniature painting, with a pond heron perched on her wrist; a circus scene by American

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photographer Mary Ellen Mark; Toda woman being measured against a chessboard backdrop, based on a 19 century photograph of an Andamanese native from a British ethnographic study; a recent newspaper clipping of two arrested (but not yet convicted) chain snatchers holding up police name slates; and Mary of Velankani, after a contemporary votive image.

"In reproducing these images with several alterations from the original, we draw attention to details that otherwise go unnoticed, and thereby bare their illusory nature," elucidates Pushpamala. For instance, the role of lighting to recreate the atmosphere; the cardboard-cut lotus and the painted backdrop against which Pushpamala poses as goddess Lakshmi.

Each ethnic type also triggers off a series of variations, using fantasy and subversive humour to debunk the stereotypes. The characters in these visuals are isolated from their original context in an attempt to explore alternative identities.

For instance, the sensuous woman in *Lady in Moonlight* transforms into a present-day model selling cosmetics; the woman in *Returning From the Tank* sports trendy goggles and a cordless phone; the Toda woman is seen at a sewing machine.

At the crux of this novel initiative is an attempt to explore the boundaries between real and imaginary, original and fake, the photographer and the photographed, object and subject, black and white, and to expose photography as a tool for creating and perpetuating stereotypical identities. In addition to a series of 'process photographs', costumes, props and backdrops also showcased, play a pivotal role in blurring these boundaries.

The process shots show the artists, the makeup man, the crew et al having 'lots of fun', complete with fake three-dimensional props and lighting paraphernalia. "The process photographs were taken from the time of make-up, through the entire performance. While some are posed, others are natural shots, of what was really going on. The idea is to show that the process is just as important as the finished product. What usually happens backstage is foregrounded as performance," points out Clare.

There are more such subversions. The make-up man for instance becomes the subject.

The subject, object inversion comes across in the photograph where Pushpamala posing as Lakshmi against the backdrop of lotus in a pond, is being photographed by Clare dressed as Lakshmi too. In others, the varied shapes of the reflectors and the spot lights add a unique aesthetic dimension.

Beneath this creative endeavour is also a social consciousness that reaches out to the subaltern female identity, be it a result of patriarchal conceptions of deification and paradoxical denigration of the woman or of ethnocentric concoction.

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5331, Bangalore - 560001
Tel: +91 (80) 25880000 Fax No. +91 (80) 25880523