

BOSE PACIA

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Sheba Chhachhi

Winged Pilgrims: A Chronicle from Asia

November 13 – December 23, 2008

In Conversation: Sheba Chhachhi and Kumkum Sangari

3:00 PM, Saturday, November 15, 2008

November 2008 New York – Bose Pacia presents **Sheba Chhachhi's *Winged Pilgrims: A Chronicle from Asia*** November 13 – December 23, 2008. The gallery is located at 508 West 26th Street on the 11th Floor, in the Chelsea district of New York City. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Friday from 11 to 6 pm and Saturday 12 to 6. The artist will be in attendance at the opening reception on Thursday, November 13th from 6 to 8 pm. The public is invited.

Winged Pilgrims: A Chronicle from Asia is a multi-part installation including sculptures, lightboxes, and a recorded soundtrack which plays throughout the gallery space. The combined works present various iconographies (such as birds, landscapes, and robed figures) whose interplay conveys a history of migration. The migration in question is personal, theoretical, cultural, and philosophical. The series can be seen as a meditation on the expanse and intricacies of globalization.

Perhaps the most poignant element in this installation, Chhachhi's lightboxes imitate the 'Plasma Action Electronic TV toy.' This object is a Chinese-made toy that is sold in many small Indian markets. The toy in a low-tech impersonation of an electronic plasma television. An image-on-roller continuously loops to give the impression of a moving-image television. Chhachhi has referred to these objects as "a metaphor for current forms of globalized exchange that enact mediated shifts from the artisanal to the inexpensive electronic assembly."

Chhachhi's *Winged Pilgrims* series is an innovative take on the questions of new media and globalization. Images of migrating birds, the robes of Buddhist pilgrims, and the exchange of technological aesthetics create a platform for these questions. By exploring the sort of reverse evolution of digital technology and migration the artist makes space for a discussion of globalization where traditional trajectories of advancement are can be destabilized and opened for discussion.

Originally created for the Singapore Biennale in September 2006, the work has also been exhibited at the ZKM Center for Art & Media in Karlsruhe, Germany as part of the exhibition *Thermocline of Art: New Asian Wave* (June 15-October 21, 2007), at the Hangar Biccoca in Milan, Italy as part of the exhibition *Urban Manners* (October 9, 2007 – January 6, 2008), and at Nature Morte in New Delhi (December 22, 2007 – January 19, 2008).

Sheba Chhachhi was born in Harar (Ethiopia) and studied at Delhi University and the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad. She has exhibited widely in India, Europe, Japan, South America and the United States. This is Chhachhi's first solo exhibition with Bose Pacia. She has published writings, given talks and conducted workshops, research, and projects relating to women, conflict, urban technologies, visual culture, and contemporary practice in India and South Asia and is an active member of the women's movement in India. She lives and works in Delhi.

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SHEBA CHHACHHI

Winged Pilgrims: A Chronicle from Asia, 2006

artist's statement

This work configures a spatial, temporal and conceptual field within which the movement of ideas, objects, forms across Asia, with China and India as significant nodes, is articulated through three key elements that are simultaneously material and metaphoric: Birds, the robes of Buddhist Pilgrims and the 'Plasma Action' Electronic T.V. toy.

The last is a Chinese-made toy T.V. sold in large numbers in small Indian markets and bought primarily by middle class and lower middle class consumers as a novelty decorative item for display in homes and shops. This low cost facsimile of a plasma screen monitor uses an ingenious system of an electronically operated roller to create the illusion of a moving image which repeats itself in an endless loop. The images in the box are most often idealized views of nature, utopian landscapes both urban and pastoral. The objects in the screen move with a sort of hypnotic, slow repetition. Images can move in one or two layers with a slight time lag between each layer so that viewers feel as though they were watching a mobile landscape.

This object is a metaphor for current forms of globalized exchange that enact mediated shifts from the artisanal to the inexpensive electronic assembly. The object evokes the notion of simulacra. The item mimics a TV, the landscapes displayed on the screen are fake, and the movement an illusionary trick. The particular nature of this movement, however, generates a special experience of time, a quality of attention.

I have created a series of imaginary landscapes, digital tapestries which weave together references culled from Indian sculpture, Chinese brush painting, the Persian/Mughal miniature and documentary photography to inhabit these moving image lightboxes. These have developed from images, narratives and fables of birds drawn from ancient art, literature and mythology as well as from contemporary media representations of birds as inter regional carriers of the avian/'Asian' flu. This material may not explicitly reiterate ancient narratives but appropriates them, transformed through subjective associations and concerns, relocated in the contemporary.

Birds have been used for many centuries as a metaphor for the soul, the spirit or the purest part of a human being. Birds appear in the often overlapping mythologies of both Chinese and Indian spiritual traditions. The Hamsa, Garuda, the Phoenix and the Simurgh are only a few examples of birds whose allegiances to the mystical are well known. Many of these birds are in fact hybrids and bring together birds and humans, birds and snakes, birds and animals.

In the contemporary period birds, especially migrating species, have suffered under the charge of carrying ''Asian' flu across terrains and national borders. Under surveillance by state and local agencies, health organizations and farmers under duress, thousands have been slaughtered, 'culled, ' to ostensibly protect humans from disease. The very first bird to be killed in Europe was a wild swan, the Hamsa, symbol of purity and wisdom.

This indiscriminate killing is a parable; it speaks of humans who are destroying their own belief in a higher self—the 'achin pakhi' (unknown bird, unrecognized inner, spiritual self) of wandering mystics. We have begun to watch the movements of birds, their patterns of

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flight, the migrations they make across land and sea, which were once oracles, sources of wisdom, places of pleasure, with trepidation and fear. Just as western states watch the influx of human migrants.

The early history of birds in myth and narrative, the contemporary obsession with avian flu, the migrations natural to them, together offer a different sightline into globalization and its historicity. While globalization has become a somewhat exhausted catchword for rapid market changes today, I feel it is important to recuperate what this means for us in Asia, in the context of our own histories. Perhaps birds were the earliest form of global movement, the pilgrim the first global citizen. This sightline, which traverses geographical and temporal terrains, mediates between the simple and the hybrid, between natural and the unnatural, the human, the non-human and the inhuman, the mystical and the brutal, the material and the spiritual.

The soundtrack gives shape to the hybrid textures encapsulated in the installation. The specially composed piece uses a female voice singing *acappella*. Voice and breath create patterns that gesture towards musical structures across the region and suggest the migrating patterns of bird flight: wheeling, swooping, circling, meeting, separating.

The third facet of the work is based on the figure of the Buddhist pilgrim. Written records of the historical exchanges in the region between India and China come from the narratives, stories, poems and philosophical ruminations composed by, remembered by and kept by Buddhist pilgrims. Pilgrims journeyed between India and China and the figure of the pilgrim is deeply embedded in both cultures, though it has metastasized in the contemporary context. The empty robe evokes this figure paradoxically, also a kind of simulacra – a gesture towards the 'real', embodying the tensions between materiality and belief.

The pilgrim and the plasma action toy are bookends of the series of movements that produce globalization. The moving images, the traversal of space and time, the tension between mechanical and conventional video time that the piece produces, the articulation of the space between movement and stillness—all these are the temporal elements intrinsic to the repetitions and reproductions at the center of the global exchanges that this work seeks to explore.

The artist herself has an affinity to the pilgrim. She is a seeker, a witness and a traveller who seeks to offer a space which elicits a quality of attention, an examination of the global circulations of our metaphoric histories and their significance to us today.

*No one visible up ahead,
no one approaches
from behind.
Not a footprint on the road.
Am I alone?
This much is clear--
the path the ancient
poets opened
is choked with brush,
and I've long since left
the public thoroughfare.*

Dharmakirti, 7th C