

NewStatesman

Visions of India

Posted by Anna Maria Di Brina - 11 February 2010 17:36

What does the Saatchi Gallery's new exhibition tell us about the subcontinent?

Work by artists from the Indian subcontinent is on display at the Saatchi Gallery in "The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today" until early summer. The show reflects the collector Charles Saatchi's recent interest in the global art scene.

If not everything is worth the visit (for example, a confusing wire-filled robot installation and an ugly stuffed camel in an oversized suitcase recall more a children's play area than the claimed issues of displacement), the show boasts some remarkable presences.

Among the highlights, both humorous and disquieting, is *U.F.O.*, an impressive golden spacecraft made of loads of brass pots stuck together, by Subodh Gupta, one of the most collected Indian artists today. It openly addresses the Indian migrant worker's dream of escape.

Jitish Kallat, in his *Public Notice 2*, visually re-creates the Mahatma Gandhi's celebrated 1930 speech against the British salt tax with four and a half thousand pieces of fibreglass, bone-shaped alphabets. Kallat will bolster the growing interest in Indian art by showing in a one-man exhibition in London later this month at Haunch of Venison (opens 15 February).

While neon sculptures by London-based Shezad Dawood refer to parallels between self-righteous America and fundamentalist Islam, the Pakistani artist Rashid Rana documents contradictions and paradoxes by juxtaposing different-sized images. His *Veils* are softly rendered images of veiled women which, on closer inspection, turn out to be made up of thousands of small, unfocused, pornographic stills of women.

Flip a coin

"My *Veils* are about representations," Rana tells me. "The veils are synonymous of Muslim women for western men, a simplified and often distorted representation. At the same time, men in the east, thanks to pornography mainly from the west, have a distorted image of western women. It is just showing the two sides of the same coin."

The relationship between the subcontinent and America informs the work of New York-based Schandra Singh, who exhibits two large canvases of people floating lazily in a swimming pool.

"The notion of anxiety is at the centre of my research," she says. "I address questions like 'how can we lay on a river all day, relaxing with silly toys, when there are things happening around us, when someone else is sitting on the side of the street?'. It is about an existential crisis."

Singh is a survivor of the 11 September 2001 attacks. In her uncomfortably funny paintings, conflict and uncertainty appear to be intrinsic elements of everyday existence.

"India today is benefiting from capitalism," she says, "and has the ability to be sitting in that pool as I do. But I'm not safe, because the water is not safe."

"The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today" is at the Saatchi Gallery, Duke of York's HQ, King's Road, London SW3, until 7 May.