



(Clockwise from left) Artist Pushpamala N as Sita, Kaikeyi and Surpanakha in her works, which are currently on display at Nature Morte

SURPANAKHA MEETS SITA

Based on *Ramayana*, Pushpamala N's latest exhibition looks at the state of women during Ramarajya — the ideal state

VANDANA KALRA

THE element of drama is a must in Pushpamala N's works. There is a narrative, a set and a protagonist, which is mostly played by the artist herself. This time, she is enacting *Ramayana*, where she is Sita — dressed in the six-yard drape; Rama's stepmother Kaikeyi — responsible for his banishment into the forest; and Surpanakha — Ravana's sister who was wandering in the forest where Rama was exiled.

"The *Ramayana* is seen as a national epic and the rule of Rama — Ramarajya — is seen as the ideal governance, invoked by Gandhi during the nationalist struggle, and which is now used by the Hindu fundamentalists. The exhibition takes a sideways look at the place of women in this ideal state," says the artist, who shuttles between Bangalore and Delhi. Comprising more than 15 photographs and two video works, the exhibition "Avega – The Passion" at the Nature Morte gallery has her trans-



porting the three women from the pages of the epic onto archival prints. Pushpamala gives life to them in modernist settings inspired by the theatre stills from the early 20th century, cinema and the 19th-century European paintings. "A dark mood with expressionist lighting has been used for psychological drama," she says.

In the three-channel video *Indrajaal/Seduction*, a black shadow falls on Surpanakha when her nose is struck off by Lakshmana. Blood gushing out of her nose, she lies on the floor, until the video once again moves to a dancing Lakshmana, to begin the loop again.

The urge to take on the challenge

of working with new mediums led Pushpamala to experiment with the burst-mode operation in camera, which allows several photographs to be captured in quick succession. The outcome is the one-minute stop motion video titled *Mrugayati/The Hunt* that has a vulnerable Sita chased by Ravana in a forest on a dark night. "It is like a fragment from a recurring dream or nightmare," notes the MS University postgraduate, who is known for her narrative photography.

The chase that seems almost endless culminates in the set of photographs titled "Apaharana/Abduction", which document Ravana's final assault and the fate of Sita held captive in Lanka. The ruthless king pulls her by her arms in a print, and in another one, Sita cries for mercy. "The original *Valmiki Ramayana* is intense and tragic, with larger-than-life characters shaken by conflicting passions. The task was to create a fresh language to express that spectacular scale and rich sensual imagery, when so many historical and modern interpretations already exist. There is a heroine and two femme fatales, both warriors, playing out their destinies," says the artist, who has painted the sets and worked on the hybrid costumes worn by the protagonists — including the embroidery on Kaikeyi's blouse and the fancy headgear she wears in the sepia photo series titled "Chala/Intrigue".

Once again, Pushpamala leaves the viewer thinking. This time, taking another look at the *Ramayana* — not just the conflict but the incidents that led to it.

The exhibition at Nature Morte, A-1, Neeti Bagh is on till April 28.
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