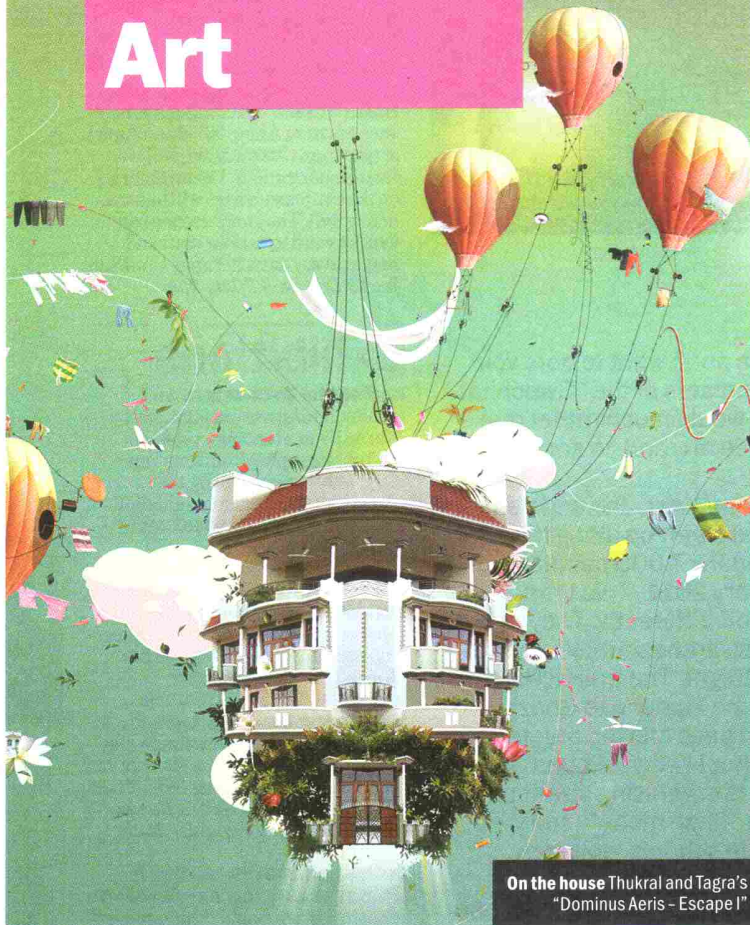


Art



On the house Thukral and Tagra's "Dominus Aeris - Escape I"

Punjabi by nature

Thukral & Tagra's show taps into the immigrant dream, says **Sonam Joshi**.

Thukral & Tagra's new exhibition is rife with that current catchword: aspiration. Through paintings and sculptures, the duo explore "middle class" desires – the dream of owning a house, the dream of leaving India – and the social and cultural dislocation that often follows the fulfillment of these dreams.

This show's long-winded title, *Thukral & Tagra: 3227, Sector 23, Gurgaon (German Returned)*, reads like a postal address and a stamp of its artists' recent trip to Germany. "We are both of Punjabi descent, where the desire to immigrate to the United States, Canada or Germany has always

been especially strong," Sumir Tagra and Jiten Thukral told us over email. "When people come back to India from abroad, they have the stamp of having been Canada-returned or something like that," they went on. They realised the pervasiveness of this sentiment last year, while participating in a residency in Germany with two young assistants. "When we came back, our assistants were very happy because they were German-returned," said Tagra.

This is only one of the stories Thukral & Tagra mined for inspiration. A meeting with a group of MBA students from Jalandhar

in 2010 led to a series of six portraits, which are hung on a wall painted baby pink and cream. "We asked them what they wanted to do after five years, and they all wanted to go abroad", Thukral said. The paintings are framed to resemble airplane windows, with the interiors of the plane forming the backdrop for the students' faces, which reflect their hopes of their passage abroad.

One hundred limited edition booklets titled *The Escape: Resume/Reset* are placed at the entrance of the show. Their pages are cut in half and consist of portraits and eight handwritten stories dealing with the experiences of migration from Punjab. In several of these, clothes become the symbols of cultural changes for those who have migrated. For instance, "Neeli jacket" is inspired by Thukral's father's story about a foreign jacket given to him by a friend, which made multiple trips abroad.

Across the room, walls are draped in red plaid, characteristic of school uniforms in Punjab. In the center of the room, a sculpture of a boy dressed in that uniform hangs from the roof; he appears to be flying out of the curtain-covered walls. His left hand clutches a lit chandelier, symbolic of the glittering allure of the West. On his right, another boy lies on the floor clutching a few strings of chandelier in his outstretched hands. "They are connected by the string of bling", Thukral joked. The installation also revisits the visual history of architecture in Punjab, especially that of the princely state of Kapurthala, whose ruler replicated the chandeliered palaces he saw during his visit to Paris.

A couple of oil paintings use helium balloons to evoke the anticipation of families of those who have already gone abroad. In "Dominus Aeris - Escape II", a boy floating on the top left corner of a balloon holds a piece of paper in his hand in anticipation of a visa, while a pigeon, holding the boy's passport in its beak, stands just out of reach. Paper planes fly all over the canvas. The balloons are attached to floating houses. Some are half-broken, others deflated – representations of dreams that don't come true.

These paintings are part of

an older series titled "Dominus Aeris", Latin for "flying houses", which explored cultural confusion through the aesthetics of "Punjabi baroque". "When people come back to India or send money back, they make mansion-like houses in Punjab. They call an architect and show him a picture of a Western house," Thukral said. The works are painted in kitschy pastel colours and contain many familiar images: the occasional gate lined with glass shards, and ubiquitous clothes hung on lines that connect houses to one another. The paintings themselves were the result of photographic documentation of houses from Gurgaon and Punjab, mixed and matched on a computer.

Although pleasantly familiar, these houses are also the exhibition's weakest link. The term "Punjabi baroque" was first brought into parlance by architect Gautam Bhatia's book of the same name in the early 1990s. Thukral & Tagra have often illustrated Bhatia's essays on architecture, but there seems to be a historical gap in the use of the term in the current show.

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The two call the exhibition an affectionate rather than a satirical look at the dream of migrating abroad. "Immigration is not a bad thing. It has given good things to India. We don't portray it as negative, we celebrate it by looking at how those who have migrated have changed themselves, how they have adapted themselves to it," they pointed out. With the exception of the installation with the boy, there are no references to the longer history and context of migration from Punjab. As a result, the show runs the risk of ringing slightly hollow: a series of empty signifiers of the present and future, stripped of critical or historical edge. In this, Thukral & Tagra's work raises several questions that have been central to pop art since the time of Andy Warhol: does it celebrate consumerism or critique it? Is it art or advertisement?

Thukral & Tagra: 3227, Sector 23, Gurgaon (German Returned) is ongoing at Nature Morte in Gurgaon. See Exhibitions.