

As an organisational complex that is claimed by spaces that are both, national and transnational, the city is a crucially intricate construction born out of the intersection of diverse social, economic and cultural tempers. As a source of multivalently layered experiences, it is a production, that is at once *real* and *imagined*. Playing itself in various keys, across diverse visual regimes and between the famously definitive Benjaminian binary of the phantasmagoria and the ruin, the city occupies the minds of artists in various arresting poses. Where it becomes the site to situate the various episodes of Orientalist vintage for a pre-Independence artist like Abanindranath Tagore¹ in his delightful suite of paintings that teased the Arabian Nights for its potential to be transformed into an urban fantasy; for a post-Independence painter like F.N. Souza (spearheading the first self-consciously modernist art movement, the Progressive Artists Group), it becomes a perverse audio-visual collage, an omnivorous creature on the loose with desperate appetites. We find him in a combative mode in most of his cross-hatchy, expressionistic work, making a counter-aggressive bid to outmanoeuvre his adopted city, which is Bombay.

In fact, it is with the development of the PAG that Bombay became the stage for the production of arguably the most important post-Independence art community in the late 1940s. Institutional spaces in the form of galleries like Artists' Centre and Chetana, proto-gallery initiatives like Pundole and Chemould; a supporting apparatus comprising writers and critics (von Leyden, et al); patrons (a few industrialists, consular officers and Homi Bhabha mainly); and the print media (the *Times of India*, primarily) came together to create a network of social and economic relations, that contributed to the creation of an energetic public sphere, making the production and consumption of art possible and feasible. This was also the time when the post-Independence destiny of an institution like the J. J. School of Art was played out for the first time by some of its more talented, maverick students.

Amongst all the members of the PAG (which disbanded soon in the '50s, one of the reasons being that most artists left Bombay for other cities like Paris, London and New York) M.F. Husain established himself, through the exploration of several mythological, popular cultural and folkloric themes, in a certain image of the city itself, as a mass-media driven consumer's artist, as an ace documenter of the city's icons and ironically, also as the artist most attacked by the city's custodians of a falsely produced morality.

Though art galleries like the Jehangir Art Gallery (1952) and Gallery 59 (1959) came up, over the next couple of decades, Delhi replaced Bombay as the art Mecca: centralised, bureaucratised, Nehruvian art institutions like the NGMA (1954) changed the power-structure substantially. Many Bombay-based artists migrated temporarily to Delhi. New and vibrant centres of art learning and practice were coming into their own, elsewhere as well (Baroda especially) and various energetic group initiatives were also gaining ground (Group 1890 in 1963, for instance).

At around the same time in Bombay, through the '60s into the '70s, three painters, among others, began on their separate quests of documenting the multiple ways in which the city was experienced by different peoples. Bhupen Khakhar, Sudhir Patwardhan and Gieve Patel have sustained these intimate conversations with the city over the years and have continued to conduct their diverse painterly explorations.

Bhupen Khakhar's radical enquiry into the nature of mofussil loneliness has led him to



Source: Karan Arora



Source: Neelam Ayaz

examine, especially in his early work, the various middle-level professions and the various middle-level spaces (caught as they are between the pulls of the city and the pushes of the small towns). The space that Khakhar tries to recreate, is a socio-architectural cross between Khetwadi in Bombay and Baroda in Gujarat and, as such, looks at the shared features and visual profiles of these two places. Khakhar writes and, might one add, paints in Gujarati, and has managed to recreate a world that is organised around two distinct community memberships: one that is socio-linguistic and the other that is sexual preference-specific. The world of homosexual intimacies and fantasies becomes a filter through which to observe ironically the many different ways in which the city's middle classes represent themselves, whether it is at a domestic event or at a religious celebration. In fact, Khakhar (last solo, 2002) is one of the few artists who have consciously developed a mode of pictorial representation, which captures the garish bolly-bazaar visual register, to which the city famously subscribes.

Sudhir Patwardhan, in what one might call a painterly socialist-realist mode, tries to chronicle creatively the changing lifescapes of the working classes in the city: it is the city under pressure that he wants to discuss. The concerns of most of Patwardhan's canvases (last solo, 2001) are informed by the desire to explore sympathetically the ways in which the changing industrial landscape impacts and transforms the very nature of urban life. Industrial pollution, mushrooming of satellite cities, compartmentalisation of life in crammed urban dwellings like chawls (where there is a heavy compromising of the privileged modern notion of privacy) are some of the themes he has relentlessly explored, in the quest to record different ways in which the middle and the lower middle classes adjust to urban apathy.

In Gieve Patel's work (last solo, 1999-2000), there are no ambiguous and difficult negotiations with the processes of pictorial aestheticisation as in Patwardhan. The colours are more abrasive and the figures more shockingly mounted. In many of his frames, Patel looks at a multiplying collective, one that is suffering the deprivations of urban life and trying to preserve its sense of personal dignity at the same time. Organising a gallery of the desperate – the dispossessed, the handicapped, the leper, the beggar, the accident victim, Patel tries to look at the nature of *deformity* itself, existing, as it does, visibly in the physical and the biological but invisibly as well, in our responses to it: in the personal and the institutional. There are also scattered, in his works, moments of brief aporia, as when a resplendent peacock is seen, being held by a man against the silhouetted skyscraperscape of Nariman Point (1999), offering us one of those stray moments of epiphany, when the pastoral and the urban monumental exist, almost disjuncturally, side by side.

One of the first attempts at publicly showcasing the diverse art-practices of Bombay and situating them in appropriate socio-political contexts was carried out at the **Century City** show held at the Tate Modern, London, in 2001. The show was curated expertly by the art theorist Geeta Kapur and the film historian Ashish Rajadhyaksha. Taking the Bombay riots of 1992-93 as a significant point of departure, they recorded the ways in which artists responded to this cataclysmic event that threatened to tear asunder, almost permanently, the social and political fabric of the city. While in many of his installations following *Memorial* (1993), Vivan Sundaram has re-enacted the pathetic spectacularity of a riot victim's public death, Nalini Malani's paintings and installations have interacted with classical writerly texts like *Toba Tek Singh* (1998), painterly texts like *The Galaxy of Musicians* (2003), and performative texts like *Medea* (1996) and *Hamlet* (2000) to integrate echoes of despair, desperation and pain over communal

Abanindranath Tagore obviously had Calcutta in mind. 1

conflagrations². Rummana Hussain's installational works from *Home/Nation* (1996) to *Space for Healing* (1999) address the double sense of violation, as a woman and as a Muslim, experienced by the artist in a communally vitiated urban space. Among other issues, Navjot's installations, *Links Destroyed and Rediscovered* (1994), *Between Memory and History* (2000) interactively address the recurrence of violence, in memory and in real life, and compose a multi-mediatic elegy on the systematic disruption of the city's cosmopolitan self-definition. Through his semi-figuratives, over the last forty years (retrospective, 2002), Altaf has also consistently produced a body of work that unmitigatedly captures the conflagration and chaos that public pogroms bring in their wake.

As transformations in communication and visual technologies alter our modes of viewing and processing, we find the younger generation of Bombay-based artists creatively responding to these changes engendered by the processes of globalisation. Finding themselves in the middle of a rapidly moulting visual and political landscape, many of them have, through their works, chosen simultaneously to participate in, meditate on and preside over the crisis of the image. The new ways in which the image, in the hands of corporate, multi-national and mass-media institutions, has grown inflated, larger than life, and has heralded a new culture of orgiastic consumerism is what comes for continuous critical investigation, in most of their works. Artists like Atul Dodiya and Jitish Kallat, for instance, use the definitive resources of the image itself, to cultivate subversive visual registers.

Pioneering the use of the photo-realistic mode of representation (which has now turned into an epidemic of sorts), Atul Dodiya negotiates carefully with the visually documented histories of our collective pasts and plays out fictions, performs anachronisms, using biographical resources to set up post-modern confrontations between distinct historical time-zones and space-zones. Quoting judiciously from diverse sources, Dodiya enters various iconic spaces, both classical and popular, a painting at one time, a film poster³ at another, using oil on canvas at one time and enamel paint on metal roller shop front shutters and laminate boards (image rolled within an image, image hidden behind an image)⁴ at another. In fact, it is in the act and mode of interrogating icons by re-imagining and re-formatting them in newer circuits, newer contexts, (a Mother India turning into a senile ogress, for instance in the *Tearscape*

series, 2000-01), that Dodiya most innovatively raises questions about the arbitrary deconstruction of history and the displacement of the national secular symbolic at the hands of a polity that is simultaneously Brahminised and lumpenised.

Jitish Kallat negotiates attentively with altering global visual registers in most of his work: the structures and forms of his earlier Xerox-transferred images (which evoked the visuality of peeling, graffiti-laden, heavily posterred walls in the city) have transmuted into simulated, televisual/computerised pixellations that look as if they have got established in conditions of transmissional *disturbance*. His earlier pseudo-narcissistic takes on the fate of the mass media-driven image have now progressed to record the changing character of the city's denizens. Kallat's mixed media works in his latest show, *Citizen Urban* (2002), critically present the city in its post-Godhra avatar: as older cosmopolitan values are rooted out and as service to oneself replaces service to the larger composite community as an operational urban ethic.

Sudarshan Shetty's mixed media assemblages, toys, photo-installations from *Paper Moon* (1995) to *A Brisk Walk Makes You Feel Good* (1999) are ironic meditations on the seductions of the modern-day marketplace: as malls, departmental stores and fashion-events showcase expensive lifestyles and generate beauty myths, urban buyers become willing victims of the burgeoning leisure-economy. Examining the nature of the urban glammerscape, Shetty explores commodity culture at its best. With a high amusement-quotient built into his work, Shetty also questions the pedigree of the diverse forms of entertainments produced around us.

The late Girish Dahiwale (*toxic tales*, 1998) also shuffled self-referentially through a series of roles and situations, locating himself centrally in large-format images (that have been reified in items of public display like advertisements, hoardings and utility items like currency notes) and overwrote them with slogans, inscriptions and statements, (framing and phrasing uncomfortable accusations), that not only implicated the apathetic state but (taken together with the image), also cocked a snook at the urban culture of self-aggrandisement.

The long-shot perspectivals of some of Anant Joshi's works (1999-2001), whose depopulated streetscapes (the *Dharavi* series, the *Litmus Test* series) carry with them a sense of spatial foreboding, capture the anticipation of some sinister event, that is waiting to unfold. A pictorial re-enactment of the post-riot calm, it

is also the moment before the next spell, somewhat like the interregnum between December 1992 and the January 1993 Bombay pogroms.

Riyas Komu's mixed media works have also grown from 1997 to his latest show, *Ambulance-Diesel Angel* (2002), where images that have been blown up, mimicking the larger-than-lifeness of news-heroes/news-victims, are subverted, almost parenthetically, by insetted images, that speak obsessively of death by war, terrorism and suicide. It is his crisis of identity as a Malayali Muslim in a Bombay becoming increasingly communalised and provincialised (even as, on the rebound, it globalises aggressively), that he addresses with continuous interest.

Even as he draws selectively from diverse cultural mythologies, in many of his acrylic and inkjet works on canvas (*Brahma's Homepage*, 1999), Baiju Parthan sets up and distributes a communicative network of emblems and symbols in much the same key as in an information flowchart, used on the computer in the designing of new 'knowledges'.⁵

In her latest show (*The Battlefield is the Mind*, 2002) Reena Saini Kallat continues with many of the concerns one saw in her earlier *Skin* (2000). The subaltern figure here is presented heroically engaged in the task of weaving the polyemblematic, polysymbolic fabric of the nation and, in the process, he looms larger than the line of skyscrapers behind him or the Kalki mascot above him.

As land prices escalate thanks to the unscrupulous deals between politicians and the real estate mafia and as the inner city areas get progressively gentrified, lower and middle middle class migrants to the city have to seek respectable accommodation farther and farther away from the city in hastily developed suburbs on the periphery.

Hema Upadhyay's mixed media works (*Sweet Sweat Memories*, 2001) explore the crisis of identifying with an anonymous urban/suburban space, with its lack of active community links and absence of a sustaining neighbourhood, which forces an anxiety-ridden existence on her protagonists. As such, hers is therefore also a specifically gendered response to the shrinking architectural and social spatialities of the city, that crowd, threaten, violate and severely disorient a woman's sense of self.

Anju Dodiya's watercolours (1999, 2001) are interior monologues containing fantasies of violence and strategies of adjustment. They explore the enormous amount of disquiet and stress that intimate relationships (with oneself, with others) fall prey to, in our urban contexts.

One of the earliest definitive installational shows in the city, Krishnamachari Bose's *Amuseum* (1992), had tried to recreate the experience of the city as a carnivalesque space: one of the central exhibits was a zigurat of disarranged books, which implied a critique of irksome textual knowledges produced by most of the educational institutions in the city.

Shakuntala Kulkarni's video installations (*Reduced Spaces*, 2001) have women running away from invisible dangers (men, crowds, roles?) and it is an acute sense of claustrophobia that her suffocated protagonists experience in sealed spaces with no exits.

While much of Kaushik Mukhopadhyay's work includes a critique of consumerist fantasies, his mixed media installation, *Charkop Rebuilt* (1995), tellingly reimagines the psycho-spatial experience of living in a matchbox apartment in a western suburb of the city. Meera Devidayal's *Dream-Home* paintings (2003), mock the hyperbolic advertising culture that plays on people's desires to own well-furnished apartments, bungalows with "top-class wiring, flooring and fittings", in and around the city.

With the coming of the auction houses in the last couple of decades, the opening of new galleries, the starting of new institutional initiatives; with the city itself becoming an important node in the global art market network, the opportunities for the city-based artists have increased. Concurrently, however, the political climate in the city has steadily worsened: the social health of this city (with two names, no less) has drastically deteriorated. Addressing these minatory urban crises through their work has therefore become imperative for many artists who nurse a social conscience. The Open Circle, a collective of four artists, Shilpa Gupta, Sharmila Samant, Tushar Joag and Archana Hande, was therefore founded in 1999, to protest against the processes of cultural homogenisation, to initiate a cross-disciplinary conversation with other expressive and academic practices and most importantly, to use art as a tool to interrogate the national/urban politics of convenience. Using Web art and other Internet media resources, Gupta, for instance, has assumed for herself the role of a committed cultural activist. Opening mock Kidney supermarkets (installation, 2002), devising subversive web-installations and Internet-projects (*Diamonds and You*, 2000), she tries to critique consumerist marketing strategies and the unequal flows of power in society at the same time.

In the course of this short essay, we have looked at only some of the artists⁶ who have radicalised their art practices even as they have creatively and critically responded to the changing politico-cultural contexts around them. As Bombay looks all set to become the largest metropolis in the world in the coming 10-20 years, we stand convinced, that the strategic interventions which all these artists make now, will only succeed in equipping them to respond to the city of the future, fostering in the process, new cultures of innovation, new cultures of resistance.

Unfortunately, there are not many abstractionists, who have explored the moods of the city, the way, say, Ram Kumar has, of Benares.

2 Tyeb Mehta's significant *Diagonal* series, in the 70s was one of the first self-conscious painterly meditations on communal violence, that the city experienced during the Partition.

3 In a different key, N. Pushpamala has, through her photo-enactments (1996-98), effectively critiqued the conventions of the Bollywood visual register, one of the city's signature registers as well. In fact, the exhibition, *Kitsch Kitsch Hota Hai*, curated by Madhu Jain and conceptualised by Renu Modi (2001) showcased various works by contemporary artists that addressed, among other popular cultural themes, the loud charms of Bollywood iconography.

4 Atul Dodiya's show was called *Bombay: Labyrinth/Laboratory* (2001). One of the more compelling images here was that of Mahatma Gandhi, sipping soup behind the retractable shutter (*B for Bapu*, acrylic, varnish on canvas).

5