

*City Dwellers*

*Contemporary Art From India*

Seattle Art Museum August 30 – February 15

Selected works from the Collection of Sanjay Parthasarathy and Malini Balakrishnan

*Mughal Painting Power and Piety,*

Asian Art Museum July 19 – December 7, 2014.

A life size red fiberglass figure of Gandhi painted with glitzy red automobile paint and holding an ipod leaps out at us in the first gallery of *City Dwellers, Contemporary Art From India*. Debanjan Roy's sculpture defiantly alters our image of the humble white garbed Gandhi. We are a long way from the non-violent Gandhi, who was murdered in January 1948 in the aftermath of the extreme violence of the Partition of India and Pakistan. (See the film *Earth* by Deepa Mehta for a potent telling of that time).

The red color of this sculpture refers to that violence, the shiny synthetic material refers to the contemporary reality of India, commercial, business oriented, and materialistic. The antithesis of everything that Gandhi believed in and lived.

All of the work in this exciting exhibition plays with the past and present, upsets clichés, fixed romantic notions of India, and provides insights into where it is today. At the same time, it is clear that all of these artists have great reverence for their own history, both cultural and historical. I can't help envy contemporary artists in India for the enormous wealth of cultural references at their disposal.

Another wonderful work is by Nandini Valli Muthiah who places the blue skinned Krishna in contemporary surroundings like a modern hotel room. In contemporary India Krishna frequently appears in full size statues in religious processions. Muthiah just takes it one step further. Vivek Vilasini poses hundreds of people on the façade of an historical façade of a Hindu temple in South India. If we look closely we see a catalog of contemporary Indian people from school children in uniforms to women in saris. The artist himself sits near the top in contemporary dress.

Pushpamala N and Clare Arni perform and restage publicly available imagery from historical paintings to police mug shots and, of course, Bollywood posters. So effectively are they re-created that you always have to look twice to know that they are not the real thing. Their work is political: they are looking at female clichés, oppressions, and shallow assumptions by foreign photographers who romanticize India.

The dazzling exhibition at the Seattle Art Museum is paired with *Mughal Painting: Power and Piety* at the Asian Art Museum, a small, but intense selection of miniature paintings along with objects similar to those that appear in the paintings, such as daggers, rings, and necklaces. This dialog of two and three dimensions is provocative, and helps us to look much harder at the tiny details of the miniatures (magnifying glasses are provided).

Mughal painting initially was the result of the amazing rule (1556- 1605) of the enlightened leader Akbar who unified India. He embraced Persian cultural traditions, as well as reaching out to include all religions, created a huge library with books in many languages, and brought artists, scholars, translators and holy men to his court. Although he was a Muslim, he sought unity among different traditions. Akbar altered the course of Indian history and art in a way that lasted many centuries.

Since Independence in 1947, sectarian violence has dominated India, but today, the religion of capitalism is the dominant force in the country. These contemporary artists respond to that with both critique and humor.

We are very fortunate in Seattle to have the opportunity to view the work of these cutting-edge artists so generously loaned from the private collection of Sanjay Parthasarathy and Malini Balakrishnan. It is a rare opportunity. Don't miss it.