

EXHIBITION REVIEW

“Women Artists of India: A Celebration of Independence”

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Fifty years after Independence from Great Britain, India is celebrating the anniversary of her freedom from colonialism. In the San Francisco Bay Area there was a particularly extraordinary conjunction of exhibitions, symposia, films, dances, readings, and other special events, including the launching of a brand new organization called the Society for Art and Cultural Heritage of India (SACHI). As part of the celebration, Mills College art history professor Mary-Ann Milford-Lutzker has created a pioneering exhibition of fifteen contemporary women artists from India. The show appears at Mills as a singular act of will on Milford-Lutzker's part, having emerged from the incredible logistical and bureaucratic complexities required to bring the work out of India.

The women of India have an extraordinary heritage. On the one hand, the stories of the powerful goddesses Devi, Lakshmi, Parvati, Kali and Durga fill literature and painting. On the other hand, traditions of oppression like suttee, the self-immolation of widows, widespread infanticide of female children, and a powerful caste system bear down on them. The women in this exhibition all draw on this heritage and its contradictions, even as they mark their new places in a rapidly changing society.

Seven of the artists actually flew in for the opening from New Delhi, Calcutta, and Bombay. Their presence in California underscores the fact that they are all privileged within Indian society to act as independent women who have professional careers as freelance painters. That in itself is an exceptional position in India, where traditional family structures, obligations, and expectations are still powerful. Arranged marriages, for example, are still common. The artists are all charismatic women who spoke articulately and passionately about their work. I was struck with their deep commitment to women's issues specifically, and political concerns in general. There were no bouquets of flowers or bowls of oranges in this exhibition.

The exhibition opened with two large, predominately red scrolls by Kanchan Chander. The work depicted a young widow burning herself in one panel, and Durga riding her lion and standing on the bodhi leaf, symbol of enlightenment in the other. In front was a doll lying face down in a lotus shaped pool, reference to the aborting of female births. The artist was inspired by village art techniques such as bhutas, large carvings of protective spirits. She adopted a simplified style to invoke the same quality in her work. These almost ten feet high images served as an invocation and homage to female spirits for the Mills exhibition.

Chandler's intersection with village techniques is common among the women in the exhibition. Instead of a rural/urban split, many of these women have collaborated with village women in various ways. Vasundhara Tewari, for example, has a series of small acrylic paintings called *Surging Energy*. These are nude women practicing yoga positions

against a background of henna designs, known as mehndi that were painted by a village artist. Traditionally mehndi are painted on hands and feet for special occasions, but Tewari, with funding from the government, collaborated with the artist to make these works. From the perspective of traditional Indian culture a nude female might not seem at all radical, when we think of the Hindu temples covered with figures who are not just nude, but animated by sexual energy and engaged in sexual intercourse, but Tewari's contemporary and secular representations of her own nude body has been controversial in a country where women left purdah and their special quarters in household compounds only fifty years ago.

Another artist who addresses the politics of the female body is Navjot. Coming from Bombay, she is living in one of the most politicized cities in India, but also the center of the Indian Film Industry known as Bollywood. Her installation for this show featured images of woman cut from Indian film posters, film stills, and magazines to underline the violation of women in the media; she encouraged people to add their own images of comparable American exploitation. Navjot protested oppression with her own body by substituting horizontal black lines for the traditional red dot worn on the forehead of married woman in India.

Three of the best-known painters in the exhibition were Arpita Singh, Nalini Malani and Gogi Saroj Pal. In *Traditions/Tensions, Contemporary Art in Asia* last year, Arpita Singh's showed dazzling almost mural scale paintings but in this show she was represented by small works. Nonetheless her offbeat iconography of large females who dominate a decorative field filled with men who seem to float helplessly among planes and cars worked just as well. Nalini Malani is intentionally elusive. Her figures half dissolve into an odd disordered space that suggests chaos and disjunction. By comparison, Gogi Saroj Pal's paintings seem easy to read. Pal's installation includes nine panels that depict dynamic woman assuming mocking yoga postures that represent rasa (aesthetic emotions). The highly saturated colors and flamboyant poses are flaunting the constraints on women both socially and historically, at the same time that they invoke historical conventions in Indian art and mythology.

Jayashree Chakravarty also addresses the power of contemporary women to partake of historic powers as well as transform them. In *The Fortune Teller* three men in jeans consult a female seer who is also dressed in contemporary clothes; she sits in a casual cross-legged position under a tree and points skyward with a pseudo-traditional gesture .

Arpana Caur takes references from Pahari miniature painting, but her large canvases completely invert the confinement and objecthood of women in those works. In *Between Dualities*, one woman, painted a highly saturated green, sews to create a new person, while another woman, with a brilliant blue hue, cuts the shape. Together they are making a self-sufficient and self-absorbed world that is no longer confined to women's quarters.

There are other works in the show like those of Anupam Sud, Rekha Rodwittiya, Suruchi Chand, Lalitha Lajmi and Nilima Sheikh that also reinterpret historical models of women, historical art references, and social conventions. Others strongly protest social and

political oppression as in Rummana Hussain's installation that comments on the tensions of Muslims and Hindus and Naina Dilal whose small etchings potently comment on abortion of female fetuses and the horrors of the millions who drowned in the Moravi dam failure. Hussain along with Navjot and Nalini Malani are also active in staging public protests on a wide range of issues.

Taken as a whole, these artists and their works speak clearly of a new freedom for women in India, as they renegotiate the parameters of both the conventions of art and their own place as women in the conventions of contemporary India. While this process is the privilege of only a small group of educated women, the vast majority of women in India are still living in conditions of extreme poverty, these artists are deeply committed and highly articulate. Perhaps the second fifty years of Indian independence will see their concerns and that of other women like them lead to the liberation of all women in South Asia.