

Seeing Beyond Space and Place Through Indian Contemporary Art

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A panel discussion on “Space and Place: Transcending Local Meaning in Indian Contemporary Art” was presented by Eye on India Festival at downtown co-host Kavi Gupta Gallery, June 11. Moderated by Tanya Gill, the conversation was between artist and researcher at School of the Art Institute, Shaurya Kumar and curator of contemporary Indian art, Betty Seid.

Having been Fulbright scholar in Delhi, Gill considers herself a cultural ambassador, whose interest in Indian art began with marriage to a Sikh. She attempted to define and relate the terms of the discussion, opposing occupied “place” (that holds memories) to yet unoccupied “space” that can be moved

into, insisting on the particular perspective inevitably brought by the observer. With global migrations, etc., (cyber-) space is collapsing all around us.

Seid presented six contemporary Indian artists whom she matched into three pairs to illustrate shared themes or approaches. “Melding Mythologies” was exemplified by Nalini Malani and Bari Kumar. By fusing epic heroines, Hindu Sita and Greek Medea, Malani (b. 1946), who underwent the trauma of Partition, has broadened her politics from local to global. Spurned Medea betrays her own people, then murders her lover Jason’s new bride and her own children by him. These scenes are juxtaposed to Sita’s “trial by fire” on either side of a vertical median line. Her “Curioser and Curioser” depicts Alice of “Through the Looking Glass” now adrift in the chaos of Mumbai. Exposed to Hispanic street art in California, Kumar (b.1966) persistently obliges the viewer to rethink the relation between image and text, as in his juxtaposition of secular and sacred, seeing versus blind faith. His art explores miscommunication, as in his portrayal of “Acceptance of Denial.”

Subodh Gupta and Manish Nai exemplify sustainability, a thematic Seid had elaborated in relation to the latter’s ongoing exhibition here at a previous panel, June 5. Nai’s objects fit formally into the Western canon but his process art is distinguished by a no-waste approach to humble Indian materials, Subodh plays on the extreme contrast between rural and urban life in India, on migrants and global displacement. His trademark is the glorification of ordinary objects, such as airport trolleys and taxis, and elevation of the readymade. His “This is not a Fountain” is made of dripping taps in a water-starved country. From the Bihar badlands of India’s poorest state, Subodh, who migrates through international art trade fairs to return home rewarded, has been attacked for exploiting his crisis of identity. His global vocation was launched by a poster he did for a local theater company.

Suhasini Kejriwal and Sanjeev Shankar were brought together under the rubric of “beyond the white box” that was introduced to Delhi in 1961 as framing device. Defiant and untamed (‘janglee’), Suhasini paints incongruous nightmarish scenes to expose the dark underbelly of nature, such her “Garden of Unearthly Delight” presented at Jaipur Festival. She thereby contributes to the “unmaking of the modernist idea.” Sanjeev, who lives as a migrant among tribals and marginals, was resident artist at Hyde Park. By having the inhabitants of a rural village on the edge of high tech Gurgaon (Delhi) repurpose unused cooking oil cans into a free-standing canopy, Sanjeev is developing a radical and democratic way to design community spaces.

As inspiration, Shaurya Kumar cited Salman Rushdie: “No matter how great the storm, if that plunges me into contradiction and paradox, so be it.” Defining his own cultural context of a postcolonial India that was still not really free and now the opening of the global neoliberal unprotected market, Kumar’s rapid synopsis of his various distinct projects highlighted how space and time determine the artist’s work. Especially significant was the encyclopedic “Painting of India” and “Handmade in India” initiatives of documenting the arts and crafts of every state that grounded him in a tradition from which he had become completely alienated. “My world was completely turned upside down upon coming to America,” he declared.

He illustrated his ongoing “Glimpses into the Vanishing Originals” with examples such as the 140,000 objects destroyed in the Kabul Museum, also in Baghdad, Beirut, etc., and construction of the Qutb Minar from about 26 destroyed Hindu temples. As member of a University of Chicago team comprising a historian, an anthropologist, and sociologist, Kumar is studying the emotional effects of looting, e.g. of images from derelict yogini temples.

Artist and dealer in Indian folk art, Manvee Vaid, asked whether one needs to know about the artist and his method in order to appreciate contemporary art. “The familiar traditional arts are so visually narrative and decorative that abstract art in comparison comes across as dry and rather strange to many viewers. The fear of asking the wrong question while seeing art, I think is the one of the main reasons that many just breeze through the artworks or paintings without making any inquiry into the process or their reaction to it.”