

TO LET THE WORLD IN: NARRATIVE AND BEYOND IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART

To Let the World In: Narrative and Beyond in Contemporary Indian Art is a four-part project addressing the work of three generations of artists currently active in India . The project is being directed by Chaitanya Sambrani for the March 2012 edition of Art Chennai: Festival for Contemporary Art. The project involves four components:

1. A major exhibition featuring the work of 25-30 contemporary Indian artists (Lalit Kala Akademi Galleries, Chennai, 15 March to 10 April 2012). We are hoping to tour the exhibition to other venues in India and overseas over 2012-13.
2. 90-minute film about the work of the artists in the exhibition
3. Seminar addressing themes relevant to the project (Chennai, 16-18 March 2012, venue TBC) with presentations by art historians, curators, artists and gallerists.
4. A book, which combines the fully illustrated exhibition catalogue with selected proceedings from the seminar.

To Let the World In: Narrative and Beyond in Contemporary Indian Art seeks to understand modes of world making and narratives in contemporary art. The exhibition will open at Lalit Kala Regional Centre, Chennai on 15 March 2012 and be open to public viewing for four weeks until 10 April 2012. We are hoping to tour the exhibition to several venues in India and overseas over 2012-14. We are hoping that the exhibition will travel to venues in Delhi, Mumbai, Singapore and Sydney over this period. These and other potential venues will be confirmed over the next few months.

The fundamental premise of the exhibition stems from the postcolonial subject's assertion of being a legitimate inheritor of multiple traditions: from India, from the Asian region, and from the wider world. Figurative and narrative art became an important vehicle for such an assertion as evidenced by the exhibition *Place for People* (1981, with Jogen Chowdhury, Bhupen Khakhar, Nalini Malani, Sudhir Patwardhan, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Vivan Sundaram, and Geeta Kapur as ideologue with her essay "Partisan Views on the Human Figure"). Such an assertion was fundamental for the practice of many Indian artists and intellectuals born in the 1930s and 1940s, in that it galvanized a reinvention of tradition to accommodate a sense of local as well as international belonging. In being able to sidestep universalist structures of a monolithic modernism as well as the provincialism implicit in an insular traditionalism lay a way into an empowered approach to local tradition that did not preclude global affiliation.

For artists of this generation (born 1935-1945, veritable *Midnight's Children*), a review of Indian tradition was the necessary coming-of-age ritual, conducted within Indian art schools and studios, and as often, on sojourns outside the country where exposure to a wider world combined with "the beauty of distance"[1] served to elucidate more complex ways of understanding Indian tradition. This view of Indian tradition seeks to emphasize ongoing negotiations between various traditions, intra-nationally as well as internationally, where local needs and expressions combine with influences from other Asian countries and from the wider world through trade, migration and colonization, to produce one of the world's great examples of cultural synthesis.

Indian artists were certainly not alone in such recalibrations of history: such processes are tangible within several cognate historical situations in other parts of Asia and elsewhere in the postcolonial world. An exploration of the Indian example may help to further elucidate an international tendency that brings personal and cultural narrative into focus as a way to let the world in, and thereby to enter the world.

This revisionist view of tradition was put through an intensely emotional and rigorous questioning through the writing of Anita Dube, the ideologue for the exhibition *Questions and Dialogue* (1989), which became the intellectual vehicle for the Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association.[2]

Closer to the present time, the “world” appears to have been transformed into data streams. We encounter a world that is on the brink of losing its materiality through “mediatization”. Many of us living in an increasingly globalised and “informationalised” world routinely encounter our immediate surroundings as well as faraway places via a plethora of media manifestations. We frequently discover the nature of the world “at large” as being simultaneously, immediately present, and dissolved into discrete diffusions from a bewildering variety of sources. We cannot ignore the world in that it routinely and violently impinges upon our consciousness. At the same time, this world that is constantly confronting us is a malleable production of a global media apparatus that specializes in generating and disseminating spectral projections that may or may not have corresponding realities attached to them.

Leave aside any voluntary gestures of letting the world in, it is now impossible to keep the world out. Meanwhile, attempts to engage with the world are beset with phantoms pretending to the status of reality, while it is increasingly difficult to separate persons, places and events from their simulacra. The world in all its beauty and horror is immediately present in our daily experience just as its seeming immanence is rendered elusive insofar as events, people, places are constantly transformed into streams of information.

The project of “Worlding” art history as evidenced by biennials or triennials needs a moment of pause. An investigation of the precise modalities whereby such “Worldings” take place is of essence. As exemplified by the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane, the biennale/triennial-driven “Worlding” of art history aspires to accommodate the synchronous existence of seemingly diachronic manifestations ranging from folk performance to other, more familiar forms of “internationally cognizable” contemporary art. What I am referring to here is the ability to present indigenous forms of contemporary art—be it weaving, carving, performance and so forth—in a framework that legitimizes all of these, in addition to conceptual experimentation, schoolroom presentation, and playground experience, as being “contemporary art”.

To let the world in, or to keep the world out: the erotics implicit in such a formulation may point to contemporary dimensions of art making in light of our existence in the age of global war, where incursions, penetrations, embezzlement and seduction are the determinants of history. What are the possibilities and limits of narrative art in the contemporary world? To my mind, these may be discussed under the following four streams. Firstly, narrative has historically been closely associated with acts of world making. Narrative art aspires to a close embrace of autobiography, mythology and dream in a

continuing project of imagining the world anew, thereby participating in a tireless interrogation of received histories and geographies. A second stream has to do with variously direct and deferred engagements with literature, fiction and poetry. Such engagements extend the frame beyond the visual to undertake a synthesis between word and image, between oral and visual traditions. Thirdly, narrative art may sometimes consist in metaphorical or metonymic declarations that offer the viewer an enigma rather than a description. The metonym may be a fragment that stands in for a concept or story, an image that invokes an entire psycho-geography. Lastly, I want to consider distillation as a way of understanding embodied narrative. I want to understand how artists deploy narrative charge onto objects that may not have such affiliations in the everyday. Distillation then, may refer to acts of transformation altering the semantics of the everyday, to transform the normative into the transgressive, or the quotidian into the extraordinary.

These four possibilities of narrative art are not to my mind, categories to consign the artist's work into. Very often, one or more of them may be simultaneously discernible in the work of individual artists. The display of the exhibition will not be premised on four categories that the works are divided into. These are merely ways for me to approach the work of the artists, a set of tools that may aid in comprehending the work for all of us and for the viewer.

Art Chennai Organizers: Art Chennai was initiated by Chennai-based industrialist and collector Sanjay Tulsyan (Managing Director, Tulsyan NEC <http://tulsyanec.net>) in collaboration with Cochin-based gallery owner Dilip Narayanan (Gallery Open Eyed Dreams <http://www.openeyeddreams.com>). The intention of Art Chennai is to galvanize the contemporary art scene in Chennai and its surroundings and to initiate an ongoing series of projects that make substantial contributions to the production and dissemination of knowledge about contemporary art in India.

The inaugural edition of Art Chennai was presented from 20-26 March 2011 and involved an artist residency, parallel exhibitions by private galleries across Chennai, displays by invited galleries from other Indian cities, a speakers' forum and an auction that contributed to the Rotary Club of Madras. For details, please see <http://artchennai.wordpress.com>/Art Chennai's principal website <http://www.artchennai.com/> is currently being re-built and will carry regular updates, so please do check back soon.

Curator: Chaitanya Sambrani has a MA (Fine) degree in Art Criticism from the Faculty of Fine Arts, M.S. University of Baroda, and a Ph.D. in Art History and Curatorship from the Australian National University. He is currently Senior Lecturer in Art Theory at the Australian National University School of Art. His curatorial projects include Fire and Life (Curator, India, 1996-97, an Australia-India series of reciprocal artist residencies and exhibitions); Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India (2004-07 tour through major art museums in Australia, USA, Mexico and India) and Place.Time.Play: India-China Contemporary Art (Shanghai, October-December 2010).