

Rs. 100 • \$ 7 • £ 4
VOLUME 8 ISSUE 2
QUARTER 2, 2003

ART *India*

THE ART NEWS MAGAZINE OF INDIA



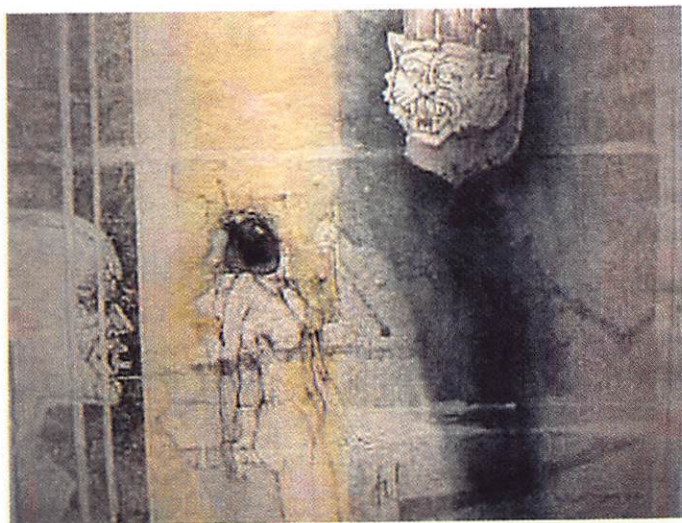
Imaging The City

CONSIDERING INDIAN ART WITH AN EAR TO THE FUTURE

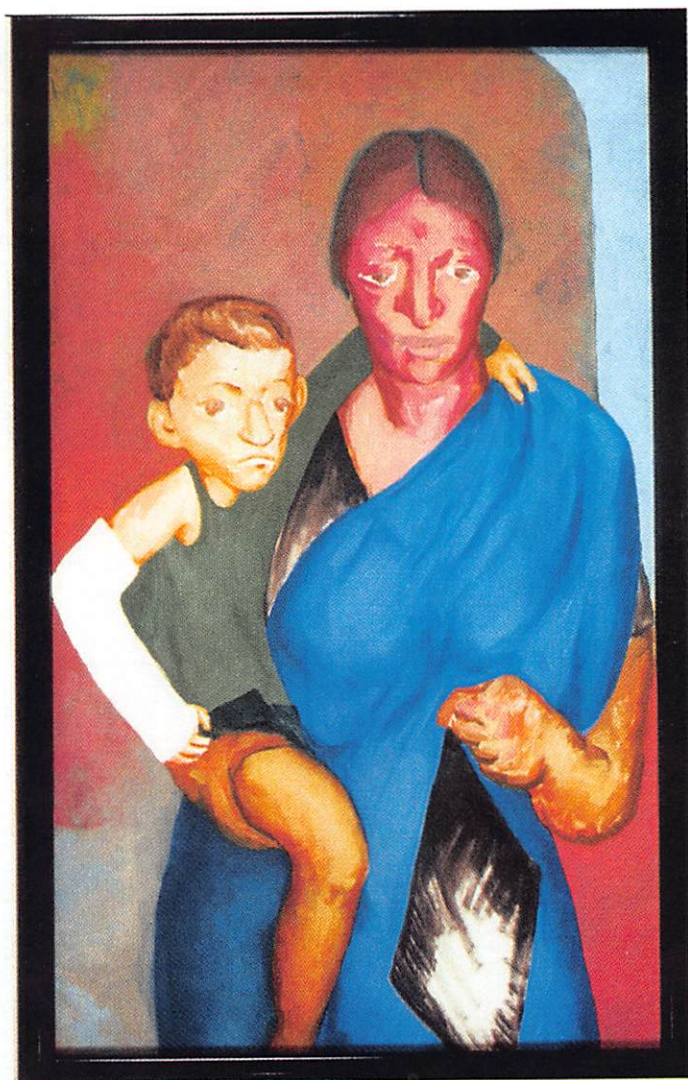
Amit S. Rai reflects on what an exhibition of post-Independence Indian art would mean to a diasporic audience in the United States.

What is the frame of reference for modern Indian art? Through what optics, affects or ideologies do we recognise a work, a collection or a movement as characteristically "modern" and "Indian"?

These questions take on a certain urgency today as transnational movements fracture, coalesce and overlap through circuits of global capital. We say "transnational" because the questions that open contemporary Indian art outward to the diaspora, to history and to politics, must not be policed around a set of pre-given borders: of the nation, for instance. So when an exhibition on post-Independence Indian Art opens in North America, not only do Indian Americans come out to celebrate their national heritage, but in that act of improvisational imagining what also happens is the creation of a specifically diasporic minority identity mediated through the aura and materiality of the visual. And in the US context, that identity is always also South Asian.



Shyamal Dutta Ray. Death of a Dream. Watercolour on paper. 19" x 25". 1973.



Sudhir Patwardhan. Mother and Child. Oil on canvas. 39 3/4" x 24". 1989.

In light of this, we ask: how does modern Indian art signify as modern and Indian in a context that is explicitly transnational and in the process of multiple becomings?

Let us, for instance, pose this question to a fine, small and avowedly didactic exhibition which recently opened at the Paul Robeson Gallery, Rutgers University-Newark, in New Jersey – *Post-Independence Contemporary Indian Art: Selections from the Sunanda and Umesh Gaur Collection*. Sunanda Gaur is a physician and professor, and her husband Umesh is a financier. As prominent members of the very large Indian community settled in New Jersey, the Gaurs see their passion for Indian art as not merely a lucrative pastime but, as Mr. Gaur puts it, as something that "really connects us back to our roots". The question of modernist art as a medium for a journey toward the authentic is precisely one of the ironies of post-modern capitalism. Bill Nichols notes that "modernism, which eschewed the contamination of mass culture and the marketplace so feverishly, becomes effortlessly reinscribed within the marketplace of the museum and the art auction as a result of authenticity, the original and the masterpiece..."

This connection to origins, this movement toward the

authentically Indian, also has another movement, for it is not only a milestone for the Indian art market, it "is the first exhibition exclusively from an NRI collection". Yet, given the range of the collection, one must understand these "roots" as more of a web of social relations, political practices, iconic images and national mythologies.

The Robeson Gallery (an important name for a gallery exhibiting Indian art, by the way) exhibition covers the entire post-Independence period, from 1947 up to the late 1990s. A range of styles, generations, movements and traditions find expression on the canvases that cover the gallery's bright yellow walls. From M.F. Husain's cubist figurations of mythological and mythologised characters like Ganesh and Mother Teresa, to the neo-tantric geometricism of Gulam Rasool Santosh, this exhibition touches on many of the complicated negotiations that artists in India engage in. Familiar questions of modernity or tradition, medium and material, "West vs. East" and politics or self-expression come up again, but are transformed by the diasporic space of this exhibition.

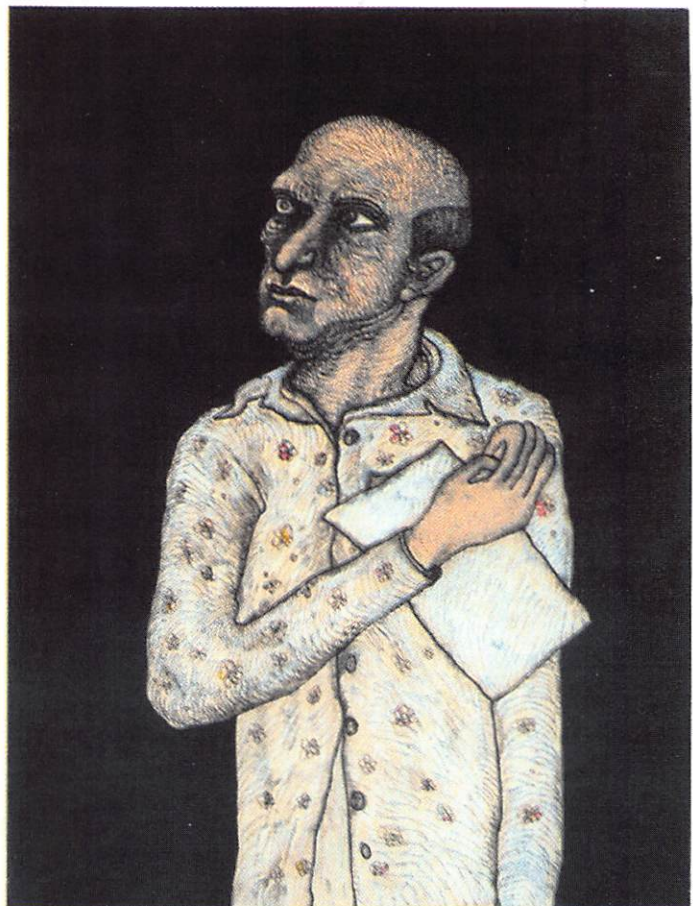
To the credit of the curator and the collector, the exhibition eschews easy identifications of Indian art with any particular style, period, school or other such aesthetic partialities. Compare, for instance, a painting like Shyamal Dutta Ray's *Death of a Dream* with Sudhir Patwardhan's *Mother and Child*. Consider the complete divergence of visual regimes (a ghastly slashing of vision vs. Bollywood perspectival), affects (the haunting pain of a tragic memory, the beauty of the tangential line and the everyday insistence of colours between bodies and matter) and materials which give off different effects (watercolour on paper and oil on canvas). The composition of visual regimes, the production of multiple affects through a careful economy of material and colour, and the specificities of a work's creation tell us exactly what is at stake in the work, where that work aspires to draw its viewers and what is possible in such becomings. These becomings shift over time and context, such that a diasporic searching for the "authentic" Indian signature image might find it in the outline of a face crafted out of a primitivist image of a decolonising Africa or a modernist dream of a defeated Europe. The frame of reference for post-Independence art must not be limited to one genealogy that would see an unbroken line from the modernist/abstract frames of European masters to Amrita Sher-Gill to Syed Haider Raza (even given their incongruous styles). Part of what our enquiry must draw from these works, then, is a specifically transnational line of flight that is as boldly creative as the works themselves.

Consider Ram Kumar's 1974 *Untitled* oil on canvas creation. Much like certain Renaissance painters, the trompe l'oeil effect (watch it from the corner of your eye, sidelong) elongates the figures as if they were shadows on a mirror. The geological layering of colours, the fast and slow movements of lines, of blocks and the indescribable breakthrough of the clear blue sky make you realise that to insist on it being a figurative composition is to deny it all its other multiple ways of communicating.

Or consider Jogen Chowdhury's 1986 composition, *Man with Piece of Paper* (pastel and ink on paper). The lovingly

etched wrinkles, the eyes that look two ways, the black hole background and, of course, the beautifully textured shirt, all allow the viewer to forget the enigma of the piece of paper (is it a marriage license, a birth certificate or a ration card?). There is a burnt quality to all the lines, the deceptive simplicity of a shadow stepping out of the darkness and taking form.

Indeed, it is with the ear to the future that renowned art critic Geeta Kapur understands the present contexts of Indian art – "Where the national formation is disintegrating, there is an uncomfortable relationship between the public and the private, the state and commerce, the national and the global." As new links between Indian and global markets develop, "globalisation allows for the first time, a freedom from the national/collective/communitarian straitjacket; freedom also from the heavily paternalistic patronage of the state". This allows for the recognition of other realities, "other discourses of opposition such as those of gender and the minority – discourses that question the ethics of the nation-state itself". Such a moment, constituted as it is through multiple lines of power and resistance, and the historical sedimentation of numerous genealogies, not least of which is the global capitalist market for art, give the exhibition of post-colonial Indian art at the Robeson Gallery its precise effectiveness. A new frame is being constructed for the very interpretation and consumption of Indian art. This frame has at once a colonial legacy and a transnational future.



Jogen Chowdhury. *Man with Piece of Paper*. Pastel and ink on paper. 15" x 11". 1986. Images courtesy the author.