

WHEN VIOLENCE BECOMES DECADENT



Rajib Chowdhury
Hand of a cynical protagonist
74x94cm
Ink jet on archival paper
2012

Press release

When Violence Becomes Decadent

Curator : Shaheen Merali

Vernissage 23rd June
24th June until the July 29th.

Artists: Sarnath Banerjee (unique book), Binu Bhaskar (drawings), Rajib Chowdhury (digital prints and drawing), Samit Das (photo and text documentation), Natasha de Betak (film screening), Probir Gupta (digital photographs), Rajkamal Kahlon (watercolour drawings and objects), Jitish Kallat (two video installation), Leena Kejriwal (photographs-installation), Simit Raveshia (sculptures and photographs)

Furthermore, a selection of documentaries and reports by journalists will be presented in the resource area.

In proposing *When Violence becomes decadent*, my research and analysis of contemporary India centred on locating the subjectivities created by artistic discourse and notations within a turbulent history that remains entrenched in what can only be described as a nation of great ambition and much aggression. How are we able to come to terms with millions starving - whilst millions are created as a new middle-class amongst a million such travesties and iniquities that make the 'world's largest democracy'.

The title of the exhibition reflects some of my concerns of recent years, as a curator who has been substantially involved with artists from a global domain, whilst having, more recently, concentrated on understanding the conditions and phenomenon of the creative surge of artists from India and Iran.

My interest lies in contemplating the wider problems of 'minority' representation in exhibitions, suggesting ways that curation can become a cohesive and transparent form of research.

We are in need of some answers, even formulae, which can help distribute the results, a dissemination beyond the proverbial essay, if exhibition making is to be considered as truly experimental. If, as so much is claimed, curatorial strategies are real alternatives and provide real, challenging developments within an insatiable market/space, then the formations informed by these strategies need to be available as a set of results for us to confidently pursue the future.

It is in assembling the works for *When Violence becomes decadent*, that one starts to realise the frame, the framing and the framework of both decadence and violence in the context of India. This vast, seething historical space, now marked by a turbulent history, is a nation-state. In turning to the great poet Rabindranath Tagore, who was instrumental in this nation's birth and its separation from its former colonial rulers, one finds one of the relevant figureheads whose art activities included writing (poetry, plays and narrative texts), directing and painting. These were combined with his activist attributes, including an education system based on rural principles, which are amazing acts of contemplation.

The exhibition at the Freies Museum is partially grounded in the study of some of his works and ideas, and an engrossing archive of designs and mediations is presented by the Delhi-based artist, Samit Das, accompanied by a series of reports and documentaries in the resource area. This history as acts of humanist, universalist and internationalist principles, helped to denounce both imperialist strictures and spurned, rigid classical forms by resisting linguistic strictures. Tagore was able to create by being a strident anti-nationalist, through which stance magical moments of clear thinking and articulation, in midst of the movement for independence from Britain and its sovereign rights, led to a better political understanding and potential in the new nation's ethical formulations. One of the key ideas of a village[s] free from the shackles of helplessness and ignorance by vitalising knowledge is extensively represented in a series of journalists' reports and non-government organisations' reports in the resource area of the exhibition. In the early 1930s Tagore targeted ambient 'abnormal caste consciousness' and untouchability. Lecturing against these, he penned Dalit heroes for his poems and his dramas, and he campaigned—successfully—to open Guruvayoor Temple to Dalits.

These acts have inspired artists Simit Raveshia and Leena Kejriwal, who present large scale environments that include photoworks, sculptures and found material that question the position of sex trafficking (Kejriwal) and the subaltern (Raveshia).

Many of these acts, initiated by Tagore, remain outside of the national history of India or of much of a world spiraling into ad nauseam triviality and hyper-consumption. Two video projections by Jitish Kallat contemplate the issues of scarcity and nationhood, whilst Binu Bhaskar's drawings map the ground for the cheap and globalised labour that drives much of the rural ambition into dwelling in city squalor or constructs the architectural gambles in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Qattar. In trying to examine this legacy, as a historical remain or archive, away from India's headlong rush into super-capitalism, one starts to understand a more contemplative set of questions, positions rather than postures and renunciations.

Rajkamal Kahlon's research into the colonial project and its mitigating circumstances are presented in a series of drawings and small sculptures alongside the witty articulations by Sarnath Banerjee. It is often the work within the creative sectors that invites us to regard this nation and its subtleties once again, through the notations of artists, filmmakers, poets, writers and architects.

Natasha de Betak's film *Speaking Tree*, is one such work, an examination of the state of rural fatality under economic and cultural domination of resources and tradition. It is this return of the development of an aesthetics within ideological constraints, that almost serves us better than the news industry with its simplistic articles that summarise the state's resolve within the world's paradigms. Here, the pertinent collages by Probir Gupta and the subtle digital drawings by Rajib Chowdhury, bring to the exhibition a fresh examination of the popular culture and its grasp on the nation's imaginary.

As a curator and writer involved in making exhibitions, I believe the selection of certain artists' works assists us in the formulation of cohesive thoughts in these pressing times and allows us to further comprehend the artistic innovations that arise out of specific contexts. To paraphrase the great poet, Hafiz, 'What we speak becomes the house where we live ...'