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ART & DESIGN | ART REVIEW

Indian Artists Look Westward, and Homeward, at the Queens Museum

By **HOLLAND COTTER** JUNE 4, 2015

In 1997, Jane Farver, the farsighted and much-loved American curator who died in April in Venice, put together an influential exhibition called “Out of India: Contemporary Art of the South Asian Diaspora” at the Queens Museum.

It was one of the few surveys of its kind in the United States up to that time, and Ms. Farver was careful to advertise it as the broad sampler it was: The oldest participant, Homai Vyarawalla, was born in 1913; the youngest, Navin Rawanchaikul, in 1971. In addition to India, countries of origin included Canada, Britain, Kenya, Tanzania and Thailand.

Now, almost two decades later, that exhibition’s successor, “After Midnight: Indian Modernism to Contemporary India, 1947/1997,” is at the same museum. This time all of the artists are South Asian-born. And while the time span is still broad, it’s more concentrated. It breaks down into what are basically two distinct shows, one of Modernist painting of the 1950s and 1960s, the other of multimedia work from the past few years, both defined by the traumatic event referred to in the exhibition title.

Midnight on Aug. 14, 1947, signaled the official beginning of India’s independence from Britain but also its division into two separate nations, India and Pakistan, a split that turned what was envisioned as a new, equitable society into a chaos of ethnic violence.

The 50th anniversary of that date in 1997 found India still on explosive ground. Its economy was booming, but the rise of Hindu fundamentalism had produced waves of sectarian conflict. Everything in the show, organized by the independent

curator Arshiya Lokhandwala, came in the wake of trauma.

The earlier, “Modern” section, with just eight artists, is by far the more focused. All were students or young professionals in Bombay at the time of independence. Banding together as the Progressive Artists Group, they saw themselves as an avant-garde and shared a sense of living in a cultural pressure cooker.

They knew that a new India wanted a new art to call its own, but they balked at the models on offer, which were either nativist or neo-colonial. Their interests were cosmopolitan. Their instinct was to go out into the world, to London, New York and Paris, carrying India with them, and bringing back what they learned. And starting outside the international loop had advantages.

Because they were beholden to no canon of art, Western or otherwise, they could choose, change and combine influences at will. They had no market to speak of, so no expectations to meet. They could make up Modernism as they went.

They all worked in European-style oil-on-canvas medium, but at least one of them, F. N. Souza, who gave the group its name, also painted with chemical solvents in an invented technique. M. F. Husain, a Muslim born in 1915, applied a Cubist-inflected Expressionism to Hindu religious subjects.

S. H. Raza soaked himself in 17th-century Rajput court art and in Cézanne. V. S. Gaitonde and Akbar Padamsee moved toward abstraction without ever entirely detaching from landscape painting. Ram Kumar hit the same balance with cityscapes after a kind of conversion experience in the holy city of Varanasi.

All, but in particular Tyeb Mehta and Krishen Khanna, were deeply affected by the political stresses of the era. In his 1948 painting “News of Gandhiji’s Death,” Mr. Khanna depicts a crowd of stunned citizens reading newspapers, the papers’ white pages filling the picture like a shroud. The vulnerability that Mr. Mehta felt as a Muslim at the time of partition never left him. It underlies his repeated images of broken and tumbling bodies.

Maybe because it’s installed in a conventional gallery, or because oil painting, however varied, speaks a naturally autographic language, the Modern section feels very much of a piece, and very much a conversation.

The contemporary part of the show, with more than twice as many artists, does not. The fact that it reflects art’s pluralist, multimedia present is one reason. Location is another: The museum’s main exhibition space is a problem. A big, square, open courtyard, formerly a skating rink, it can hold a sizable sculpture or two

but otherwise requires that art be lined up against its side walls.

Centrally placed, Subodh Gupta's "What Does the Vessel Contain That the River Does Not?," from 2014, a wooden boat piled high with tattered blankets, clothes and cooking pots, the basic needs of a self-sufficient life, looks effective here. So does Jitish Kallat's set of five big buckling mirrors with the words of Jawaharlal Nehru's legendary independence eve "tryst with destiny" speech seared like scars onto their surface.

More surprisingly, much subtler quasi-architectural pieces by the New York-based Conceptualist Sreshta Rit Premnath work here, too. One has life-size photographic images of sleeping migrant workers pressed behind sheets of industrial plastic; another is composed of aluminum tubing, measuring tapes and what look like carpets of molded sand. Both make smart use of an under-construction aesthetic to bring the museum itself into a larger story about globalism as a force at once accommodating and crushing.

Other, smaller, good new works — videos by Sharmila Samant and the collective called CAMP (Shaina Anand and Ashok Sukumaran) — get lost in space, as does a dark upright oblong sculpture, like a free-standing closet or cell, by Sheela Gowda. Tushar Joag's audio piece "Are You Awake?," with recordings of dozens of Mumbai telephone conversations ostensibly about sleep but also about political awaking, at least claims some visual turf by including a full-size bed.

And if you look across to the opposite wall, you may just be able to make out Anita Dube's "The Sleep of Reason Creates Monsters," with an outtake from Goya's famous print traced in Ms. Dube's signature medium: tiny enamel eyes of a kind used in Hindu goddess worship but here associated with Big Brother surveillance.

Altogether, this part of the show is persuasive only when taken as the sum of its individual parts, and certain of those parts are better presented than others.

A jumpy video called "Noise Life 1" by the Desire Machine Collective (Sonal Jain and Mriganka Madhukaillya) gets a room of its own, a good idea. Another, by the veteran Raqs Media Collective (Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta) is embedded in atmospheric library-laboratory installation that complements a photographic work by Dayanita Singh memorializing the fate of fragile, half-forgotten manuscript archives.

The idea of the archive — preserves of things hoarded, cataloged and consulted to create meaning — looms large.

Atul Dodiya displays photographs that line up Nazi atrocities, ethnic attacks in India and Sept. 11.

Prajakta Potnis, the exhibition's youngest artist (born in 1980), combines slides of kitchen appliances, recordings of her mother reciting recipes and references to 1950s Cold War ideology to undermine the comforting fiction of something called home. And Mithu Sen has arranged, under a glowing transparent dome, a personal collection of trinkets, charms, dolls, votive images and sex toys as a mini-museum in which sensuous and sacred are equally valued.

Finally, the performance artist Nikhil Chopra is a walking archive of cultural types. In the guise of a character named Yog Raj Chitrakar, he shows up in various places — Mumbai, New York City, Havana — as a day laborer, a prince, a soldier and a dandy, filming himself and making drawings of his surroundings wherever he goes. The drawings would look at home in the Modern section; the films are entirely of the YouTube now.

And they are in a prime spot in the museum, along the ramp surrounding its great New York City panorama, which is itself a model for what a contemporary South Asian survey should be: a heaven's-eye view of history, comprehensive but fully detailed, with Ms. Farver looking, delightedly, down.

“After Midnight: Indian Modernism to Contemporary India, 1947/1997” runs through Sept. 16 at the Queens Museum, New York City Building, Flushing Meadows-Corona Park; 718-592-9700, queensmuseum.org.

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