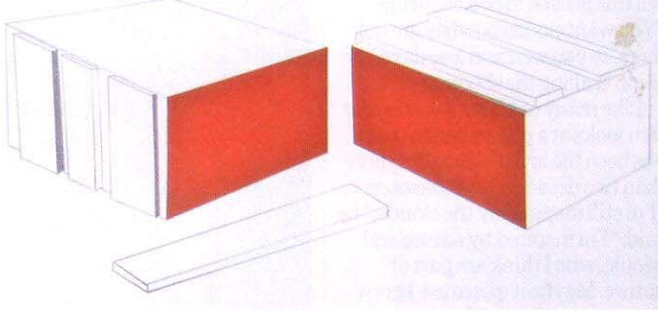


Space cadet



Angling for praise Avantika Bawa hasn't cut corners for her debut show

Avantika Bawa wants you to see history in a grey cardboard box, says **Deepanjana Pal.**

At the time of going to print, Avantika Bawa's first solo show was titled *Mathesis, Dub dub, dub*, but she gave us a fair warning that when it opens on November 3, the title may be *Billi Meow* or *Disco Dancer*. "There's a part of me that wants to make it gibberish, just to shake up the idea that everything has to make sense," said Bawa, who grew up in Mumbai and now divides her time between Atlanta and New Delhi.

Mathesis, Dub dub, dub, though, is far from illogical. Tight reasoning connects the installation to the gallery, the neighbourhood and Mumbai. The first part of the title refers to *Mathesis Universalis*, a hypothesis that propounds the idea of a perfect mathematical code that can be a universal language. With "Dub", Bawa contrasts that sense of structure with the impregnable logic of Mumbai's dabbas, cardboard boxes used in her installation, the rhythms of dub poetry and gibberish. This tension between organisation and creative chaos is central to *Mathesis*, which Bawa insists isn't esoteric but "pretty simple and straightforward".

Contrasts have long intrigued Bawa, who developed her minimalist style while completing her Master's in Fine Art from the School of the Art Institute of

Chicago in 1998. She was inspired by modernism and the Bauhaus school of architecture of the early 1900s, with their emphases on functionality and clean lines, as well as the city of Chicago. "The grid-like layout of the city plan was different from the urban layout of New Delhi and Baroda, where I lived prior to Chicago," said Bawa. "Additionally the mix of Chicago's architecture – the Mies Van Der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright

With one coat of paint, boxes are transformed into works of art.

buildings along with the newer buildings – influenced the formal decisions made in my studio."

Lassoing architecture into the gallery space, Bawa's installations are minimalist and may at first glance seem absurd. In her 2004 show at Nature Morte in New Delhi, a teal-coloured line made of pipe-casing ran all around the gallery's floor. It seemed to mark out the layout for another space within this one and the viewer had the feeling of having walked into an incomplete architectural plan. This was Bawa's way of exploring the idea of shifting boundaries. It also mocked the functionality of pipe-casings by turning this hardware equipment into a work of art that has no immediately quantifiable use.

Bawa, 35, conceptualised *Mathesis* as a site-specific venture that connects to the gallery's layout and also to Colaba. Warehouse at Third Pasta will be largely empty to emphasise the contrast with the crowded city. The sculptural part of her installation is made up of boxes sourced from neighbouring galleries and shops. She wants her tower of empty cartons to salute the present and also recall the gallery's history of being a colonial warehouse for cotton. For Bawa, the boxes express the contrast between the chaos of Colaba and the "controlled white blocks" of Navy Nagar.

Besides, she's a fan of both the form and function of the humble cardboard box. "The modular quality of boxes fits my aesthetic perfectly," said Bawa. "Often I see boxes that need no alterations. They are perfect. The fact that they are containers for something else is also appealing. They imply movement (shipping) while also being rather stoic, static and cold. I like this contrast. They could be described as 'micro-architectures', a term coined by the artist Tilman."

The 40-foot ceiling proved to be another exciting challenge and at one point, Bawa said she felt like the ancient Egyptian architect of pyramids who needs his creation to keep growing higher. Ultimately, her tower of boxes is a curious monument to past and present businesses of the area, their ambitions and change. Bawa painted all the boxes in shades of grey, which is a neutral colour and according to her matches the increasingly-concrete city's colour palette. With that one coat of paint, they are transformed from being vessels into works of art. Once the show is over, they'll be ordinary boxes again and Bawa is hoping that the galleries she has borrowed boxes from will use them to send works to prestigious fairs and biennales. "That way, I can validly claim I've sent works to a biennale," she said with a grin. *Mathesis, Dub dub, dub opens on Tue Nov 3 at the Warehouse at 3rd Pasta. See Exhibitions.*