



Public Notice 2 (2007) by Jitish Kallat, fibreglass sculptures, dimensions variable. Courtesy of Saatchi Gallery, London © Jitish Kallat, 2009



Tar Man 6 (2008) by Kriti Arora, fibreglass and tar, 185 x 76 x 97 cm. Courtesy of Saatchi Gallery, London © Kriti Arora, 2009

The Revolution Continues

by Rajesh Punj

With the 2009 art calendar firmly behind us and the beginning of the new year in fruition, advertiser-turned-art-mogul Charles Saatchi is first off the blocks to unveil yet another of his vast collections of contemporary works of 28 artists from a new location. The Indian sub-continent is his new playground on this occasion and his show *The Empire Strikes Back* is a survey of contemporary artworks from a country fast becoming a leader among the developing nations and so Saatchi has included artists who have already gained great notoriety for their astonishing market value. The principle architect of the success of contemporary British art in London in the 1980s and 1990s, Saatchi had invested where others were still pontificating and encouraged a whole generation of young wannabes to succeed. Drawing on all corners of China in 2008 to delivery a show of resounding success, Saatchi re-rooted to the vastness of the relatively unknown art of the Middle East in 2009, from where, as an army of one, he drew on his interests for paintings and sculpture, objects that are always at the centre of all of his collections.



An Absence of Assignable Cause (The Heart) (2007) by Bharti Kher, binds on fibreglass, 168 x 308 x 150 cm. Courtesy of Saatchi Gallery, London. © Bharti Kher, 2009

these replica gargoyles as somehow Kallat's portraits become emblems, epitaphs even, to all of the animated lives in the city well before they have ended.

Such grand works are replicated in the thoroughly brilliant dynamism of Probir Gupta's paintings that appear to deal in the complex and recycled information of a multitude of narratives that titter on the point of being utterly confusing. *Rats and Generals in a Zoological Park* (2007) in acrylic and oxides is a wondrous work of menus and magnitude in which figures both appear seated and standing, on closer inspection a full-length portrait of Mahatma Gandhi is depicted in front of a depleted version of the Bayeux tapestry. Nothing appears to take precedence as you attempt to comprehend the brushwork from Gupta's unresolved plot. An earlier work *Anxiety of the Unfamiliar* (2006) appears to have figures metamorphosed into beetles laid out as corpses. Man, machine and insect intertwined into an incomprehensible form resembling a scene from Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

Much of Kallat's work appears to deal with Mumbai's dislocated and downtrodden inhabitants and in his canvases ill-fitting faces are illuminated by animated collages that rest precariously over their heads like overbearing wigs that have within them scenes of the underbelly of the city. Kallat mounts these animated portraits onto bronze gargoyles that are taken and then reproduced from the Victoria train terminus in central Mumbai. The *Untitled (Eclipse)* 2008 series takes on a more pressing significance having been elevated upon

Another artist of much renown is Atul Dodiya whose works deal in the multifaceted cultures that exist side by side in India. In *Woman from Kabul* 2001 acrylic and marble dust on fabric is a complex work of what it might be to exist in Afghanistan at the turn of the new millennia. Rich in history and resources, Kabul has collapsed under the weight of war, Dodiya's elderly woman, stripped of her burka, appears to be squatting over a very decorative backdrop of wall papered aesthetics. Her body exposed as skin and bones, representative of the oppression

and squalor that has become endemic of a city once thriving on its trade roots and cultural exchanges.

While Dodiya reduces colour to the some of its parts, T.V. Santhosh appears to apply an illuminated surge of electrical energy to his paintings which read like explosive episodes from recent history that might, upon our return have burned themselves out. Employing the themes of war and global terrorism, South Indian artist T.V. Santhosh succeeds at rationalising such brutality with a series of solarised oil canvases. Painted in lurid greens and shocking orange Santhosh appears to recreate the effect of a colour photographic negative and charges his canvases with an illuminating radiance that surrenders everything to the light. Like any of his politically motivated contemporaries, Santhosh lifts pivotal episodes from recent history and renegotiates their appearance with a shock-blub of violent energy that eclipses everything. Santhosh's paintings of impending doom, a world at the brink of an atomic end, are intentionally more apocalyptic than cathartic. T.V. Santhosh's mode and method is based on the practice of hyperrealism, painting to a photographic finish Santhosh switched positive for negative. Saatchi's recurring interest for painting is well illustrated in the works of Atul Dodiya, Probir Gupta and Jitish Kallat but it also exists on another level in works that function as much as sculptural objects as they do as paintings, noticeably in the work of Reena Saini Kallat and Bharti Kher, who have both taken on their husbands, Jitish Kallat and Subodh

Gupta, for a podium position among the elite of contemporary Indian art.

Synonym (2007) by Reena Kallat is a series of large scale portraits in paint, rubber stamps, acrylic, wood and steel frame that are troubling whilst still being thoroughly engaging. Likened to French artist Christian Boltanski's use of anonymous portraits and resembling the fragmented works of American Chuck Close, Kallat has taken fleeting portraits and painstakingly reconstructed them as configurations of colour and form. Composed of several hundred rubber stamps pressed between Plexiglas, Kallat's faces emerge from behind the coded apparatus of her works. Like early European divisionist works, these fractured and intentionally crude representations of individual faces, all of whom appear to have perished, become more uniform the further you move away from them as the process of stamps and Plexiglas becomes as important to Kallat as the portraits themselves. Touchingly each stamp has the name of each of the missing people in several different Indian dialects. Bharti Kher, highly regarded for her sculptural works, has also produced paintings and installations that purposefully challenge the cultural and social taboos that are intrinsic to the Indian sub-continent. In *An Absence of Assignable Cause* (2007) Kher has recreated a disembodied whale's heart in fibreglass and decorated the enormous heart and the protruding arterials with different coloured binds. The scale of the work is intentionally intrusive upon the space but it is Kher's ability to qualify such scale and significance that challenges her reinvented episodes of reality from their perceived locations.



Arabian Delight (2008) by Huma Mulji. Rexine suitcase, taxidermy camel, metal rods, wood, cotton wool, fabric, 105 x 144 x 155 cm (open with lid). Courtesy of Saatchi Gallery, London © Huma Mulji, 2009

This show illuminates Indian art for its wealth of imagination and robust ability to re-examine itself at the cusp of its reinvention

SECRETS...PIRIED THEMSELVES LOOSE FROM THE CRACKS OF HER PALMS, CRAWLED FROM THE PAGES OF ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS--ARMIES MARCHING INTO DARKNESS, OR PROPHECIES FOR ROTTING CORPSES TO RISE FROM THEIR SLUMBER AND SPEAK LEAVING HER NO CHOICE BUT ONE: TO BREATHE IN BETWEEN THE LINES...



Secrets (2007) by Chitra Ganesh, C-print. Courtesy of Saatchi Gallery, London © Chitra Ganesh, 2009

For Pakistani artist Rashid Rana, whose works cross-over photography, painting and video, there is a devilish complexity to the pixelated images that are in the Empire show, like his contemporary T.V. Santhosh, Rana employs the very undoing of the photographic medium as the pivotal point from which many of his works develop. The artist manages to engage with his cultural roots in Pakistan with such vigour that it is almost impossible to be unmoved by his works. Unlike T.V. Santhosh who intentionally takes his explosive narratives from recent history, Rana borrows from the more contrived history of cinema in order to critique the medium of film as a mirror for social culture. In *Veil I and Veil II* (2004), Rana appears to have photographed an anonymous figure dressed in a burka as a portrait, yet upon further inspection the photograph is actually a fragmented collage made-up of thousands of small and very details phonographic stills of women in the act of sexual intercourse.

Subodh Gupta's having recently shown at Hauser and Wirth is represented by the work *UFO* (2007), which is made up of hundreds of brass water utensils that are soldered together to resemble a vast flying saucer resting on the floor of the gallery. Amusing whilst also being incredibly pertinent to ideas of sustainability, poverty and otherness, Gupta appears to seek his audience's attention by repeating forms and even exaggerating their existence as one water vessel is replaced by many hundreds and the ordinary ready-made becomes something else entirely. Saatchi's second major interest is sculptural works and for that there are the works of Tallur L.N, Mansoor Ali, Huma Mulji and Shezad Dawood among others who are sited within the vast gallery spaces, each demonstrating their ability to translate their cultural interests into objects and situations that settle remarkably well in any given situation. Once outside their country of origin, rather than dissolve under the dazzling spotlights of Saatchi's Gallery, these works illuminate an incredible sense of themselves out into each of these vessels of distilled space.

ethnographer preoccupied with the fascinating collision between dilapidated infrastructures and the zeal for modernity sweeping across billboards and televisions in Asia and the Middle East. *Arabian Delight* (2008) is a recent work of a taxidermed camel forced into a battered suitcase that addresses ideas of the relocation of cultures. The rather crazed manner in which this deflated camel is impossibly forced into this suitcase, legs thrown in disarray, is a piece of genius. Less tragic and much more complex, Shezad Dawood's works from 2007 include a series of neon's entangled in tumbledweed on aluminium plinths. *The Bestover, The Judge, The Majestic, The Protector*, all have neon symbols in traditional script radiating from the centre of a ball of tumble-weed, that appear almost to have a biblical aura about them.

Tushar Joag works, *The Enlightening Army of the Empire* 2008 is an installation comprising of sixteen robot style figures that are animated by electric blubs and stop lights. This Disney-styled army of dishevelled robots appear to stand to attention holding fluorescent tube lights aloft as possible weapons against human kind. Each individual robot is crafted with a subtly styled personality that makes for an endearing body of dilapidated ready-mades that resemble an army of light figures. Emerging artist Mansoor Ali's work *Dance of Democracy* (2008) appears to have all of the charm and self-assurance of any of his more established Indian contemporaries. Ali's free-standing installation of discarded chairs piled high, resemble the sculptural works of Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei. Their chaotic and collapsible configuration in space makes for many infinite possibilities for the way they might fall if gravity were to let them as they might return to earth with a momentous crash. Like everything then that comes under the Saatchi spotlight, new India has as much to lose as it does to offer.

From 29 January to 7 May *The Empire Strikes Back*, Indian Art Today, at Saatchi Gallery, Kings Road, London, www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk

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