

Visual arts

PAINTING THE NEWS

:: 'American Debut' :: Indian Mithila artist uses traditional form to address contemporary issues

In Bihar, one of India's poorest and most rural states, the remote village of Haripur Baxi Tola is touted as one of the most inventive and scholarly areas of the region — boasting scads of religious pundits, artists and other intellectuals — despite high rates of poverty and illiteracy in the surrounding areas. It's also the village that artist Shalinee Kumari calls home.

Kumari's "American Debut" exhibition, which premieres today at the Frey Norris Gallery, features 18 works on hand-washed paper that stem from the illustrious Mithila tradition of folk painting, which for centuries has been passed down through murals and wall hangings made by women, in celebration of milestones such as weddings and births. While the communal, domestic context of Mithila painting still rings authentic in 23-year-old Kumari's works, "American Debut" juxtaposes bucolic scenes of village life against the backdrop of a changing geopolitical landscape — one in which global warming, terrorism, information technology and capitalism have spread their tentacular influence.

The eldest of four daughters, Kumari decided to pursue a career in art when most women in her village were preparing for marriage. Although she has exhibited throughout India, she will be making her first trip outside the country for the opening of the exhibition (which will enjoy a coinciding show at the Los Angeles Craft and Folk Art Museum).

Curator Wendi Norris discovered the largely unknown Kumari after a friend introduced her to the work, which was directly aligned with Norris' penchant for showcasing "politically intoxicating art... Shalinee is uniquely positioned as an artist



This is a detail of Shalinee Kumari's piece "Mumbai's Taj Hotel in Flames," part of her "American Debut" exhibition.

in that she presents such a fresh and pure body of work, even as she utilizes an eye-catching, age-old tradition."

The Mithila tradition of painting is whimsical and animated, filled with brilliant murals of gods and goddesses, sensual images of courtship and symbols from epic Hindu narratives. While Kumari's work approximates Mithila painting's harmonious aesthetic, her pieces are less interested in pastoral visions than they are in the malaise of contemporary life for people around the world.

Kumari's access to life outside of India has largely been limited to watching international news at a cafe in her village, but her observations and ensuing paintings are universally topical. Symbolic depictions of global warming, terrorism, the financial crisis, women's rights and swiftly changing political regimes can be seen in pieces such

as the near-mythic "Obama's Roles and Challenges," which offers five images of Obama tackling crises on several fronts. In many of Kumari's works, the concept of masculine and feminine as the underlying principle of the universe is prominent ("Shiva & Parvati: The Divine Couple"), but the sensuality of such pieces is undergirded by a scathing critique of obscurantist gender roles ("Radiant Yet Submissive").

"Shalinee possesses a strong narrative grasp of such powerful issues that she imagines through her primary source of information, the BBC, or that she discusses among colleagues," says Norris. "She is the first Mithila artist who transcends her craft and has the ability to reach a contemporary collector, curatorial and critical fan base."

— Nirmala Nataraj,
96hours@sfcchronicle.com

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:: OPENINGS ::

THU18

Fecal Face Dot Gallery Works by Brett Amory. Reception today. Through Sat. 66 Gough St. www.fecalface.com/gallery. (SE)

Frey Norris "American Debut." Work by Indian artist Shalinee Kumari. Through July 19. 456 Geary St. (415) 346-7812. www.freynorris.com. (SE)

Haines "Color and Construct." A group exhibition by Amy Ellingson, Patsy Krebs, Bruce Robbins. Through Aug. 1. 49 Geary St., suite 540. www.hainessgallery.com. (SE)

Palo Alto Art Center "Danae Mattes: Wetlands." "Stephen de Staebler: Continuity." "Permutations From Nature's Perimeter: Radius." Receptions today. Exhibitions run through Aug. 30. 1313 Newell Rd., Palo Alto. (650) 329-2366. www.paacf.org. (SE)

Robert Tat "Beauty Challenged." Digitally enhanced photographs by Rebecca Martinez. Through Aug. 22. 49 Geary St., suite 211. (415) 781-1122. www.roberttat.com. (SE)

FRI19

Exploratorium "Reflections." Interactive art installations by Daniel Rozin that focus on self-examination. Through Sept. 20. Palace of Fine Arts, 3601 Lyon St. (415) 563-7337. www.exploratorium.edu. (SE)

Galeria de la Raza "Contrabando." Work by Dignidad Rebelde, the Bay Area artist/activist collective composed of Chuy Barraza and Melanie Cervantes. Reception Fri. Through Aug. 15. 2857 24th St. (415) 826-8009. www.galeriadelaraza.org. (SE)

Jancar Jones "Give Me Some Peppermint Freedom." Oil paintings and sculptures by Chris Lux. Reception Fri. Through July 18. 965 Mission St., suite 120. (415) 281-3770. www.jancarjones.com. (SE)

Lake Gal Living M... the band Fri. Thro... dero St. 1 (SE)

Mission Latino A Performance Fri. 7 MCCLA... St. (415) 4... culturales

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Arts Ben Probity of 991 Tyler (707) 747- org. (SE)

CordenP Photograp Reception Warnock St., suite www.cord (SE)

Double P Power? W and the M theme. Re July 19. 18 399-9785 com. (SE)

Eleanor I New paint by Jon Cla helm. Rec Aug. 1. 124 867-7770 wood.com

FabricB works by the Gross Through J www.fabr

Reception 6-9 tonight. Through July 19. 11 a.m. - 7 p.m. Tues. - Sat., 11 a.m. - 5 p.m. Sun. Frey Norris Gallery, 456 Geary St., S.F. (415) 346-7812. www.freynorris.com.