

Roots in the Air, Branches Below

MADHVI PAREKH
Durga
2005
Acrylic on canvas, 152.4 x 182.9 cm.
Collection of Asha and Rajeev Motwani.
Courtesy Christie's Images Ltd.

Vishnu is worn out and has plopped down on his cobra couch, still wearing his stylish workout tracksuit. Clearly the protector of the universe needs a break, and Vinod Balak's *Vishnu with Bonsai* (2006), an updated Indian miniature painting, pays tribute to the god's afternoon nap. At 28 years old, Balak was the youngest artist featured in "Roots in the Air, Branches Below," a survey of modern and contemporary art from India, and his painting is one of the flashiest in a collection of nearly 50 works. The piece also epitomizes the particular new Indian aesthetic framed in this show: one that incorporates the myths of ancient Hindu culture into a bold and hip vision of national ascendance in the era of globalization.

"Roots in the Air, Branches Below" was assembled from eleven private collections in the San Francisco Bay Area. While San Jose has a large South Asian population, contemporary art from the region is rarely seen in West Coast museums. Indeed, this is an unprecedented survey. With a title quoting the Bhagavad-Gita, a central Hindu scripture—"Roots in the air, branches below, the Tree of Life is unchanging"—this exhibition watered the roots of Hinduism and agrarian village life to meet the branches of global commerce and the South Asian diaspora.

Across two sprawling rooms one could see the evolution of a national art scene that began with artists in the 1940s, initially influenced by abstraction and Cubism, who then seized upon traditional and folk art motifs during the surge of nationalism that followed the Subcontinent's independence from Britain in 1947. Along with abstract paintings from Manjit Bawa, Vasudeo Gaitonde, Ram Kumar and SH Raza, the focal point of the show's first section was MF Husain.

Husain's loose, playful brushstrokes and cubist forms reverberate with European modernism while incorporating multiple secular and religious symbols. *Mother Teresa* (1989) frames the forms of three body-less garments under Mughal arches. One holds a child, while the others are posed in similarly maternal gestures. Mother Teresa is recognizable from the headscarves that hover on top of vacant robes, yet the allusion to the Madonna is clear, as is the Indian architectural context. With simple solid shapes, Husain encapsulates history, politics, religion and human relationships in an austere, balanced composition.

Many of the artworks in the contemporary part of the show (dating from 1990) appropriate images of Hindu deities, transforming their cohorts and accoutrements into ironic modern objects. Madhvi Parekh's *Durga* (2005) is a large-scale acrylic painting in which the invincible titular goddess' multiple limbs splay out like a frenetic caterpillar,

and Miró-like figures outlined in black fill the entire canvas around her in a jigsaw arrangement. While the mythological characters in *Durga* are surreal, in other works they are hyper-real. Alexis Kersey's painting, *Lucky, Lucky, Lucky* (2008), Surendran Nair's painting *Neti Neti: the Doctrine of the Forest (Cuckoonebulopolis)* (2009) and Chintan Upadhyay's sculpture *Untitled (Designer Baby)* (2008) each depict immaculately-rendered life-size figures in reverent postures, artificially colored and festooned with odd props.

The postmodern penchant for sampling and remixing is abundant here. Rekha Rodwittiya's *Encrypted Soliloquies* (2004) shows a stylized female figure sitting in the lotus position, looking straight ahead and holding a perching black bird. The canvas' colors scream with energy—yellow, orange and gold—and the compositional symmetry recalls an earlier untitled work by Jamini Roy in the first room, in which a sari-draped woman meets the viewer's gaze with cartoonish eyes. Valay Shende replicates Donatello's 15th-century sculpture David with an adolescent warrior figure covered in leopard skin, grasping a gilded shotgun while floating on a lotus flower. The opposing symbols of peace and violence, the contrast of soft fur with shiny metal and the unlikely combination of Renaissance sculpture with contemporary India speak to a general comfort with contradiction.

The exhibition perfectly fills the museum's two grand exhibition rooms with bursts and shouts of color, and the art objects have been carefully placed to maximize delight and discovery. The viewer might leave the exhibition energized, anticipating earnest, enthused and evolved global discourse for the form.

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