



# OUT OF THE PICTURE

Moments of transcendence and dissonance at the India Art Fair.  
A critic's diary

Courtesy Galerie Mirchandani + Steirnuecke



By Rosalyn D'Mello

## January 30, 2019

I am obsessed with the loneliness of Amrita Sher-Gil who died at the age of 28. It has been exactly 71 years since Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated by Nathuram Godse. I am struggling to arrive at a cohesive perspective on two recent headlines concerning Gandhi, perhaps among the world's most heavily pedestalled male figures. This morning I read a report in the *Times of India* on an incident that took place in Aligarh: 'Hindu Mahasabha leader shoots at Mahatma's effigy to mark his death anniversary'. It takes me back to another incident concerning his contemporary dethroning reported in *The Guardian* on December 14th, 2018—'Statue of 'racist' Gandhi removed from University of Ghana.'

I take these dissonant thoughts, ball them up, and toss them to the back of

● (LEFT) *I REVIVED AS FRESH AS EVER ALL TAKES SO LONG TO TELL* BY BENITHA PERCIYAL; (BELOW) *LULLAMENT-B* BY THUKRAL AND TAGRA



Courtesy Thukral & Tagra

my brain, unable to synthesise their polarities which seem only to add to my feminist anxiety about the continued patriarchal zeitgeist when it comes to male pedestalism. I focus on where I am instead, seated in a room at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, surrounded by Arpita Singh's paintings. I see her on the platform in front of me. To her left is Madhvi Parekh, to her right, Nalini Malani, who is seated next to Nilima Sheikh. Roobina Karode, curator of *Submergence*, the ongoing retrospective of Singh's works at KNMA, prefaces the afternoon's proceedings as a 'rare occasion', offering little explanation as to why it has taken so long to facilitate a public conversation between these four pioneering women artists, considering they have been life-long friends and live in the same country. I resort to the clichéd 'better-late-than-never' adage as I begin to transcribe what unfolds. I am disturbed by the moderator Gayatri Sinha's reiteration of the adjective 'feminine' with regard to these artists' practices. I remain attentive to anecdotal accounts that reinforce the *raison d'être* of this panel: a collective re-visitation of a moment dating back to the early 80s, when the four women began a conversation that culminated in a series of four multi-city exhibitions of their watercolours, notably eschewing the feminist label for justifiable fear of their practices being either discredited or typecast.

Later, I tracked back to an observation made by Richard Bartholomew in his 1974 review of Sher-Gil's two-part retrospective in Delhi. 'She was so outspoken that she antagonised many. Her contemporaries considered her a curiosity, a kind of hothouse flower of mixed culture. She was isolated and she pined for warmth, understanding and friendship. In March 1938, she wrote to critic Karl Khandalavala, 'Please, please come. I am starving for appreciation, literally famished.'

And so it came to pass that, without willing it, I circumambulated my way back to a provocative line in Chris Kraus' 1997 ground-breaking, genre-bending book, *I Love Dick*—'Who gets to speak and why?', I wrote last week, is the only question.'

It is the 30th of January 2019. On this day, 106 years ago, Sher-Gil was born.

## January 31, 2019

Despite getting dressed, after having experienced moments of indecision, I decide to skip the VIP preview of the India Art Fair. I am convinced it will not be a safe space for me, even though I had been informed of the fair's decision not to include any work by the Indian art world's most pedestalled male figure, against whom allegations had surfaced mid-December. One thing had changed, however, in that the big players in the art world were now claiming to espouse a 'zero-tolerance' policy. Except, this apologetic buzzword was beginning to assume the same insignificance as 'Swachh Bharat'. It had the same rhetorical resonance as most political propaganda. Some years ago, I thought the Indian art world functioned like a joint family. Lately, though, it has been performing more like a regressive Ekta Kapoor soap.

## February 1, 2019

As a viewer I am aware of how art offers potential for introducing into one's life moments of crisis or transcendence, or both. Sometimes, artworks evoke within us primal emotions that only surface through the intimacy of a first-hand encounter with them. I felt such a delicate immediacy, for instance, when I saw a large painting by Nataraj Sharma at the Aicon booth. Its conceptual underpinnings weren't esoteric, and it didn't pretend to be anything other than what it grandly was: a beatific seascape. Upon the tidal skin of the stretch of sea between Mandawa and Mumbai rested fishermen's canoes and sailboats. In its vicinity was a painting by Pakistani artist Salman Toor, whose work documents the in-between-ness of South Asian immigrant queer experiences in a picture-book style. I was magnetically drawn to them, as I was to Julien Segard's charcoal-on-linen diptych of the Okhla flyover, and Jitish Kallat's collage-like mixed-media works at the Nature Morte booth.

I was glad to have come to the fair. It was exciting to catch up with recent turning points in certain artists'

trajectories. Manish Nai had moved from compressing newspaper and found fabrics into square-sized blocks. He had begun experimenting with books and the results were strangely poetic. Near his sculpture at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke was an incredible new installation by Chennai-based Benitha Perciyal, a portable library made with re-used Burma teak with laser-engraved titles on the spines of her selection of unreadable books. Titled *I revived as fresh as ever all takes so long to tell*, the 2018 work offered clear evidence as to why Perciyal is perhaps one of the most mindful artists we can boast of, whose works are always a case of careful consideration with exacting, laborious proportions and deliberations that make them flawless yet wholly vulnerable in their exposed tactility, an artistic quality she perhaps has in common with Yardená Kurulkar.

Titled *Fall of the Buckler*, Kurulkar's 2017 work on display at Chemould Prescott Road's booth was a series of images she created with a 3D recreation of her own heart. I gaped at the description accompanying the piece: 'Each slice, equally robotic as it is intensely human, is printed on paper the pulp of which is charged with Yardená's blood.' The material, therefore, consists of ink, paper and blood.

I registered one moment of visual crisis when I arrived at the Crayon Art Gallery booth. A sign outside announced Amrita Sher-Gil in bold. I entered to find myself enclosed in darkness. I was expecting to see work by her. What I walked into, however, was a shrine, the focus of which was one thick-framed 1932 self-portrait below which was a shelf with a framed portrait by her father, Umrao Sher-Gil, and an open book, presumably on her life. I wasn't

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prepared for such an experience. It felt like the opposite of male pedestalism; female enshrinement, and it did no favours to dismantling the mythical aura that surrounds Sher-Gil's practice. I was left with a sense of unease.

### February 2, 2019

I attended Jitish Kallat's conversation with art critic and curator Adam Szymczyk around his monograph published by Mapin that I'd worked on as managing editor. It was wonderful to see Kallat disarmed by Szymczyk's questions, yet his answers were always non-hesitant, quick-fired. What must it be like to be so certain of one's practice, to not allow room for articulating doubt, I wondered. I learn that according to physics, our feet are younger than our heads.

When Szymczyk asks him about his 2010 work, *Anger at the Speed of Fright*, that uses miniature figurines to speak about the Mumbai riots of the early 90s, he says: "If we really start exploring anger, you find fear. If you really start exploring fear, you find anger." What about feminist rage? I wondered. A history of inequalities suffered by my gender? A spectrum of violence endured through major and minor aggressions that seem never ending?

I am alarmed by the platitudes Kavita Singh constantly uses, however inadvertently, to describe Gulammohammed Sheikh's practice. Why is it that 'magnificence' and 'genius' continues to be used unquestioningly in the case of male artists while the greatest female artists both dead and alive have to contend with lesser qualifiers, like 'tragically', 'vulnerable', 'fragile' or 'solitudinal' *et al.*

"Why are there so many towering male figures in Indian contemporary art?" Szymczyk asks me when we meet. I have no words.

I remembered what a dear, successful curator friend told me a month ago: "The art world feeds on your insecurities." I couldn't let it. And yet, it was difficult not to project my own feeling of alienation when later that evening Sumir Tagra asked me to stand in the centre of Thukral & Tagra's newest work, *Lullament-B*, and meditate. Iron tracks



Jeethi Sharma, Courtesy India Art Fair

### A PERFORMANCE BY YASMIN JAHAN NUPUR

were used to create seven columns at the beginning and end of which were a total of 14 power fans that ushered seven herds of seemingly weightless ping-pong balls into a back-and-forth motion. I was swayed by the gush of wind that made it seem as though the seven sets of balls were competing with each other, but I found myself communing with the one ping-pong ball that seemed to find itself continually out-casted by the wind. Was its alienation the consequence of its own disobedience, or was it a casualty of forces outside its control?

### February 3, 2019

I return to the art fair for a final look at the solo projects. But I am disappointed by the corporatised display. The exhibition aesthetic should have been non-commercial, since these projects had been subtracted from the main halls. I am confused and disturbed by Madhusudhanan's decision to re-enact for his viewers an act of violence upon an Adivasi body. I am similarly affronted by what I perceived as senseless visual assault in Sohrab Hura's video. Why did I experience cognitive dissonance, especially considering these were artists whose works I otherwise enjoyed?

I bump into a gallerist friend outside the Forum, where, for several hours on day one and day two it seemed as if Bangladeshi artist Yasmin Jahan Nupur had been carrying, Atlas-like, the weight of all the art world's sins and complicities in a humble gunny sack. □

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