

THE PAST AND ITS SHADOWS

Neha Mitra visits two shows and three artists in Mumbai.

From the 12th of January to the 9th of March, Mumbai's Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke hosted *seekrajan*, a retrospective of more than 30 years of work by CK Rajan.

Starting his journey as an artist at the M. S. University, Baroda, Rajan moved to Hyderabad and then finally to his home in Kerala. His work was first taken to documenta 12 (2007) held at Kassel by Grant Watson who has worked with him since 2006 and has curated this show.

CK Rajan's world is reflective, tongue in cheek, dark and minimal; this retrospective lays bare the artist's engagement with his place and time in history and a few steps in, makes the viewer a willing participant in critically interpreting the past and its transformations.

In the first series *In Search of Utopia* (1989-90), the artist has made the most of his frugal resources by painting on the inside of cigarette packs. Thus far a member of the Kerala Radical Group, an artists' collective with a heightened political sensibility in the mid-1980s, the series presents a language that is independent of the group. Rajan constructs geometrical shapes in an architectural manner creating a fantastical stage for contemplation. Graphic forms cast long, soft shadows keeping it quiet yet sinister. The shadows themselves are at liberty to extend and bend, but never break free. These bite-sized ruminations strip down the excess and inspect elements in their bare forms. This search for Utopia on Gold Flake packs has an improvisational spin that is endearing.

The series *Survivors* (1991) takes a deep dive into the absurd and the ominous. Rajan plays with scale in

these still life paintings, distorting proportions to tilt the balance of power between everyday inanimate objects. There is no foreground or background, just a flat statement of the artist's intent. An intent that is open to interpretation, as is the title of the series. The *Mild Terrors* collages (1992-1996) document a culture being confronted and transformed by a newly liberalized economy. Traditional meets global, modest meets ostentatious, sepia meets pop. There is an underlying comment on the vulgarity of Capitalism played out in the use of local newsprint juxtaposed against jarring bright cutouts. Dismembered body parts and distorted images superimposed on news items paint a picture of a confused people on the cusp of change. However, the female body is unfortunately present mainly as a carrier of glamour.

The bizarre and the duplicitous take centre stage in *Psychic Objects* (2010). The *Psychopathic Killer Fan* extends a warm welcome into this zone with its cheery colours and affable proximity. One flick of the switch however could turn this scene into a swift blood bath. The ambitious *Golden Broom* stands stoically in a corner daring you to judge it while *Silent Assassin* is menacing, promising all kinds of dangers. The *Newly Wed Bucket* and the *Obsessive Compulsive Disordered Garden Cutter* seem blissfully quixotic, intertwined inextricably in their own dysfunction.

Offering respite from this disarrangement are the series *Small Paintings* and *Small Sculptures*. The former is a selected display of oils on unstitched canvases from the 2014 show *Classified: For Your Eyes Only*. These are abstract landscapes that pay homage to art history while continuing the socio-political commentary. The palette is dark with lone figures; text is used as a tool



CK Rajan. *Psychopathic Killer Fan*. Wood and iron. 101" x 153.5" (height x diameter). 2010.
Image courtesy of Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke.



CK Rajan. From the series *Mild Terrors II*. Collage from print media on A4 sheet. 1991-96.
Image courtesy of Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke.



Simryn Gill. *Untitled (from Clearing)*. Photogram.
190.5 cms x 101.6 cms. 2022.
Image courtesy of the artist and Jhaveri Contemporary.

for intervention. The works are minimal in content and size, but certainly not in scale. *Small Sculptures*, debuting in this show, are clay objects that are cast in bronze and painted in upbeat colours. They could be beatific houses that tell shiny, happy tales of those who inhabit them or bricks carrying the weight of 'Hate' inscribed on them. *Table Top Sculptures* from the early 1990s are modular MDF structures resembling toy houses, in which objects such as a clock, a knife, a bike or a mirror are tightly held. Are these critiques of consumerism, of the trappings of ownership? Like much else in this show, thoughts are planted and interpretations are encouraged.

A few kilometres away, Jhaveri Contemporary presents a show of distinct photograms by Anwar Jalal Shemza and Simryn Gill in its show *Contact* on view till the 25th of February. Photogram or camera-less photography is a print made by laying an object on photographic paper and then exposing it to light. The negatives develop with variations in response to the transparency of the subject and are free from the grand intervention of the artist. British-Pakistani Shemza's works include austere photograms of pliers, scissors, hands and flowers.

Simryn Gill, the Singapore-born artist of Indian descent, shows *Untitled (from Clearing)*, a series of photograms of the leaves of a 100-year old Canary Island date palm exposed on a redundant roll of Kodak Portra paper. The palm was cut down to accommodate a building renovation and the resin-coated, photo-sensitive silver halide paper lay gathering age and dust at a commercial printing lab in Sydney. Both elements ravaged by the vagaries of time, hold close together, celebrating this second lease of life, as it were. Gill captures this poetry and leaves us with images that are simultaneously stark and soft – two old souls caught in a feathered embrace, in a momentary flash of light.