



92-95

'METAPHYSICAL EGGS'

C.K. Rajan

C.K. Rajan
Metaphysical Eggs (from the series
'Mild Terrors'), 1992-95

Courtesy
Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke,
Mumbai

The tragic events at *Charlie Hebdo* have focused attention on the traditions and ethics of political satire around the globe. Coincidentally, only a couple of weeks after the attack, on 26 January, India's most celebrated cartoonist, R.K. Laxman, passed away. Laxman's comic strip, *You Said It*, first appeared in 1951 on the front page of the country's leading national newspaper, *The Times of India*. Its chief protagonist was a dhoti-wearing, bespectacled elderly man in a plaid jacket known as 'The Common Man'. This popular cartoon ran for five decades and became the unofficial narrative of the developing nation's pitfalls, expressing daily the discontent of the average person facing corruption and injustice.

Given the parlous state of freedom of speech, cowardly politicians and arcane laws in India, it seemed rather absurd – albeit generous – that Laxman was given a state funeral. Historically, the

Indian arts community has faced censorship. In 1994, for example, the right-wing fundamentalist group, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), attacked an exhibition of cartoons in Pune. Organized by the Sahmat Collective – as a response to the 1992 Hindu extremist demolition of the 16th-century Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya – 'Hum Sab Ayodhya' (We Are all Ayodhya) toured to 17 Indian cities. Undeterred by the RSS attack, the exhibition continued its run and prompted a three-day debate in the Indian parliament about freedom of speech.

Today, satire is still very much alive on the subcontinent. Among the new generation of cartoonists, the work of Vishwajyoti Ghosh demands attention. His graphic novel, *Delhi Calm* (2010), gamely takes on the Emergency, a period in Indian history when, from 1975 to '77, basic civil rights were suspended by the country's Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. Ghosh

recently published *This Side That Side: Restoring Partition* (2014), an anthology of graphic narratives by 48 artists from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

While Ghosh often employs the language of the political cartoon to articulate his concerns, C.K. Rajan takes a more oblique approach. Having trained as a painter at Maharaja Sayajirao University's Faculty of Fine Arts in Baroda, Rajan became one of the youngest members of the highly politicized but short-lived group, the Radical Painters and Sculptors Association. Active from 1985 to '89, the group aggressively rejected the narrative tendency of earlier Indian artists. After the association's dissolution, Rajan abandoned painting and produced a series of collages, 'Mild Terrors' (1991-96), which is fiercely critical of the rapacious and alienating effects of economic liberalization on contemporary Indian society. These works were shown in

galleries, as well as at documenta 12 in 2007. After a hiatus of nearly 20 years, Rajan's solo exhibition, 'Classified: For Your Eyes Only', at Mumbai's Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke in December 2014, included 81 small new paintings.

At first glance, these works recall Nicolas De Staël or Etel Adnan's semi-abstracted landscapes. Where they differ is that Rajan introduces an element of figuration. Barely discernible people, cars travelling on never-ending highways, planes lost in darkness – all lend the paintings a foreboding quality, although they also have an incisive and humorous element. Rajan often embeds words such as 'greed', 'agriculture' and 'so what?' into his surfaces, emerging from, or sinking into, horizons or occasionally floating in speech bubbles. As the curator Grant Watson observed, they 'recall the language of political cartoons, where text bolsters image, but they are intentionally without verbal punch or deliberate meaning. Instead, elegant and spare, they inhabit the language of painting and, when they do gesture towards a cartoon language, the result is deliberately inconclusive.'

Rajan subtly borrows from the traditions of the political cartoon. In one painting, *Waste Land* (2013-14), the title hovers over a black landscape; in *Ethics* (2013-14), a speech bubble materializes with the word 'profit': the response from another speech bubble is empty. It is in these acts of resistance to resolution where Rajan's boldness lies. Working at their own pace, at a time when freedom of speech is under such fierce attack, artists like Rajan, who quietly formulate their own modes of political expression, are of ever-greater significance.

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Mining the traditions of the political cartoon

Shanay Jhaveri

Indian Satire