

## Arts & Reviews

### Art Review

Dream Factory

An ambitious exploration of the relationship between Mumbai and the movies affirms cinema's role in moulding the collective imagination

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**TRAVELLING LIGHT** by British playwright Nicholas Wright is about cinema. The play, which opened this January in London, is a fantastical retelling of the beginnings of Hollywood. In *Travelling Light*, the history of blockbuster films is traced to a nondescript shtetl in Eastern Europe where one Motl Mendl chances upon a cinematograph. Everyone wants

to be filmed by Mendl because they want to see themselves as moving images, going through their everyday motions in what is in equal parts performance and reality. This is, perhaps, the fundamental draw of cinema: it is a delectable mix of fact and fiction. It draws from life and then renders it magical.

In *Project Cinema City*, organised by the National Gallery of Modern Art in Mumbai and the Ministry of Culture to mark 100 years of Indian cinema, more than 20 artists, designers, technicians and architects present an exhibition that seeks to do what Mendl did—capture the relationship of cinema and life. Instead of a nameless village, their setting is what is perhaps Indian cinema's most beloved city. Just as *Travelling Light* suggests that all the key tropes of Hollywood had their genesis in Mendl's village, *Project Cinema City* would have you believe that Bollywood is a completely local product, born out of life in Mumbai rather than a magpie's nest of shiny, borrowed elements. Although the theory is flawed, it's romantic, which, alongside the elaborately presented exhibition, helps persuade the viewer to buy the illusion.

Put together by Majlis, an interdisciplinary arts initiative, and the Kamla Raheja Vidyaniidhi Institute of Architecture (KRVI), and curated by filmmaker Madhusree Dutta and artist Archana Hande, *Project Cinema City* is an ambitious and expansive show. It was conceived because of the duo's interest in those that Dutta describes as “the invisibles of cinema”—technicians, extras and other little people who are integral to filmmaking but are rarely noticed by the viewers. (Fittingly, every exhibit in *Project Cinema City* has detailed credits, acknowledging the contributions of all those involved in the making of a work, including technicians and fabricators—a welcome change that is rarely seen in art shows.) The curators were also eager to explore the idea of “negotiating the city through cinema”. While roaming around the exhibits in *Project Cinema City* may not improve your understanding of Mumbai's geography, it does leave the viewer with a sense of how critically important cinema has been to the city in terms of both reflecting aspects of society and moulding the collective imagination.

*Project Cinema City*'s participants comprise a number of well-known names from contemporary Indian art, such as Atul Dodiya, Nalini Malani, Pushpamala N and Shilpa Gupta. Some have contributed prints for ‘The Calendar Project’, which draws upon the role of printed images in consolidating the iconic stature of cinema. It uses found objects and images to create kitschy reproductions of the humble calendar often seen hanging in modest shops and restaurants. Typically, such calendars perform certain functions: providing dates, offering visuals that are meant to be attractive, and (frequently) advertising certain brands or products. The artistic versions at the exhibition, which appropriate the imagery of the original, serve no particular function and embody the now hackneyed idea of Indian kitsch being used ironically to depict social attitudes.

Pushpamala N has conceptualised and starred in ‘Return of the Phantom Lady or Sinful City’, a performance photography piece that is a sequel to her brilliant 1996-98 work, ‘Phantom Lady or Kismet’. Shot by Clare Arni, ‘Phantom Lady or Kismet’ saw Pushpamala take on the persona of a heroine inspired by actor and stuntwoman Fearless Nadia. The black-and-white series presented Mumbai as the setting of a noir thriller, with shadowy bars, the underworld and this masked heroine. ‘Return of the Phantom Lady’ is a reprisal of Pushpamala as Nadia, but this time the photographs are in colour and the villains are modern (in one photo, public artist Tushar Joag strikes an

acrobatic pose usually seen in hip hop dance routines). The story is about a kidnapped girl whom Nadia—still in her Zorro-esque mask, hat and cape—saves. Like so many cinematic follow-ups, 'Return of the Phantom Lady' is not as powerful as the first installment. In a number of the photographs (taken by Clay Kelton), you see little of the scene and more of your own reflection. However, Tushar Joag makes for a very convincing thug and Dodiya stars as a rather dapper mafia don.

Atul Dodiya's more substantial contribution to *Project Cinema City* is 'Fourteen Stations'. The 14 large paintings depict names of train stations alongside the faces of familiar Bollywood villains. They are hung in a row so that when you walk past them, it's almost like seeing the names of stations out of a local train in Mumbai. The journey Dodiya invites the viewer to take is one past the stations crossed when going from lowly Ghatkopar—where Dodiya was born, raised and still lives—to Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST, formerly Victoria Terminus), which has signified Mumbai in numerous films. This is the route one would take on a Central Railway line, well known for its frequent malfunctions. Local commuters would agree that while Western Railway line is more suited to heroes, Central Railway's regular disruptions often feel pernicious. It's an amusing visual trip, though one can't help feel bad for some of the stations. Byculla, for instance, has Shakti Kapoor as its ambassador, and the sign for Kurla has Gulshan Grover's mug. Mumbai's grandest station, CST, fittingly has Gabbar Singh of *Sholay*, one of the icons of Bollywood villainy. It is, however, unnerving to remember that in recent times, CST has been associated with a real trigger-happy villain—Ajmal Kasab—who with his partner unleashed terror at the station in 2008. It's a disturbing twist to *Sholay*, in which two good guys are outnumbered by the bad guys but still fight (one of them to his death) out of a sense of honour.

Many of the exhibits in *Project Cinema City* seem frivolous but have serious undertones. Pushpamala's 'Return of the Phantom Lady', for instance, contains veiled references to the land mafia. The clattering wooden pieces of Anant Joshi's installation subtly allude to the spindles of weaving looms and the textile industry that was once an important part of Mumbai. One of the more memorable confections is in Shreyas Karle's 'Museum Shop of Fetish Objects'. With the help of fabricator Ashok Kansara, Karle has created a mini-exhibition within the larger one. His is made up of fantastical objects, directly and indirectly related to Bollywood. Many of them are very witty, like the milk bottle with a label that reads "*Ma ka Doodh*", the staple of a Bollywood hero's diet. There's also the "Multi-religion Protagonist Locket", an accordion-like pendant that shows a mosque, a temple, a church and a gurudwara. There are glasses made of *kulfi* moulds for cinemagoers who are above 18. These aids help "to focus on special parts of the opposite sex" and the 'He-She Object' aims to provide sexual pleasure to a man and a woman, simultaneously but separately. For Karle, cinema is a sensuous medium whose allure is used to censor and manipulate the way people think. The objects in his museum are part of a mission to expose this agenda.

A sense of history pervades the exhibit, which benefits greatly from experiments by KRVA's students. 'Table of Miscellany' is a collaborative installation that includes everything from laminated maps to glowing, spinning cubes and fake books that look like they're made of glass.

Behind *Project Cinema City* are two architects—Rohan Shivkumar and Apurva Parikh—and two designers—Kausik Mukhopadhyay and Shikha Pandey. The quartet plays a very critical role in making the exhibition as intriguing and enjoyable as it is. While the arrangement of the show is haphazard and there is little connectivity or dialogue between works, *Project Cinema City* looks inviting.

Some of the most impressive exhibits show an inventive use of technology, which is apt for a tribute to a medium characterised by technical innovation. Filmmaker Paromita Vohra's 'So Near Yet So Far' is a charming series that uses telephones from different eras. There's the vintage switchboard-era telephone, the yellow coin-operated box and the modern PCO cubicle. The viewer is asked to select from the options and when he or she does, a soundtrack featuring old Bollywood songs and dialogues can be heard through the receiver. Each phone has a different soundtrack. These are richly nostalgic works that also imply a thesis on how people communicate. The telephone has aided revelations, facilitated eavesdropping, played messenger for lovers, collapsed distances and caused rifts in the movies. It is an agent of change and a technological marvel that transformed how information was passed on the big screen. Its various avatars signified different time periods and social strata. For example, the working class heroine of the older movies couldn't afford a private telephone but had access to the public one in the neighbourhood corner shop. In the age of cellphones, the public telephone is almost a relic and Vohra highlights this with a crackly soundtrack.

Also dabbling in nostalgia is Kausik Mukhopadhyay's 'Bioscope', which is reminiscent of the mobile cinemas that were once seen in rural India in particular. Look through the viewfinder and you see moving images. Inside Mukhopadhyay's creation is a complicated set of carousels. In the foreground, you see cards printed with tweet-sized information about Mumbai and film trivia. Press the switch that's dangling nearby and the wheels turn to bring you a different card with a different nugget of data. After a few minutes with 'Bioscope', one is in possession of facts like actress Sakinabai appearing nude in a 1919 film, in a scene that wasn't censored.

One of the most elaborate works in *Project Cinema City* is 'Cinema City Lived' by the exhibition's architects Shivkumar and Parikh. The installation, a grid made up of PVC pipes, is an imaginative road map that shows how films and their paraphernalia mark the geography of the city. Parikh also has a work titled 'Mapping the History of Theatres and Studios in Mumbai', which is one of the elements in 'Table of Miscellany'. This piece is essentially a set of maps of the city drawn on tracing paper and marked up with cinema halls and studios. Thanks to the translucence of the paper, one can see the crawling spread of the film industry at one go, or consider each page individually. Although it doesn't seem geographically accurate, 'Cinema City Lived' is almost like a three-dimensional rendering of Parikh's maps, using PVC pipes. Scattered randomly are names of theatres, which appear like glowing tattoos on the body of the pipes. 'Cinema City Lived' also uses images seen in another work that is part of 'Table of Miscellany'. The mouth of each pipe acts as a viewfinder. Put your eye to it, and there's an image, like a model of an operation theatre or a court room, that shows a snippet of the film industry. It's a beautifully fabricated piece. The PVC pipes allude to the construction that marks modern Mumbai as well as to the idea of Bollywood as a hub connecting disparate aspects of the city the way underground pipes do.

There's nothing novel about the idea of Mumbai as a cinema city. Exhibits like 'The Calendar Project' are an indication of how worn out this idea is, but thanks to the irreverence of some artists and their willingness to experiment, *Project Cinema City* is ultimately an engaging, collaborative work that is as much a research endeavour as it is creative. Cinema has meant an unromantic livelihood for some, a fantasy for others and for everyone from the viewer to the gaffer, it has been a site of hope. Mumbai's film industry stands apart from others in the country for being open to outsiders and producing work that is both easily accessible and uncaring of limitations like language barriers. This has resulted in a cultural product that is multifaceted, one that conflates contradictions. It is both the conservative, manipulative agent referenced in Karle's 'Museum of Fetish Objects' as well as the irreverent and potentially subversive creation that generates enough anxiety in the political establishment to necessitate censorship laws. It reiterates stereotypes but also facilitates invention and novelty. The medium represents reality but often in a way that is wildly unreal. *Project Cinema City* posits the idea that Hindi films and Mumbai have enjoyed a certain synergy. At least in this exhibition, this is true. The worst of *Project Cinema City* bores you and the best of it fills you with a sense of wonder and fun memories—much like Bollywood and Mumbai.

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