

A date with art

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They innocuously hang on walls; they can be humble or extravagant, simple or chic, nonetheless they unobtrusively perform their duty—keeping a track of days, weeks, months and years. But along with chronicling the passage of time, they are also a visual ‘representation’ of an ethos or a milieu. Calendars in India could perhaps be even described as a repository for a vibrant visual history; they are works which became highly popular as a form of visual mass culture. The popular calendar art of India may be defunct now, the images of gods and goddesses may no more adorn the walls of Hindu households, but once upon a time in India, there existed a glorious era of calendar art. While today it is a little-discussed genre, it cannot be discounted for the fact that it is one of earliest styles that epitomised the Indian kitsch.

Of course, now there is an overkill of superfluous Indian kitsch art, with everyone paying paeans to it, so much so that it seems to be caught in its own clichés. The Calendar Project, one of the many parts of Project Cinema City, an ongoing exhibition at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) in Delhi, embodies the Indian kitsch, but with a twist. While the project name creates an imagery of the usual Bollywoodish poster art, here the artists have chosen to stay away from the usual grit and grime associated with the typical posters of, say, a Don, a Mother India or a Sholay, and made an attempt to “re-negotiate the process of iconisation of contemporary images in the public domain through the 20th century”. So it’s really filmy, but then, it’s not. All the 60 calendars by multiple artists are unique renditions of a part of history, which may have slipped past us, or a reminder of how it was a part of a long forgotten past. And binding the works together is the city of dreams, the tinsel town of India: Mumbai.

Different calendars say different things—there is a sense of longing, belonging, alienation, forced existence, shattered identities—and of course, Mumbai, like a refrain in a poetical rendition, effortlessly guides one to acknowledge its permeance in all the works. The calendars manage to sneak in an image of the city as portrayed in cinema, while playing upon popular brands and iconic images of an erstwhile era as well as our modern times. In this process, they have managed to show that like a living organism, cinema city’s vitality is in a flux.

Maybe the biggest appeal of cinema lies in the fact that everyone in some way or the other wishes to be part of that celluloid dream, even if just for a moment. To capture those moving images within a frame, to make them tangible brings one a little closer to that dream, with a foothold in reality. The works of art in The Calendar Project, while making an attempt to give a shape to the ‘dreams’, have also created a visual language of the 20th century. From becoming a voice to anti-imperialist agenda and propagating a collective nationalism, calendar culture in 20th-century India also saw the realms of the sacred and the political collude into each other.

Popular calendar art in India is often an eclectic combination of religious art, pin-up posters of women, which has earned the ire of many feminists, promotions or advertisements for things as diverse as pencils, pickles, undergarments, soaps, watch repair shops, theatre plays and even condoms. Sometimes one cannot miss the irony of seeing a graphic art combined with random company logos that have nothing do with the images. There is also an interesting interplay of religious iconography with strong sexual undertones. Let’s take an example from The Calendar Project: The famous painting, Birth of Sakunthala by Raja Ravi Varma (regarded as the father of calendar art in India), where Vishwamitra refuses to accept his child Shakuntala from Menaka is cleverly used as the backdrop of the eponymous Vishwamitra condoms. The ad is accompanied by the famous and witty quip, “Don’t cry over spilt milk”. There is also a clever and curious mixture of cinematic images with the images of gods and goddesses,

so quintessential to calendar art. One of the works displayed has ingeniously taken the iconic and mythical image of Krishna lifting the Govardhan hill with the iconic rain song image from Shree 420, where the couple serenades on the streets of Bombay sharing an umbrella. The product it endorses: Govradhan umbrella, with the tagline: umbrella for stars. These works of art, while entertaining and visually appealing, validate the iconic stature cinema has in the collective Indian psyche over the past seven decades or so.

Project Cinema City has been organised by the NGMA and the ministry of culture as part of the celebrations commemorating 100 years of Indian cinema. It is put together by Majlis, an interdisciplinary arts initiative, and the Kamla Raheja Vidyanidhi Institute of Architecture (KRIVA), and curated by filmmaker Madhusree Dutta and artist Archana Hande. After a successful debut in Mumbai, the exhibition is now on at NGMA, Delhi till September 23. It will then travel to NGMA, Bangalore.