



The Cinema and the City

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Atul Dodiya, Fourteen Stations. Image courtesy: Majlis Culture.

Cinema and the city are both sites of human life intensified by commerce and its social and cultural consequences. These conjoined twins sustain each other, and thrive. They appear in each other's dreams and nightmares. 'The Cinema and the City', at New Delhi's National Gallery of Modern Art – a touring exhibition organized by Majlis and curated by Madhushree Dutta and Archana Hande, sets out to draw out the analogies between these two larger apparatuses — city and cinema — with their shared mechanisms of urban spaces, architecture, subcultures, and migrant populations, and the complex industrial production, distribution, and exhibition networks and nodes of cinema.

To this effect, it eschews aggrandizement and condescension of a culture straining to break out of its already larger-than-life mould. The nostalgic register is tuned to the historic rather than mawkish. Only small doses of mockery are admitted, an act of remarkable restraint, considering the signature un-self-criticalness of Indian popular cinema.

Using a populist, often participatory interface in a nudge-wink tribute to its motley, plebian subjects, the show begins aptly with a set of calendars executed on commission by well-known contemporary artists and film-makers. A happy mix of horology, commerce, popular, avant-garde and contemporary art, and pedagogy, these calendars explore narratives surrounding popular cinema and the city through found iconography. Kamal Swaroop, of the 1988-cult classic *Om Dar Ba Dar* fame, ropes in the Bengal-school artist Nandlal Bose's linocut image of the striding lathi-holding Mahatma Gandhi and the iconic Charlie Chaplin silhouette, to create a calendar-cum-advertisement for walking sticks.

The strong pedagogic tendency of the show surfaces in full measure in, *The Table of Miscellany*, by Shikha Pandey and Paroma Sadhana. Cluttered with curios — transparent books, rotating cubes, text, imagery, a bioscope, a light box with multi-purpose maps of the Mumbai film

industry showing its various sites of suppliers and vendors, the large table-top installation aims to convey the difficulties of archiving the many-splendored Mumbai cinema and its constantly changing urban context. Edifying, the installation yet had an air of a school science projects about it.

The same theme is elaborated in *Cinema City Lived*, a collaborative architectural work made of PVC drainage pipes, by architects Apurva Parikh and Rohan Shivkumar, and artists Apurva Talpade, Elizabeth Mathew, and Shivani Shedde, who provided the objects and moving images displayed at certain points in the construct through peep holes cut into the conduits. To make the invisibles of the film industry visible, it gives body to the lowly and the lofty socio-economic-cultural networks of the industry — its cinemas, studios, local train stations, and neighbourhoods with dedicated suppliers and vendors. The work culminates in another, *The Western Suburb*, a rather sloppy installation, enclosing in it a large projection of the Marine Drive, and its pricey real-estate neighbourhood – the smaller videos of sweat shops catering to the Mumbai film industry — the bromide of the toil and squalor that grandeur hides within it.



Pushpamala N., *Return of Phantom Lady*. Image courtesy: Majlis Culture.

In *Return of the Phantom Lady* or *Sinful City*, N Pushpamala, known for her self-posed photographic iconography revisits and updates an earlier film-noir-ish, black-and-white photo-narrative of the 1990s with a rather familiar filmic adventure in colour of the *Phantom Lady*. Yet, she delivers a sharp comment on the unimaginatively unchanging narratives in the Mumbai cinema despite its ever-changing context.

Anant Joshi's untitled orrery of sorts, made of bedizened lacquered figure whirling frenziedly, noisily in a mechanical choreography on top of simultaneously spinning disks atop a table, makes a spindly connection between Mumbai's textile industries and its ever mushrooming multiplex cinemas — the former having gradually given way to the latter. And predetermined by its underlying mechanics, the dance remains the same through infinite reiterations, casting Mumbai film industry and its products as operose and prolific, yet uncritical and unresponsive to its own environment — the sites of stasis. Archana Hande's participatory installation, *Of Panorama: a Riding Exercise*, made the same point with an elaborate arrangement of two video cameras, a projection screen, lights, and an exercise bike against a modern-day green screen.

Atul Dodiya's painting series Fourteen Stations associates thirteen Mumbai stations with thirteen most beloved villains from the Bombay film Industry since the 1950s. The fourteenth station is intriguingly dedicated to himself. The work seems to draw more on nostalgia and Dodiya's celebrity-status, than forwarding any ideas to enliven the show.

An emerging, younger artist Shreyas Karle makes a more critical contribution with his Vastusanghralaya ki Dukan (Museum Shop of Fetish Objects) satirically literalising and making into objects, hackneyed tropes that keep recurring infinitely within the formulaic plots of Indian Hindi cinema as pieces of dialogues, lucky charms, the hyper-sexualisation, machismo, and socio-religious pieties. A bottle labelled Ma Ka Dudh (mother's milk); a multi-religion brass pendant showing together the church's spire, the temple's tower, and mosque's dome; a wire hangar with long horizontal spikes to hold up the large cups of a female lead's dress, meant to house her padded-buxomness. Together they reveal the chasm that has appeared between the film industry and its audience that has also splintered into a wide-ranging gradation of levels of education and critical faculties.

'Project Cinema City: Research Art and Documentary Practices', curated by Madhushree Dutta and Archana Hande, August 17 – September 23 , National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.