Escape routes

The Cinema City project attempts to bring art and research together, finds Zeenat Nagree.

Mumbai’s film industry is a dream factory, manufacturing heroes and villains, love stories and revenge plots, and a cityscape suspended between reality and fantasy. Mumbai and the cinema borrow from each other in equal measure, in both the production and consumption of the illusory world of moving images. This entangled relationship has been the subject of enquiry of the multi-disciplinary arts project Cinema City since 2007. One of its manifestations – an exhibition of installations, photographs, paintings, sculptures and films – opens at the National Gallery of Modern Art this fortnight, along with weekly film screenings.

Curated by Madhusree Dutta, documentary filmmaker and director of the cultural centre Majlis, the show makes room for factual documentation of Mumbai’s filmmaking practices as well as artistic interpretations of images produced by cinema. “We are looking at what the city does in order to make cinema, and in turn what the cinema does to the city,” Dutta said. “There is much more to films than what we see on the screen.” For the project, Dutta has selected artists, architects and filmmakers who have engaged with the metropolis in their work, including Atul Dodiya, Pushpamala N, Archna Hande, Anant Joshi, Kausik Mukhopadhyay, Paromita Vohra and Avijit Mukul Kishore.

Performance photographer Pushpamala’s response to the cinema comes in the form of a “photo-romance” titled Return of the Phantom Lady (Sinful City), a hilariously dramatic series of images that weave a “dark web of murder, intrigue and foul play in contemporary Mumbai”. Casting herself as the masked heroine to the rescue, Pushpamala saves an orphaned girl from the clutches of the evil operations of the land mafia in places such as Dharavi and an old office in south Mumbai. The new set of stylised photographs is a sequel to the acclaimed black-and-white Phantom Lady or Kismet (1996-98). It departs from the old set in two ways: it is in colour, and it moves from south Mumbai to the northern suburbs. “It’s the same character and the same costume,” said the Bangalore artist. “Everything, except the top, fits.”

Pushpamala’s fantastical homage to Bollywood’s escapist narratives, which also address the megapolis’s very real transformations in recent years, finds an echo in filmmaker Paromita Vohra’s sound installation So Near Yet So Far. Constructed to resemble telephone booths, the installation allows visitors to pick up a receiver and eavesdrop on recorded conversations. The work refers to what Vohra sees as an erotic undercurrent surrounding the telephone in Hindi movies, but is also a metaphor for the experience of film-watching. “The coming of private telephones opened up a new box of experiences,” Vohra said. “Like the city and the cinema, and so many other institutions or symbols of modernity, it allowed you to be somewhere you were not. Perhaps it allowed you to be someone you were not, or someone you hadn’t known you were yet.”

The privacy offered by the movie-going experience and the suspension of disbelief are the twin forces behind Shreyas Karle’s fictional museum. The artist creates drawings and sculptures based on situations and objects that are to be found in the illogical world of films. “It’s like having sex; you feel the same person before and after the act, not while you are in it,” Karle writes in his concept note. The metal sculpture The kiss/kiss/the kiss is inspired by a couple’s hunt for a secluded spot to snuggle, while Whether its Kashmir or the Alps doesn’t matter, a marble sculpture, transforms ice-capped mountains into the curves of the female body. “This project revolves around the sensuousness in the cinema – the images that camouflage themselves to deceive the censorship – and the manipulation of situations to create ideas with two meanings,” Karle told Time Out.

Dodhiya takes his own artistic liberties in creating 14 signboards for Mumbai’s local train stations, including a fictional one named after himself. Each painting contains art historical and pop-culture references in Dodhiya’s signature style, most strikingly an iconic villain like Prem Chopra or Gulshan Grover. The cracked surfaces of the works add to the grim tone – have the villains taken over our lives? “People may ask, ‘Why not the good guys’?” Dodhiya said. “But I think heroes are boring. I don’t find them fascinating.”

For all the bad guys in Dodhiya’s paintings, there are enough good guys in the Pipeline Network, an installation conceptualised by the students of Kamla Raheja Vidyanidhi Institute for Architecture and its deputy director, Rohan Shivkumar. The work spotlights the individuals and small businesses that power the Bollywood machine, and was culled from a 2010 research project that mapped the movie industry. Viewers can look through a network of criss-crossing PVC pipes to see back-lit slides showing drawings and photographs of Mumbai landmarks, the locations of sets and studios, and pictures of the crew. A 13-screen video installation titled The Western Suburb: Sweatshops of Cinema, by Mukul Kishore, Rikhav Desai, Mamta Murthy and Kausik Mukhopadhyay, puts a face to the production units that deliver costumes, wigs, props and special effects, among others. “When we started out we were discussing how one would make the map of a cinema city,” Shivkumar said. “We realised that we could simultaneously map two opposite things – how the city is displaced by the cinematic image but also the tangible spaces where film is being produced and displayed.”

Cinema City opens at the NGMA on Sat Aug 18. Films will be screened on Saturdays and Sundays, starting Sat Aug 18. See Art and Film.

Pushpa, I hate tears A photo from Pushpamala N’s Return of the Phantom Lady (Sinful City)