

INDIA: PUBLIC PLACES/PRIVATE SPACES

Contemporary Photography and Video Art

Newark Museum

49 Washington Street

Newark

Through Sunday

Chinese contemporary art, glinting and posturing, continues to hold the limelight, but for my money the work being made in India these days is the real deal, deep and rich. This is partly because it is less intent on promoting itself to an international market. It is inwardly probing rather than outwardly ingratiating. “India: Public Places/Private Spaces” at the Newark Museum bears out this impression.

In the 20th century Chinese art was split by a great divide, the Maoist era. Before it traditionalism predominated; after it there was postmodernism, with no transition between. In India cultural rupture came with 19th-century colonialism. In the 20th century the move from Modernism to postmodernism was, if not smooth, at least organic, a process.

You can see that process in the show of photography and video art, most of it from the last two decades, at Newark. Raghu Rai’s 1984 photographs of [Indira Gandhi](#)’s death and funeral stand in a long Indian journalistic tradition, as do Manish Swarup’s 2002 pictures of the effects of sectarian violence in Gujarat.

Raghubir Singh (1942-1999) stands at the head of a remarkable line of socially engaged contemporary photographers that includes Ravi Agarwal, Pablo Batholomew, Shahid Datawala, Gauri Gill, Ram Rahman and Rajesh Vora. These are names the New York art world should know.

Like any art deeply invested in its culture, most of the works in the show, documentary or not, have a political dimension. A beautiful human-interest video by the artist named Surekha about a couple who spent their lives planting and caring for trees carries an inherent ecological message. Still-life photographs by Samar and Vijay Jodha depicting televisions in homes rich and poor say much about the pervasiveness of globalism.

An interactive video in which the artist Shilpa Gupta appears as a camouflage-clad puppet moving to the whims of her audience is only the most obviously barbed of several performance-based pieces. A photographic series by Shantanu Lodh, in which the artist, nude, serves tea to his elderly father, offers an ambivalent view of family values.

Tejal Shah, Annu Palakunathu Matthew and Pushpamala N. all offer theatrical send-ups of Indianness, while in a video that is among the exhibition's highlights Anita Dube impersonates a Muslim man who works as an assistant to "the famous artist Anita Dube."

The most moving work comes at the beginning and end of the show, which is displayed on two floors. In an upstairs gallery are several photographic diptychs by Sunil Gupta. Mr. Gupta is a fearless, generous, far-thinking, self-exposing artist. He has never been better than in these recent pictures, which have a fresh simplicity and metaphoric clarity. They are heart-lifting and heartbreaking.

Downstairs, in a video installation by Navjot Altaf, a panoramic shot of rolling waves on the coast of Gujarat is gradually covered over with news images of upheavals on the subcontinent. As the images multiply, the sea turns red. Then, in a wheeling image of destruction and redemption, it returns to its original color, and the process begins again.

In presenting this exhibition, organized by Gayatri Sinha, an art critic in India, and Paul Sternberger, associate professor of art history at Rutgers, the Newark Museum does everyone interested in international art a major service. And, yet again, it does itself proud.

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