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ART REVIEW

Taking a Magical Flight Through Modern India

By Holland Cotter

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With "Inside Out" in 1998, the Asia Society threw open a door on something New Yorkers knew little about: contemporary art in China. Now, with "Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India," it does something similar, this time in collaboration with the Queens Museum of Art, which adds a surprise of its own called "Fatal Love: South Asian American Art Now."

The Chinese survey made a splash; I wonder if "Edge of Desire" will. In some ways it's the better show, though not as obviously sexy. Smaller and denser, it offers a vertical cut of a decade or so of art rather than a sampler spread. This is not at all to say it is short on visual gratification. There's plenty: many exquisite paintings; memorable photographs and films; and as if to finesse the exotica quotient, an inflatable Hindu temple. Even so, it's a tough show, one that demands -- and rewards -- a little work on the part of a visitor.

Much of the buzz around the Chinese art came from seeing how thoroughly new Chinese art departed -- or seemed to depart -- from old Chinese art. Yesterday, ink and brush painting; today, digital animation. The feisty, reckless look of the work jibed with Western expectations of an avant-garde. And the politics were stirring: brash young pro-democracy rebels resist repressive Communist elders. We were psyched to see heroes, and, of course, we're crazy for the young. That several of the artists were working in then-current international styles didn't hurt.

"Edge of Desire" is a different show, with a different kind of art. For one thing, it's contemporary but not young. It's solidly multigenerational, genealogical even. At its center, represented by three vibrant paintings, is K.G. Subramanyan, an artist who was born in 1924 and who is a living link to early Indian modernism.

His panoptic view of art, embracing craft, folk and tribal traditions, as well as popular culture and academic modernism, is the model adopted by the show, organized by Chaitanya Sambrani, a lecturer in art theory at the Australian National University in Canberra. It has also shaped a group of influential Indian artists now at midcareer, among them

internationally known figures like Nalini Malani, Vivan Sundaram and Bhupen Khakhar, who died in 2003. And through them it is paving the way for promising newcomers like Shilpa Gupta, Swarna and Manu Chitrakar, and L.N. Tallur.

This continuity of inspiration helps explain why the then-and-now effect of the Chinese show doesn't really operate in "Edge of Desire," and why contemporary Indian art, with its wealth of ideas and styles, is both eclectic and of a piece. This is useful to consider when approaching this art. So is some sense of the culture it comes from.

Most Americans know a bit about modern China. It was once, after all, The Enemy, or one of them, so we've kept a wary eye on it. To India, though, we've paid scant attention, so we know a lot less.

This is too bad. We have much to learn from a country that is defining, on a truly staggering scale, the positive and negative potential of democracy; a country that has been torn apart by fundamentalism and isolated by nationalism, and is seeing the vast gap between private wealth and dire poverty widening further.

These realities matter deeply to many artists in India and elsewhere in the so-called third world. They matter partly because such realities are so apparent, but also because the distinctive brands of modernism developed outside and independent of the West -- which dropped the utopian ball early on -- are often infused with an ethic of social engagement.

By no means do all Indian artists subscribe to this. But many of those in "Edge of Desire," and in other non-Western countries, do. That's why, so often when you talk to artists from India, or China, or Africa, or South America, effortlessly cosmopolitan people, you discover how few of them ever think about New York art, or Chelsea with its flickering fashions. Why should they? They have a life.

"Edge of Desire" is in two sections. The one at the Asia Society is smaller, mostly paintings; the one in Queens, more expansive and varied. To be blunt, if you visit only the Asia Society, you won't have seen the show. Plus, you'll have missed "Fatal Love," which would be a shame.

That said, the basic themes that Mr. Sambrani explores -- the link between fine art and folk traditions; the role of pop culture, politics and religion in art; the question of what Indian means in a globalized context -- are all set out at Asia Society.

Here, complex stories are beautifully told. In floor-to-ceiling scrolls Nilima Sheikh uses the language of miniature painting to map out a history of the ruined paradise that is Kashmir. On a portable shrine, her husband, Gulammohammed Sheikh, depicts the destruction of the Babri mosque at Ayodhya in 1992, which set off years of sectarian ferocity.

An installation by N.N. Rimzon, "Speaking Stones" (1998), was a direct response to this; it includes newspaper photographs of violence weighed down by rocks, as if to keep them from blowing away. And particularly evocative images of brutality come from two artists associated with folk and tribal craft, Santosh Kumar Das and Sonadhar Vishwakarma, in narrative drawings and sculptures of extraordinary delicacy.

Narrative has always been the backbone of figurative art in India. It still is. Surendran Nair's painting of a demonic deity with a pistol for a hand riffs sardonically on Hindu and Buddhist myths. Ms. Chitrakar, who like her brother Manu is a professional storyteller from West Bengal, reconstitutes the movie "Titanic" on a painted scroll. Raj Kumar Koram and Ganga Devi Bhatt, both self-taught, produce startlingly graphic autobiographical narratives in sculpture and painting.

These last two artists are making their New York debuts, though several others, including Ms. Malani and Atul Dodiya, have already had successful Manhattan shows. (The estimable Subodh Gupta will have one this month.)

So have Indian artists who are not in "Edge of Desire," enough of them, in fact, to constitute an alternative Indian show, one less political, more conceptual, which takes artists like, perhaps, Nasreen Mohamedi or Zarina Hashmi as its lodestar.

In a way, "Fatal Love" is such a show. It has been organized by two artists, Jaishri Abichandani and Prerana Reddy, who have rounded up 29 superlative colleagues, most of them young, female and living in New York.

Some, like Rina Banerjee and Shahzia Sikander, are by now fully woven into the city's art-world fabric. Others, like Chitra Ganesh, surely will be. She was born in Brooklyn in 1975 and is a recent Columbia graduate, and her work, from wall drawings to photography, is maturing before our eyes. It's exciting to see.

Ms. Abichandani and Ms. Reddy also introduce some new or unfamiliar people, always a good thing. One is Anna Bhushan, who recently moved to New York from London, bringing tiny watercolors with her. Until now I had not encountered the paintings of Nitin Mukul, or the penumbral photographs of Yamini Nayar, but I was very glad to do so here.

Through certain artists, the two exhibitions are in close sync. Landscapes by the New York painter Mala Iqbal in "Fatal Love" share a charge of Romantic turbulence with a panoramic image of explosively unfurling vegetation by the Mysore-based artist N.S. Harsha, a highlight of "Edge of Desire."

The installation "Disappeared in America," on view in "Fatal Love," is as politically hard-hitting as anything in the other show. That work in progress, by a New York-based collective led by Naeem Mohaiemen and Ibrahim Quraishi, documents the harassment and detainment of Muslim men by the United States since 9/11.

The pairing of these shows could have been a disaster. Instead, it feels inspired, an exchange of modernist and postmodernist energies that is absolutely of the moment. And if I were to pick one piece from each show that embodied the spirit of that transaction I know which I'd choose.

From "Edge of Desire" it would be a video by Umesh Maddanahalli titled "Between Myth and History." It opens with an image of a temple priest in South India pointing to a sacred cave, which the artist, holding a lighted candle, enters. He walks and walks in the dark, and finally emerges into daylight, but from the mouth of a different cave, this one in Austria. But without missing a beat he continues to walk, barefoot, still-lighted candle in hand, down a nearby European street.

And in "Fatal Love" there is "Magic Carpet" by Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi. Installed with the Queens Museum's famous relief map, "Panorama of the City of New York," it is an image of a patterned Oriental rug made from hundreds of colored lights, and it hovers, glowing, over the section corresponding to the museum's location.

It can be taken as a comment on cultural nostalgia or Orientalist fantasy, or as an immigrant's impossible dream of transport home. For the moment, let's see it as other things: as an affirming emblem of the South Asian-American presence in New York, so bright. And as a beacon of welcome to South Asian artists who have arrived in this city in force at last, with their openhearted, profoundly rooted, morally committed art.

"Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India" remains at Asia Society, 725 Park Avenue, at 70th Street, (212)288-6400, and at the Queens Museum of Art, Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, Queens, (718)592-9700, through June 5. "Fatal Love: South Asian American Art Now" also remains at the Queens Museum through June 5.

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