

Reflections on self and the world

ABHIRUP DAM

It would seem that the author's name, unlike other proper names, does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it; instead, the name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterising, its mode of being." (*What is an Author?*, Michel Foucault)

The artist, like the author is perhaps a disembodied entity, somehow occupying a mute yet garrulous space within his/her artwork — the artist is both a presence and a non-presence. Yet the ways in which perceptible reality shapes a particular work of art is rarely devoid of an artistic viewpoint. For Navjot Altaf, artistic production can seldom be extricated from the social and the political. Her own interactive, cooperative and collaborative projects have actively engaged with the artist's politics. Altaf has worked extensively with tribals in Bastar, and continues to probe how environmental concerns often co-terminus with larger questions of development and human displacement.

"I am a feminist and an artist. For me feminism is a way of life, a critical awareness of the world as a woman. My art is no stranger to my way of life; it embodies how I view the world. I have constantly been interested in the existence of several knowledge systems, and how some are always glossed over by the dominant others. Through



Navjot Altaf's *A Woman and Two Donkeys*

PHOTO: ABHISHEK SHUKLA

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my artistic undertakings, I have always tried to manifest this plurality. Hence I do not restrict myself to mediums; I am neither trained sculptor nor filmmaker, yet I do produce videos and sculpt forms as their differences of dimensionality offer me contextual freedom of expression," says Altaf.

Altaf's latest sculpture installation at the Talwar Art Gallery is an exercise in self-reflection and rumination. Titled *Horn in the Head*, the three-part installation explores how myth and communal belief govern and crisscross in everyday life. *A Woman and Two Donkeys* reference a Sassanian myth

where a three-legged donkey purifies the stagnant water of the Caspian Sea, polluted by the exploits of the lord of evil and ignorance. Altaf has been working closely with the conservation of the Mithi River in Mumbai and once encountered a donkey with an injured leg on its banks. The sight and the knowledge of the myth prompted her to think about a possible confluence with the world around her.

In the second installation of *A Woman and Two Don-*

keys, a three-legged donkey, alongside a four-legged one approaches a horned female figure (the artist herself). It almost seems that the meek creatures, with their puerile timidity, seek to overcome the monstrations of being, as embodied in the artist's self image.

Agkuklios Paidea — meaning "learning to articulate the disjointed points of view of knowledge into an active circle" — has two women sitting in conversation with each other. They are surrounded by scattered puzzle-like pieces of railway tracks which, if put together, form a circle. This is the artist's idea of the existence of several knowledge systems which gather shape and meaning through dialogue and conference.

Altaf's works are a fascinating display of how the descriptive and the abstract perfectly merge to produce infinite significations and compels one to question the status quo.

Venue: Talwar Art Gallery

Date: Until 7 December

Timing: 10am-7pm