

Construction / Deconstruction

Imagining the City

The metropolis with its changing skyline provides the grist for the creative mills of Anjum Singh and Sheila Makhijani, two artists who live in New Delhi. As the winds of globalisation blow over the subcontinent, its capital goes into overdrive to project the face of the new global India. In 2010 the city will host the Commonwealth games so Delhi wants to strut its stuff, constructing a new identity for itself to reflect this newly won self confidence. Old structures get dismantled while new ones mushroom in their place in a complex continuum of construction and deconstruction. Anjum Singh and Sheila Makhijani negotiate the glitz and glitter, the grit and grime of the city they have grown up in. As they explore the changing face of the metropolis, dwelling on its insecurities and aspirations each artist arrives at her own unique visual vocabulary to reflect this engagement with the city.

Demons of Destruction

The burgeoning city beset by manifold ills has been an ongoing preoccupation of Anjum Singh's. In her oils on canvas she looks behind the glamorous, glass facades of the malls and the hypermarkets that continually spring up around her and questions their synthetic sensibility. Big city blues as evidenced in the growing mounds of garbage, the never ending traffic jams and the lack of drinking water and civic amenities all come under the artist's scanner. What Singh portrays is a city gasping for breath, its arteries and veins slowly but insidiously poisoned by noxious fumes, its ground water depleted and unfit for human consumption. Her works are an elegy to the city and nowhere is this seen more poignantly than in "Rush hour" where clouds of dark exhaust and smoke paint an apocalyptic vision of the megapolis. Scratch below the surface and it reveals a series of pop pink cars obliterated by the toxic fumes they have generated.

In "Deconstructing my city" the artist turns her gaze on the series of skirmishes over space that have taken place in Delhi in the past year. In its effort to portray a new face of the modern India, the city planners have opted for a sterile city paradigm, demolishing slums and "illegal constructions" thereby dispossessing its very inhabitants. What they seek is a sanitized space disrupting the organic nature that is the very hallmark of a city of the South. As the artist engages with the social upheavals she sees around her, she displays the uncanny ability to distill the events of its images without taking sides or the high moral ground. Her works though a telling social comment are neither didactic nor preachy but lay bare the images of our age leaving it to us to decode them. The bulldozer poised claw like over the map of the city is emblematic of the threat that looms large. As the machine tears at the innards of the city it demolishes in one fell swoop histories and hopes, memories and moments.

A feeling of impending doom also informs the artist's current body of mixed media works. Anjum Singh makes complex linkages between the local and the global and between the city/home and the world. Here too the works are tinged with menace and are pervaded with a sense of anxiety and *angst*. The blue waters of the oceans are not idyllic, tranquil sites but carry with them threatening presences – a lurking submarine or an ammunition shell waiting to explode. Replete with symbolism she references incidents which speak of a general paranoia that has gripped the globe at large. In an increasingly networked world new boundaries and barriers are erected using processes of biometric screening and racial profiling as alluded to in a work like "To Travel". A black fighter jet obliterates the presence of a white passenger plane in "Escort" and recalls an incident last year when twelve Indian passengers were offloaded and arrested on account of their suspicious behaviour aboard a flight from Amsterdam to Mumbai. The plane was escorted back to Holland by two Dutch fighter jets after the pilot radioed for

help. The treatment she metes out to the work gives it a tension and edginess while reflecting the jitters that swamp our increasingly insecure world.

Anjum Singh brings a ritual of repetition to the way she painstakingly builds her surfaces. Using rubber moulds and stencils, bottle caps and bubble wrap, she imprints their images to create a series of richly patterned spaces. Harnessing corrugated cardboard cutouts she breaks the monotony of the surface in an elaborate process of mark making. Lending a three dimensionality to the works are the pastel plastic straws protruding from her maps, reminiscent of the vividly coloured optic fibre cables that are constantly being laid in the city as it gears up to be wired with the world.

Site Under Construction

If it is demolition and debris that informs Anjum Singh's oeuvre then it is sites of construction that mark Sheila Makhijani's work. As buildings sprout forth, the artist is fascinated by the labyrinth of lines that their creation invokes. Unlike the edgy, anxiety ridden works by Singh, Makhijani's small format canvases have a joyous, yet restless energy about them. She follows the rhythm of her lines as they carry her off on a roller coaster ride. Abandoning herself with glee to their whimsicalities she lets them take her chuffing down a train track or soaring up a scaffolding. Viewing the world as an amalgam of colour and line, she transposes these experiences onto her canvases creating a tangled and complex web of nets. Trapped within their interstices are morsels of memory as the artist dredges the recesses of her mind to capture and recreate a series of moments. As thoughts meet canvas, coalescing and coagulating, colour floods every nook and cranny of the surface, flowing and ebbing, toggling between densely worked grids and free wheeling expanses. Playing hide and seek, patches of red sneak a peek at us from the bottom of a work like "Who done it", jostling out the lemony hues that attempt to smother and extinguish it.

Sheila Makhijani's ladder like striations mimic the stripes of a zebra and were black and white in earlier works. They have since then shed their affiliations and taken on a life and colour of their own. They also recall her long journeys by train and road as she crisscrossed places on her own. Fascinated by the rail tracks and the forms they offered, they reappear in her works bringing with them the feeling of being in a state of perpetual motion. At times her lines appear to snake languorously through her works, at times they are taut like the strings of a musical instrument aquiver with tension and tonality.

In her current series of works the artist offers a play of horizontal and vertical lines and planes recreating thereby the feel of an emerging metropolis. In "Whups" the viewer has the feeling of being transported to dizzying heights with a bird's eye view of the cityscape. In some of her paintings highrise buildings and skyscrapers appear to tower over a complex grid of streets and alleys while in others the viewer seems to be gliding over a patchwork of rural pastureland.

Both Anjum Singh and Sheila Makhijani grapple with the city as it finds itself in a flux of demolition and construction producing works that speak of erasure and creation, of dashed hopes and emerging dreams.

Meera Menezes, 13.2.07