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Art Talk

Marta Jakimowicz

Hybrid culture

The 'Brand India' paintings by Tonni, or Anthony Roche, at Samuha (ADA Rangamandira, 109, J C Road, opposite Ravindra Kalakshetra, August 8 to 20) conjure a disquietingly alluring spectacle of the composite urban youth culture in which popular western images mix with and layer traditional indigenous ones. Whereas most artists critiquing present reality use its visual-topical elements but stand outside, Tonni embraces its imagery whole-heartedly as a participant in order to from within speak about its deceptiveness, superficiality, perils and hidden agendas.

In tune with the freshness of the phenomenon being widely accepted and identified with, he evokes the joyous and somewhat naïve, uncritical enthusiasm of young people for globalising fashion, fast food and imported brands, icons and notions.

His aesthetic language relies on comic book, design and advertising styles which become inherently as well as loosely impregnated by qualities of the classical Indian stroke and decorative motifs. Thus, although one may associate these canvases with Pop Art, contrary to its seriousness, Tonni's works are full of playful energy, mischievous humour and pun-loving subversive-ness. The main character and admitted self-portrait, Mickey Mouse comes here in a number of metamorphoses – as the Statue of Liberty, Superman, Cola-Mouse, L'Oreal's Merlin Mouse or Mac Fighter. His wide-open, thrilled eyes protrude sideways like in ancient Indian paintings. While kathakali dancers wear superhero costumes and Kishangarh miniature Krishna and Radha have a Star Plus wedding on television, the attractiveness of the brilliant colours and vibrating line simultaneously yield excitement and irony, the dizzily enchanting smoothness of the merger hinting at superficiality, copycat identity, pretended virtues and commercial lies. Throughout, the relishing of this new iconography remains permeated with indications of warning, as corporate logos clarify the witty twists of the images. With an ease equal to comic strip reading, the viewer guesses greed behind the Tatas' liberalising Indian heritage and the armed belligerence supporting multinational banking even if it dresses in the moods of love and art history. If not all the works are as strong and formally cogent, the whole is bold, original, very engaged and relevant.

Transcending the mundane

Another valid exhibition inspired by popular indigenous culture is the work of George K brought to UB City by Chennai's Apparao Galleries (August 7 to 31). Its authentic freshness, by contrast to Tonni's youthful vivaciousness, comes from the bold and passionate embracing of the immediate in a mature artist unspoiled by professionalism, although this can be referred only to his sculptures, the latter part of his "Shringara/Fragile" whole. The almost naturalistic character of the life-size fibre-glass statues acts towards enhancing the complexity of what appears to be merely obvious and loud in the images of Hijras.

At first glance one is struck by the heavy, obvious physicality of these lower-class women-men dressed as brides. Like in reality, the sculptures oscillate between simple, charming ordinariness and ornate crudeness that verge on kitsch. Their transgender traits lend themselves both to emphasising the unresolved seam of the two sexes and desire to transcend them. The plain presence combines with the atmosphere of performed as well as internalised spectacle.

Eventually the literal and the bawdy yield sensual tenderness, indeed permeated by vulnerability, and poetry accentuated by the large flower petals painted on each figure's eye.

Knowing that the eunuchs are about to ritually become divine brides, incarnations of Vishnu-Mohini, lets one see them as a metaphor for the aspiration to transcend. These traditional embodiments of fertility and carnal bliss in marriage, they seem here to epitomise a perhaps unrealistic yearning for earthly love that finds fulfilment in religious rite. The artifice of assuming another appearance can be also understood as a parallel to the structure of art.

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What is wonderful about the sculptures, apart from their sourcing from a hardly used and powerful area of life, is their sheer visual expressiveness whose literal nature makes one intuit complex ideas. By comparison, the paintings which use kathakali motifs to deal with issues of beauty, love and the building of artwork as related to literary and spiritual experience, may have moments of strength, subtlety and inspiration but dilute over the dominant formalism, their layered, merging ingredients being too pleasant and literal.

Labour moods

Sathya Shivakumar may be genuinely respectful to and admiring of the hard realities and the lyrical grace of rustic workers' existence, but what his paintings suggested (CKP, August 9 to 14) was a somewhat facile way to the same. Fairly exact renderings of typical objects combined there with human figures of a stylised essential realism, all set against fancy, decorative backdrops with dynamically slanting planes and heavy, patterned textures echoing of Yusuf Arakkal. Moods of earthiness and lyricism were aimed at merely to dissolve in design.

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