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Intersecting lives, fragmented visions

VINEET GILL 22nd Aug 2015

These days, it's only in bureaucratic circles that you come across the term "cultural exchange". What it usually signifies is a transaction between two countries, or cities, in which the only acceptable currency is the cultural cliché: India sending out folk dancers to Japan, for instance, and getting in return



Insight by Kathryn Myers. | Mapping Mindstains by Gopika Nath.

a troupe of martial-arts specialists. There's something distinctly off-putting about such a soulless interchange of artistic capital, which is less about exchanging styles, forms and temperaments than showcasing them.

But cultural exchange takes another, more spirited and dynamic, form when it's executed on a personal — as opposed to political — level. Such a state is possible only when individual artists influence, inspire, and in some sense transform each other. *Fragments and Fragmentation* — the ongoing exhibition at a gallery called Art and Aesthetic in Delhi's Lado Sarai — can be seen as a prime example of such a cross-cultural aesthetic journey that has, for the artists involved, a transformative power.

The exhibition has a double highlight: it features embroidered pieces composed by the Indian artist Gopika Nath, who had once studied as a Fulbright scholar in the United States; and gouache-on-paper paintings by the American artist Kathryn Myers, who, years ago, had made the same journey as a Fulbright scholar in reverse — leaving home to travel to India. Myers and Nath have both been long-time friends and, having closely studied each others' artistic leanings and evolving styles, are well-placed to offer interpretive and critical notes as part of a mutual exercise.

That explains why Nath has written the introductory text for Myers' paintings and vice versa. "Her gaze," Nath writes about Myers, "quite naturally has a 'foreign' perspective, but it is exactly this view which enables us to see fragments of India that we may otherwise miss, either because we take them for granted or we choose to ignore the uncomfortable mess."

But it's not just the "uncomfortable mess" of our cities that we choose to ignore; most of all, what we ignore are the ordinary accoutrements of the places we inhabit. And it takes an artist of Myers' ability to make us look with new eyes at a clothes line, say; or at a worn-out curtain half-covering an open window, or overhead cables and drainage pipes. These paintings by Myers — around of dozen of them are exhibited here — are miniature masterpieces of sorts, with their narrow, vertical perspectives mimicking that lasting symbol of city life: a building facade.

A professor of art at the University of Connecticut, Myers nevertheless continues to be a devoted student of Indian painting and sculptures. Her series of documentaries on Indian artists, called *Regarding India*, is one of the finest on the subject, establishing her credentials as a discerning art critic. And shedding light on Gopika Nath's work showcased in *Fragments and Fragmentation*, Myers writes in her introductory note that the Nath's "visual language moves fluently from form to formlessness through often startling junctures of surface and space".



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Nath works with fabrics, embroidery threads and sewing machines. She also works with table cloth and tea stains. Indeed, the chai motif is a recurrent one in Nath's art. One of the her installation pieces at the ongoing exhibition includes an elaborately set out tea table — it has placed on it cups and saucers and an aluminium kettle, seemingly suspended in mid-air, held at an acute angle over a cup. The tea pouring out of it is actually brown strips of fabric, although the stains on the table cloth are authentic.

It's fascinating to look at the little labels that accompany Nath's artwork, the ones that usually carry the title, date, medium and method used by the artist. The "technique" outlined next to a typical piece by her would go thus: "layering, tearing, pulling, stitching, staining with tea-leaves"; or "burning, machine embroidery, staining with tea-leaves". This alone adds to the appeal of the showcased pieces, some of them sounding not unlike a short poem by William Carlos Williams.

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Poetry sometimes makes its way into Nath's art directly, and not just in its visual manifestation. Pasted alongside some of her works are lines composed by her. Symbolist lines like: "A careless hand/ poured/ Filled my cup/ And stained/ the world/ that saucers it." This again echoes her overall theme for this particular set of artworks, which is a tea stain. But it also establishes her work in a strictly modern context. This, too, is where we find a direct link between her works and those mounted on the other side of the gallery hall — the "uncomfortable mess" of urbanity captured in Myers' paintings.

If we are to come up with one defining emblem of modernity, in literature or in the arts, it has to be the fragment. Modern art presented to us the fragmented images, sounds and words (quite like the lines by Nath quoted above) right up close. It took the focus away from the "bigger picture", from the epic, and zeroed in on an isolated — and often stained or messy — detail.

Both Myers' paintings and Nath's fabric art pieces are, in this sense, expressions of the modern and the fragmentary. Rather than telling a story, these exhibits capture a moment. Not the "defining" moment, though — not perfect emblems of the past, or auguries of times to come. In these pieces, it's the random moment, seized by the artist's eye, that seems to count. To return once more to William Carlos Williams: we all remember that famous four-sentence poem of his, *The Red Wheelbarrow*, which begins with the words "so much depends/ upon/ a red wheel barrow..."

Some would say that there couldn't be a more insignificant and pointless subject for poetry than a wheelbarrow — red or not. Yet, the poet tells us, so much depends upon it. Just like so much depends on the random moment. And what better metaphors for that than tea stains and clothes lines?

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