

Luminarium by Sheba Chhachhi, by Shubhalakshmi Shukla

‘Luminarium: a Prelude’ earlier title **‘Winged Pilgrims’**: A chronicle from Asia’ is conceived and constructed in 2006-2008 by Sheba Chhachhi. The installation has been conceived with back lit moving image light boxes with digital print on dura-transparencies, robe sculptures and specially created soundtrack that resounds in the gallery space. The work was commissioned in 2006 for the Singapore Biennale.

The installation was exhibited in 2007 in Nature Morte, New Delhi, 2008 at Bose Pacia, New York, March/ April 2009 at the Walsh Gallery Chicago, as well as the 3rd Moscow Biennale, in the same year. It is most recently, showing at Galerie Alain Le Gaillard in Paris in association with Studio La Citta, as part of Saison Inde.

The photo based installation envisages a spatial and temporal field wherein mythical birds, imaginary/ utopian landscapes and electronic talismans weave traverse cultural elements of/in the globalized world. This is achieved in construction of moving images in backlit light boxes, each with photographic images on a series of transparent/ translucent layer. The exhibition also brings together robe sculptures signifying the Buddhist pilgrims and especially composed sound loop in the voice of Vidya Rao. The sound element along with the slow hypnotic movement- created with the help of endless loops in layers that construe the digital tapestry, also evoke the mystery of the moment depicted. However, there are distinct spatial and cultural incidences that encounter interfaces like the avian/ ‘Asian’ flu and the cultural significance of a bird, say phoenix for resurrection and hamsa for wisdom, that form the seed thought of this installation. While the contrasting experiences of varying time frames are evoked simultaneously the mystery is also retained through the musical ups and downs – the lyrical titles of the works in synch.

In her work Chhachhi maps the movement of visual texts and myths and objects from varying time frames across Asia- India and China acting as significant nodes. The diligently conceived narrative represents dense Asian cosmopolitanism experienced in contemporary times. Chhachhi’s references vary from the 6th century pilgrims who carried texts from India to the Far East, to the mass produced Chinese goods that flood India today carrying distinctive forms of globalised culture. The interactions between these combined elements of the work examine the global dissemination of out allegorical histories and their significance to us today. The interacting images collectively mediate relationships across cultures that share histories.

The ‘Plasma Action’ electronic toy T.V. monitors, held close by the robe sculptures – like electronic talismans in the time of civilization catastrophe also represent the Chinese goods that flooded the Indian markets. The sculptures depict no particular human- figure; transcend the gendered identity of a pilgrim. These also depict a particular time (6th century) when pilgrims carried philosophic palimpsests from India to the Far East – the cultural identities signifying a seeker, traveler and wanderer (the soul). China made ‘Plasma Action’ toy T.V., mostly consumed by the Indian middle class is more of a recent phenomenon. By merging diverse time frames with monitors displaying avian/ ‘Asian’ flu, the artist recuperates the monastic presence of the pilgrims in the dark times, as well as creates a converse aesthetic highlighting the presence of birds in literary and mythical texts. The presence of the birds in this work is a converging metaphor conjoining earliest form of migration, spiritual strength and

myths conveying truth, honesty and surrender, to the battery hens on the one hand and the Goddess Rati whose vehicle is a bird-parakeet as well as the hybrid human-bird form garuda on the other. There are more symbolic aspects like references mined from Indian sculpture, Chinese brush painting, the Persian/ Mughal miniature and documentary photography to dwell as 'real time' (as against cinematic time) in the moving image light boxes.

The depiction of various kinds of colourful birds is predominantly poetic and provides a deep philosophical component to the totality of the work. Simurgh, kaha, hamsa, garuda, parakeet, peacocks and crows appear taking a slow motion flight into the imagined landscape (subverting documentary photography) configuring the plane as the mental space, a special experience of time, for the viewer. These birds draw from ancient literary myths and fables as well as find representations in the contemporary media representations of birds as the international regional carriers of avian/ 'Asian' flu. The imagined narrative is 'real time' transforms and relocates their subjective presence. Some of these birds are hybrids and bring together birds and humans, birds and snakes, birds and animals. For instance, a rare iconography of a sculptural shaman standing in a yogic posture under a tree (human body with a crow head) in the light box 'crow-mughal', painted blue.

The migrating species of birds have suffered under the charge of carrying 'Asian' flu across terrains and national borders. To protect humans from disease thousands of these birds have been killed. Birds also imbibe a symbolic connotation of purity and wisdom, for instance the swan. Incidentally the first bird killed in Europe was a wild swan. Birds in folk traditions also depict the soul within the body. One of the baul songs from Bengal by Lalon Fakir elucidates the metaphor of 'auchin pakhin' – the unknown bird.

***'Khachar bhitor auchin pakhi kemni ashe jai,
Tare dhorte paarle mono beri, ditam pakhir pay...'***

(The unknown Bird I the cage...
how does it fly in and out?
Catch it, I would, if I could..
And put my mind's chains on its feet.)

In today's world of religious divide and materialistic gain, Lalon Fakir's songs gain significance for its simplified philosophy and love for honesty, as the basic truth. His songs enlighten the human mind confused and lost in the dark times. The unknown bird- the unrecognized inner, spiritual self is also symbolic of the wandering mystics.

In the above work, one can experience that the artist's mind is close to the poets. She has been a seeker, traveler and a witness. She investigates the global circulations of our metaphoric histories and their significance to us today.