

## Body Language

Pushpamala N.'s parodic productions continue their interrogation of fixed historical frames, gender roles and ethnographic biases. **Kamayani Sharma** muses about the interventions and their relevance.

One of the attractions of Pushpamala N.'s work is the opportunity to encounter the past anew, reflected in a funhouse mirror of the present. In her latest show too, at Nature Morte, New Delhi, from the 11<sup>th</sup> of January to the 9<sup>th</sup> of February, titled *The Body Politic*, questions of history, the project of nationhood and the politics of the gaze abound. Apart from her signature photo-performance prints, the show features videos, photographs and sculptures to examine society through the metaphor of the body.

At first glance, what dominates is a series of large inkjet prints, some of them dramatically mounted against backgrounds matching their colour scheme. A few, like *Bharat Mata* (after 1905 painting by Abanindranath Tagore) (2004), *Kichaka Sairandhri* (after 1890 oil painting by Raja Ravi Varma) (2013) and *Kali* (after 1908 print by Calcutta Art Studio) (2014), feature elaborate re-stagings of well-known works that have long been understood as part of an ur-nationalist visual imagination. Retro imagery is an idiom that is patent in Pushpamala practice – the two series about *Phantom Lady* (1996-98, 2012), *Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs* (2004) or *Avega ~ The Passion* (2012) all riff off visual tropes from the popular canon – cinematic, theatrical and colonial.

According to Geeta Kapur, Pushpamala's "indulgent iconophilia" gives her the "sanction for a conceptually iconoclastic – and political – form of alterity". However, at a moment when the word 'nationalism' gets twisted into a perverse noose to slip around the necks of citizens, these parodic pastiches, begun in milder times, seem worn. The distancing effect of postmodern irony, which grants it its playful charge, loses its piquancy when the referents are reanimated by a rhetoric of actual violence in the contemporary moment. Pushpamala's strategy through which representational regimes are troubled involves putting the body in the service of performances

that resist or mock fixed selfhood, but that this absence is inherently liberatory is not a given. Politically, the theorisation of gender as a performance is not without a problematic denial of the materiality of the signified realm that the photo-performances lampoon. In a nation echoing with chest-puffing chants while the bodies of real people are being lynched, kitsch appears too anodyne an aesthetic.

A recent critique of one of Pushpamala's influences, Cindy Sherman, notes, "Could it be that we are so used to seeing camp, kitsch, and trash on TV and the Internet that there is nothing [Sherman] does that doesn't seem anticlimactic?" For viewers familiar with Pushpamala's conceptual conceit, there's a feeling of déjà vu. One such work, *Motherland* (after 1992 calendar painting by Jesudoss) (2004) was installed such that it was seen in juxtaposition with a redux of Atul Dodiya's *Woman with a Chakki* (after 1999 painting by Atul Dodiya) (2018), itself a reworking of Nandalal Bose's depictions of the Adivasi character in the *Ramayana*, Sabari. Where the former's now-familiar frontally framed figure of goddesses is ubiquitous in calendars around the country, Pushpamala's enactment of Dodiya's painting presented an ironic engagement with modernism that explored its art historical truths – about the role played by nationalism and nostalgia in constituting it, for example. The black-and-white videos from the series *Good Habits* (2016) paid homage to another explicit strain in the visual archives of modern India – the Films Division documentaries of the 1950s and 1960s that advertised government health schemes and guides to model citizenship. Footage of the artist-as-*Bharat Mata* washing a brain, submitting her body to tedious measurement and playing midwife to a mechanical womb expressed a wry discomfort with the state's attempt to influence the private lives of citizens, a concern that is all too relevant in the current regime of control. Delving into the vocabulary associated with



**Pushpamala N.** *Kichaka Sairandhri* (after 1890 oil painting by Raja Ravi Varma). Archival inkjet print. 55" x 41". Photography by Clay Kelton. Cast: Cop Shiva and Pushpamala N. 2013.

a bureaucratic attempt at high culture is more effective than the recourse to popular imagery in that the jabs directed at cultural history are fresher for being gentler.

Contemporising biographical history can be as vexatious as reflecting on a social one. *The Ethnographers* (2017), a revisiting of documentation from a 1985 field trip that Pushpamala took to a Bengali village, foregrounds the faux-anthropological accent of her practice. The soft, vintage colours underscore the anachronism of the compositions, the rural community framed as figures of study by the elite gaze of the art students and functioning as paternalistic documents of their asymmetrical interactions. Ostensibly out of respect for their privacy,

their eyes are blacked out to prevent identification. The lack of irony provides an earnest meta-commentary about Pushpamala's own practice and the 'ethnographic turn' in art practice of the post-colonial 20<sup>th</sup> century, though one wonders if this is more of a historiographic statement than an aesthetic one.

The highlight of *The Body Politic* were the 100 imitations of copper plate land grants that the artist found in a museum in Bangalore. Freed of the burden of pat ideological commitments that weigh down treatments of the recent past, the work titled *Transcripts* harked back to actual material evidence from the ancient period, an antidote to the fanciful statements that have become





**Pushpamala N.** *The Ethnographers #2* (Village Naya, Midnapore District, West Bengal). Colour photograph. Printed from a scanned 1985 negative on Aluminium Compressed Panel. 40" x 60". 2017. Images courtesy of Nature Morte, New Delhi.

the staple of propagandists. Scholars have pointed out that these title deeds were evidentiary documents belonging to the liminal space between inscriptions and manuscripts, and their presentation by the ruler probably involved some kind of public ritual performance.

The large metal plates bearing runic engravings were placed on tables, beautifully engraved, the script beguilingly decorative and the dark lustre of the copper rich with connotation, the artisanal detail approximating that in Pushpamala's photo-performances. These performative objects could be seen as an index of the link between the body of the sovereign and his territory and subjects. Dieter Roelstraete writes in the essay *The Way of the Shovel: On*

*An Archaeological Imaginary in Art*, "The archeological imaginary in art produces not so much an *optics* as it does a *haptics* – it invites us, forces us to intently scratch the surface (of the earth, of time, of the *world*) rather than merely marvel at it in dandified detachment." In *The Body Politic*, the act of excavating the past through mimesis was on display, and it is most successful as a sensory engagement with the matter of history rather than the orchestration of a stock of icons. But the more pressing question to be asked, when thinking about the retrospective as an artistic technique, is: how does refracting the past enable us to not just understand the present, which is easier to manage, but imagine the future? /