



Art

Handing over Nachiketa and Yama (right) contemplate the cycle of life and death

Past master

Ashish Avikunthak's new film goes 2,500 years into the past to excavate the meaning of life and death, finds **Zeenat Nagree**.

Ashish Avikunthak holds many academic degrees. He's studied social work, ancient Indian history and cultural anthropology. But the discipline that holds sway over this film artist's work is archaeology, which he studied as part of an MA course. Avikunthak's artistic practice imbibes the characteristics of the subject – in most of his work, he excavates his own life and memories, returning to dig deeper with subsequent films. Avikunthak's latest creation, *Katho Upanishad*, an 82-minute film spliced into three chapters to be shown as a three-channel installation at Chatterjee & Lal, is inspired by the artist's reading of the ancient metaphysical text, which meditates on death and the possibility of freedom from reincarnation.

Katho Upanishad returns to the mode of Avikunthak's earliest film experiments – the four short films *Et cetera* – in which single-shot takes of banal acts and rituals examine the relationship between cinematic time and lived time. All three chapters in *Katho*

Upanishad are without cuts; the longest runs for 58 minutes. Avikunthak's exploration of death runs through his oeuvre – from *Et cetera*, in which the camera wanders through a cemetery and a man's head is tonsured, to his last film, *Vakratunda Swaha*, an ode to a friend who committed suicide. Avikunthak, who spends most of the year teaching film at the University of Rhode Island, was in Mumbai recently.

Tell us about *Katho Upanishad*.

This film focuses on one key *Upanishad* that was written around fifth century BCE. The story is very simple. Nachiketa is a young Brahmin boy, who upon angering his father, is cursed to go to the house of Yama, the god of death. He stays there for three days and three nights but doesn't find Yama. When Yama returns, he grants Nachiketa three boons. [For] the third boon, Nachiketa asks Yama [to explain] how he can go beyond the cycle of life and death.

***Katho Upanishad* continues your**

engagement with death.

My conversation with death runs through all my work, particularly in a very visceral way in *Vakratunda Swaha* because it deals with the death of a real person. I am aware of the fact that I am moving from Girish [Dahiwalé's] death to this. In a certain way, it is connected because I have to eventually speak to Yama myself.

You have talked about your reluctance to use digital technology. What made you adopt it in this film?

I continue to be sceptical about the quality of the digital image. It's an aesthetic choice. Still, I've chosen digital for parts of this film. With the new high resolution cameras, I can shoot without cuts. I could not do that with 16mm and 35mm film. In *Katho Upanishad*, the longest take runs for 58 minutes. This is important because the crux of the film is the issue of time.

As the camera wanders through the forest in the film, the passage of time is palpable even as one

loses sense of place.

In my films, I am trying to shift the balance between narrative, time and space. In most cinema, space and time are the handmaidens of narrative. I am trying to make time central to the film. I am not rejecting narrative, I am marginalising it.

Do you think your films belong in an art gallery?

Things have changed a lot in the last 20 years. I was trying to show my work in a gallery in the 1990s but it was very difficult. The only gallery that did show my work, as part of a larger project, was Arshiya [Lokhandwala's] Lakeeren. There were reasons why the galleries were sceptical – video work was not monetised. The possibility that video works can have a market is still marginal but it has opened up space for filmmakers like me who don't fit into mainstream cinema.

I am happy to show my work in a gallery setting. I don't see much distinction between a black box and a white box. Both of them have different rituals of viewing. Festival viewing is momentary. There are one or two screenings. At a gallery, there is room for contemplation.

***Katho Upanishad* opens at Chatterjee & Lal on Fri June 29.**