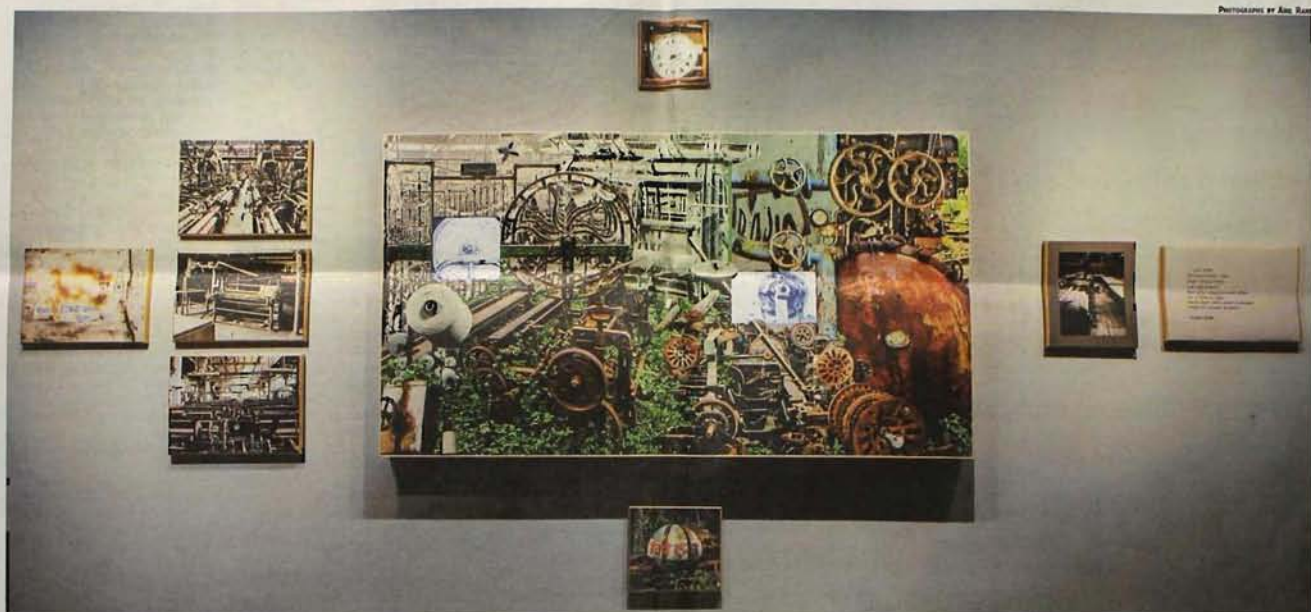


MUMBAI MULTIPLEX | DHAMINI RATNAM

The ghosts of a mill city

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANU RAO



Artist Meera Devidayal reimagines the spaces that once occupied Mumbai's textile mills

There are many entry points to the myth that is Mumbai. For 68-year-old Meera Devidayal, the ruined Gothic arches of the city's now defunct mills serve as some. The artist, whose show *A Terrible Beauty* started last week at the Chemould Prescott Road art gallery in Mumbai, uses paint and digital print on canvas to juxtapose alternate realities—some historical, others contemporaneous—to reimagine the city.

Mumbai became a textile hub in the middle of the 19th century after the cost of imports rose rapidly in the first four decades of the 1800s. By the end of 1895, there were 70 mills in the city; 13 more came up in the following 20 years. In 1946, the year the artist was born, her father was instrumental in setting up the Orissa Textile Mill (OTM), one of the first modern mills in the country.

Devidayal recalls visiting the mill from the age of 5 till she was well into her teens. "I would walk around and see the goings on," she recalls. The artist insists her childhood meanderings—the mill eventually shut down in 2003, its workers denied their dues for years on end—has little to do with the current exhibition.

Yet the mill isn't removed from Devidayal's art, and remains a preoccupation in the world of arts and letters. Aunad Patwardhan's 1996 documentary *Occupation: Millworker* records the action of workers who forcibly occupy a mill they were locked out from; Neera Adarkar and Meena Menon's 2004 *One Hundred Years One Hundred Voices* offers an account of the history of the cotton mill workers right till their current state of dispossession; theatre director Sunil Shanbag produced *Cotton 56, Polyester 84* in 2007, which



(clockwise from above)

The Silent Wheel: These photographs taken by Shekhar Krishnan, an anthropologist, have been superimposed on each other by Devidayal. Within the main piece, the artist has inserted two videos, which were shot at a functioning textile processing firm in an industrial compound in Mahalaxmi. "The owner asked me why I was keen to photograph his machines, and I told him that instead of explaining things, I'd send him an invite to my show," laughs Devidayal. The main canvas is surrounded by seven smaller images from inside a mill.



A Terrible Beauty: Using acrylic and digital print on canvas, the artist paints a tulip garden over the outer shell of a derelict Mumbai mill. Tulip gardens, once all the rage as a symbol of beauty on posters and in Hindi films (think *Silsila*, 1981), are a trope that finds its roots in Persian literature, where it symbolized paradise. Even rose gardens, a Mughal architectural staple, are used by the artist.

Solomon's Temple: The photographs used here date back to the early 2000s, when the artist first visited the mills to create a triptych for a joint exhibition called *Kitech Kitch* (Hota Hai). She shot surreptitiously in a mill in Lower Parel and in an abandoned mill in the Itay Road area which have since been brought down. Devidayal links these pillars to those inside the Biblical Solomon's Temple, made of pure gold.

Untitled: When the artist returned to shoot Shakti Mill in Mahalaxmi, after nearly a decade, she was unable to recognize the mill owing to the dense vegetation. The tiger, she says, echoes her reflection on the mill's new role—a seemingly dense forest within the city.

portrayed life in Girangaon, where mill workers worked and continue to live; poets Narayan Surve and the late Namdeo Dhasal repeatedly brought up their concerns; painter Sudhir Patwardhan's 2001 work *Lower Parel* refers to the same socio-economic context.

In 2001, Devidayal made a triptych that drew inspiration from the mills. She visited and photographed Mahalaxmi's Shakti Mill, which earned notoriety after a photojournalist and a telephone operator were sexually assaulted inside its premises last year. In 2010, the artist revisited Shakti Mill, and even paid the abandoned Great Eastern Mill in Byculla a visit. She was struck by how much the former had changed—there was dense undergrowth, and the arches of this private mill, which had been shut since 1981, were covered with fresh green tendrils of vines. "It was visually very exciting," she says.

Over the course of the following two and a half years, the artist visited these mills every Sunday, capturing scenes of life

inside these "structures that were meant to last forever". She followed groups of young men, who climbed the rickety stairs that led to a vast terrace, where they played cricket; she photographed workers bathing at the *baoli* (stepwell), after taking their permission; and often, she spoke to men sitting there in groups, asking them for directions. "It was all very accessible then," says Devidayal.

It's not as if the artist isn't aware of the threat that faces these spaces she once roamed freely in—she too had an accident that made sure she did not return to Shakti Mill. "One doesn't think of the dangers inherent in doing this, till something happens to give pause," she says. "I've never really stopped myself from doing something because of the threat involved. That's just the way I am."

The works, however, include painted rose gardens and tulip fields, reminiscent of paradise in Persian literature. A tiger emerges from the ruin of a wall, and another work showcases a

Wonderland-like pathway that leads to a hut. In a series of photos titled *Solomon's Temple*, we see pillars—some burnt, some breaking, some rusted—of the various mills that Devidayal has been to. In *A Levelled Playing Field*, Devidayal superimposes television screen grabs of cricketer Sachin Tendulkar hitting a six in between the pillars of the roof.

Gyan Prakash, an author and the Dayton Stockton professor of history at Princeton University, US, who wrote the wall text for the exhibition, warned her against making this a romantic exercise, says Devidayal. "Something so monumental in a state of ruin is a romantic visual to behold. But I'm trying to understand the nature of change, and how things that seem like they will stay forever, don't. What happens to them?" asks Devidayal.

Perhaps her question is best answered by the show's centrepiece. In *The Silent Wheel*, Devidayal uses photographs taken inside mills by anthropologist Shekhar

Krishnan, and superimposes a few using Photoshop on a large 59x108-inches canvas. His photographs speak of utter dereliction. The spinning wheels, weaving machines and walls in the images are rusted, covered with cobwebs and destroyed. The centrepiece—an amalgamation of a number of disused machines, with two videos of a working mill inserted into the canvas—is surrounded by seven frames, including a clock.

The juxtaposition of the past and present, of technology and abandoned machines, is straightforward. And thus, the artist solves her conundrum by deploying what were once symbols of progress and industry to create yet another myth about the city.

A Terrible Beauty is on till 9 July, 11am-7pm (Sundays closed), at Chemould Prescott Road, Queens Mansion, Third floor, G Talwar Marg. For details, call 22000211/13.

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