



Artist of the Floating World

A retrospective brings together Nalini Malani's widespread oeuvre — comprising videos, camera-less photographs or reverse paintings

DIPANITA NATH

THE film, *Utopia*, is split into two — one half of the screen has animated cubes in garish colours, the other shows black-and-white images of swamps, slums, construction heaps and railway tracks. The former is an imagining of Jawaharlal Nehru's socialist agenda for the country, the latter looks at how that dream broke. Made between 1969 and 76, *Utopia* is among the first examples of tile-based art made from film in India, an honour that meant that its creator Nalini Malani had nowhere to show it at the time. "It was difficult to exhibit such works, especially for a woman artist," says Malani. Fittingly, *Utopia* is the first

the Musee Cantonal des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne, Switzerland, have showcased retrospectives of Malani's watercolours and oils, besides her reverse paintings and video works. The idea of this exhibition is contained in its title, "You Can't Keep Acid in a Paper Bag". "When I was in my twenties, and my first exhibition was put up, I saw an India that was changing rapidly. I wondered if the frames of a painting could hold all the difficulties of the time. I shaped this into a metaphor, 'How does one hold

technology and techniques to comment on gender, identity, alienation, politics and history. She had studied at the JJ School of Art, and done a stint in Paris on a French government scholarship in the early '70s. But, it was her inheritance of loss and her position as a woman artist that fuelled her work. "The attitude towards women artists was strange and things have changed only slightly. The Kochi Biennale, for instance, featured 8-9 women artists and 80-90 men. Didn't they look hard enough?" she asks, adding, "It is some consolation that



Nalini Malani (above); her work titled *Mother India*

An agonised shriek of a woman rents the room. Immediately, the screens light up with a series of images of Mahatma Gandhi and women at the charkha, packed trains and bullock carts during the Partition, goddesses and a cow, female body parts and a young girl who wears pictures of Lakshmi and the Coca Cola logo in her bindi. The video ends with a montage of burnt houses after the Gujarat riots. All the while, the soundscape of violence continues unabated — creating a drama that goes back to Malani's theatre background. "Mother India refers to two moments in history, the Partition and the Gujarat riots. After Independence, women are shown spinning away as a new nation is born but ghosts of their rape and abuse never go away. In 2002, fanatics raped and

mother is in her nineties now but even the other day, she was talking about the gals of Hyderabad in Sind where she lived and how she would walk to school," she says.

The exhibition is dark, both in lighting and subject. Except when one steps into the last room, where sunflower yellow hues burst from a wall. This is *Cassandra*, inspired by the Greek myth of a Trojan princess who foresaw doom but no-body believed her. Cassandra is among the women characters from Indian and Western myth and stories through whom Malani continues her exploration into the contemporary female, and stands alongside Lewis Carroll's Alice and Medea in her canon.

Medeamaterial, a collaboration with theatre artist, Alakanda

SHOW Stealers

DELHI

Upper Limit

NOTED dancer and choreographer Julie Nioche presents a piece titled *Nos Solitudes* or *Our Solitudes* as part of DanSe Dialogues at Kamani auditorium on April 29. *Our Solitudes* is like a continuous free fall in which a woman's body is suspended into space, with cables and pulleys attaching it to weights and counterweights, weaving through space and triggering some dance movements.

May Flower

MAY DAY Bookstore and Cafe is celebrating its second anniversary with a series of performing arts themed around "choices". The performers and speakers will reflect on choices (and the lack of them) through stories, songs, performances, images, readings and reflections. On May 1, at 225/4/2A Shadi Khampur, New Ranjit Nagar.

MUMBAI

Songs & Symphony



IN AN ambitious programme of cultural exchange, the BBC Scottish Symphony Opera embarks on a three-city tour, joined by musicians from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. In Mumbai, James MacMillan will conduct and Nicola Benedetti will be the featured soloist. The BBC SSO will also present a programme for young audiences and families, presented by renowned animator Paul Rissmann. At National Centre for Performing Arts, Nariman Point, Mumbai.

nowhere to show it at the time. "It was difficult to exhibit such works, especially for a woman artist," says Malani. Fittingly, *Utopia* is the first work one encounters at Delhi's Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA), which is holding a retrospective of 45 years of Malani's works.

The retrospective has been planned in three parts — the first ends in April — that will continue till November. Previously, the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, US, and

difficulties of the time. I shaped this into a metaphor, 'How does one hold acid in a paper bag?'. I needed to find a form that could be a stronger container than paper," says Malani, 68. Hence, the exhibition contains experimental video art, camera-less photography and reverse painting — but no canvases.

The Mumbai-based artist was among the first to experiment with

Nalini Malani (above): her work titled *Mother India*

women artists such as Anita Dube and Sheela Gowda are being represented prominently outside India."

At the current exhibition, a video work titled *Mother India* addresses Malani's deepest concerns. In the room so dark, one can barely make out the bench, a viewer sits at the centre of a semi-circle of five screens.

the Gujarat riots. After Independence, women are shown spinning away as a new nation is born but ghosts of their rape and abuse never go away. In 2002, fanatics raped and ravaged once more but the difference was that women were not silent this time. This must be some sort of progress," says Malani.

She was born in 1946 in Karachi, a twilight's child who would leave her home and take a boat to Bombay with her mother as the winds of Partition blew. "My

temporary female, and stands alongside Lewis Carroll's Alice and Medea in her canon.

Medeamaterial, a collaboration with theatre artiste Alaknanda Samarth, will be a part of the next chapter of the retrospective, to open in May. The highlight of the third chapter will be a work that Malani is working on at present — a 6x50 ft reverse painted installation encompassing the viewer. "It will have images from mythology, much like a storybook," she says.

'I was surprised by similarities between rural India and post-war Italy'

Award-winning Italian photographer Gianni Berengo Gardin looks back, as his images of Indian villages from the '70s are displayed in London

DEBESH BANERJEE

WHEN award-winning Italian photographer Gianni Berengo Gardin thought of travelling to India in the late '70s, it was with a specific purpose — to document rural life of the country. Armed with his Leica camera, Gardin travelled from Milan to the rural parts of central India to document what he believed was the "real India" as he read in Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography. Between 1977 and 79, Gardin visited India several times. The result was a documentation of villages that is devoid of chaos or glamourisation of poverty.

Gardin, 85, recipient of the 1963 World Press Photo award, is showing around 25 images from his India series at Prahlad Bubbhar Gallery, London, in an exhibition titled "Sense of a Moment: Gianni Berengo Gardin". The black-and-white images are dedicated to rural India of the '70s. Another set of images represents Italy in the '60s. Over email, Gardin looks back at India and its uncanny resemblance to Italy:

What prompted you to display these works now?

I wanted to show the photographic record of life in the vil-

lages as I had witnessed it. These photos were shown earlier at two exhibitions in Italy and France. They also appeared in a book, published in 1980, titled *India Dei Villaggi (India of the Villages)*.



(Right) Gianni Berengo: one of his works titled *A Man Takes Shade Under the Leaves of a Teak Tree*

Your photographs have a sense of space and openness. Was that your impression about rural India as well?

Yes, I was struck by the openness of the places I visited. I did not have any pre-conceived notions in my head before visiting. One day, I had a discussion with Antonio Monroy, an expert on India, at an exhibition in Milan. I was interested in the countryside because I had read in one of Mahatma Gandhi's books that we Westerners, when visiting India, always go to Bombay, Cal-

cutta and New Delhi, whereas the true India is found in villages.

What intrigued you about rural Indian life? Were there any similarities that you could draw with rural life in Italy?

I was surprised by the similarities with rural Italy, especially the post-war era. I did not find many differences though. At that time, work in the fields was not yet mechanised in Italy either.

Which parts of India did you travel to? On what basis did you narrow down on those places?

I visited the regions around Indore because I was a guest of a friend of a friend — Virender Bubbhar (father of Prahlad Bubbhar, whose gallery is hosting the exhibition in London) — who was living there at the time. We chose to work on a small area in order to get an in-depth understanding of it.

What kind of research went into preparing you for rural India?

I read books on Gandhi but I also learnt from the people who accompanied Monroy and who knew Indian culture well. I like everything about India. The culture is so different, with a less hectic way of life, closer to nature. That was certainly the case when I visited.



PIETRO CHELLI

Most of your subjects in the portraits look relaxed and unflustered by the camera. Did you encounter any reservation from them during the shoots?

Nobody objected. On the contrary, as they were all appreciative of our project, they cooperated with us.

Your images are devoid of the chaos, lack of hygiene and commotion, which is commonly associated with India.

I tried to be as objective as possible. I certainly did not see any chaos in those villages. There was a lot of life in the villages. I was impressed by the order and cleanliness; I had not expected that.

This was your first photographic assignment outside Italy. Since these images were going to be seen in Europe, were you trying to depict rural India from a western perspective?

I did what I thought was right and natural. This was my first assignment abroad; I had already worked in many parts of Europe and the US. Though it was my first major work in Asia.

Have you recently visited India or plan to visit after the series?

I have not been able to visit the villages again, but I imagine they must have changed as much as the Italian villages have.

the city will also present a programme for young audiences and families, presented by renowned amateur Paul Rissmann. At National Centre for Performing Arts, Nariman Point, Mumbai.

Paradise Regained

MUMBAI-BASED artist Meera Devidayal's latest show, which opens on April 28, is based on her work on the mills of Mumbai. In her paintings and mixed media contemporary artwork, she paints the mills in a hopeful light, imagining the decrepit and dilapidated structures as a part of paradise. The show will be on at Gallery Chemould, Fort.

PUNE

Feel Green



ARTIST Sanjay Devsalle captures minute details of all kinds of trees — from colours, sizes and shapes to reflection of light and textures — in an his series

titled "Trees, Nature's Pride". On till April 30 at Malaka Spice, Lane no. 5, Off North Main Road, Koregaon Park.

Contemporary Impressions



HRISHIKESH'S Center for Contemporary Dance, in association with Max Mueller Bhavan, has organised the sixth edition of Prayatna Film and Dance Festival. The festival is a celebration of contemporary dance in India, and will showcase the artists of the institute. On till April 29 at Mazda Hall, Sardar Dastur School, Camp Cantonment.

CHANDIGARH

Play Ground

THEATRE director Neelam Man Singh will showcase her new production, *The License*, based on Saadat Hasan Manto's story, with certain references from Bertold Brecht story *The Job*. Both these stories talk about an economy that is industrialising at a fast pace, and its implication on people. The play will be presented at The Rock Garden from May 1 to 5