

Newspaper Name	Mint lounge
Date	25-04-09
Page	15
Description	An ode to wanderlust

ART REVIEW

# An ode to wanderlust

An impressive show by artists who don't necessarily stick to the brief

BY LUCIAN HARRIS

**Z**ip files are a compressed format for the transmission of large packets of data, the constant high-speed freight on our global digital highways, transforming from one file into many when unpacked. Curator Ranjit Hoskote's title provides an appropriate metaphor for this group show in which the given themes are travel and its potential to stimulate the birth of ideas.

The show consists of works that have been made in response to a series of "art camps" or cultural tours organized by Mumbai-based publisher Harsha Bhatkal, after his decision to increase the arts focus of his 85-year-old company Popular Prakashan. Since 2005, each trip has taken a group of artists to a destination of cultural significance—Turkey, Mexico, China, Jordan, Sri Lanka, Cambodia—the intention being to foster creative discourse. For Bhatkal, it was an opportunity to formulate an agenda for his move into art publishing while also building a collection, funding the trips through a stipulation that each artist must donate a work made in response to the trip.

For this show, Hoskote selected works from 24 of the 200 artists who have so far taken part in the art camps. With the concept in place, Hoskote says the task was purely an editorial one and, in the spacious gallery, he has created a visually effective display that makes an immediate impact as a cross-generational snapshot of the current contemporary art landscape.

Although there was no strict edict as to how explicitly the works should engage with ideas arising from the art camps, it is noticeable that the submissions of some artists show little divergence from their recent oeuvre. The likes of Baiju Parthan's digital *Hawkmoth*, Bose Krishnamachari's psychedelic colourscape, Riyas Komu's blurred photo-realist portrait, and Farhad Hussain's garish cartoon-like grinning family group all look great in the gal-



lery but might have appeared in any recent group show.

Of course, many of the works have more obviously engaged with the brief. The theme of travel is given form in H.G. Arunkumar's bulbous, shiny, nickel-plated sculptures of a car, a plane and a globe, placed in the middle of the gallery floor. Ram Rahman and Pooja Iranna have both created works from photographs taken on trips to Mexico and China, respectively. In *Towards The Celestial Empire*, Iranna's understated study of crude stone stairways behind four wooden doorways, paint has also been used to manipulate surface texture and achieve a sense of formal abstraction.

An abstracted study of texture and tone is also the result in Ravi Kumar Kashi's photograph of the torn posters and scrawled graffiti on a Jordanian wall. In G.R. Iranna's painting *Tempered Temple*, the faceless gun-toting soldier and tangled razor wire contrast with the Chinese temple behind, the cracked gold surface, giving the work the feel of a Buddhist mural. N.S. Harsha's work uses both style and content to create unsettling contrasts—a mountain of bodies, perhaps the dead of the



Cambodian killing fields, is represented in his naive, gently whimsical style as a besuited man with a briefcase ascends skyward in a trail of black smoke.

Commendably, the show also includes works by more senior artists. As the sense of a polarized gulf between progressives and contemporaries recedes, it becomes clear that generational boundaries have frequently been over-emphasized. Rameshwar Broota's skewed photograph of a man carrying a tray of liquor bottles on his head shows an artist continuing to reconsider his practice at a mature stage in his career. Similarly the

**Art of travel:** (above) An untitled work by Farhad Hussain; and *Doctrine of the Forest* by Surendran Nair.

coarse iconic primitivism of Madhvi Parekh's *Three Brothers With Animals* draws inspiration from early 20th century European Expressionists as well as Indian folk art. Yet for all its historicism, it holds its own among the work of younger contemporaries.

Hoskote has produced a show of some distinction with a very immediate visual impact, unhampered by conceptual complexities. There remain some questions about how much of the art has genuinely been made in response to the art camp experience.

For Bhatkal, an interesting and stimulating idea has not only led to ambitious new publishing initiatives but left him with an art collection of considerable depth and quality.

*Zip Files* is showing at arts1 Gallery, 7, Atmaram Mansion, Kasturba Gandhi Marg, Connaught Place, New Delhi, till 20 May.

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