

Freeze frames, still changing

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The puissant pink yarn of Kite String Making, Surat, Gujrat, 1998, by Ravi Aggarwal can seep into your senses. But in a nation like India where hot colours are candidly frequent you may just miss out on this evocative snapshot, however, in cold autumnal Newark Museum, people stand and stare as of caught in a time warp of sorts.

"The very transitory nature of human existence in the 20th century has pushed art practice through the revolving door of rapid transitions," wrote curator and critic Gayatri Sinha in 1999. But long after she penned those enigmatic words, Sinha has been following keenly following the practice of photography as a genre in the nation. Last month she became the highpoint of scrutiny when, along with Paul Sternberger, she curated a historic show 'Public Places Private Spaces' at The Newark Museum in USA.

From what is fascinatingly Indian to flagrantly international, from picture within a frame to the art of video installations, from art for the nation to art for the self or even commerce, from the romance of rural and migrant India to the blight of poverty in the city, from art as vocation to art as profession, from woman as an ideal to woman as an autobiographical subject, from art as a narrative to art as a blackboard of concepts — this show is more like an unveiling of reality in the tenuous timbre of unequal patterns in reality.

The number of transitions that Sinha embraces in this heady project is rapid and of academic and alchemic certainty, only in the very nature of the signature of impermanence and the suggestion of divisional domains in the lived gesture.

Ram Rahman's Portrait of Husain painting a horse (1994) has a historic hint of nostalgia, particularly because Husain the performer is now in exile. Gigi Scaria's A Day with Sohail and Mariyan (2004) signifies the hard truth of conspicuous consumption, as well as the persecuting and perennial problem of child labour in India. Sinha injects into this artful curation the gamut of portraits and the persistence of vision.

The idiot box which shares space with sacred symbols, the sepia-toned Navarasa Suite of N. Pushpamala, Subodh Gupta's contradictory connotations of hallowed beliefs and rituals washed off in his video, Pure (2000) are just a few examples of the meandering metaphors that artists are exploring in a post-colonial India. In a single sweep we are given India as the world never knew, and thrown in for historical measure is Vivan Sundaram's recreation of Amrita Shergill. Is this art in a state of transition?

New documentary positions have taken a key stance in Sinha's epicurean view of Indian photography. "Perhaps the most consistent transition in photography has been from a rural to an urban ethos which becomes a zone to define the values that are inherent in them," says Sinha. "From a celebration of limpid realism, the body of photography has moved in the last decades to a dismayed critique of its gradual annihilation under the onslaught of urbanism."

In this onslaught some artists/shutterbugs have seen a virile energy, a new hope, even a resonant and reflective recognition of new possibilities as in the works of Pablo Bartholomew and Gauri Gill. This show at Newark is more like a quiet assault on preconceived notions. It continues in Newark till the end of January.