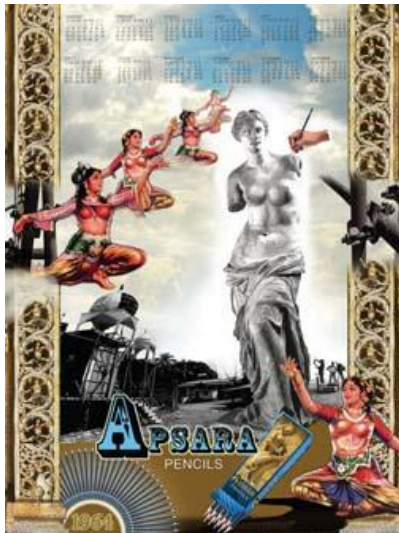


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*Project Cinema City scavenges a hundred years of cinematic history to make a larger than reel life monument to movies and Mumbai, says **Sunaina Kumar***



Mise-en-scène (from top) The Calendar Project; Return of the Phantom Lady by Pushpamala N; 14 Stations of Villains by Atul Dodiya; A still from Certified Universal by Avijit Mukul Kishore

BEFORE THE hegemony of Bollywood, its star system and studio films, there was the magic of moving pictures. It is what drew Dadasaheb Phalke in 1913 to craft *Raja Harishchandra*. As Hindi cinema gears up to celebrate its centenary year, the tributes will likely be a garish and over-the-top, consistent with current trends. Project Cinema City is that necessary reminder of the magic of the film industry that was.



The multi-disciplinary art exhibition is showing in Mumbai at the National Gallery of Modern Art. Initiated by Majlis, a centre for rights discourse and interdisciplinary arts initiative, the project is a culmination of four years of research and collaboration with over 60 artists and filmmakers. The resultant works — paintings, installations, calendar art, short films — are thoughtful and irreverent, camp and clever. The heroes of Project Cinema City are the “hidden faces” of the movies, those who migrate to Mumbai and work in the sweatshops of Bollywood. In that sense, the scope of the exhibition is beyond films. It sets out to question how a city shapes cinema and how cinema reflects back the city, exploring the sheer labour and multitude of dreams that went into creating the magic of tinsel town.

“Films are one part of cinema. Cinema is made of demography and spaces, mass migration and ancillary industries, and the desires of those who work in those industries. Mumbai and the film industry have grown up together in the 20th century. As a multi-lingual city, Mumbai never had a language of its own and that space was filled by the visual language of cinema,” says

curator Madhusree Dutta.

Atul Dodiya's paintings illustrates this synchronicity. *14 Stations of Villains* are covered with station names from Ghatkopar to Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, his daily route as an art student at the famous JJ School in the early '80s. Made in crackle medium, the fissures on their surface reflect a pain-filled elegy to Mumbai, a city in decline. On the left corner inset of each canvas is a portrait of a Hindi film villain from Dodiya's student days — Pran, Ajit, Amjad Khan — each representing a station.

Return of the Phantom Lady is another story running through multiple frames. Artist Pushpamala N goes back to a guise she undertook in the mid '90s. In a series of arresting narrative pictures, Phantom Lady rescues a young girl from the land mafia. Each backdrop is telling — a demolished Bandra drive-in cinema, Bharat Mata, a single screen catering to mill workers and Dharavi, the shantytown for celluloid dreams. In a delicious twist, Atul Dodiya ends up playing a smoky villain in this one.

Not everything is a meaningful metaphor; some are just pun and play. The section on calendar art is a nod to the populist origins of cinema. Artists like Nalini Malini, Shilpa Gupta, Vivan Sundaram and Chintan Upadhyay let go and have fun, piling up double entendres as they borrow from street images and old advertisements. Abeer Gupta's calendar for acting classes uses posters of Amitabh Bachchan's angry young man avatar, dubbed *Vijay Acting Classes*. Tushar Joag's *Mother India Harvests and Farm Implements* shows Nargis as brand ambassador wielding an axe and sickle; crop circles in the background in the shape of the copyright symbol.

Spread over four storeys, the exhibition yields many surprises. There is a peephole installation laid on pipelines with iconic images of studios and exhibition theatres, a museum of fetishist objects by Shreyas Karle with drawings and sculptures from the iconography of cinema. Some works bounce off each other, some stand alone, but each is created in a spirit of inquiry into the process behind the creation of cinema. For that alone, Project Cinema City is a blockbuster.

Project Cinema City will show in Mumbai till 29 June and then move to Delhi and Bengaluru

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