

Galerie Daniel Templon

Paris

ATUL DODIYA

MODERN PAINTERS, May 2007

This month, *Modern Painters* presents three different views of contemporary Indian art and urbanism. Wary of the fervor with which the artworld seizes upon the next "hot" culture, we hope to avoid the pitfalls of exoticism and cliché. Curator **Suman Gopinath** untangles the history of a key episode in contemporary Indian art; architects **Anuradha Mathur** and **Dilip da Cunha** explore the palimpsest of burgeoning Bangalore; and, in the unlikely location of **Pittsburgh**, 10 Indian artists confront their rapidly changing nation from half a world away.

INSOURCING INDIA

RADICAL NARRATIVES

Lead essay by SUMAN GOPINATH

In the 1980s, two influential exhibitions, "Place for People" and "Questions and Dialogues," opened a critical space in the Indian art scene for the articulation of the personal, the autobiographical, and the political in the context of the contemporary world.

The 1981 exhibition "Place for People," shown at JAG, Bombay, and Rabinder Bhavan, New Delhi, was put together by six artists and an art critic; among them were Gulammohammed Sheikh, Bhupen Khakhar, Nalini Malani, and Geeta Kapur. Together they became known as the Baroda School, after the city in which many of them lived and worked, or, more plainly, as narrative painters. The term "narrative painting," in this context, was coined by Timothy Hyman, a British artist who spent time in Baroda during the late '70s and '80s, after a show that he curated in England whose participants included Khakhar.

The Baroda School artists worked in direct contrast to the preceding generation of artists, led by the

Progressive Artists' Group. The PAG, formed in Bombay in 1947, included F. N. Souza, S. H. Raza, and M. F. Hussain. While these artists shared neither ideology nor art practices, they allied to put forward a "formalist manifesto" that helped the first generation of artists in independent India position themselves internationally. Some of them veered toward abstraction, while others used symbolic and iconic imagery to depict archetypal subjects. Political engagement with the world around them failed to enter their frame.

Politics, in fact, is where the main difference between the Baroda School and their predecessors lay. The '70s and '80s were a period of great change in India. Baroda, in Gujarat, where many of the artists in the group lived, was periodically torn by communal clashes. This upheaval led artists to explore new possibilities in their practices. What brought the group together for "Place for People" was an underlying visual similarity in their works along with

common concerns. Instead of abstract or expressionist styles and iconic, archetypal subjects, their use of the human figure was marked by a return to a kind of reality—one that not merely took stock of the situation in which they lived but also embraced and investigated the intermixing of the social, the political, and cultural.

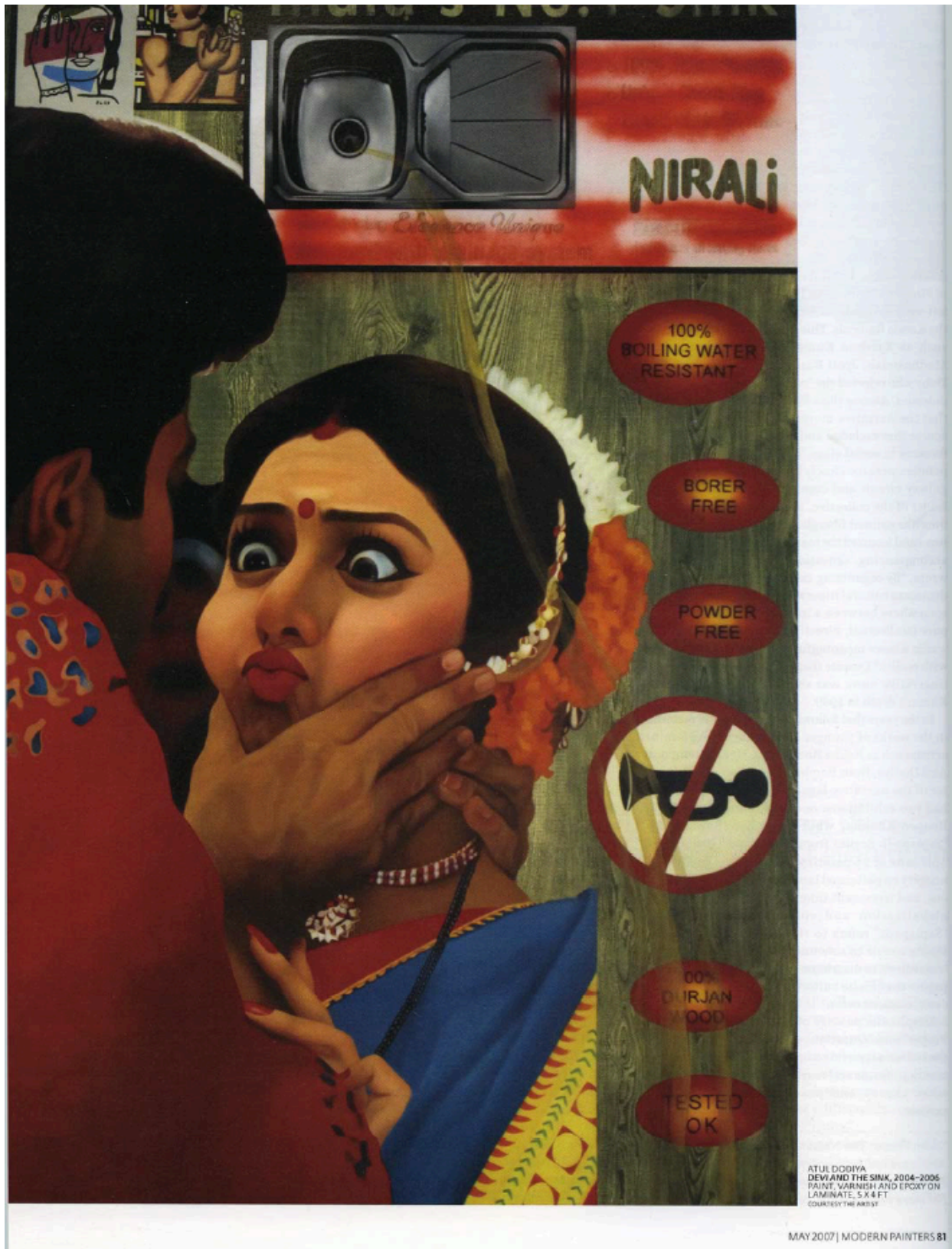
In the work of the narrative painters, the figure acquired a specificity of class, region, and ethnicity. Some—like Khakhar, who had no use for the conventions of high art—turned to the art of the streets and Pop art from the West. With his painting *You Can't Please All* (1981), he created a space in contemporary Indian art for biographies of the self. For Sheikh, more interesting than creating a single narrative was exploring the multiplicity and simultaneity of narratives that could exist in a single canvas—a practice that went back to the second-century Ajanta murals in Maharashtra and the miniature Pahadi paintings from the 11th century. The idea of the single frame

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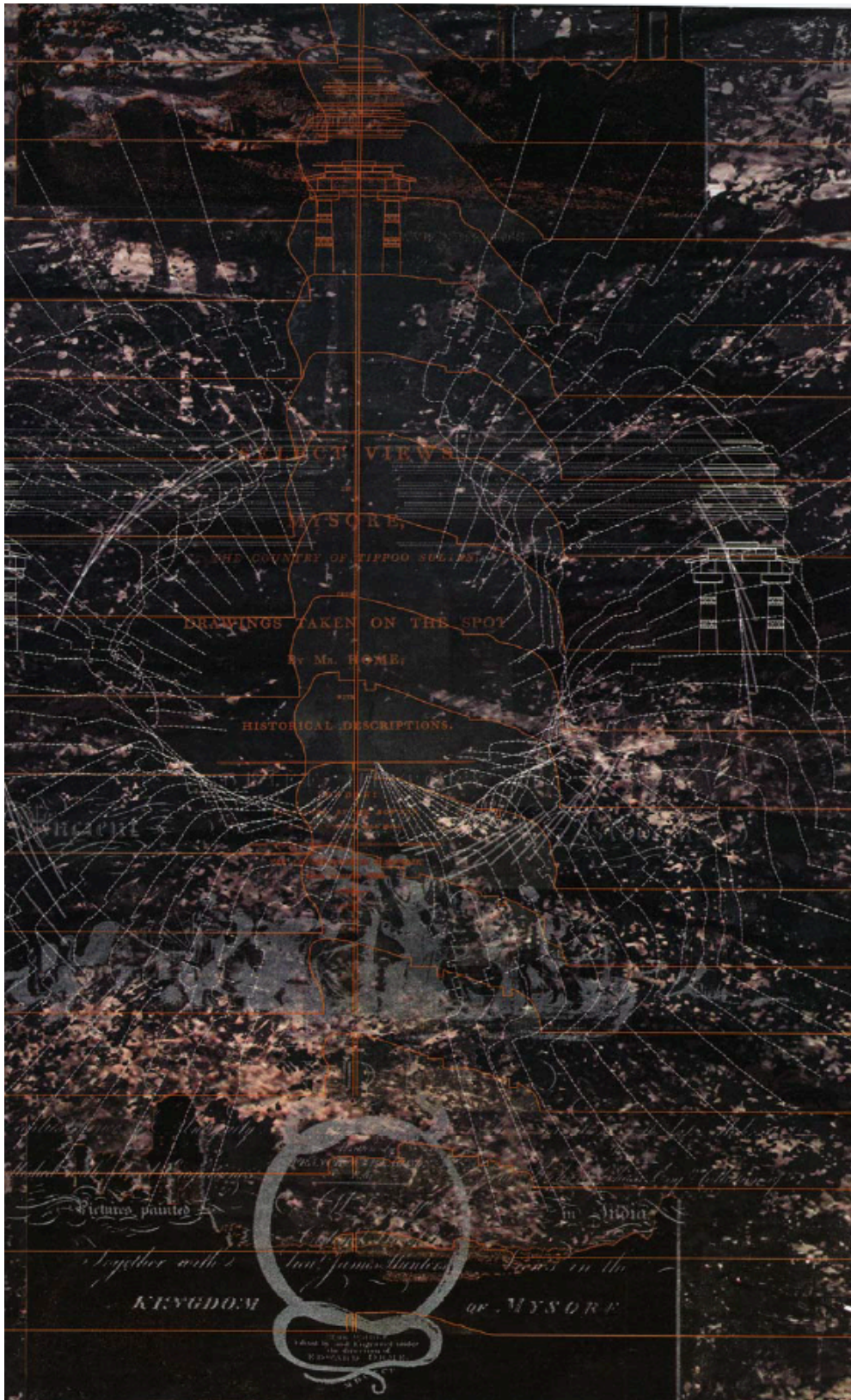


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This sectional drawing depicts the circular steps hewed into rock that lead up to one of the city's *mantaps*, templelike markers of high ground that are popularly believed to have been built by Kempegowda II to mark the limits of the city that he envisioned. *Mantaps* like this were allegedly used as military lookouts by Tipu Sultan in battles against the British, and later captured the imagination of European artists who featured them in artworks. Today they are used as shrines.

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SITE-SPECIFIC



SUDARSHAN SHETTY
LOVE (DETAIL), 2006
METAL, GLASS, PUMP, TUBING,
AND COLORED WATER, 3 X 2 FT
COURTESY GALLERIE, MUMBAI

While painting is embraced by India's growing middle class, installation art has lagged far behind.

It's now expected that international art scenes go in and out of style in the galleries and museums of the West with alarming speed—the current ubiquity of cattle-call-like group shows of ever-younger, ever-newer Chinese and Eastern European artists is a case in point. This trend is not completely without its merits, however; by virtue of it, a few names will have entered the international contemporary-art lexicon, and will hopefully stay there, further breaking up the pool of always available, always marketable Western male artists.

India has not quite yet become the next hip thing, a bit surprising for a country with such a remarkable art heritage. This year, coinciding with its 30th anniversary, the venerable Pittsburgh art institution the Mattress Factory presents "India: New Installations," a two-part exhibition featuring works made in residence by 10 artists from three cities. While painting is embraced by India's growing middle class, installation art has lagged far behind. This residency, then, offers a significant opportunity. Sudarshan Shetty's resultant work features an enclosed wood-and-glass bookcase containing clear piping and glass jars brimming with a milky white liquid. The work evokes both the poetic and the medicinal, suggesting an archive of bodily systems. The Mumbai-based artist Mansi Bhatt has undertaken a series of posters featuring digital photographs of herself dressed in Western interpretations of myriad Asian stereotypes (16TH CENTURY PORCELAIN ITALIAN SCULPTURE IN METROPOLITAN MUSEUM, NEW YORK, 05, reads a line of text at the bottom of one, poking fun at the Met's—and the West's—culture-col-

lecting tendencies). When invited to participate in Mumbai's Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, she chose to install her work not in the festival per se but guerrilla style on walls where attendees would encounter it more fleetingly. Navin Thomas is best known for works that critique India's ubiquitous call centers, where he himself has worked. In the past few years, he has used images and recordings of birds to symbolize the voices of Indian call-center employees, who must learn to mask their accents to appeal to foreign customers. In the sound piece *Auto-In...Now!* (2005), he layered birdsong with recordings of customer-service training of Indians by British supervisors. In Pittsburgh, however, Thomas departed from this body of work to explore more idiosyncratic themes. Inspired by dung beetles, which use a ball of dung as both a portable food source and incubator for their young, he created a steel-framed sphere six feet in diameter that he could enter and roll. Another artist from Bangalore, Krishnaraj Chonat, created a landscape in two rooms of the Mattress Factory's satellite facility. Its clay floor is dried and cracked, bringing to mind the parched earth that one associates with famine or the end of the monsoon rains. A dead tree hanging from the ceiling is a kind of 3-D version of the axis mundi seen in the artist's paintings on paper, while a telescope aimed out the window, meanwhile, focuses on the hilltop above the gallery, bringing the viewer back to the US with a jolt.

For more information on "India: New Installations," turn to Index on p. 110.

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