

REVIEWS:

UK

Serpentine Gallery, London
10 December – 22 February

Indian Highway

Given the Western artworld's current fixation with the emerging art scenes of China, India and the Middle East – both as new lures for the commercial art market and as pieces on the chessboard of cultural diplomacy – it would be easy to be cynical about the growing turnover of big group shows focusing on these increasingly active artistic hubs. That we should all take an interest in what artists in China, India or the Middle East are doing is a good thing, but that interest can easily be hijacked by curatorial interventions eager to massage the work into the prescriptive frame of what we 'should' think about what's going 'over there'. Luckily, *Indian Highway* steers clear of such didactics, opting for a cacophonous, throw-it-in-and-see approach that, one would like to think, presents a representative – if never comprehensive – sample of what Indian contemporary art wants to be about today... whether we like it or not.

In contrast the string of sparse monographic shows recently presented by the Serpentine, *Indian Highway* is stuffed full of art, with a swathe of videoworks even colonising the lobby spaces, and it is the presence of video which especially articulates the show's preoccupation with old and new – how 'old' and 'new' India might be articulated in relation to a spectrum of artistic tradition or innovation, and what value different formal and technical traditions have in addressing the social, political and historical realities of the Subcontinent, given that this is where the majority of the artists in the show choose to situate themselves. What might one make, for example, of Subodh Gupta's installation *Date by Date* (2008), an assemblage of decrepit office desks, typewriters and overflowing wooden filing cabinets? A dry, ironic reflection on the sclerotic bureaucratic habits of everyday India? How might such an allegorical tradition of object-making work in relation to the more activist, networked documentary impulse of Ashok Sukumaran and Shaina Anand's multiscreen *Lossfulness (News from the Network Neighbourhood)* (2008), a collection of recorded TV and footage fragments, including a clip from a recent TV discussion about a boycotting campaign against British and American food corporations? If Gupta's installation visualises the dreary administration of everyday life in India, it might only be for an audience and a society that is already starting to outgrow these. Gupta's work might ironically memorialise the fading form of the older India, but it is the videowork of Sukumaran and Anand's collective practice as CAMP, or in the similar curatorial intervention of Raqs Media Collective (who 'subcurate' a room of other artists' videos), that the business of thrashing out a relation to the often ambiguous experience of modernisation gets done.

So with *Indian Highway*, the social and cultural experience of economic growth and cultural modernisation, in opposition to that of tradition and decay, almost entirely frames the content of what we are presented with, whether in sculpture, painting, photography or moving image. If this is representative of contemporary Indian art, it starkly captures the tension between old artistic habits (the museum spectator, the market, the sculpture-and-painting art object) and emerging ones (documentary and networked media, and the blurring of art and activism). Shilpa Gupta's *In Our Times* (2008), a motorised, see-sawing double microphone on a stand, which sing-songs extracts from the founding speeches of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Pakistan's first governor-general, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, in 1947, is a slight but powerful reflection on the moment which would indelibly define the two states for the rest of the century. Yet Gupta's earlier videowork *National Highway No. 1* (2002–4), shot from a car as it speeds through the Indian countryside, and stuttering and looping each time it passes by military personnel standing on the roadside, has a sense of contingency and urgency that her sculpture cannot match.

These contrasts perhaps reveal how the renegotiation of Indian experience is being conducted in the public realm afforded by art, with an urgency and presence which has now largely disappeared in Western artmaking. Sheela Gowda's *Darkroom* (2006), made from flattened tar drums, might look forbidding, but inside the murky space, the mirrored, punctured steel ceiling becomes a night sky full of stars. Its mix of hope and realism, of urban and economic realities and aspirations, might appear mawkish, but it still attempts to comment on the changing values of a society in flux. Compared to this, Indian artists might find some of the involuted esoterics of current 'Western art' bizarre in the extreme.

If *Indian Highway's* strength is its energetic, magpie survey of diachronous tendencies, its fixation on the legibility of sociopolitical experience in the work is either an accurate reflection or a tendentious curatorial refraction of current Indian art. How (or if) this generation of Indian artists continue to use art as the locus for a reflection on the terms of national identity and the accelerated changes driven by global modernity will be interesting to observe – and at least the metaphor of the highway serves to suggest that India may indeed be going somewhere fast. *J.J. Charlesworth*

