

Critic Note

By **Bharti Kher**

There have never been any rules in art, nor any boundaries and efforts to grasp at some type of definition sends us spiraling into a mutation of a thousand other patterns and questions. All of us are in some way caught up in the unorthodox dictates and wavering realities of diversity and choice. So the contemporary artist courts these two infinities that stubbornly seize the tail end of an ism weary millennium – and try and find substance from our times. Since Khoj arose out of a clash of many systems and their changing ideologies, and has become a melting pot for conflicting and cooperative aspects of culture (surprise and disjuncture keeps the edges sharp). Khoj is as much about artists learning and influencing each other as it is about product.

The motivating force behind Khoj is the sharing of a dynamic process of art making with co-artists, the art viewing public and the uninitiated. Khoj provides a structure in which the artist is free to orientate, probe and act; evaluative criticism could however mention the insularity of the workshop but KHOJ maintains its initiative: to act as a proving ground for fragmented ideas and concepts that assimilate and adapt to a given environment.

For Khoj 1998, twenty two incomparable artists of different locations came together, bringing with them their histories, systems of values and idiosyncrasies; things were shared, others seen, cultures and countries recounted and small town India encountered. India's chaotic stimuli- its vastness, its vitality, its density - confusing morally and exhilarating mentally created a vibrant energy, the 'tensions' of which were certainly cathartic and channeled the competitive spirit whereby much was achieved in the 14 days of the workshop.

Personal processes mingled with the infinite possibilities which were provided by the bazaars in now derelict Modinagar, one a booming industrial township. A myriad of materials and manpower – from marbles to magnets, handkerchiefs to truck tyres, mirrors to fireworks along with the carpenter, the gardener, the welder, all provided stimuli and substance to Sikriabagh, the large open site of the Khoj workshop.

Definite systems were begun reinvented in Khoj 1998. A search for the threads that linked disparate works became an inquiry into politics, practice and personal possibilities. Reference to 'place' both in political and spiritual terms highlighted some facets of these disparate realities.

Patrick Mautloa from South Africa painted a series of canvases. Seemingly abstract, they reflected spatially, the loss of land and mineral rights of the black South Africans. The continuing divide between the clustered black living areas as opposed to those of the white clearly manifested. Despite five years of Apartheid, the lethargy of the process of change was obvious. His site without intending, held tenuous links with the past workshop: unwittingly using Simon Callery's site of work of 1997 – now moss aged and green, the superimposition of one work on another and ignoring of authorship was an interesting, new manifestation for Khoj.

The regeneration of materials both in the making and dismantling gave works fleeting permanence. Holes were refilled, plastic reused, wood and metals resold. With some exceptions, very few tangible traces were left of past works. Everything was turned over.

Quddus Mirza's search for the 'penultimate painting' was a participatory work inviting the viewer into a dialogue about the nature of art. Puzzle like, one followed the block printed textual paintings from room to room, acutely conscious of the saffron and green background of the works and their appropriation by fundamentalism in India and Pakistan.

While Quddus' political overtures were cautious and subtle, the barrelism of Chandragupta Thenuware from Sri Lanka were directed clearly at causing discomfort. Referring to the instability and indignities of war in Sri Lanka, Chandragupta told of how his barrels subverted the military barrel checkpoints of the police and army all over Colombo. Suddenly, one sensed the liberating nature of what he had created. When Chandragupta blocked the front entrance to the Khoj 1998 with his brightly painted barrels one was forced into considering who was keeping whom out.

Carter Hodgkins created the traditional Indian palm leaf manuscript format using tempera technique of painting. Juxtaposed within however, were passages from the highly controversial Starr Report sensationalizing Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky along side images from the Kama sutra. The work had a definitive irony as a manifestation of Indian sexuality met a less poetic equivalent.

Continuing in the same vein, Pushpamala presented a series of photographs of the archetypal Indian housewife and juxtaposed them with her fantasy role of a 'lady in a golden frock' – stylish, dangerous and desirable. The work commented on the socio – political straitjackets and the ambiguities of female myth and fantasy in popular culture. There was a sense of 'B' movies in the photos and for the wise and uninitiated she arranged a visit to the local cinema. Dressing for the shoots became a daily ritual.

In fact during the workshop these personal processes and rituals, both spiritual and secular, acts of repetition and scrutiny evolved in all works to some degree.

Fuji Hiroshi's clearing of a stretch of drain was an integral part of one of his works. It became a two-day silent ritual of cleansing and demarcating of site. He needed to involve and nurture his space before the understated presence of tiny fish could be later confronted with a bright red and white sign shouting 'HERE'. Another work used giant sized fish cushions sewed and painted by the artist himself. Set out in a hired rickshaw, Fuji took the people of Modinagar for rides in his riksha - playing as he did, with the word 'reeeksha' and 'deeksha' meaning the same thing, in Hindi and Japanese respectively.

Anite Dube's wrapping of a tree with the red thread used for religious occasions, became a sweep of colour in a strategically formed work subverting the veneration of the tree so popular in rural India. She added, playfully, and O and U to the natural contours of a Y in the tree and connected with the work she made inside the house. Watching 'you' everywhere were hypnotic eyes caught in the oval templates of all the doors in the house.

Umesh's large crater like earthwork in black and white overhung by a tight interlace of terra cotta pots and rope, evolved ritually as he lit each sulphur coated rope one by one. As dusk fell the experience of space and time over as both artist and viewer became involved with each clay pot falling to the ground. The dramatic intervention of smoke and expectation became an essential part of the work.

Time specificity also applied to both Bharti Kher and RV Sindhu who utilized the opacity and silence of the nights in Sikribagh. Both works were to be seen at night and both used light but with very different connotations.

RV Sindhu lit diyas (small clay lamps) inside baskets that had been burnt to a deep black and re-suspended from tall bamboos. As night fell a strangely spiritual work began to float above the ground with a visceral quality of silence. The work was strongly connected to her life in Varanasi.

In contrast Bharti Kher used high powered halogens to light up an iron cage at night. Inside, abstract forms hung from which metallic sea anemone like clusters spawned. Intentionally anachronous, the yellow lake that ran short of a circle around the tree could have been an industrial seep. The door of the cage remained locked and lights were placed for close observation.

Peter Isuge managed to capture the spirit of the workshop in a humorous dancing figure called 'Rummy'. He swirled with colour capturing the rum dancing artist of Khoj. His tradition of working in wood carving became less formal and more playful as he experimented with different materials, though his expertise in wood carving was more obvious in his other finished wood sculptures.

Manisha Parekh alternatively used natural daylight to create a jewel like work. She transformed an animal watering tub into a deep blue receptacle by placing small mirrors inside it. Reflections on the insides of the wall magically came at particular times of the day and then- as magically disappeared.

PS Ladi experimented with glass – a material that reflect light itself. Working with salvaged glass tube lights and bulbs, he twisted and heated the glass to make a fragile and contradictory ladder. Using the play and double meaning of support and weightless ness he managed to create multiple metaphors.

As most works were made as a direct response of the site itself, Khoj forced the artist to make do with what was available. This was both limiting and liberating, provocative and participatory.

Some chose to directly interact with the public. Bastienne Kramer's large green flower raft carried passengers across the lake and back . She invited the audience to physically engage with her work, continuing with her choice to make public participatory sculptures. An unconventionally placed tent provided sanctuary for those who dared to wade across the lake on her raft constructed of old rubber truck tyres and wood.

An interplay of fantasy , wit and playfulness extended into the work of Kaushik Mukhopadhyay who built a huge fish that disappeared into the lake. Making a dummy periscope that went from land to water, Kaushik sat a large glass of water with a small fish behind a magnifying glass at eye view visual drawing you into the belly of the lake!

In contrast, Margo Gran's playfulness with materials and reference to game playing was a foil for a deep personal loss. A glass labyrinth with a child's long shirt beside it became both a shroud and a homage to life itself: evoking simultaneously the fear we associate with death and the anticipation of birth – of life itself. Sixty four handkerchiefs were used to construct ladders suggesting a stairway to heaven or perhaps a futile attempt to escape?

The barricade at the gate- more fluid and less imposing than Chandragupta's was a work by Binghui Huangfu. Part of a shifting Chinese diaspora, Binghui moved her worked towards languages and their profound barriers. For Khoj she wrapped empty spools in newspaper with texts written by different artists of the workshop. It was both restrictive and decorative at the same time.

Painstakingly, Harsha made a mock carpet painting. He cut a large 'peepal leaf' out of canvas and placed it in the center of an aged Persianesque flower patterned carpet in the lounge. Meticulously

copied and painted from the edges inwards, his trompe l'oeil was a reflection of the transformative , chameleon like historicity of the site.

Shukla Sawant turned two pristine white guard rooms into 'his' and 'her' spaces by placing signifiers above the door. Painted in luminous , velvet black within , the walls were covered with floating postcards of grains , seeds and pulses seemingly growing out of the void. A reclusive place for thoughts to germinate, playfully suggesting the toilet as an urban retreat.

Chila Kuamri Burman, a second generation Indian from the UK made vermilion body – prints indoors aka Klien with a definite feminist stance. She displayed them out doors decorate with bindis and mirrors. Subverting the use of bindis, a photograph questions the notion of stereotype and identity.

Sheila Makhijani obsessively knitted black wool insects. Nesting on trees opposite a large stitched and painted canvas and tarpaulin wall hanging of black, white and army greens, the work created a silent organic space to be stumbled upon.

Mica Marsh transformed a storeroom into a semi altar like space using the organic and inorganic. A mound of moldy green and dried lady's fingers were a proffered offering as a bright red coiled plastic wire bounced out to decorate the space.

With only memories of Khoj 1997 and 1998 left and preparation for Khoj 1999 well underway , a sense of continuation and 'process' has begun. And yet Khoj cannot place itself firmly on any map since it remains a constantly evolving and serendipitous method of search and discovery.