



MEMORY QUILTS



BORDER GAMES: For her work 'Seven Seas', Syed travelled to most of the countries mapped in her quilts. Visa problems kept her away from India but she sourced the Warli art material from friends and worked on it in Lahore

NEELAM RAAJ
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Artists are experimenting with a host of new mediums and materials. Why have you chosen to go back to something as old-fashioned and traditional as needle and thread?

With *Seven Seas*, I wanted to start a dialogue with a tradition and what better way to do it than with something as multi-layered as a quilt? And this isn't the first time I have worked with needle and thread. When I was studying in London, I became interested in Victorian lace patterns. I started painting lace in my work and juxtaposing it with photographs in the nineties. Since 2001, I have been using a lot of stitching. For one work (*Tent of Darius*), I bought army coats from the second-hand market in Lahore and embroidered them. I think it all goes back to when my son was born and my mom took out all those frilly baby sets they made us embroider in the convent. It was assumed that when we grew up, we would find a suitable man, marry and have children. This is my way of being critical of the expectations imposed on women.



Needlework carries the baggage of domesticity. Yet you embroider

guns on military uniforms and juxtapose flowers with missiles. I use domesticity to present things in a pretty way but there is violence within that domesticity which connects with the violence outside.

Your work is called Seven Seas. Did you travel to all the seven countries mapped in your quilts?

I travelled to most of them. I couldn't come to India because of visa problems but I have been many times before, so I could draw on my memory. For the map that shows Mumbai, I got friends to send over a Warli tribe sari and Maharashtrian handloom. The

gara and *dabka* badge that you can see on the quilt was done in Lahore. The base material for all quilts is cheap cotton from Lahore with European prints.

Why the fascination with maps?

Maps connect the past and the present. The maps on my quilts show modern-day geographical boundaries but they look old — that play is important. Maps say so much about history, about how land is defined and divided. In the UAE map, I made a mistake, calling the Arabian Gulf the Persian Gulf, and I had to correct as it would have caused a controversy. But that mistake became part of my work.

In a work from the Needlework Series, that showed at the Devi Art Foundation in Gurgaon, you borrowed an image from the news coverage of the US invasion of Afghanistan which showed a missile launch. Does all that is happening in Pakistan and the world influence you?

Even when I started painting, I used to collect images from the newspaper and use them. The idea was that so much happens around us but in print, the news somehow becomes distant. Even now, I paint journalistic photographs. I animate them by painting them but they're plastic because I use acrylic.

You have explored colonialism in several works, especially the one titled Two Indians Viewing the Landscape. Tell us about that work.

I made a replica of Thomas Cole's *Indians Viewing the Landscape* (1827) which sums up the philosophy of the 19th century — discovery, exploration and settlement. I then placed two child-size Victorian chairs in front of it so that any two 'Indians' could sit in the chairs and view the two Indians viewing the landscape in the painting. In a way, they then become a part of the dialogue of the present with the past. The two Victorian chairs that I made are still used today in upper middle class homes in Pakistan — we love the Victorian era and still like to live it. ■



DISCOVERY CHANNEL: A replica of Thomas Cole's 'Indians Viewing the Landscape' has two chairs for 'Indians' to sit in and relive the experience

RIP Adrienne Rich

The pioneering feminist poet Adrienne Rich died last week at the age of 82. Her poems were treasured by thousands of ordinary women, many of whom had not studied literature or poetry. As the New Yorker put it, "The ringing, defiant poetry of Adrienne Rich...articulated the frustrations of women who came of age along clipped paths in the nineteen-forties and fifties, only to discover in the sixties and seventies the extent of their longing to tear up the grass." She wrote about the horrors of domestic confinement and the kind of woman "who shaves her legs until they gleam/ like petrified mammoth-tusk". After Rich died, she began to trend on twitter, and this brought a whole new readership to her passionate verse: *You're wondering if I'm lonely: OK then, yes, I'm lonely as a plane rides lonely and level on its radio beam, aiming across the Rockies for the blue-strung aisles of an airfield on the ocean.*



You want to ask, am I lonely? Well, of course, lonely as a woman driving across country day after day, leaving behind mile after mile little towns she might have stopped and lived and died in, lonely

New, Unimproved Titanic

Some cuss it out as sentimentalism on steroids, but its fans consider it the most perfect film ever made. The *Titanic's* perfectionist director James Cameron has his own demons. In the years since the blockbuster released in 1997, he has become increasingly obsessed with the "unsinkable ship", diving to the wreck in the North Atlantic 33 times in a submersible, to study how the real thing compared to his film creation. "We found places that the set was wrong, little bit, you know, this was wrong, that was



wrong. There was glass missing from a door. I thought I'd thought about everything about *Titanic*," he moaned. Now, 15 years later, while working on a re-mastered 3-D version — a laborious process he called "horrific" and "mind-numbing" — Cameron restrained the urge to correct those doors and kept to the original frames. "There was a moment when I thought, fleetingly, I could correct the film and actually have it match what the *Titanic* really looked like," he said. "Another part of my mind said, no, then you're going to be a nutter standing on the street corner babbling away. Didn't change a frame. The ship still sinks. Jack still dies." And the heart is still going on.

Goodbye, Ruby Mondays

Veteran vegetarian Paul McCartney has joined forces with his two daughters to pen a new cookbook. Together with designer Stella and photographer Mary, the legendary Beatle has decided to publish the family's favourite recipes as part of their Meat Free Monday movement. The campaign — a response to a UN report that the livestock industry as a whole is responsible for more greenhouse gas emissions than the whole of the transport sector put together — encourages meat eaters to cut animals out of their diet once a week. *The Meat Free Monday Cookbook*,



which contains 52 menu ideas ranging from stews to salads, also features contributions from fellow health-conscious and environmentally friendly celebrities like the singer Pink, actors Kevin Spacey and Woody Harrelson and British fashion icon Vivienne Westwood. "The idea of one meat-free day per week is something that many people find do-able and something that can be achieved relatively easily," Sir Paul said. "Having been a vegetarian for over 30 years, I find it very simple and in fact, tasty and most enjoyable." Bok choy in oyster sauce, anyone? ■

All the world's an egg

A new exhibition of master sculptors Prodosh Das Gupta and Sarbari Roy Choudhury is full of curves

SUBHRA MAZUMDAR

Centennial exhibitions are heavyweight occasions by any yardstick, but when the exhibition combines a centenary tribute to master Indian sculptor Prodosh Das Gupta with a tribute to 80 years of sculpting by Sarbari Roy Choudhury, it becomes an embarrassment of riches. Even the scale of this exhibition, in terms of the number of sculptures — there are more than a hundred — is something of a record. According to Dr Sudhakar Sharma, secretary, Lalit Kala Akademi, "In the many decades of showcasing art, such a large body of sculptures sourced from individual outputs is a historic first among the many exhibitions held at the Akademi."

Das Gupta and Roy Choudhury were known for their ingenuity in confabulating sculptures around the plasticity form, and the show derives its name *Contours and Volumes* from this essential standpoint of the duo's creative force.

Born exactly a century ago, Prodosh Das Gupta was a founder-member of the Calcutta Group, a reaction to the imitative methodology of sculpting of the forties. After his initial training at the Chennai and Lucknow schools of art, he moved to Paris and London. His protégé, Sarbari Roy Choudhury, trained at the MS Uni-



Both artists travelled widely in Europe and were influenced by the masters of the era, such as Henry Moore and Giacometti



CREATIVE CONTOURS: 'Egg Bride' (left) — one of Prodosh Das Gupta's bronze-and-metal creations and Sarbari Roy Choudhury's 'Mother' (above)

versity in Baroda. Both men travelled widely in Europe and were influenced by the masters of the era, such as Henry Moore and Giacometti. While Prodosh Das Gupta was curator and director of the National Gallery of Modern Art, Delhi, from 1957 to 1970, Sarbari Roy Choudhury lived in Santiniketan and nurtured contemporary talents such as the sculptor K S Radhakrishnan.

The display must be saluted for bringing to the public eye so many of their legendary masterpieces. In the case of Prodosh Das Gupta viewers are privy to his characteristic egg-shaped bronze-and-metal creations in works such as *Sun Worshipers*, where three standing egg figures have their faces upturned in a gesture of celestial worship. In the numerous depictions of the mother-and-child theme, formed into images of tactile smoothness and fluid lines, one can see the influence of a western aesthetic on an eastern lyricism. The solitary egg form *Genesis* evokes a symbolic depiction of the entire process of creation through

Das Gupta's masterly treatment of solid material.

Sarbari Roy Choudhury's technique of sculpting creates small-scale forms inspired largely from classical music. The forms depicting Ustad Bade Gulam Ali Khan rendering his compositions, for instance, cut away at the material and bring forth on the facial features a musical rhythm strummed out in stone. The figures have a strong link with a modeling tradition but in Roy Choudhury's hands, the craft-linked superficiality deepens to more sensitive interpretations. Even when the themes are downright every day, such as *Combing her Hair* or *Me and My Mother*, they evoke a delicate blending of eastern realism and western abstraction.

Bringing the works of the two masters to a single platform was a conscious decision of the exhibition's coordinator Reena Lath. "Both these artists were extremely soulful people," she says. "They are inclined towards a language that is very personal. A show of this magnitude is not about numbers or expertise. It is also a landmark link from a period of transformation when western art methodology was being questioned by Indian artists at the dawn of Independence. Over the fifty-year period of their creativity, these two artists devised a language of sculpture that would break away from an imitative follow-up of western art to a more expressive and creative Indian alternative." ■

The exhibition is on at the Lalit Kala Akademi, Delhi, from April 1-13