

Woman Is As Woman Does

Part I – JNAF Gallery

Curated by Nancy Adajania

This exhibition proposes an inter-generational mapping of 25 women artists who have engaged with postcolonial India's raging political and cultural problems. It presents five generations of practitioners, the late Zarina Hashmi (1937-2020) being the oldest and Al-Qawi Nanavati (b. 1995) the youngest, with an emphasis on female artistic labour—'doing' as achieving the impossible, whether incrementally or through radical gestures. Here we witness multiple forms of consciousness and agency by which women artists have addressed questions of location, materiality and context. The exhibition title refers to Radha Kumar's seminal 1993 book, *The History of Doing*, which historicised the Indian women's movement across the 19th and 20th centuries.

'Woman Is As Woman Does' does not treat gender as a static identity. These artists belong to different classes, ethnicities and caste groups. Those born to privilege are shown alongside those of Dalit or Adivasi origin. Artists who have concentrated on studio practice appear, here, with artists who produce zines and graphic novels, collaborate with subaltern artists, local communities, farmers, activists and grandmothers.

Focusing on a select ensemble of practices, this exhibition embraces iconic works, contextual ephemera, as well as new works. Whether they explore conventional media or alternative practices, these artists challenge patriarchal norms to express solidarity with the marginalized.

Part I – I begin 'Woman Is As Woman Does' with the 1980s phase of the women's movement in India. I was in school then and remember this brutally recurrent front-page headline: 'Woman burnt alive by in-laws'. Woman was being constructed as a juridical subject in those years. The war over women's freedoms—their very right to exist—was being

fought in the courtrooms and streets, in the newspapers and classrooms. The horror of dowry killings and rape was invoked by Nilima Sheikh and Sheba Chhachhi, the latter being both a participant in and a chronicler of the women's movement.

Nilima's revisiting of her own iconic 1984 series against dowry killings, 'When Champa Grew Up', bears witness to how crimes against women continue unabated today, at an increased pitch of violence. Alongside, I flag the impulse towards articulating and building solidarities, which has been a key theme in the women's movement, as evidenced here in Sheba's photographs, which foreground the empathy shared by women protestors across the class divide.

These themes are transmuted in the work of younger-generation artists navigating new political landscapes. For Nilima and Sheba's generation, I would argue, gender was a category of resistance that required special affirmation because it was not considered a legitimate issue, not even by the Left. But for Gen X and the millennials, gender is interwoven with questions of caste (Ranjeeta), regional aspiration (Aqui), livelihood and ecology (Shweta and Ita), ethnicity, linguistic diversity and freedom of speech (Arshi and Baraan). And an artist of Adivasi heritage demonstrates solidarity with a Dalit cause (Durgabai).

This exhibition pays homage to the late Kamla Bhasin, a pioneer of intersectional politics who encouraged women to denounce the patriarchy, not only in earnest tenor, but also while 'dancing madly'.