

Woman Is As Woman Does

Part II – Premchand Roychand 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 II – Think of 'Woman Is As Woman Does' – both Part I and II – as a kaleidoscope. Its iridescent bits of red, green and blue glass come together and fall apart, form patterns that disrupt and reinvent themselves again and again. **Part II** presents the forging of solidarities across difference and the politics of adjacency (Navjot and Shantibai,

Gauri and the Balika Mela girls). It also demonstrates a seismographic portraiture of self and society, where the schism, calling to be bridged, becomes a leitmotif. Memories of violence and unbearable loss are revisited through radiant affect: the impermeable geometry of unfinished rooms, maps of silences and erasures, a history the size of an unhealed wound and language that stammers at the edge of experience (Zarina, Gargi, Purvai, Shilpa, Nilima, Mithu, Sosa and Al-Qawi). Some artists have placed the formal language of abstraction under pressure here, politicising it to reclaim what has been lost to accidents of historical rupture and aggressive intolerance.

How does a masquerade, in which Self and Other cohabit momentarily (Anita taking on the persona of Noor Mohammed) speak obliquely of the bloodbaths that continue to haunt our nation decades after independence? While most of the participating artists identify as 'she/her', Sharmistha no longer identifies as a 'woman' and defines herself as non-binary. In the 1980s, the Indian women's movement, challenged by the immensity of crimes against women, focused on legal redress while deferring questions of sexuality. Alternating between moments of consensus and dissensus, the Indian women's movement has never been a monolithic entity. The Marathi and Hindi words for a movement or agitation – *chalval*, *khalbali* or *andolan* – are infinitely more active and sensorially rich than their anodyne English counterpart. It is these kinetic impulses that guide the works assembled here.

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