

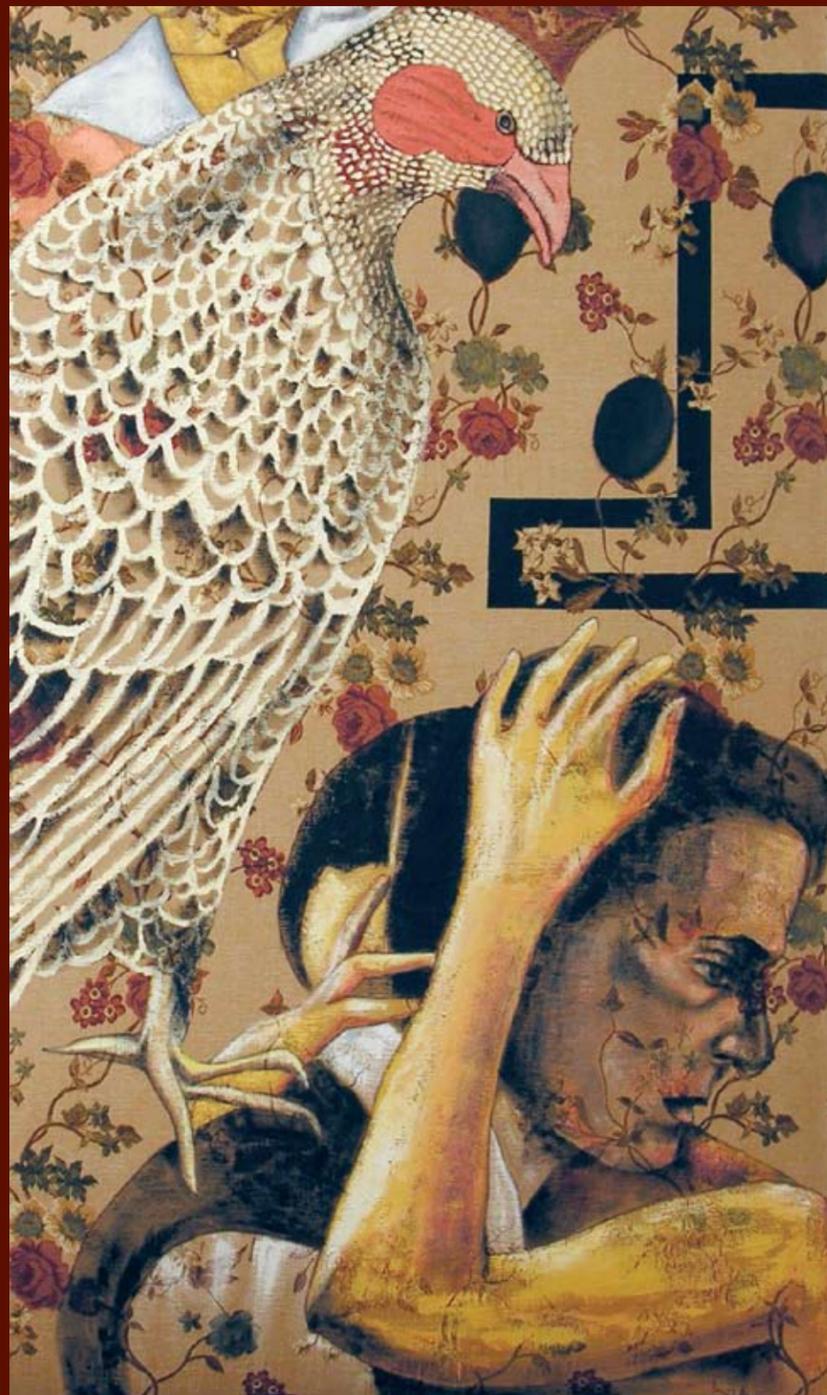


NEW NARRATIVES
Contemporary Art from India

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Anju Dodiya. *The Path of Berries*, 2005. Detail, see page 60.

New Narratives

Betty Seid

Narrative is a much-overworked word in contemporary academic discourse. It has come to mean “meaning,” “definition” or “purpose” rather than plotted storytelling. Whether with an Aristotelian beginning, middle and end, or by suggestions that ask the viewer to fill in the blanks, all of the works in this exhibition have a story to tell. Fact, fiction or something in between, they are stories. Contemporary artists from India have stepped back from the Modernist rejection of plot and returned to picture-making with *New Narratives*.

There are new stories to tell and new ways to tell them.

In his essay, “Reading for the Plot,” Peter Brooks discusses how narrative is the means we use to order and give meaning to our lives, in effect to overcome and control the chaos that is human existence.

Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semi-conscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue. We live immersed in narrative.¹

All the artists in this exhibition have a narrative agenda. Through the making of art, they command an audience. The purpose of each of them varies; for some, the depiction of their story is equivalent to being on a psychoanalyst’s couch. For others, it is the occasion to speak out politically. Or it is an opportunity to clarify and make public their identity. Again, by manipulating the data, perception is controlled.

Some of these narrators choose to tell their stories through personal means—investigations of the psyche through the stream of consciousness, portrayal of dreams, exploration of family lineage, episodic self-portraiture. Others choose to make visual the moment in which they exist via observations of daily rituals, political extremities, and the general ironies of existence. Still others go beyond illustration, like sages of yore, adding a layer of commentary to an existing tale. “True” narrative, like any oft-told tale, changes with the telling.

Gulammohammed Sheikh. *Book of Journeys*, 1996 onwards. Detail, see page 38.



Nalini Malani. *Ecstasy of Radha*, 2004. Detail, see page 100.

What, then, is narrative and why are stories told? Obviously, there is the impulse to entertain. At the same time, that entertainment may be used to inculcate cultural values through the teaching of myths and traditions. Narrative is about culture; in storytelling, the narrator manufactures a cultural identity on a macro-level and an individual identity on a micro-level. Stories impress, particularly if they are told well. Ultimately, in the telling, there is the impulse to order the chaos of life.

Aristotle grandly philosophized about what was necessary for a story to be a story. His essentials are those famous “W” queries that journalists have codified and today widely employ: Who? What? Where? When? and Why?—Character, Event, Setting, Time and Meaning. *Character* drives the plot, suggesting the “what,” that is the narrative *event*. Often the protagonist is the artist. The *setting* may vary, and is a potent visual device for locating the narrative, both physically and psychologically. *Time*, as we shall see, is not always an Aristotelian linear progression. And “why”—the impact of *meaning*—is always determined by a tacit agreement between artist and viewer.

Searching for meaning in myths or symbols requires that there be a known story. Symbols mandate a mind for interpretation. Historically, a patron

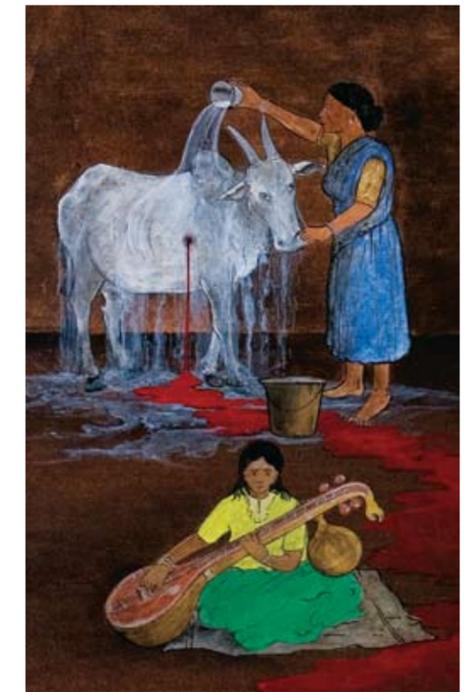
determined much of the impact of meaning. A historic work of art, sponsored by church or court, has a significantly different content from that created by an autonomous artist. And, oh the difference in context! Propaganda is essential, but the impetus has shifted from patron to artist. Today’s patron is the art-buying, museum-going public, but he no longer dictates what the art will be simply because he has underwritten it. The arena for an artist expounding a point of view is enormous, and the opportunity for that point of view to be personal, rather than determined by a patron, is paramount. Historically, as in the West, art in India has been also supported by church (temple) or state (princely court)—e.g., magnificent Chola bronzes or exquisite Mughal or Rajput album paintings. It is now the lay collector who buys art. The new narratives of contemporary art are directed to this educated, elite audience.

For the curator, a triangular relationship exists between artist, public and museum. Until recently, American museums have avoided collecting and/or exhibiting contemporary art from India.² The connoisseurship of Indian contemporary art has been stuck in an ethnocentric mode of self-comparison. Western curators haven’t had the training or vocabulary (beyond “hybrid,” “syncretism” or “influence”) to locate culturally what has been happening in India. Often, no distinction is made between modern and contemporary art, and the word “derivative” has been bandied about. Contemporary art from India has, for the most part, been ignored by Western art museums. Currently that is changing. Western curators of contemporary art are beginning to catch on about India. Layering is universal; identities, people and cultures have always overlapped. Although some specificity remains, we need not continue to exoticize the international conversation about art from India.

What makes these narratives *new*? Does it matter that these works are by Indian artists? Are the stories Indian, but the art global, or vice versa? Perceptions of Indian art have long been mired in Orientalist theory. The West has wanted art from India to “look Indian,” but most contemporary Indian artists have come to realize that “Indianness” is not in itself an artistic pursuit. They have broken away from that expectation. In a sense, they are saying, “Know me! Know my ancestors, my fears, what I read, what I see, what I hear. Let go of your Orientalist stereotypes of me and who I should be.” Contemporary artists from India are *of the world* but happen to be living and working in India.

None of these artists is working in the modes that long have identified art from India: the miniature or the folk/tribal painting. They have ontologically progressed beyond the initial appeal of Modernism and the attendant desire to use acknowledged Western idioms. More than anything else (and possibly more than *anywhere* else), they respond to politics and work to impact social justice. They are doing this—and here is where tradition enters—*via narrative*. They tell, expound, dramatize and regale us with stories. Storytelling is an important element of India’s traditional character and the narrative impulse continues to be a motivating muse for contemporary artists. What is *new* about these narratives is that the tales have moved from local to global, women have a stronger voice, and the technology for telling them has expanded into new media.

Since the earliest days of the twentieth century, an artistic struggle has existed between being Indian and being Modern. That push-pull “between a rock



N. S. Harsha. *On my way to museum*, 2006. Detail, see page 74.

Vasudha Thozhur. *Sanctum*, 2006. Detail, see page 57.

