Re-Picturing Gondwana for Grrrls

MARNIE DEAN

Simone Eisler, image 6 from *Night Vision* series, 2010, photograph/ chromogenic print on archival paper; image courtesy the artist.

As I sit, contemplating how to begin to contextualise the array of manifestations that have accompanied the process of curating a survey of female artists from India and Australia for Indian patron/collector/ dealer Dilip Narayanan, his Gallery OED Cochin and partner Sanjay Tulsyan, I recall a recent exchange with one of the participating artists, Sangeeta Sandrasegar. Sangeeta, when relating her own experience of working in India, perfectly summarises an example of the cultural bias that I needed to address before formalising the framework for this exhibition. She said:

> Since I did the last project and trip, I have begun to think that the hard or challenging part of such projects like you are working on (and the recent works I made), is that component, when you are in Australia working within the Australian mentality and process of correspondence and expectation and juggling that with the working process /methodology of an Indian etiquette.[1]

To say that I have struggled with this and my own American enculturation would be an understatement, even though my ties with India are multifaceted. I have had to let go of the formal structures I normally put in place in managing such a project, that don't work in the context for 'this' show.

Despite having worked in Los Angeles promoting South Asian contemporary art for state Democratic lobbyists and private collectors, and despite my immersion in Indian culture via a partner Vedic/tantric pundit, Sir Chandan Ghosh, nothing prepared me for the complexity and reward of mounting this show. The full title of this exhibition is *Re-Picturing the Feminine: New and Hybrid Realities in the Artworld – A Survey of Indian and Australian Contemporary Female Artists*. These same fellow artists have given tremendous support to this project, rallying to include this show in amongst *Documentas*, biennales, residencies, et cetera.

When I was presented this platform, the premise was for a show inspired by the ideas of feminist Lucy Lippard. However, the stalwart imaginings of 'second-wave' feminist critical theory do not quite fit the climate for this exhibition. The exhibition is an official satellite event of the inaugural Kochi-Muzuris Biennale, a much anticipated undertaking in the South Indian city of Cochin. Cochin, or Kochi, is a city with a long history of cultural convergence. Contemporary Kochi, with its booming economy and high literacy, is a gateway for Indian nationals working in the Middle East, who earn their wealth in cities such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi and 'build enormous, brilliantly gaudy pastel palaces'[2] back in Kochi that are mostly unoccupied except for holidays and extended family. Kochi is a city with a well-worn liminality, a clever location for an international biennale. In this cultural mixing-pot, bringing together female artists under any banner requires a framework with a fusion of possibilities that reflects the practices and lives of the artists involved. In this vein, I was drawn to include the post-structural theories of author Donna Haraway.

Haraway concluded her much fêted essay, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the late Twentieth Century': 'Though both are bound in the spiral dance, I would rather be a Cyborg than a Goddess'.[3] For Haraway, this statement was a quasi-decree and an appeal to women everywhere to create new mythology. Haraway and a generation of women with her could no longer tolerate the finite spaces in society reinforced by prevailing archetypes and mythos; women had and have moved beyond them.

Into this equation enters the female artist, equipped with creative substance. Well over a decade after Haraway's appeal, female artists are developing unique and sophisticated *oeuvres* with visual languages that embrace pop culture and are, collectively, re-writing or creating new mythologies. These new gestures are self-determining and embrace the complexity of the contemporary lives of the women who make them, in the process providing new representations of feminine gendered identities. The exhibition taps into an emergent

1/ Sangeeta Sandrasegar, *And I see myself, flat, ridiculous a cut paper shadow*, 2010, 170 x 130 x 3cm, varying papers, watercolour, glitter, sequins, adhesive pottu; image courtesy the artist

2/ Chitra Ganesh, untitled work from *Delicate Line (Corpse she was holding): Her head in the Flames* series, 2009, portfolio of 11 screenprints which variously involve other print mediums; some also with metallic powder or glitter; printed/published by Brodsky Center for Innovative Editions, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey; Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York; image courtesy the artist

visual culture amongst female artists while also juxtaposing the seemingly diverse positions of Indian and Australian practitioners. Within the cross-cultural context of 'Gondwana', the artists in this exhibition are all, either directly or indirectly, making gestures toward visualising new mythologies, with a firm agency and awareness of how to navigate the art world terrain (in accordance with the original premise associated with Lippard's *Pink Glass Swan* essays[4]). The artists are all involved in pluralistic practices, weaving in networks of contemporary experience in an ever-evolving global culture. The exhibition also aims to highlight the strong connections between the artists involved, as more proof of a visual culture developed through the shared knowledge of female artists in all stages of their careers.

Nalini Malani has a remarkable career, an internationally acclaimed pioneer of women's and human rights. Nalini has not only created new mythology, she has re-written history. Geeta Kapur describes Nalini's sway, stating: 'Refusing to portray the roles that have limited and restricted women from reaching their potential, Malani has recast the representation of women in Indian society over the last four decades.'[5] I have personally felt the force and e/affect of Nalini's work for over a decade now; she is a powerful and ever-humble presence for many of the younger artists in this exhibition.

Nalini's work in *Re-picturing the Feminine* comprises two large works on paper, made during the build-up to her *D13* body of work in 2011. The images, titled *About Sign and Language: The time has come to Talk – I* and *II*, refer to a poem recited to Alice by Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Dee in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1872). Alice has been a recurring figure in Malani's work, used to question the political situation in India. Malani's renderings position 'Alice' in a 'wonderland' of chaos and political turmoil. Nalini's Alice is a girl who constantly forces the re-establishment of the order of things; she is a heroine protagonist who challenges the fixed ideals within the liminal worlds she inhabits, proof of the persuasive power of a 'little girl'.

The Asia Pacific's Kate Beynon has created a series of works specifically for this exhibition titled *Trans-Mythic Woman Warrior Series*. The works are displayed as a cluster and pay homage to Kate's original avatar 'Li Ji Warrior Girl', but move significantly beyond her in attitude and complexity. In *Transfigured Gorgon,* Kate continues to portray a multifaceted character in a hybrid reality – part-monster, part-woman; the figure with piercing green eyes is a re-imagined Gorgon. The Gorgons were the three monster sisters of Greco-Roman mythology, among whom the figure Medusa is most known. Reflecting on the Medusa myth, Kate imparts: 'My Medusa (Gorgon) only turns bigots to stone. If they can redeem themselves they might be lucky enough to change back to human form!'[6] Kate's *Transfigured Gorgon* articulates a unique place of cultural difference. In this space, the figure of the Gorgon challenges the viewer to meet her gaze, to confront, perhaps, parts of self in need of redeeming or reclaiming.

Redemption is not on offer for the character 'Surpanakha' in the three-channel silent video from India's famous Pushpamala N. Pushpamala explains: 'Indrajaala/ Seduction is based on the punishment of Surpanakha by cutting off her nose and ears, by the prince Lakshmana.'[7] *Surpanakha*, like Beynon's Gorgon, is a monster, a demoness that is punished for her dark powers. In this work, Pushpamala again assumes the role of the leading character; she plays the seductress in her

Pushpamala N., video stills from *Indrajaala/Seduction*, 2012, 3-channel video (silent, looped), 4.27min; from the body of work, *Avega – The Passion: The Drama of Three Women*, 2012; images courtesy the artist

chameleon style. 'Surpanakha' sways evocatively in circular motions. Her hypnotic gestures were inspired by an ethnographic film Pushpamala saw in Melbourne, an unusual Australian connection for a work based on one of the key Hindu texts, the *Ramayana*. The video deconstructs the original story in a present context that borrows from Western and Indian cinematic genre codes, the paintings of Ravi Varma, psychoanalysis and contemporary events.

More personal gestures are given by artists Sangeeta Sandrasegar, Sonia Khurana and Di Ball. Sangeeta's selected works are 'semi'-self-portraits, titled *And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut paper shadow* and *The Bush has ceased to weep, and when she smiles, she is a mistress not to be denied*. Completed in 2010, they mark the artist's homecoming to Australia. These works draw from a literary source (as Sangeeta often does) yet also gesture towards a personal mythology. For Sangeeta, identity is not a fixed position but instead a personal and self-reflective process of becoming or evolution. For fellow Australian artist Di Ball, the position of a non-fixed identity has played out in her adoption of multiple avatars in both performance and virtual spaces. For Di, who first entered the visual arts scene in Australia playing the part of the Goddess Kali in performances for Luke Robert's Pope Alice, physically travelling to the birthplace of Kali to create work for this exhibition also represents a homecoming of sorts.

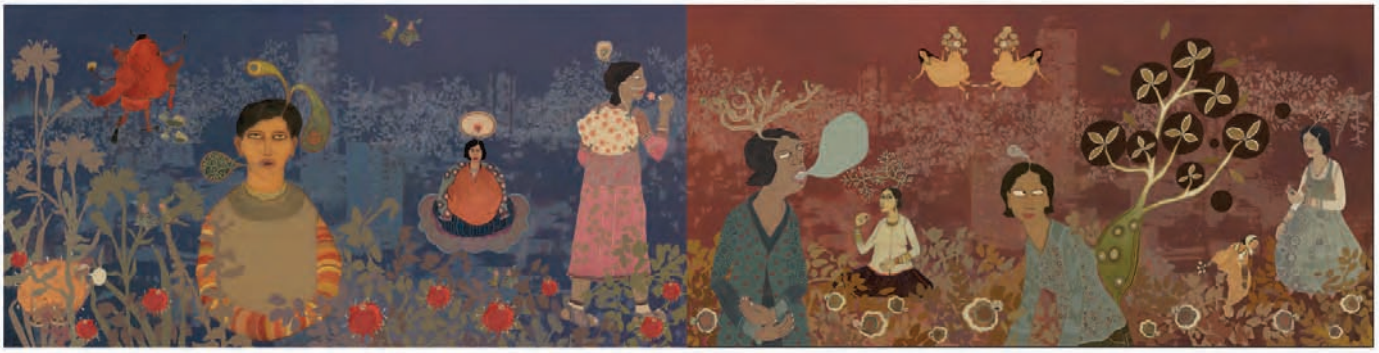
India's infamous and venerable Sonia Khurana famously hijacked the privileged male Indian gaze in her performance titled *Bird* (2000). Khurana continues to build a fascinating body of work that challenges traditional female stereotypes, creating in the process new and far more interesting ones. Her latest is the figure of the Somnambulist, which is explored in a multimedia installation including lightboxes and video projection. Sonia's Somnambulist is a series of self-portraits, derived from her performance practice; the figure of the somnambulist can more broadly represent a global contemporary condition, the restless passenger through so many time zones and destinations.

Personal connections with India impacting on identity are present in the works of Britain's Nicola Durvasula, America's Chitra Ganesh, and Australia's Mandy Ridley. Mandy has created luscious, quirky drawings which seem to parody her own image while at the same time place her in the multicultural fabric of an Indian terrain. Nicola Durvasula lived for ten years in India, married to an Indian national. She has explored the stereotypes of Westerners in the subcontinent; in order to navigate her complex existence she has assumed the character of a wandering artist, undeterred by borders or apparent differences. Durvasula's sculptures for this exhibition encapsulate this wandering artist's reverie in female forms that belong to the dolmens and dolomites of her ancient Britain yet are also evocative of the *yonis* and *lingams* from Tantric and Hindu sculpture. Chitra Ganesh is an American of Indian heritage, known for her sexually powerful female figures depicted in cartoon-like, pop culture forms that together create new visual mythology. This mythology is highly ironic and critical of traditional Indian and Western stereotypes like the 'Bride'.

While Chitra's goddesses and heroines won't be tied down, demanding the freedom to exercise their autonomy, India's Remen Chopra re-contextualises Western mythologies, and Queensland's Pat Hoffie revisits the bare-breasted 'princesses' of Kerala's past, redressing the 'herstory' of women in the Indian state. In bringing together the women in this exhibition, in this context, at this time, the following statement from Homi Bhabha seems appropriate in conclusion:

> ... 'in-between spaces' provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood –singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation ... [8]

1. Sangeeta Sandrasegar, personal communication, 13 October 2012.
2. Ranjana Steinruecke, in conversation with the author and Nicola Durvasula, at Gallery Mirchandani and Steinruecke, Mumbai, 5 October 2012.
3. Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in *Simians,*



clockwise from top left : 1/ Dhruvi Acharya, *Mumbai City*, 2009, Giclee print on archival canvas; image courtesy the artist

2 + 3/ Kate Beynon, *Transfigured Gorgon* and *Transcultural Spider Goddess*, from the *Trans-Mythic Woman Warrior* Series, 2012, each acrylic and Swarovski crystals on canvas, 40.5cm diameter; images courtesy the artist

Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature, Routledge, New York, 1991, pp.149-181.
4. Lucy Lippard, 'The Pink Glass Swan: Upward and Downward Mobility in the Art World', in L. Lippard, The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays on Feminist Art, The New Press, New York, 1995, pp. 117-127.
5. Geeta Kapur, *When was Modernism? Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, Tulika Books, New Delhi, 2000, p. 26.
6. Kate Beynon, personal communication, 5 October 2012.
7. Pushpamala Narasingarao, personal communication, 11 August, 2012.
8. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 219.

Re-Picturing the Feminine: New and Hybrid Realities in the Artworld – A Survey of Indian and Australian Contemporary Female Artists, curated by Marnie Dean, is showing at Gallery OED, Kochi, from 8 December 2012. Artists: Dhruvi Acharya, Di Ball, Kate Beynon, Laini Burton, Remen Chopra, Megan Cope, Marnie Dean, Nicola Durvasula, Simone Eisler, Chitra Ganesh, Fiona Hall, Pat Hoffie, Sonia Khurana, Nalini Malani, Monali Meher, Simrin Mehra-Agarwal, Pushpamala N., Benitha Perciyal, Sangeeta Sandrasegar, Mandy Ridley and Yvette 'Vexta'. galleryoed.com

Marnie Dean is an Australian visual artist with expertise in new genres, interdisciplinary practice, and South Asian Contemporary Art. Previously based in the USA and India, she has recently returned to Australia, and is a sessional teacher in the Department of Art Theory, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Brisbane: marnie.dean@live.com.au

ARTISTS' INSURANCE $230 as part of NAVA's Professional Membership
go to www.visualarts.net.au
NAVA
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE VISUAL ARTS LTD