

A look back, even as the show goes on

Project Cinema City offers a look at the past through the lens of the 21st century

Project Cinema City at the National Gallery of Modern Art is a quaint exhibit, or a series of exhibits that tries to capture some of the cultural, political and socio-economic changes India faced in the 20th century. The twist: all of that documentation happens while keeping in mind that this is a generation that no longer connects with all of that — a look at the past through a fresher lens, from the perspective of the 21st century.

As part of that project, a series of short films set in and around Mumbai are being screened at NGMA (the project will remain in situ at the museum till December 3, so there's still time to check them out if you haven't so far).

There's *Anna Sound Please*, directed by Madhavi Tangella, which explores illegal cinema shacks, the poor man's theatre. In an age where we find ourselves sneaking up to occupy the executive seats and plush



SHE'S BACK: Spectators at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Bangalore were treated to a walkthrough of Pushpamala N.'s 'Return of the Phantom Lady'. — PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

sofas in the lofty balconies of the chain multiplexes for in-theatre thrills, this is a rather brutal shake-down that prompts the reaction: people live like this?

Other notables are Shrikant Agawane's *Sin City*, a record of sorts, of the criminal elements in Mumbai; Richa Husing's *Director Painter Shri Baburao Laad Saheb*, about Baburao, who runs an acting school in a Dha-

ravi attic and Archana Hande's *Animation: Panorama of*, a caricature on life in the metropolis, among others.

Tale in pictures

However, all of that is still only Part 1 of what I went off to see. Recently, NGMA played host to Pushpamala N., visual artist and storyteller, known for her 'Phantom Lady' and her cheeky 'Native Wom-

en of South India: Manners & Customs'.

She took the audience on a walkthrough of her newer work, the 'Return of the Phantom Lady (Sinful City)' — starring the visual artist herself, back in her enthralling ensemble, in an attempt to save not only a young girl but also a theatre in Lalbagh from the clutches of Mumbai's notorious land mafia.

Although such a plot, presented in a noir, haunting Bombay, would have been conveyed better in film, Pushpamala's work suits the narrative. For one, as she says, the photos are more ambiguous, and allow the viewer to explore independent interpretations. Besides, there's really no need to explain the lengthy process that film goes through — that is, the hero goes somewhere, does something, but to get to that somewhere, he takes a bus/plane/car or simply walks.

Pushpamala's method of presenting such a narrative through photos gets rid of all the transitions; each photograph is an independent scene and for plot convenience, one simply assumes that the Phantom Lady got there at the right time.

Cut to the chase

One of the best photographs in the sequence is the 'chase scene': Phan-

tom Lady with girl in tow, chased by two ruthless goons, all four figures silhouetted against the commercial backdrop of Mumbai. It's a clichéd shot, which appears in almost every action flick you care to name; the protagonist (armed with nothing but a Macguffin) chased by any number of henchmen, set against a panorama that utterly dwarfs all players involved.

Another which stands out is when the heroine searches for a bomb in the theatre. The setting is amazingly powerful, darkening out all but the most important details — only her face is visible — emphasising the mood of the scene. One can easily make out the urgency in the Phantom Lady's gaze, this desperation that's driving her to uncover, and defuse, the villain's explosive solution.

The whole sequence reads like some old action/adventure flick (such as Indiana Jones — basically, forcing the protagonist into one tight corner after the other without rest or pause).

All of that is part of the script, since, according to the visual artist, the Phantom Lady's storyline is based on those old and time-tested gritty noir stories — all of the action, none of the nonsense.

JAYDEV NAIR