

Mumbai talkies

Project Cinema City looks at how the city and cinema have fed off each other over the last hundred years

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It is not the intention of *Project Cinema City: Research Art & Documentary Practices* to make catty, tabloid-style exposés on the lives and loves of Bollywoodwallahs. And trendy though it may be, it is also not its intention to historicise a golden era of Indian cinema.

This multi-disciplinary project focuses on the movies as a microcosm of Mumbai, and is a timely commemoration of one hundred years of Indian cinema. On May 3, 1913, a screening of Dadasaheb Phalke's silent film *Raja Harishchandra* at Coronation Cinema, Mumbai, inaugurated Indian cinema.

Mumbai and cinema are nothing if not twinned. Consequently, cinema too has its own sweatshops and migration patterns, which have thus far remained largely unexplored.

Madhusree Dutta, curator-producer, *Project Cinema City*, says that it all started with Reshma, one of the characters in her 2006 docu-drama, *Seven Islands and a Metro*. Reshma is a stunt-woman who earns more working as a body double than in an original role. In the docu-drama, she announces, "We get Rs 2,000 per day to hide our faces and Rs 1,000 to show them." In doing so she shores up the economics of the invisible in cinema.

"A substantial part of the project engages with the hidden faces, hidden spaces and hidden processes in the city that are related through an invisible network and culminate in manufac-

turing cinema," says Dutta. "I was interested in taking film studies beyond narratives."

Fittingly for a project that is a cross between urban and film studies, *Cinema City* is a collaboration between Majlis and KRVIA. Majlis is an interdisciplinary arts initiative, whereas KRVIA is the acronym for Kamla Raheja Vidyaniidhi Institute for Architecture and Environmental Studies.

Dutta, also founder-director of Majlis, was first on board. Soon after followed co-curator and artist Archana Hande, architect Rohan Shivkumar and design head and artist Kausik Mukhopadhyay. Steered by the Fab Four, this

Atul Dodiya's large paintings are full of city motifs — from station signs and cracked surfaces to villains

sprawling interdisciplinary project has, over the years and along the way, picked up several fellow travellers in the form of architects, academics, filmmakers and artists. Like any ambitious production, *Project Cinema City* has been years — four in this case — in the making. Unlike other ambitious film projects, the crew are happy to discuss, debate and share their work. From 2008 to 2012 and from Mumbai to Berlin to Pune, *Cinema City* has been debated, discussed and presented at makeshift exhibitions. Although



STOP OR MY MOM WILL SHOOT: 'Return of Phantom Lady' by Pushpamala N forms part of the show that will soon travel to Delhi

some of us may have already encountered the project's past lives, the NGMA show brings the real McCoy back home to Mumbai. And the next stop, Delhi's NGMA, is not too far either.

In its current form, the exhibition consists of 13 artworks and 10 films. The exhibition consists of two broad categories of work. Artists such as Pushpamala N, Archana Hande, Anant Joshi, Shreyas Karle and Atul Dodiya have worked on individual projects. At the other end are a bunch of collaborative works by Avijit Mukul Kishore, Paromita Vohra, Rafeeq Ellias, Mamta Murthy and others. Mukhopadhyay points out, "Take for instance *The Western Suburb*, a video installation on sweatshops of cinema. The work consists of 13 monitors and projections on acrylic sheets. While the idea for the projection on acrylic and the general design of the installation was mine, the videos are by Avijit Mukul Kishore, Mamta Murthy and Rikhav Desai with found footage

from the Majlis archive."

This longstanding project has impacted the practices of those who've participated in it. To begin with, Mukhopadhyay was no great cineaste and Hande wasn't terribly fussed on the idea of collaborations. Hande explains, "I'm not opposed to collaborations but no matter how collaborative the work, one person always has the final say. *Cinema City* has been different though. So while some like Madhusree have contributed to its theoretical backbone, others, such as myself, have approached the subject visually. There's been enough room for everyone."

Of Panorama and Of Panorama: a Riding Exercise, Hande's animation and interactive installation respectively, address the politics of landscape in films. "Indians are not big travellers, so songs were meant to show landscapes, and through these landscapes one can deduce many things," Hande says. "Like the time when

Kashmir was replaced by Switzerland. When this first happened, for a long time filmmakers continued to identify Switzerland as Kashmir. Then came a time when Switzerland was finally acknowledged, and now there seems to be a gradual return to Kashmir."

While Mukhopadhyay has only just developed a curiosity for cinema, Dodiya's long abiding interest in the form and the city of Mumbai is well known. Not too many people, however, know about the decisive early call Dodiya had to take. As a student, Dodiya was torn between studying filmmaking and art. It was a close call; the latter won if only because it did not require any of the elaborate infrastructure necessary for filmmaking. Consequently, *Project Cinema City*, which afforded Dodiya the perfect opportunity to conflate cinema and city, was accepted with little hesitation. For over a year, Dodiya worked on 14 large-scale paintings — together they are a 100 feet across — titled *Fourteen Stations*. This new suite of paintings returns to a motif that he first used in a 1981 painting titled *Homage to Ghatkopar* — the bold signage that announces the names of stations on platforms. "For the years that I was at the Sir J J School of Art, I would take the Central line from Ghatkopar to VT. The journey had a total of 13 stations, to which I've added a fourteenth station called Atul," explains the ever-playful Dodiya. The fourteenth station first appeared in a painting in 1984. Incidentally, Atul, apart from being Dodiya's name, is also an industrial village in Gujarat. In the new works, station signage is juxtaposed against the villains of Indian cinema, cracked surfaces, ambiguous paint clots and other motifs.

"On these daily journeys to art school, resolutions to personal dilemmas were combined with the cityscape and the many film posters and hoardings that lined the platforms," says Dodiya. This easy melding of everyday art, city and cinema is the fulcrum of *Project Cinema City*.

Cinema City is on display at NGMA, Colaba, Mumbai from May 20 to June 29

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