

# FORT GANSEVOORT

## ASIAN ART NEWS

### Zoya Cherkassky at the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion for Contemporary Art

Gil Goldfine, January/February, 2007

The artist maintains that geometry has been in Indian art all along. He says that if the figures from the *Mandalas* and *Thankas* were removed, what would remain is a diagram. That is what he calls Tantra art.

Uma Prakash

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#### Arpita Singh at Vadehra Art Gallery

There is a whimsical flavor to Arpita Singh's work in her recent exhibition entitled *Picture Postcard* that can be misleading. Her sensitive and perceptive art is layered with cryptic allusion, even as she includes suggestions of the world's injustice and despair in her narrative. Her oils, watercolor, and sketches suggest a world that is timeless and tranquil, realized in earthy colors. Her world is seemingly overrun by daggers, guns, cars, arrows, airplanes, deracinated palms, and separated heads, all of which point to an extraordinarily violent world. Her distinctive working methods translate her observations into powerful, universal images. She lures the viewer into her traumatic account of the world by combining childlike innocence, inspired by folk art, with sophisticated insight. There is an element of joy and wonder in her work that is reminiscent of that which is found in the art of Marc Chagall.

Singh's awareness of the despair and violence in the world is clearly seen in *Watching*. This work shows men in black suits sitting on three rows of chairs, all staring in one direction, waiting in anticipation. The lettering on the blue background is taken from the judgment of Best Bakery of the Gujerat riots case as reported in the newspapers. The artist questions the brutal, frenzied zeal during the communal riots by subtly portraying the shock of the experience on the taut faces of the men.

Singh also reinterprets Indian mythology in her own special visual language. Singh uses oils to tell the story *In*

*Thirty-six Clouds: Yudhishtira Approaching Heaven*. Prince Yudhishtira is sitting astride a plane, followed by a dog, going to heaven. While he is made welcome, the dog is not. Yudhishtira refuses to abandon the faithful dog, and turns down the offer made by the gods, thus establishing compassion as his true religion. The blue sky is spotted with white clouds in the background, which suggest floating.

Singh's connection with the Mahabharat is profound. In the triptych *Whatever is Here* the artist places blind king Dhritrashtra in the middle of a war zone. Unable to see, he uses his charioteer Sanajay to reveal the progress of the battles surrounding him. Singh adds a contemporary flavor by giving Sanajay a pair of binoculars. Repetition is a must for Singh. There are many horses, many men striding, and many war widows on a pink background. In this painting, Singh has explored working on a large scale with great compositional skill.

In what appears to be a family picture, *The Seabore*, Singh injects uncanny mystery into a simple scene. Here nine men are standing while four women sit on red chairs on a boat and below them are motifs of palms and custard apples. The white boat sits on the horizon atop a blue sea and appears to be transferring these figures to the shore. The question in the viewer's mind is simple: who are these men and women, family or merely figments of her imagination?

Again a sense of power and mystery is to be found in *Woman Smoking* (2005). The image of a powerful woman dressed in black and holding a cigarette fills the painting. In the background Singh fills her spaces with people, animals, and flowers. Here the artist seems to be searching either for myths and aspects of human struggle or merely for the world that lies between the lightness and darkness. Singh has always maintained that she finds it difficult to use black, as it lacks the vibrancy, hence here her mixtures with indigo or brown.

There is a lighter side to Singh's art and that is found in her watercolors that are gentler, less dense. She uses only indigo or Indian red. A good example of her gentler nature is *Short Story X* portraying a sensuous nude lolling languidly against a pink background in which there are visions of the desert and a camel painted.

Uma Prakash

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#### ISRAEL

Tel Aviv

#### Zoya Cherkassky at the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion for Contemporary Art

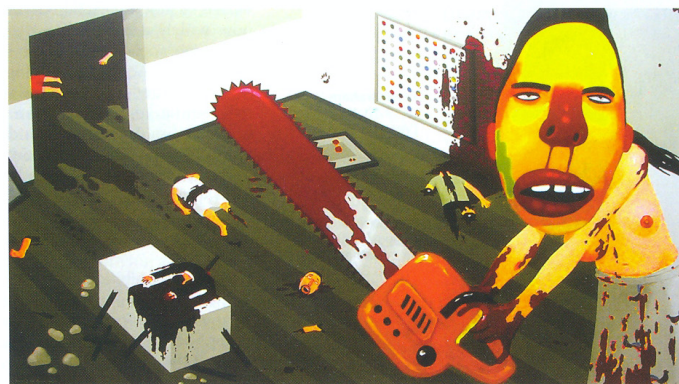
Violence, brutality, and human degradation have been on the world's cultural agenda for generations. From Bosch,

Goya, and Sweeney Todd to Hollywood horror movies, one should not be astonished by Zoya Cherkassky's paintings that hammer at museums for contemporary art, secular institutions transformed into the new cathedrals for our time while housing icons that set postmodernist glass and concrete spaces into motion.

Mad black dogs with exposed fangs framing salivating red tongues, apparently chasing an unidentified intruder through the halls of a fabricated museum, are as shocking as a female mass murderer wielding a chain saw amidst the blood and gore of a dismembered public. And, to the dismay of several onlookers, an enormous pile of human waste filling a picture gallery is the kind of narratives presented by Cherkassky (b. Kiev, 1976) in her virulent frontal attack in an exhibition entitled *Action Painting*.

Cherkassky's innocent, yet acerbic doll-like sculptures exhibited last year have been restyled into a community of two-dimensional, unimpressive, characters embodied in a calculated cross section of society, including an intellectual, a spinster, student, tourist, and mother and child figures, all plying her artificial museum. These static *animé* illustrations have lost the sarcasm and biting wit that made them outstanding social comments in the past and every frozen *mise en scène* is viewed from above as if being spied upon by a divine spirit.

*Action Painting No.1, 2, and 3*, a tongue-in-cheek con-



Zoya Cherkassky, *Like There is no Tomorrow* (detail), 2005, acrylics.



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nection to the New York School of the 1950s, have provided the curator with the exhibition's title. Each composition includes the same group of people, albeit in different viewing positions, and the same artistic references by Anthony Caro, Clyfford Still, and Damien Hirst. But on the canvas' surface Cherkassky has created an abstract pour-and-drip image in grimy mustard, black, and powder blue that are as much industrial as they are Jackson Pollack. For those who consider the museum a postmodern place of worship, then these particular works are her most iconoclastic.

Another bizarre painting, influenced by the pulp film of 1958, is *Attack of the 50 Ft. Woman*, a weird handling of a comic subject that shows gallery-goers ogling a gigantic female bum who, according to curator Ellen Ginton, is an object of veneration and whose presence elicits panic, wonderment, and awe. Seeing only cropped buttocks and genitalia, with panties hugging her thighs, the museum visitors have turned from the art on the walls simply

because they are confronted by something lots more mesmerizing. Cherkassky axiom is: once presented with a more luscious alternative to confusing bits and pieces of high art, low art is preferable.

If the Taliban can physically destroy the cultural patrimony of others with one big blast, why not accept the idea that contemporary artists can aggressively challenge the virtues of the hands that feed them. Cherkassky, of course, is delivering her diatribe from the floor of the museum. She has little to lose.

Gil Goldfine

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## NEW ZEALAND

Nelson

### *On Display* at The Suter Te Aratoi o Whakatu

This could have been just another 'hanging storage' summer-time filler



Fred Graham (b. 1928), *Whakatu (Vessel)*, 1997. Kauri, metal and acrylic paint, 1580 x 605 x 325 mm. Collection of the Suter Te Aratoi o Whakatu. On one level the sculpture can be read as a synthesis of Bishop Suter's robes and mitre and a Maori waka (canoe). On another, the robust Kauri form recalls the depletion of indigenous forests by early settlers.



Jane Zusters (b. 1951), *Art Hero*, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 1785 x 2575 mm.

exhibition, but *On Display*, a relatively small exhibition of 44 works, effectively surveyed more than a century of dynamic shifts in the arts and their communities. Curated by Charlotte Reith, a recent graduate in art curatorship at Melbourne University and guest curator at The Suter Te Aratoi o Whakatu, admirably demonstrated why galleries and their collections are forums of engagement and education—vital parts of a community and not just historical and/or 'selective' arenas.

Whereas in the past, galleries were perceived, almost without question, as store-houses of (predominantly Western) national treasures, increasingly these establishments, their collections, and modes of display have become much more interactive arenas. Now, in order to function effectively, galleries can no longer be run as exclusive or unquestioned shrines or 'innocent' white precincts without agendas. Display—who and what is included or excluded—is now widely acknowledged as a dynamic social, political, and cultural economy. In order to be relevant and genuinely representative, galleries are becoming more inclusive and expansive, demonstrating how and why acquisitions are made and subsequently displayed. These were some of the issues scrutinized by Reith through *On Display*.

The exhibition was divided into six sections. In each of these time-frames a chair metaphorically signaled something of the design shifts in the wider socio-political era—a suc-

cinct and accessible reference. However, it was the physical grouping and selection of the paintings, prints, and sculptures themselves that divulged much about the complex relationship between art and society and how art is accommodated, or not, within society, in general, and in galleries, in particular.

Within the 'white cube' of the Sargood Gallery, Reith created a small maroon U-shaped Victorian alcove full of gilt edges. Within this, portraits of *Hamiora* (1901) by Charles Frederick Goldie (1870–1947) and *Huria Matenga* (1909) by Gottfried Lindauer (1839–1926), immediately caught the eye. Literally opening the exhibition (and in advance of portraits of missionaries and colonial pioneers), the positioning of these works was strategic. It conveyed not only the historic importance of *Hamiora* and *Huria Matenga* to the Nelson community, but also communicated the *mana* of Maori as the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand. The prominence awarded to the portraits served not so much as a record of that period, but more as a rejoinder to the Western art perspective in general with its historic habits of appropriation of and/or exclusivity towards non-Western cultures and art forms. The *Hamiora* and *Huria Matenga* portraits were sited interrogatively at the beginning of this exhibition and the enquiry it opened up concerning the power and parameters of representation.

Within the wider white 'U' space, the interrelationship among the six sections—rather