

Ways of Seeing **Any Which Ways**

By

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What does a way of seeing, an engagement with the aesthetics of art and an encounter with creativity seem to entail? The exhibition with a new body ofart works by 25 young artists from diverse backgrounds, schools of thought, art practise and regions of the country attempts to explore their many different ways of seeing. They make an interesting and unusual group together, though each one of them has his/her individual oeuvre. While some of them are reclusive others are more articulate, some minimalists others profusely projectionists. But given that they all share a common historical juncture with its inherent cultural associations, in current time and space, it would be fascinating to see if and how this has impacted on their creative outpourings and their ways of seeing things. In a complex and mass media fashioned and globally networked contemporary society, where individuals have very little time to stand and stare, we will re-examine this question within its historical genesis and try to see and re interpret it in a current context. Are there certain set principles of seeing or can art be viewed in any which way? What are the different ways of seeing an art work, for its creator on the one hand and its spectator on the other?

It is a large and culturally diverse world that we inhabit. Open to multiple views and interpretations, it presents us with many different ways of seeing artistic creations. Questions around history, society, politics, culture, gender, race, science, philosophy, economics and a whole lot of other complex and inter related issues, which play a catalytic role in shaping our ways of seeing, need to be examined in order to understand the context. To start with, we need to define what constitutes a work of art. Broadly speaking an art work is essentially an image, a visual expression of the creator's inner feelings but it is also his/her response to the world around, that tickles the mind, both the creator's and the viewer's at a sensory, emotional as well as intellectual level. And how do we explain seeing? Is seeing the physical process of setting the eye on something or is there more to it? Does it also involve observing, perceiving, imagining and absorbing? According to Longman Dictionary of the English Language seeing is 'to perceive by the eye', to look at, to have experience of, to undergo, to find out, to ascertain, to form a mental picture of , to imagine...It is about an experience. We see with our eyes that receive the flow of light rays that invade the retina that simulate meaningful forms that cause sensations and that are absorbed differently by each individual depending on his/her location, time and mood. Our vision depends on our surroundings and circumstances both natural and increasingly now, as life is getting more and more mechanised, man and machine made too.

Historical Context

In our classical texts and treatises art and its aesthetics are elucidated within an abstract system, as some thing pleasurable *rasa*, a spiritual experience, unique to each. The *Natyashastra* and *Shilpashastra* are repositories of Indian cannon that describe, prescribe and

analyse systems and philosophies of creativity within a rational understanding of the concept of beauty, aesthetics, ethics and metaphysics. There are no sharp distinctions within each category and these thoughts are treated as intrinsic and natural essences that help human beings attain absolute delight *ananda*, fundamental knowledge *jnana* and ultimate freedom *moksha*. Art has continued to be accepted as a basic human instinct and an outcome of an artist's urge to create triggered by his flight of imagination and his desire to communicate. It has been described as a total human activity by early modern thinkers Rabindranath Tagore and Ananda Coomaraswamy.

The onlooker or spectator, the *rasik* who sucks or takes in the juice *rasa*, plays an equally crucial part in this endeavour, which unlike an ordinary physical act or emotion, is more about the involvement of one's inner mind and imaginative faculties. Indian saint-philosopher Bharata describes this concept in *Natyasastra* which is subsequently elaborated by Abhinavagupta in the 11th century. It has been further elucidated as a set of triple principles; 'determinants *vibhava*, consequents *anubhava* and transitory mental states *vyabhicharin*'. Together they secrete what is best described as an extra ordinary phenomenon of heavenly experience *ananda*, a combination of *bhava* and *rasa*.

There is a similar reference in western art history to the human faculty for seeing and looking at things with imagination, reflection, elaboration and delight laying a special emphasis on a personal language, private sensibility and individual circumstances. To quote John Berger from 'Ways of Seeing' a BBC film series and book that has been the inspiration for the focus and title of this exhibition,

"It is seeing, that establishes our place in the surrounding world, we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. Thus, from the very beginning, words are a reduction of images, an attempt to capture through language, the essence of something that will inevitably elude that attempt."

John Berger refers to this ability, the use of words, visuals and symbols, as a means not just to communicate with each other, but also to one self. As one see things, he/she begins to imagine, reflect, manipulate, enlarge, elaborate, alter, reshape and reinterpret his/her own inner ideas and emotions in the privacy of one's mind and heart as and when one likes and within the context of his/her personal associations. It is this faculty and capability that distinguishes man/woman from animals. J. Bronoswki describes this as a special human ability to "see ourselves in a thousand situations which are not present to us, and never may be" and this foresight is a distinct human characteristic and attribute that gives us a freedom from environment and to project ourselves into many different imaginary situations. He illustrates this by citing the case of a child's play that allows it to frolic in a fantasy world, as well as continue to experiment in rational reality, as they play he-man or she-mother, influenced by the typecasts of established notions and rituals around adult life.

Colours & Contours of Contemporary Canvas

The variety, vibrancy and colours of the current visual arts scenario confront us with different manifestations in varied disguises at all times and levels and in diverse situations and contexts. The invention of still photography followed by movie camera, graphics, television and now internet and digital technology have revolutionised our ways of seeing. It is not only the human eye but also the focal lens or view finder of machines; cameras, both still and movie ones, computers or robotic devices that can 'see' things and images. There is a subtle and important difference though in their ways of seeing. In the case of mechanical devices the seeing or its manipulation is limited to what has been pre-programmed as machines lack faculties of imagination and ideas, which only human beings are endowed with. Any which way of seeing for men and women is often a manifold experience, unrestricted and unmatched in its potential and scope. What one gets is what one is able to see and make of seeing, which in turn is determined by an individual's creativity, imagination and intelligence that enable him/her to see much more than what meets the eye.

Creative works of art are unique and precious, as there exists, only one of each kind in its original shape and form. In contrast there are other works, more easily and instantly accessible in large-scale multiple reproductions and representations, available virtually through the internet, television, cinema, advertising and other modes of mass media. The impact of this plethora of visuals that seems to have been triggered by an over dose of popular, packaged and standardized images, has in some ways impacted on our mental frame resulting in changes in our focus, sight line and ways of seeing. On the positive side it has exposed us to a whole range of different types of images and ways of looking at them. It has taught us a new visual language and vocabulary that has expanded our ability to decode symbols and visuals. The picture has come into our homes and hearts and is here to stay. Most images can be duplicated and downloaded with a simple click of a mouse. There is a democratisation of visual language and information can be shared and transferred at a break neck speed. The monopoly of the elite in this arena has been broken, as people from any region, race or religion or for that matter members of any group, field or class can see and recreate art which is beginning to be seen as a 'part of the apparatus of human life', thanks to the revolution in communication and media.

There is another side to the issue that presents a different picture. The overdose of popular images, often used repeatedly, seems to have blunted people's ability to see through good versus bad, real versus virtual and original versus fake. The trappings seem to have become more important than the central image or picture. A degradation of environment and distortion of our mental frame seem to impair one's vision and sensibility. Perhaps we see what is included in the picture all right, but fail to note what has been deliberately left out or debarred from our vision and mental frame. This act of hype or hide is best summed up in the currently used I T acronym WYSIWYG -What you see is what you get.

See Through

Factors which according to John Berger impact on our ways of seeing include the cultural context, location, timing, emotional quotient and display or presentation of the subject and the object. The way each individual responds to a given visual stimulus is different and determined

by each one's specific cultural background, location in terms of space and class, surroundings—what is happening around him/her at that time, the instant in hand in terms of its timing, or the mood of the moment. Even for the same individual a given image is likely to have a different meaning and impact depending on what has gone just before or after the experience or exposure. The sight of an elaborately adorned interior that looks inviting around festive times, begins to appear incongruous and disturbing for the same individual at a tragic turn of events. The fulsome figure of 2nd century sculpture *Shalabhanjika* is revered as a Goddess by the Hindus, admired by other Indians for its beauty, where as the early European visitors to India saw it as merely a stylised stone figure. Beauty, as they say, is in the eyes of the beholder.

Seeing something in a given frame of time, space, environment and mind for the first time or scanning it again and repeatedly, for a short while or giving it a long concentrated look also impacts on one's ability to take it in. Often objects are seen or viewed not as what they are or were made or meant to be, but what they have become and how they are seen and used and where in what context or light. The symbols art works carry also entail another layer of meaning which could be obvious or hidden and work differently for each person or group. This is illustrated by the religious significance attached to phallic stones worshipped as *Shiva Linga* in temples all over the country and instances of innocent rural folk offering fruits, flowers and coins in reverence to the make believe performers of the roles of Rama and Krishna in theatres screening or showing films or plays based on religious epics such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

Human beings think visually when negotiating through a difficult path or a complex issue. There is a form even in abstract ideas in art, a creative act which involves the use of hand and mind in perfect unison. Niharranjan Ray suggests that for a work of art "its structural organisation, formal arrangement, its logical principles of proportion, balance, harmony etc" though important are not significant enough. What is more crucial is its entity as a unified coherent image. 'Art' is seen as an object involving creative skills where as 'Craft' is something primarily driven by technical virtuosity. A related idea is propagated by E H Gombrich in terms of the psychology of pictorial representation as an inter play between the eye and art, that declines as one grows older and tries to re-create reality and focus on realism rather than work from one's imagination.

An individual's ability to manipulate symbols is the spring of creativity and art. The differences in perspective stem from one's cultural roots and routes and they in turn determine one's ways of seeing. No two human beings, not even identical twins, see things quite the same way. Each one takes the picture for what it does to him/her, in the privacy of one's mind and heart, internalising and seeing it for oneself, connecting things, drawing analogies and in the process claiming its ownership. The physical proximity of objects can also modify their visual appearance and we see this clearly manifested in works of installation and performance art that acquire a new look and meaning with each change of location. It is also evident in high tech display designs that have captured the landscape as well the mindscape of our mass media driven contemporary art scenario.

We also carry associations and burdens of memory, history, selfhood, environment, status, emotions, prejudices and a great deal else that affects the way we see and perceive things;

impacting on our point of view in the process. As these factors begin to colour our imagination we start to see through things and ameliorate the image giving it our own distinct angle and perspective. Seeing is like multi tasking involving a combination of contextualisation, unravelling, demystification, experiencing and absorption. It also involves rewinding, recalling, reminding, restructuring, re-imagining and refocusing.

Scanning Artists' Personal Settings

The collage of images in the exhibition explores the interplay between what one sees and what one knows, or believes one knows, from the participating artists' dual perspective as creators and spectators within the context of arts and aesthetics. Their vision is focussed on their personal encounters with life and its surroundings, as we gaze at them unravelling the complexities of today's global societies and what it means to each one of them. They unwind their emotions and unfold their desires, baring their hearts to express feelings of joy and pain and articulate their concerns shaped by personal experiences, preferences and circumstances within a contemporary social and political context. The artists' authored statements published in the relevant sections of the catalogue are their own varied ways of seeing that allow us a peep into the inner sanctum of their mind. The response below is my way of seeing these artistic creations. What you the viewer or the *rasik* makes of it is another integral part of the whole process of seeing. Who ever and in which ever way, looks at this new body of art works, it is essentially about ways of seeing and about cultural studies with a shifting focus.

The politics of strife ridden societies and struggles of life seem to have drawn in the attention of many artists. There is in the show, **Veer Munshi's** diptych painting of a man displaced from his home land, seen naked and empty handed, except for some bitter sweet memories at the political turn of events despite the involvement of legendary figures in the frame, evocatively bringing home the truth and struggle of uprooted communities. In contrast **Kriti Arora's** protestations depict angst, as her workers, women and warriors with their multi layered oeuvre can be seen staring at us in anger. **Bindu Mehra** who has narrowed on the futility of war in much of her work seems to voice her concern about the toy culture of our contemporary society in one of her works in the exhibition. A lantern that shows light and hope in the second work appears to offer a better option for all any day. **T V Santosh's** colourful composition of a mutilated hand or tool whatever you see it as, attempts to awaken our consciousness about the futility of war that can not be justified under any circumstances by anyone at any time or any where.

There is also a search for meaning of life and its changing surroundings. Contemplation and self introspection is the focus of **Chandra Bhattacharjee's** two works in the show. The two paintings by **Manish Modi**, focus on the early morning chore of reading newspaper, and in the process bring to our attention two contrasting views and the associations they evoke, a nostalgic one of an old man sitting on a bench in a park facing vintage cars and intricately patterned drawings that perhaps reflect the churning that goes on his mind, while in the second frame, our eyes shift indoors to empathise with the younger man, possibly beginning to feel burnt out due to his fast paced life, dreaming of an expansive outdoor green. **G R Iranna** seems

to have culled his amazing figure with larger than life legs from ideas and techniques is an interesting synthesis of fiction and reality.

The artists have also reflected on the impact of new technology and globalisation on man. **Baiju Parthan** draws the viewer's attention to the virtual reality of our IT driven life today that revolves around what he calls 'cryptic computer codes'. The words in his frame conjure up images that do not physically exist in front of us but belong to a cyberspace. **Apurva Desai's** work with lines, contours and broken objects that assume twisted and robotic figures is a disconcerting manipulation and projection of a reality of industrial waste re arranged for the viewer. **Riyas Komu** in his archival prints of Blood Red Series in digital form confronts us with views of the global city of New York, its high rise buildings and world of restaurants.

There is a social history in the making in some of the artists' ways of seeing. **Chintan Upadhyay's** photographic series of male images with a sense of self-deprecating humour looks like a spoof on the thriving marriage market, equally pervasive and a leveller for rural and urban India. The social sanction for sexual play that it licenses and people's hidden desires and sexual preferences can also be seen on display in this work. There is a female gaze surveying the scene with a watchful glare in the work of **Shivani Aggarwal** and **Bharati Kapadia**, who create art using fabric, paint, thread, embellishments and other material, associated generally with women. Their art works, each in her own different way, resonate with concepts around tussles between a woman's traditional role as a nurturer and her contemporary urge for freedom from bonds, as they wish to assert their individual 'identities' in this new 'supersonic' age. **Bose Krishnamachari** seems to present us in his characteristically subversive way a colourful painting about absurdities of human life where the exteriors and interiors are seldom in synch.

A search for roots and a desire for co existence of the old with the new is implied in **Nita Thakore's** double framed canvases. There is a conscious connecting of our contemporary life and heritage together with wit and humour in figures painted in miniature style that are seen carrying a mobile phone in one, data quest in another and a display of the latest models of cars in the others! The two works by **Manisha Gera Baswani** present us with another view of the subtle link between our history and modernity. The night bird perched under the dark skyline within the metallic gouache and surrounded by intricately drawn floral patterns in one painting and the towering shower peeping from above the curtain with a play of hide and seek in the other frame seem to resonate with the Pichwai tradition of paintings impregnated with a touch of fun and contemporaneity.

A touch of sensitivity and sensuousness is evident in the work of **Pampa Panwar** whose colourist palette is about sights, sounds and feel of objects and their strong under currents of associations with nature and the regular rhythm of day and night together with the annual cycle of seasons. The ripened mangoes and the umbrella covered dark blue skyline, resonate with miniature tradition of painting of *Barhamasa*. There is a sneak and comic display in **Yunus Khimani's** partially covered faces with wind blown edges or crumbled or blurred or differently framed pictures. **Prasanta Sahu** looks at the act of seeing and touching through the visual trappings of modernity and its clash with class structures as we see his bare footed man

walking on a thorny or wired ground. The eye as the focal lens is the centre of his attention in his other painting.

S. Gopinath's sculptures in mixed media present a manipulation of the visuals conjuring up images, some that are based on hard realities of life such as scarcity and depletion of natural resources like water turning into marketable commodities, and others such as shells and lotus which are seen as springs for life. **Ravi Kumar Kashi** seems to enjoy a play of words in the painted images, in which he combines parts of his photographic work with alphabets to bring together the seen with the unseen. **Heeral Trivedi** presents us with a visual treat of the same object seen from different angles, some in a double act, with a psychoanalytic perspective. There is a fairy like charm and an expression of a desire to fly high and free to another land of our dreams.

In 'Bubbles of thoughts' juxtaposing a mix of images from different time and space **Arunanshu Chowdhury** presents us with ironies of present day kitsch, a bullock cart jostling for space with a finely laid dining arrangement- wine bottles, glasses and fruit bowl in one and rail or machine parts with twinkling lights and bulbs in another, both frames overcast with clouds possibly of doubt. In **Jagdish Chintala's** brightly painted highly stylised papier-mâché sculptures, a man and a woman, wearing an interesting mix of pop art deco and traditional toy making techniques, we see kitsch turning on its head as a comment on false social posturing in our lives today. **Reena Saini Kallat** in her dense series of nine small circular works all of which are within a rectangular frame seems to make a dig at current political players and happenings disguised as historical characters and information dressed up and coded in somewhat incongruous theatrics to jog our memories and consciousness as do spin doctors.

This substantial body of new work specially created in response to the theme is about seeing through things and images to decode the symbols and infer various interpretations and meanings, which Norbert Lynton claims is a self justifying truth about art. The images, comments and interpretations provided by the artists direct our gaze in different directions adding other dimensions to our ways of seeing and experiencing their work. Events are caricatured, emotions expressed, political issues raised and environmental concerns voiced through a rich spread of visuals, images and symbols some in abstract form, others narrative or in landscapes, digital prints, conceptual frame or art in other garbs. Whatever their size, shape, colour, technique or form; we see these art works for what they do to us as we try to appreciate and understand them, churning backwards and forwards, in bits and pieces, and the images begin to move and speak to us. A picture we realise is worth a thousand words, and there are many different ways of seeing.

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19.08.2005