

Review

THE CRITICAL STATE OF VISUAL ART IN NEW YORK

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Subodh Gupta

Bose Pacia Modern through June 26

Yuri Kuper

Serge Sorokko Gallery through June 26

By STEVE MUMFORD

TWO EXHIBITIONS OF WORK by foreign-born artists which opened last week, one Indian, the other Russian, feature artwork created within a distinctly Western contemporary art format. Subodh Gupta of New Delhi combines painting with installation, which allows him to create assemblages of images that seem partly foreign and partly universal.

Yuri Kuper, on the other hand, makes paintings with collaged elements that come out of what might be called textural Minimalism — the sort of work pioneered by Antoni Tàpies and Anselm Kiefer.

The question of how artists from former Communist countries or developing nations come to grips with Western modernism and Post-modernism is an interesting one. India remained largely apart from developments in modernism in the visual arts, and Russia, which pioneered many of these very developments up until 1920, was subsequently shut off from the West for several generations of artists.

From the perspective of an ambitious artist anywhere in the world, what we call Western art is the only game in town. Attempts to revive traditional or vernacular art styles such as Persian miniatures or Japanese wood block prints simply become gimmicks to add to the international Post-modern stew. Art done outside this context can't shake its status as Outsider Art in the West — not the rubric within which most artists with international ambitions want their work to be classified.

Like MTV or *Baywatch*, Western art trends are closely if warily watched by artists around the world. Strongholds

of vernacular cultural expression like India's famous *Bollywood* film industry seem destined to be absorbed into Western-style film making, with the increased exportability of Hollywood action movies.

Bose Pacia Modern is evidently working hard to promote India's fledgling artists in an international context. Subodh Gupta has received Bose Pacia's 1997 Emerging Artist Award, a prize created by the gallery, which gives the winner a show at that venue as well as a one week trip to New York City.

Gupta, born in 1964, shows work that betrays a knowledge of recent trends in Western art, while clearly referencing his life in India. His attractive installation, *29 MORNINGS, 1997*, features a series of low wood stools on the floor and mounted to the wall. Each sports a painted image, or has an object set into the top of the stool.

The imagery includes Pop references to consumer products like Colgate toothpaste, polyurethaned heaps of grain and other foodstuffs set into the stools and some beguilingly-painted images including a striking and humorous picture of a young boy playing with his penis, which is somehow devoid of either sentimentality or prurience. Other images in the show are more mysterious. A painting of a silhouetted black face with an enormous photo-realist tongue protruding from the mouth has, besides the obvious sexual connotations, other meanings specific to India. Gupta animatedly explained that sticking one's tongue out quickly after some faux-pas or embarrassment is a common gesture in India. This would be lost on Americans, but the explanation struck me as a refreshing change — after all, how many explanations of Matthew Barney's football-derived imagery must be going on in art schools from China to Brazil?

Yuri Kuper's paintings present

fewer such obstacles, however, and therefore remain rather more generic. They have the look of art, of the distressed surface variety, with a conceptual edge provided by collaged elements such as spoons and palette knives. Occasionally forms are painted *trompe l'oeil* fashion over his gray weathered surfaces.

UNTITLED BOXES NUMBER TWO, 1997 features nine antique tin box fronts arranged in a Minimalist grid over a paint-spattered gray canvas. These box fronts are shadowed to give the illusion of three dimensional empty boxes projecting from the canvas. They're rather forlorn, as if waiting to be filled. There's a reticence about Kuper's work that makes it hard to interpret beyond the attractiveness of the surfaces. The turgidity of these surfaces, however, can't help but have psychological implications, as it does in Kiefer's themes of war, or Tàpies' references to fascism. Here, a Soviet bleakness emerges like a dim echo through this otherwise rather tastefully crafted brand of abstraction.

The difficulties of adapting globally diverse cultural and aesthetic concerns to Western modernism, mixed with the inevitable desire to have one's work appreciated (and sold) in the largest market for contemporary art make for a challenging situation. There are obvious parallels to America's relationship with Europe at the turn of the last century. The emergence and expansion of markets for contemporary art within developing countries will inevitably play a key role in expanding the scope of contemporary art, a good thing certainly for American artists who've been retracing well-trod cultural territory in seemingly tighter and tighter circles for the last twenty years.

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