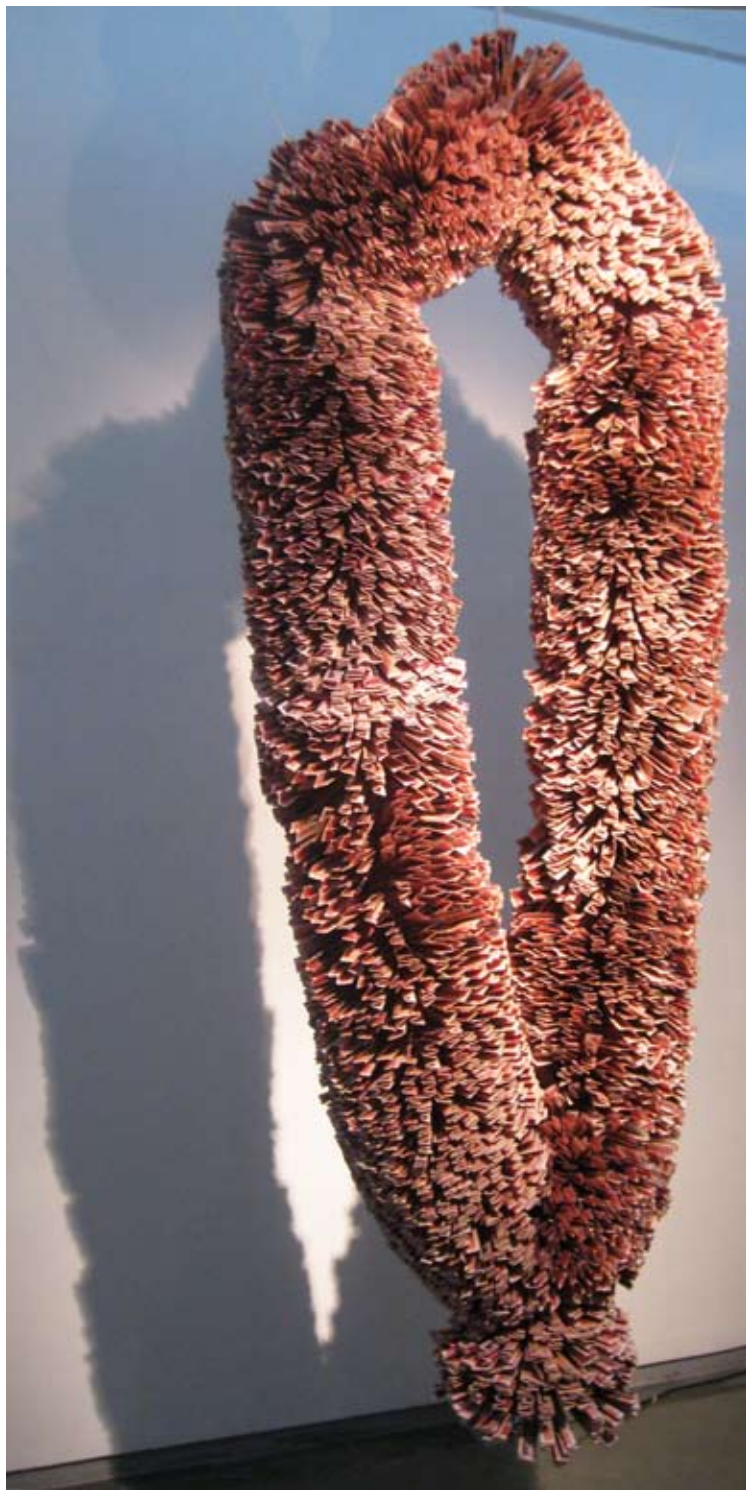




Wish, I had stayed home

Vdiya Kamat

1 – 12 December, 2011



For the love of my people, Play Money, strings,
108" x 48", 2011

AFTER WISH

Vidya Kamat in conversation with Veeranganakumari Solanki talks about her recent solo exhibition *Wish, I Had Stayed Home* at The Guild, Mumbai

Veeranganakumari Solanki: Let us begin with the title of your exhibition and your title work – *Wish, I Had Stayed Home*. It relates to a universal thought that has crossed everyone's mind at some point. There are so many instances where one might often be in situations where they find themselves reflecting just this – *Wish, I had stayed home*. It could have implications of denial, moving away from something, or even suggest being reclusive in certain situations. When you are in a certain spot, where you know you cannot escape, you do not want to revert back, so home may not necessarily be a space, but could be a virtual feeling of comfort. Could you comment on this?

Vidya Kamat: By home I do not mean domesticated space, but a space that provides comfort. It could be anywhere- even in a land which is not your own, but where you have found comfort, almost like a mother's womb. I think this is an existential space you are searching and longing for. City here represents that space where one is constantly searching for the comfort space, which one would call home. But, this search for home remains unfulfilled, an illusory as one feels alienated and isolated in the sea of humanity that defines the city.

The title of the work *Wish, I had stayed home*, a single channel video, is about that sense of alienation. It actually refers to an incident I experienced in my early days in Mumbai, soon after migrating to the city. I happened to see a stark naked young woman roaming around completely disoriented, in the middle of a busy traffic junction trying to make sense of the environment she was in. So, in this work I am trying to interpret city/home through her subjectivity using her as a symbol/metaphor. How is she negotiating the city? Is she longing for home like many of the people walking past her? Is her un-clothedness in public symbolic of the vulnerability of every person who is living in this city? Is this a nightmare you dread to dream being played out; or is it just another spectacle the city has generated before your eyes? In a sense city always makes you feel vulnerable because you are confronted with a tangle of similar imagery which I refer to as spectacle.

VS: There is also a very strong reference to cities and spaces being sites for incidents and scenes beyond one's visual control. This would relate to aspects of excess, influx and impositions.

VK: Life in a city is paced or operates on a different register. It is fast, furious and dangerous.



Wish-Bubble I - II, digital print on archival Bamboo paper, 24" x 24", edition of 1/3, 2011

Events move past your eyes like on a movie screen hardly giving you time to make coherent connections and to generate meaning. In short, for me the city experience is more visual and visceral compared to a sleepy town where I grew up and where time is eternal and unending. This is what I meant by city lives through its spectacles. The more spectacular it is the more alive it becomes. I distinctively remember my first images of the city as a child who watched riots and rampage during 1960's, which were then repeated in the 90's. These images or spectacles of violence wounding the city in blood and tears have become an integral part of the cityscape.

Images permeate. Images you have no control over. Images, which alienate you rapidly.



VS: One also sees this in Vanishing Point and Effluence series? In these, there is a sense of the urban invading nature. One might not see that much of concrete and building but the traces of it establish their presence, as though nothing could exist without it!

VK: The back lit work Vanishing Point is the panoramic image of a creek that is slowly getting filled by sewage flowing out of the city, executed across six panels of backlit boxes. This image appropriates the look of glossy cinema poster and kitschy sunset images often placed on the walls of middle class living rooms to create a sense of scenic beauty of country side. Such images serve as nostalgic references to country homes left behind before families migrated to city, to invoke the presence of the home that was. In the same way this work is trying to invoke the presence of the creek, as it was in the past before the city claimed it. This work is actually creates a deception by hiding the loss and degradation of values under the veneer of gloss and glamour lent by the back lit boxes. The point is to look behind this deception. In a sense city displays itself in Bollywood styled mythic narratives. Everything is told in a loud and larger than life narrative, like a Bollywood screen play. Images just accompany that spectacle of life as a vulgar display of excess.

Effluence is a set of three photographic prints, again natural water bodies of Mumbai. Over a period of time these areas rich in mangroves and natural water bodies have been destroyed and have turned into the city's sewage and garbage dumps.

Urban spaces are changing rapidly into unbridled concrete jungles. If you understand nature as the original spot or starting point from where you began this journey towards urbanization, then you have lost your home again. As an artist, when I experience my city, my living, my abode – there is a sense of pronounced loss of these vanishing terrains.

VS: Your works in this exhibition implied “the pursuit of excess” and questioned whether “search for meaning has become a futile act”. Could you elaborate on this?



Wish-Bubble III, digital print on archival Bamboo paper, 24" x 24", edition of 1/3, 2011

VK: As I mentioned earlier, my own position vis-à-vis the city, shifts within the registers of citizen/migrant location. Am I a citizen because I am born here, or am I a migrant because I have come to city like million other migrants to make a living and create a home. (?) As a migrant my references are of the small town where everything seems normal or regular. But the city bumps up the whole experience not only in terms of size but also in terms of meanings. City is a place of dreams and where aspirations can be realised. It is space where impossible is made possible.

The city communicates through excess not just in terms of wealth and luxury but also in terms of poverty and deprivation, violence and pleasure. Everything is magnified disproportionately, so I am using the word excess to zero in on two contrasting experiences of life, and these contradictions, relate to my work Wish Bubble.



Wish-Bubble IV, digital print on archival Bamboo paper, 24" x 24", edition of 1/3, 2011

VS: With reference to your Wish-Bubble series, there is this sense of golden bubbles being almost overwhelming and a feeling of them being omnipresent no-matter-what! This is quite true with the way a wish is often so over-powering that it is almost impossible to push it away if it is inaccessible, but one cannot help it being there and the wish becomes a sort of implication.

VK: That is so right! In this series, which is a set of four digitally modified, black and white photographs the experience of excess is suggested through the motif of sweat – the bubbles are like gold beads that are oozing out of your own body – it's something you have no control of, but something you want to purge out of your system like a toxin.

The city leaves you a little exasperated in terms of visuals, apathy, celebrations; and everything becomes



Vanishing Point, 8 Light boxes (15" x 21" each), 92" x 35", 2011

overbearing and senseless in a way denying you a meaningful existence. I think as migrant that is when you start looking for 'Home'.

VS: That could lead us to your strong references to myth and myth building in a city. Through the influx of images, myths are being created on a daily basis and are soon turning into accepted facts and norms. Having studied Contemporary Mythology, one notices several references to myth playing a part in your exhibition – even with the viewers. It is as though you are creating and / or shattering myths or busting the conjured image of a myth.

VK: I am referring to 'myth' in a Barthes-ian way as how urban mythology is generated through cultural artefacts, thus naturalising a belief. Media plays a significant role in creating myths that circulate in everyday life and in that way constructing a world and our place in it. In that sense, the idea of a city, the idea of a home, is a kind of memory, not a reality.

Many times when I speak about recollecting a memory, it is not about being correct factually and historically, as the event has moved beyond historicity and has entered into the realm of a

mythic narrative – because it is not factual, does not mean that it is an incorrect narrative. What remains as memory, is only your experience at that point in time. So, for me the city becomes a site of myth making.

VS: Mentioning politics, For the love of my people, is a reference to excess and politicians who are garlanded with money. Your use of "play money" in this magnificent garland also seems to imply the flippant side of the way power plays with the public at the latter's cost. It is very relevant to the city, that you cannot ignore politics when you are looking at the city, because it is so inherent!

VK: Right, they literally play with the money!

The politicians have also created a sense of despair and disappointment. For me that garland was such a potent image, that I had to get it out of my system, in a way I had to purge the image out like Wish Bubble.

But, corruption is also a myth which is being 'naturalised' to be included into and within Indian sensibilities. Today we come to believe that to be in politics one needs to be corrupt. Corruption and politics have become synonymous. Then you create motifs like money garland to support that belief, and justify it as the 'love' of my people. In India the garland motif inhabits every aspect of life from birth to death as a



Effluence, photograph on archival paper, 30" x 44" (each), edition of 1/3, 2011

symbol that celebrates the process life. This garland of money adds another shade to this motif. The garland work is made up of a hundred thousand play money rupee notes. To me, the contrast of the pink notes and their dark shadow was a very interesting aesthetic experience; because you identify pink with the roses, with innocence and love, in contrast to the dark ugly shadow it casts. So, it demolished the myth – in terms of beauty, in terms of sanctity; turning all that into a dark and hideous shape of greed. This was the most difficult work to execute, but the most satisfying one!

VS: In the end, could you talk about your Last Prayer before I go?

VK: This work is connected and was conceived along with Wish Bubble. The bead work has a similar connection with the excess we discussed. It is also the notion of consumerism and conspicuous consumption that has become the core expression of the city. By consumerism, I am not only implying consuming commodities and brands, but also emotions and the sense of total consumption which invades and takes over and erases your individuality.

This bead work is the result of the sense of visual stress that comes across through the overt display of glitter or 'bling' overload, especially gold. Somewhere in my mind I have associated gold with divine, but today the sheen of gold is edging towards vulgarity, a vulgar display of excess.

'Last Prayer before I go' expresses the mood I wanted to communicate through the title, in the sense this is a last act and I have reached an edge where I have to decide how to define the city in my own way without taking these overloads.

VS: Another thing that struck me specially with reference to excess. In a normal rosary there would be 108 beads, but in this, there are so many you cannot count them! It is as though you have this extended rosary where you are praying for time, or buying time for the excess of everything and you do not want it to end because you keep saying it is the last time...

VK: Right, you literally feel as if you are living on borrowed time, buying and borrowing time and yet you cannot stop from that last act. It is a kind of an addict's resolution- for last time! Consumption has become habitual and we begin to consume everything that comes our way. And, I wanted the background wall red because wanted the sense of bleeding heart – the rosary and beads as you said aids you to keep counting. Through all the death and destruction that has become part of my memory of the city, I still celebrate it for what it stands for and how it braces itself like a bride for yet another day of violence and bloodshed. Somewhere on the way you get weary of this repeated violation and exaggerations and at that point you wonder where you belong, and that is where I come back to Wish I had Stayed Home.

On Confirming the aesthetic of Spectacle - Vidya Kamat at The Guild Mumbai

Shubhalakshmi Shukla

Much before Vidya Kamat acquired her degree in Fine Arts and her doctorate in Comparative Mythology, the seed of a radical thinking started making foundation within her. Much before she became an artist, subversive thoughts around identity gripped her and escalated her experiences of the mundane. As a child she was worshipped as goddess Kaumari till her puberty. For a girl child such loaded experiences of a deified position of a goddess must be surely a palette of mixed experiences of awe and confusion, feeling empowered and violated simultaneously. Then as slow stepping into the world of mundane she had to shed the ‘false skin’ of the deity and battle with the hardships of an ordinary girl in a ‘patriarchal’ surrounding. Often Vidya Kamat’s works address the complexities of such experiences of inculcated paradox within the myth of sanctified position of a goddess, practiced as a strict ritual within certain ethnic groups. Her photographic works accentuate human body-as- a-site of experiencing the ‘invisible’ wherein she portrays herself taking violence and sensuality, beauty and macabre on her body. This enfolds the incoherence one experiences in the world of spectacles. The photographic works titled Wish Bubble in the ongoing exhibition Wish I Had Stayed Home at The Guild Mumbai are aesthetically closer to her earlier works in Birthmark and Re write exhibits. However, the present show also includes a video work titled ‘Wish I had stayed Home’ and a body of backlit photographic works of the present day landscapes of Mumbai. The video work extends Vidya Kamat’s enquiry on the context of woman’s body placed as an arid landscape in the centre of the pomp and pleasure of the metropolitan world of opulence. The naked body symbolically undergoing a ritualistic bath (abhishek) in an open-space (location Churchgate Station in Mumbai) suggests a lack of human touch and indifference of the surrounding world thus titled ‘Wish I had Stayed Home’. The work recalls Kamat’s observation of a displaced woman, she observed, when she had newly arrived in the city of Mumbai.

‘Vanishing Point’ (sarcastically suggesting a Black Hole) hosts a desire for a gorgeous sunset in the city of Mumbai, yet it imprisons the bitter truth of violation caused to Nature. The location captured in these photographs is the Northern Mumbai where the city’s waste is dumped for good. The work includes a combined aesthetic of both the experiences. Likewise, the backlit works titled ‘Effluence’ captures the beauty of the natural streams in Mumbai which have turned to nullas- the dumping grounds. These works are symbolic of the ‘excess waste’ produced due to a culture of indulgent consumerism in the cotemporary times. Vidya Kamat also skillfully demonstrates the ‘excess produce’ in her installation with

golden beads, titled Wish Bubble -a part of the ongoing show at The Guild Mumbai. These landscapes are carved out with the help of saturated colors and are endowed with a paradox of evoking feelings of beauty and morbidity in the city.

I would like to view Wish Bubble, as a personal soliloquy of an urban individual who is in the groove of the urban need for ‘more’ refinement. The ambitious metropolitan individual is empowered rather than obsessed with one’s growth and success. S/he sheds away the oppressive demands of the conventional living in the society and contributes her minutest thoughts and moments to create a ‘new’ language. S/he chooses to be outright, open and challenging in her performance and provokes simplicity. S/he seems to be drunk with a paradoxical wisdom to explore the world of illusions- Maya. S/he is extravagant and yet fearless. S/he is resplendent and yet calm within.

In her recent suite Vidya Kamat explores the landscape of excess and the loss of coherence. She exploits her personal experiences of self-within and of the world-outside to create an aesthetic of loss and beauty in the present day world of spectacles.



wish, I had stayed home, single channel video projection, 5 min. 30 sec., 2011

City, Gender and Us: In Vidya Kamat's Wish, I had stayed home

Vidya Kamat's solo show, *Wish, I had stayed home* was shown at The Guild from 1st to 12th December, 2011. As one walked into the carefully crafted space of the gallery, one encountered six set of works in a variety of media ranging from photographs to light boxes to video to installation. These works, held together as a single show and as stand-alone pieces, express multiple themes that string themselves on two primary axes. One, that seeks to foreground the woman's body-be it the homeless woman, the 'good' woman or the woman in politics- in all its corporeal starkness while continuously shifting its representation into abstract spaces, sometimes mythical, sometimes symbolic. Two, that receives the urban as a complex visual cityscape while relentlessly holding up mirrors that seek agency from within its multiple layers-sometimes civic, sometimes political. Kamat's works are not attempts to chart out, witness or document the volatile urgency contained in political engagements of feminist, environmental or peoples movements. Instead, sitting in the apparent comfort of the gallery space, they speak to us, with the disturbing restlessness of engaged art as it replaces rage with a brooding silence. In a sense then, the mood of the show is melancholic. Though the rendition of each work is like a conversation between the artist and herself, it is also an appeal to the viewer to partake in this conversation, with their own interpretive eloquence.

The set of three photographs called *Effluence* and the eight light boxes named *Vanishing Point* are multilayered images of the city of Mumbai as it experiences increasing environmental degradation due to uncontrolled greed for power and wealth. These works express Kamat's, and many of our, experiences of Mumbai as we inhabit it. While *Effluence* speaks to us of the colossal waste-generation problem that the city faces, *Vanishing Point* draws us into a sense of the much-talked about impending doom, predicted by environmental scholars and activists, if we as human actors do not seriously address the problems of our environment. Both these works hold up silent mirrors for us as citizens and inhabitants of the city.

The city emerges once again in the centre piece of the show, the engaging five minute single channel video called *Wish, I had stayed home*, based on an event that the artist witnessed at a railway station, of a destitute woman being targeted, shunned and publicly humiliated as hordes of commuters passed by silently busy with their own life worlds, the work brings forth the plight of women migrants to the city, often reduced to dire poverty and degradation. It also implicates the city as the silent spectator of

enormous amounts of violation of their dignity. As the video foregrounds the sculpted nude, shining and metallic, trophy-like but mythical figure of a woman being bathed in tar, blood, milk and water, it leads us into a shift of registers from the profane to the sacred, all the while gently mocking at the artificially created difference between the two. It moves from the uncaring cityscape and the woman's poignant figure to the act of ritualistic bathing of deities in Hindu culture, reflecting Kamat's continuous engagement with religion and mythology. Kamat informs us that the myth of Bahubali and his struggle with power, control and wealth on the one hand and the desire to renounce it all, in the quest for enlightenment, on the other was an important source of inspiration for this work. Subverting the spectacular ritual of Mahamasthabhishekam i.e. bathing of the idol, of the 30 ft high Bahubali statue in Karnataka as the taal of her visual composition, Kamat brings home to us the pain of the prime protagonist of this work, the homeless woman, against the backdrop of an indifferent urban space and a fallow cultural space of the ritualistic, where she is treated as less than human. The only question that some of us may ask of this work is in its titling. Wish I had stayed home, as a title, suggests, in a manner, that the imagined 'home' is a safe place. Is it?

Allusion to spectacle and to the ritual resurface in the gold beads and strings installation called Last Prayer Before I Leave. Looking at this work in conjunction with the set of two digitally mastered photographs called Wish Bubble, I would argue that Kamat steps into more critical feminist spaces of women's negotiations with how culture writes over their bodies, something that Kamat has worked on in her earlier shows too. Like most women artists, while Kamat shies away from the label of being a feminist, her work is a definite invitation for feminist interpretations. Decorative gold beads signifying upper caste and upper class notions of wealth and property associated with 'good' and 'auspicious' women are set, a random arrangement, against the deep vermilion red backdrop of velvet symbolising chastity of women in the Last Prayer Before I Leave evoke the goddess motif that cultures write, through rituals, over women's bodies during symbolic rites de passage at birth, puberty, marriage and widowhood. Kamat's dark self portraits in Wish Bubble spewing out this decorative deification are the best critical mirrors that one could mount and hold up. It is in this work that one gets a glimpse of the rage that one associates with the works of Kamat's body of earlier work.

While the mood of the show is largely melancholic, in the large 9'x 4' garland of play money Kamat plays with irony -and critique-more directly than in the other works in this show. Called For the Love of

My People and inspired by the episode where Dalit leader, Mayawati was felicitated with a garland made out of thousand rupee notes. Common in our political culture, this practice of garlanding with money instead of flowers, is accepted as a sign of the love of one's followers. Kamat's garland of play money, as it stands in the gallery space, is a hard hitting critique of the ostentatiousness and the corruption of our political and cultural system where idioms and practices from religious spaces find their way comfortably into so called secular spaces, where politicians, irrespective of caste and gender, fall prey to the 'love of their people.

Strung together and as stand-alone works, all and each of the exhibits in Kamat's show at The Guild provide a rich experience for the viewer. Not only do the works speak to each other reflecting the mature engagement of the artist with gender and culture but they also succeed in holding up mirrors, both for the artist-as a complicit victim with a unique agency and for the viewer, in whatever location they may stand.

Gita Chadha
Mumbai based sociologist
gita_chadha@hotmail.com

VIDYA KAMAT



- 1999 Ph.D. University of Mumbai, Thesis Titled -"Myths and Symbols in Pictorial Expressions as seen from Sanskrit and allied literature"
- 1995 Diploma in Sanskrit
- 1992 Post Graduate Diploma in Comparative Mythology
- 1983 B.FA(Painting) University of Mumbai

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 Wish I had stayed home, The Guild, Mumbai
- 2009 Birth.Marks, Sumukha, Chennai
- 2007 Birth.Marks, Sumukha, Banglore(ct)
- 2007 Tales from the Edge, The Guild NY(ct)
- 2005 Rewrite, The Guild, Bombay(ct)
- 2003 PMS -a Catalogue, The Guild Mumbai.(ct)

SELECTED SHOWS

- 2011 Reprise, Aicon gallery , New York
- 2011 New Indian Film and Animation, LASALLE College of Arts, Singapore
- 2011 VAF@ The Guild 2011, The Guild, Mumbai, Curated by Johnny ML
- 2011 The Second Sex: Feminist Photography on the Cusp, Lakeeren Art Gallery, Mumbai, curated by Dr. Arshiya Lokhandwala

- 2011 Of Gods and Goddesses, Cinema, Cricket – The New Cultural Icons of India, Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai,curated by Dr. Arshiya Lokhandwala
- 2011 Palimpsest: Exploring compound Identities in Contemporary South Asian Art; curated by Niru Ratnam, Aicon Gallery, New York
- 2010 Myth -Reality: Constructing cult-u're , The Guild, Mumbai, curated by Veeranganakumari Solanki,
- 2010 Changing Skin, The Fine art Company, Mumbai, curated by Marta Jakimowicz (ct)
- 2010 Songs of Sorrow, Songs of Joy, The Sparrow
- 2010 I am Red- celebrating Orhan Pamuk's works , Monsoon grey, center for Design, Porvorim, Goa
- 2009 If I were a Saint, Shrine Gallery, New Delhi, Curated by Johnny ML(e-ct)
- 2009 L'Machines, Gallery OED, Cochin, Curated by Dr. Kavitha Balakrishnan(e-ct)
- 2009 Intimate Lives, The Loft and Tao Gallery, Mumbai, Curated by Anupa Mehta,
- 2009 Ways of Seeing: Contemporary art from India, Indian Cultural Center, presented through Gallery Soulflower, Bangkok, Thailand(ct)
- 2009 1x1 India, A tribute to 26/11 victims of Mumbai, organized by SG Private Banking and JSW Foundation, Mumbai (ct)
- 2009 Through Other Eyes: Contemporary Art from South Asia, Curated by Gerard Mermoz, Herbert Art gallery & Musuem, Coventry, England(ct)
- 2009 Indian Contemporary Art Palais Benedictine, Fecamp Paris, Curated by Ranjit Hoskote and Supriya Banerjee(ct)
- 2008 Synonymous, The Guild Mumbai, Curated by Shubhalaksmi Shukla(e-ct)
- 2008: Of Myths and More, Sans Tache Art gallery, Mumbai, Curated by Jasmine Varma(ct)
- 2008: Ethics of Encounters, Contemporary art from India and Thailand,Gallery Soulflower, Bangkok, Thailand, Curated by Pandit Chanrochanakit and Brian Curtin(ct)
- 2008 Obscure Objects of Desire, Gallery OED, Cochin, Curated by Johnny ML
- 2007 Contemporary Istanbul, Turkey, by The Guild
- 2007 Harvest-2007, Arushi Arts, New Delhi(ct)
- 2007 Group show of Indian Contemporary Artist, Sumukha, Chennai(ct)
- 2007 Aparanta Contemporary art in Goa, Panjim, curated by Ranjit Hoskote(ct)
- 2005 New colours of Sumukha, Sumukha Banglore(ct)

- 2005 Change of Address, The Guild, Mumbai(ct)
2004 Tolerating Intolerance, A public art intervention project as part of bi-centenary celebration of Asiatic Society of Bombay.
2002 Tribute to Picasso, The Guild, Mumbai-
2000 Anonymously Yours, Lakeeren Art Gallery, in collaboration with British Council of India, Mumbai
1999 Secret Life of an Object, Lakeeren Art Gallery for the Kala Ghoda art festival.
1998 Jamboree, a group show organized by Lakeeren art gallery, Mumbai

PUBLIC ART PROJECTS

- 2004 Tolerating Intolerance, A public art intervention project as part of bi-centenary celebration of Asiatic Society of Bombay and MPCVA, Mumbai

PARTICIPATION

- 2012 India Art Fair, New Delhi by The Guild, Mumbai
2012 VIP Art Fair, The Guild by The Guild, Mumbai
2009 India Art Summit, New Delhi by The Guild, Mumbai
2009 Arte Fiera di Bologna, Bologna, Italy by The Guild, Mumbai
2008 Art SantaFe, New Mexico , USA(ct)
2007 Istanbul Contemporary, Istanbul, Turkey(ct)

AWARDS

- 2002 Awarded National cultural Fellowship by Majlis-India, and funded by HIVOS Netherlands
1983-84 Awarded Fellowship of Goa College of Art, Goa
1983 Best Students award at annual Art Exhibition

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The Guild
Art Gallery

02/32, Kamal Mansion, 2nd floor,
Arthur Bunder Road, Colaba,
Mumbai 400 005, India.
Tel: +91 22 2288 0195 / 2288 0116
theguildart@yahoo.com / theguildart@gmail.com
www.guildindia.com