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ART

The imperfect art of cartography



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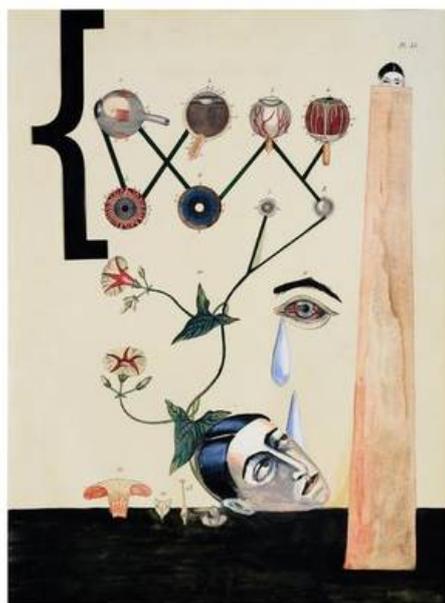
PRINT



A



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Anju Dodiya
Tower of Tearlessness
Mixed media on printed page
2017
14 3/4" x 10 3/4" Inches

Ten artists interpret emotions, geographies and their concerns through maps of a cerebral kind

A multi-artist exhibit at Sakshi Gallery aims to make cartographers of artists and navigators of their audience, a collaboration that curator Meera Menezes hopes will evolve into new ideas and explorations from artists and viewers. Revolving around the premise of cartography as a knowledge system and an often-used device in an artists' repertoire, *Here be Dragons and other coded landscapes* features work by Anju Dodiya, Mithu Sen, Arpita Singh, Nilima and Gulammohammed Sheikh, Shilpa Gupta, Marie Velardi, Varunika Saraf, Zarina Hashmi and Raj Jariwala.

Recurring device

As a writer and curator, in her conversations with artists over time, Menezes often found mapping to be a recurring device artists – especially painters and sculptors – used to connect concerns with their work. It became a curiosity – how this imperfect science of making maps (there are still concerns over what is the correct way to represent the earth), leads to thoughts of home, acts of drawing borders, or explorations of desires mapped onto the human body. *Here be Dragons...* manages to convey a sense of these functions map-making

inadvertently addresses. From star-charts to historical maps charting the seas and marking the unknown as fantastical with the words 'here be dragons', cartography has been a way of moving forward, not individually but as a people or society. So what happens when artists are invited to map their concerns?

For Menezes, the answer is sometimes they make new work. Artists Varunika Saraf, Anju Dodiya, Raj Jariwala, Madhavi Subrahmanian and Marie Velardi chose to respond with new work that map society, self and the idea of the nation-state in times of surveillance. Saraf's 'Map of Pain' (2017) references early-Renaissance painter Sandro Boticelli's 'Map of Hell' based on Dante's Inferno to map the systemic inequalities in India. The canvas, littered with familiar faces in a pit brings to mind mining as industry and its longstanding fight with forests and its inhabitants, points to the need to address obvious flaws in what seems like a well-designed system.

Elsewhere in the gallery, Jariwala, the youngest artist in the show currently working through his MA at the Shiv Nadar University in Noida, draws attention to map-making technology using maps of Japan, Italy, England, Germany Argentina and Israel. What were once hand-drawn maps are now mapped digitally with satellites constantly looking down at us. Adding cartography to a practice that works with numbers and grids, Jariwala's drawings are an attempt to compare what these rounded, familiar hand-drawn maps stand for, with the jagged edges and darker lines marking the number of satellites employed in configuring our borders down to the last inch.

Elements of design

Madhavi Subrahmanian, who works with ceramics, creates her versions of the 'Mappa Mundi' – the medieval European map of the world: circular, fanciful, limited. Subrahmanian's map of the world is limited to her worlds – Mumbai and Singapore. A constellation of circular sculptures scored with lines reminiscent of your Google Maps route home, that also tells you most places are now accessible as long as you're one of those with a smartphone and an Internet connection. It speaks to the dystopic overlaying of maps onto physical cities in our heads, that makes our world simultaneously accessible and increasingly closed off. People start blurring into the background as we look for landmarks and road signs.

Subrahmanian's 'Mappa Mundi' is visually counterbalanced by Baroda-based stalwart Gulammohammed Sheikh's famed 'Mappa Mundi' prints (a process he started in 2003), created by overlaying graphic elements onto scans of original mappae mundi of yore. Sheikh replaces a number of traditional elements of the map with those from local history and mythologies, reconfiguring the map to look at Indian history.

Also on view is Nilima Sheikh's 'Majnun 4' (2014), also showing at the current Documenta in Kassel, Germany. Sheikh's delicate and seemingly decorative style does its job creating 'keys' rather than obvious maps to the emotional

difficulty faced by those living in Kashmir. Here, Majnun is a symbol, as is Laila, who is not woman but a grave, with a forest between them. It's less map more coded graphics on Sangner paper, that give clues into the cartography of loss and pain in a region outside of the politics that one reads about in newspapers and debates on social media.

Mapping bodies and blurring borders

Stepping away from traditional mapping of landscapes are Anju Dodiya and Mithu Sen, whose work has been a conscious mapping of the body. For Dodiya it has been a more philosophical exploration of womanhood that comes from a prolonged skin-related illness, for Sen it is an extended conversation about sensuality and the body. Dodiya, in a newly produced suite of drawings speaks of navigating the body as a journey. She tries to visually depict distances between the heart and the mind, feeling and doing as journeys we undertake. She positions ancestry as map 'plotting' our place in time, the journey of the foetus from the womb as the first journey we undertake, and medical diagrams as maps of our bodies. The suite propels the exhibition towards considering mapping as being so much more than a question of joining obvious dots plotted out by cartographers and satellites.

There's also Shilpa Gupta, continuing her work with borders – here she outlines with thread images of trees – mango, mangrove, acacia, olive and pecan. All trees growing across various borders already in conflict, like India/Pakistan, India/Bangladesh and others. These considerations are a throwback to Partition literature, reminding us of the human and ecological cost of creating and enforcing borders.

With this wide variety of work on display the takeaway is that thinking about mapping and borders is an effective way to think about reshaping it – perhaps so there are no 'unchartered' spaces. That is, no unknowns that we can cite to hide a systemic lack of concern in repairing the snags we know of but haven't pinpointed to yet, no dragons, so to speak, in the way of us conquering the open seas.

Here be Dragons and other coded landscapes *ongoing at Sakshi, Colaba till May 31*

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