

A Mumbai Market of the Mind

Tina Chandroji *India Unpacked*, The Visual Arts Gallery, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi. September 2014



Vegetable I (72 x 120 inches Oil on Canvas, 2011)

In this impressive and spellbinding exhibition of seventeen of Tina Chandroji's huge paintings of Indian shopfronts and market stall displays everything is in place and in order. It is as if the world is yet to begin.

There are signs of life but it is life suspended. There are exquisite mini portraits of shop owners, blue-hued plastic bags waiting for customers, beautiful fat bananas, bindhi (okra) like stacked cutlasses. In *Flower I*, (2011 Oil on Canvas, 172" x 120") a few petals have fallen on the floor but elsewhere order and spic and span-ness are absolute.

There is none of the detritus of living. The painted walls of the shops are pristine. There are no smudge marks, no fingerprints, no rubbish and no fetid grey water seeping along the perfectly tiled pavements outside.

These beautiful interiors, viewed from outside, are minutely ordered. This is the shopkeeper's art of the bazaar or market place. There is no hint here of the 21st century mall or the edge-of-town supermarket and electrical goods showroom.

The scale of the paintings is half life size and larger. They are big. Very big. They span 12 feet and more and rise 6 ft. The viewpoint is that of a customer looking in; the ceiling space is compressed while the floor space stretches out daring you to lift your feet and break through the picture plane.

The meticulous ordering and rendering of objects is hugely impressive. It speaks to the shopkeeper's pride and Chandroji's acute eye and absolute control of her medium and her rigorous approach to perspective, tone, brushwork and colour.

Trained at the JJ School of Art¹ in Mumbai, Chandroji also worked as an Art Director in the film industry and learnt a lot from the process of set creation – something her husband continues to work in. Not the most family friendly of trades with its periods of intense work and long hours Chandroji returned to painting in her Mumbai studio.



Detail from Grocery (72 x 120 Oil on Canvas, 2011)

The sheer effort of constructing these huge canvases over eight years is immense and palpable. In this it is like the shopkeeper working achingly long hours to keep the display ordered and well-stocked. There are no gaps where some unruly customer has disturbed the calm and regimented scene with its acute sense of symmetry and placement. Nor do we see the assistants who, under a watchful and commanding eye, crowd Indian shops with intimidating density.

This is the beginning of the shopping day when the displays are set up. It is the pristine state between wholesale and retail commerce. The goods have been bought in or baked and unpackaged. Everything is cleared away. The tills are set to zero. The day frets to begin but order holds it down, the glorious, delicious, eternal, enticing and perishable consumables will not be consumed. The

¹ Sir J. J. Institute of Applied Art was established in 1935 and since 1981 institute has been affiliated to the University of Mumbai - <http://jjiaa.org/home.htm>

shopkeeper, standing outside his shop tells me politely but firmly, 'Display only, sir. Shop closed.'

I felt a sense of suspended, hypnotic animation looking at Chandroji's paintings in a large air conditioned room in the protected bastion of the Indian Habitat Centre in Delhi. I experienced a kind of awe close up to individual paintings. The calm of the room and the paintings' endless detail had a religious air. I was reminded of immense, towering German Renaissance altar pieces of dark oak filled with exhaustive narrative detail.

But here there is a tension between the apparent timelessness of religion and the advancing modern world. The paintings have a valedictory air, standing fragile before the immense and uneven waves of Indian economic development.



Religion and Ancestry: detail from Flower I (72 x 120 inches Oil on Canvas, 2011)

And I was relieved in a strange way to be able to 'picnic on the Otherness of India' without having to step into the searing heat and chaos of Old Delhi's streets. This sanitised, enjoyable, ordered and beautiful world suited me down to the ground.

This is not arte naïf writ large. Although the shopkeepers appear to be 'doing the composition' this is not the case. Their displays are the starting point from which Chandroji digitally cuts and pastes compositions to achieve balance and harmony on a huge scale. Once finalised the composition is printed out and meticulously scaled up onto the huge canvases.

Building up the delicate layers of paint across the canvas until the immense detail is painted in is a process that takes three to four months. Over the last 8 years Chandroji has produced 19 canvases in this series.

And just in case you were wondering there are no assistants lurking in the background doing the artist's grunt work. It is all by Chandroji's hand – from the underpainting to the final touches and from the cleaning of the studio to the weekly ritual of cleaning her innumerable brushes.

These paintings are not the eye tricks of the Dutch Renaissance and there is little that is photographic or hyper-realist here. The colours, although dazzling in their array and patterning, do not reflect the pumped-up quality of storefronts with their clever lighting and mist sprays that make the greens greener and the highlights more dazzling than magazine art.



Detail, Chicken (96 x 72 Oil on Canvas, 2011)

The flat frontal light and minimal shadowing eschew the drama and projection of chiaroscuro for a delicately controlled perspective patterning that reflects the tiny and shallow spaces occupied in reality by market vendors in Indian markets.

And the stores are carefully chosen: fruit, veg, bread, flowers, spices, bottles, cans, Paan², loose dry goods, booze, carpets, firecrackers, antiques, poultry, an office. There are no 'subversive insertions' here although the range of goods talks of India's past and present trade relations – Tresemme shampoo, lots of Whiskey, with three VAT 69 boxes lined-up to read 'VAT 69' and the crates of Alphonso

² Paan is the Hindi word for '[betel](#)', a mixture of betel leaf, areca nut and or cure tobacco.

Mangoes that magically appear in East End markets in London (except for this year due to a health scare).

The more difficult shops are kept out of this calm and serene view of the world – there is no meat, or fish; no clothing or electronic gadgetry (but for those till displays with their eternal red squared zeros.)

A Muslim poultry stall is pristine, just the handle of a knife and a discoloured chopping block suggestive of the brutal end in hand for the dropping-less serene chickens in their cages of white and green mesh.³



Office (120 x 72 Oil on Canvas, 2011)

The only conceit in the paintings is the inclusion of religious images as centrepieces in each painting. These represent one of the faiths or branches of faith in India – Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian.

Chandroji's intention here is to put the role of religion and the historical association of particular faiths with particular shop trades front and centre in her canvases. Normally confined to a corner of the stall or shop the religious iconography is smack in the middle of the picture plain.

³ 'My mother is holding my hand on the way to the chicken shop with the money for the evening meal ... The meat hanging in great mean lines on the hooks, and scattered behind there's the scene of blood. Terrified, fascinated, I wait all week to see this flesh being chopped but I pull away, almost close my eyes to it, when it comes.'

Deepti Kapoor, *A Bad Character*, 2014 39-40 on the impression a Mumbai chicken shop makes on the novel's 12 year-old narrator.

Messing with these associations and iconography, making them go 'haywire', is not an option and Chandroji takes great care that the religious icons and scripts are exact and faithful representations. A 'fullstop' out of place or colours mistaken would be to court confrontation and approbation in the often tense world of India's inter-faith politics.



Detail, Flower I (120 x 72 Oil on Canvas, 2011)

The catalogue preface by Curator of the India Habitat Centre's gallery space, Alka Pandae, talks of the undying knot between modernity and tradition in an assertive and post-post-colonial India where 'the alternative gaze has subverted the conventional socio-cultural hierarchies'.

By this he means that the Indian artist no longer feels constrained to pander to Western tastes and trends. He argues that Chandroji's art is both democratic and assertive of the artist as independent of the claims and constraints of one or other Indian tradition/community and thus able to celebrate a 'cross cultural framework'. But it is also clear that the solidity of that framework and the fragility of its interrelationships is something that a public artist messes with at their peril.⁴

⁴ 'Art unleashes what is for fundamentalists of all hues the most dangerous thing ... freedom of thought, action and depiction. It has become the routine for such elements to vandalise or otherwise attack artworks ... There is now competition between Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists on this front, and action can be taken based on a complaint even from a single person.'

The Times of India, leader comment, 15th September 2014.

It might seem that this calm and intricate series of beautiful paintings that pay homage to the importance of religion and ancestry in contemporary India is a long way from the India of the Tata Corporation and the Indian space mission to Mars.

But it is not and I loved it for its honesty, its lack of pretention, its sheer hard work and wilfulness and the audacity of its scale and achievement.



Detail, Bakery (60 x 48 Oil on Canvas, 2011)

Fergus Murray September 2014.