Bharti Kher. *The Hunter And The Prophet*. Archival digital C-print. 30" x 45". 2004.

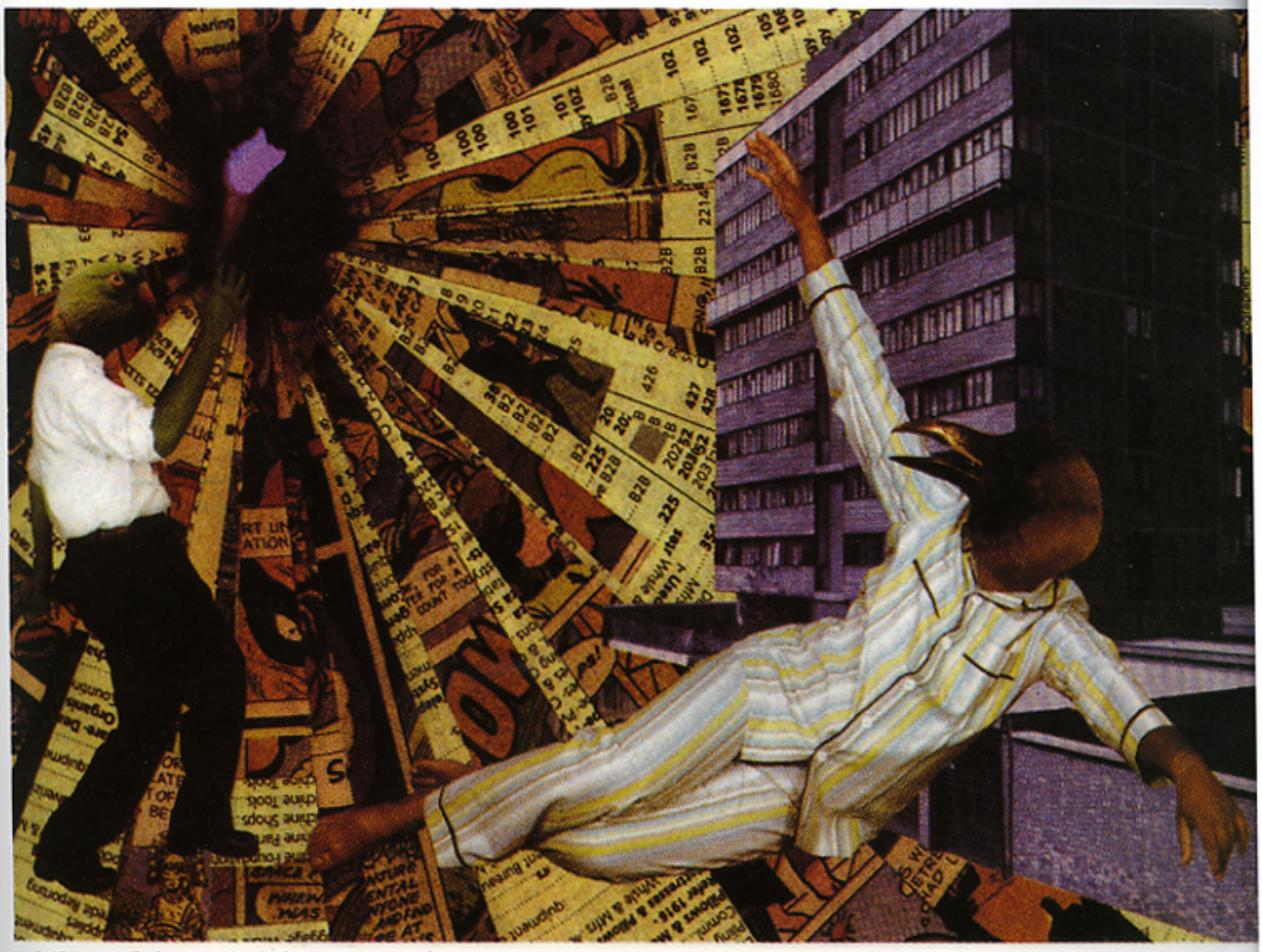
DRESSED TO KILL

The Devi Art Foundation has changed the face of the contemporary Indian art world. Does it matter if it didn't look its best on opening night? asks **Zehra Jumabhoy.**

"IT'S THE PARTY OF THE DECADE!" I HEARD A GLEEFUL INVITEE say at the opening of the Devi Art Foundation in Gurgoan on the 30th of August. And, to risk sounding like *Vogue*, we have to admit the launch of India's first museum of contemporary Indian art – founded by collector Anupam Poddar, designed by architect Aniket Bhagwat and spanning 7500 square feet – is something worth celebrating.

Apart from his lavish parties, Poddar is known for his rambling Delhi farmhouse stuffed with exciting (and very naughty) installations, amongst which Sudarshan Shetty's metal dinosaur doing unmentionable things to a cream-hued Jaguar is a happy camper. The collector appears to embody just the sort of 'passion for art' to make Devi's artistic adventures worth staying tuned for. Given that 'The Lekha and Anupam Poddar Collection' (accumulated by Poddar and his mother, Lekha) is allegedly some 2000 artworks strong – and we only saw works by 25 artists at the inaugural exhibition – there is a lot more to watch out for.

One thing is for sure: if we were counting on governmental support to start a contemporary museum, we would still be whistling in the wind – or feeling annoyed at the misguided upshot. (When was the last time anyone visited Mumbai's NGMA with anything resembling delight?) It is just as well that a private initiative took matters into its own hands.



Navin Thomas. *Still Asleep*. Print on Archival paper. 51" x 35". 2006.

Apart from artwork, Devi is also brimming over with Poddar's good intentions: "Regardless of all of this buying/selling at inflated prices and lack of transparency, the bigger point is to ensure that the there are discussions about individual artworks, curation and exhibition design. I want the Foundation to stand for all of these discourses," he assures us.

So, did Devi's first offering, *Still Moving Image* curated by Deeksha Nath (from the 31st of August to the 2nd of November) fulfil this promise?

According to Nath, she chose her tricky little title because "it refers to two things: in the first instance [this] is an exhibition of photography and video works and secondly it is an examination of images that move us." The show – it contained a few sculptural installations (like Susanto Mandal's mysterious bubble-producing offerings) thrown in for good measure – was meant to display the pivotal part visual data plays in defining contemporary society.

The result was a wide-ranging show – which included everything from Ranbir Kaleka's lyrical video-installation *Man with Cockerel 2* (2004) – last encountered projected over Poddar's massive bath-tub – to a suggestive video by Mithu Sen, *Breathing* zoomed in on a thatch of pubic-looking hair). Also on display – in all its annoying obviousness – was *Madharchodo* by Valay Shende (in order to show us all how Indian women are treated like doormats, Shende thought it would be a good idea to focus on dirty mats, inscribed with the faces of women, lying unsuspectingly outside people's homes).

In fact, *Still Moving Image*'s scope was so broad, that it saw lots of mini-themes – and many indifferent artworks – lurking under the umbrella of its overarching idea. Some of the ones, Nath signposted being: "identity and how it is constructed", "an examination of … globalization in India today" and "finally the honest documentation of the present."

The upside of Nath's inclusive approach was that we got to see some goodies from Poddar's hoard – like Nalini Malani's famous video-installation *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* (1998) and Sonia Khurana's disturbing discussion of race and gender in *Tantra*, where the features of a black man became confused with close-ups of female genitalia.

As we meandered through the display, some of the works seemed well-placed to generate interesting constellations of meaning. Like a room where the videos, photographs and sculptures from Atul Bhalla's *Mashk* (2006) were paired with Rameshwar Broota's video *The Body* (2006), where a human torso looks like a piece of meat hanging at a butcher's. The section served to remind us that while both Bhalla and Broota speak about the body in their oeuvre, their ideological standpoints have nothing in common. In Broota's art, human figures are invariably treated as impersonal stand-ins for Everyman, but Bhalla's work is always acutely conscious of the socio-political context of the body. *Mashk*, for instance, documented the process of halal-ing meat, a method he learned from the Qureshi community in Old Delhi, which is filled with sociological significance.

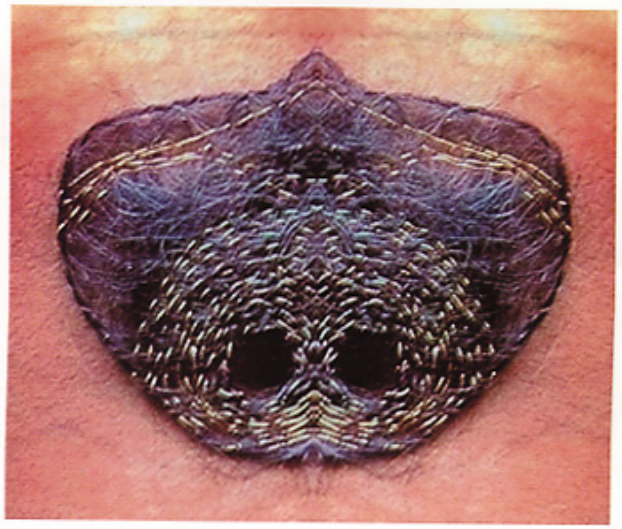
Nath saw her curatorial function as an opened-ended dialogue: she wanted to tread carefully and let audiences think for themselves: "It is uni-dimensional to situate each work firmly and squarely within a context. To even speak of a context is to destroy the many possibilities of an artwork," she explained in her write-up. But, if being sensitive about not "precluding the other intentions of an artist" is noble; it shouldn't be confused with leaving viewers to trawl through so many different types of art that the onus of finding connecting links falls squarely on our sagging shoulders. Which was, unfortunately, exactly what we felt at *Still Moving Image*. Surely, one of the chief joys of visiting a group show is discovering what the curator thinks – even if (or especially if!) we don't agree?

Just as *Still Moving Image* provided us with morsels to munch on regarding the role of a curator (admittedly, more tit-bits than we were looking for in this direction), the opening of Devi threw up pressing questions about the role of a collector too – especially timely given the number of dealers masquerading under this title in India at the moment.

Devi Art Foundation is a not-for-profit initiative. Poddar confesses: "I think my role as a collector changed when I decided to open the Foundation. To have curated exhibitions, which use your collection as a lodestone, raises the bar for you as a collector." For Poddar, a collection – even one for a Museum – is always going to be about personal taste: "I am really not concerned about being as inclusive as possible…My view, based on seeing many other private collections, is that strong collections are definitely based on the collector's personality and taste."

We could of course argue that *Still Moving Image* was less successful than expected because it wasn't stocked with the fun-and-flashy installations we've come to associate with Poddar (think Subodh Gupta's vast silver-tinsel pompom or his delectably pink, fibreglass cow) – meandering instead into video art that is representative of what the youngest generation of 'talent' is up to.

But such quibbles aside, the more pertinent question is whether owning a private museum (especially the only one in India) will bestow Poddar with a huge amount of power. Might he be tempted to abuse it? Poddar thinks not: "I think the Foundation has value as a model which can be emulated by others…If the Foundation manages to do that, I will be content."



Mithu Sen. *Breathing*. Video. 3 mins 18 secs. 2006.