

THE NEW YORK TIMES

July 18, 2003

HEAT

Bose Pacia Modern
508 West 26th Street, Chelsea
Through July 19

Popular cinema in India — and, more recently, Indian television — is famous for its extravagant visual effects and sex-and-violence plots. These elements have also had an influence on contemporary art, as this entertainingly sharp-edged photographic show, organized by the artist Ram Rahman, reveals.

Some of the contributors, like D. Ravinder Reddy, have actually worked in the movie industry: he is represented here by stills from a 1997 bodice-ripper titled "Daud," starring Sanjay Dutt and Urmila Matondkar. Philip Lorca DiCorcia's "Bollywood" reflects a stint in Bombay film studios in the 1980's. The artist Subodh Gupta recently took a bit part in a B-grade gangster film; he appears in a painting of a scene from it, and again in a hilariously phallogocentric television video he made in Egypt in the early days of the war on Iraq.

A beautiful series of photographs by Samar Singh Jodha documents the now-pervasive presence of television in Indian life, while Abul Kalam Azad and Mr. Ram focus on the vivid film posters that have long filled South Asian cities, roadsides and villages. Sheba Chhachhi and Sukyana Rahman, working in video and photo-collage respectively, consider the sexual politics these advertisements sell, while Pushpmala N. takes such images into her own hands in a series of fabulous pictures, shot by the film studio portraitist J. H. Thakker, in which she enacts a variety of female film stereotypes, from temptress to ingénue to earth mother.

These roles embody the nine rasas, or moods, that form a conceptual basis for classical Indian art, and which, when feminized, have complex, often troubling implications in terms of gender and class. Pushpmala N.'s update on such conventions is inspired. So is the way Mr. Rahman, in his statement for the show, deftly casts Indian film, television and photography into historical perspective. "The motion picture, with its fantastic synthesis of Hollywood, Indian folk performance, music, mythology and linguistic variety, has become a major visual cultural tradition, no less important than the murals of Ajanta, Padmanabhapuram or the sculptural friezes of Sanchi, Konarak or Mahabalipuram." Absolutely true, and totally fascinating.

HOLLAND COTTER