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"PHENOMENOLOGY OF PERCEPTION"

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EXHIBIT 320

INDIA



PARUL GUPTA, from the series "Extending the Line," 2013, photographs and drawings, installation view of "Phenomenology of Perception" at Exhibit 320, New Delhi. Courtesy Exhibit 320.

The latest show at New Delhi's Exhibit 320 gallery, "Phenomenology of Perception," featuring three female artists from the Indian Subcontinent, presents an astute curating of various sensibilities that are each distinct and yet share a certain sense of synergy. As one walks into the gallery, located in the Lado Sarai area of New Delhi, one does feel pleasantly surprised at not being overwhelmed by a profusion of imagery and symbolism filling the space, exploring post-colonial anxieties and gender politics. In the current climate of art—especially in the Subcontinent, where it is largely shaped by the demands and desires of the market—any work by an artist that privileges aesthetics over identity politics strikes one as a rarity.

"Phenomenology of Perception," whose title (a bit dry in contrast with the lyrical content of the show) is borrowed from French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's 1945 book, is curated by Meenakshi Thirukode. It brings together the work of Parul Gupta from India, Pakistan's Nurjahan Akhlaq and Yasmin Jahan Nupur from Bangladesh. All three artists draw heavily from abstraction; though, ultimately, it is the subtle hints of figuration that transform their work into something rich and strange.

The progression through the roughly tripartite space that comprises the ground floor of Exhibit 320 feels akin to a plunge into a river. Gupta's starkly minimalist photographs in black and white, which usher the viewer into the gallery, have the stillness and lucent clarity of a pond on a summer afternoon—when shadows play tricks on the eye and angles and edges collide to create fantastical forms. In the next room, viewers become submerged in Akhlaq's series of deconstructed miniature paintings, while Nupur's richly imagistic work offers a breathtaking grand finale, as one is forced to come up for air.

The dialogue among these three bodies of work feels poetic and graceful, yet also enigmatic and reticent. One hears the whispers of several traditions—from European modernism to the Mughal painting of South Asia—coexisting with the confident articulation of contemporary styles. If the muted elegance of Gupta's photographic montage feels unyielding at times due to its grim, Germanic flavor, its inscrutability is much like that of a cogitative literary verse. Her work inspires thought without giving the viewer the satisfaction of complete understanding or obvious meaning.



YASMIN JAHAN NUPUR, *Untitled Drawings*, 2015, 43 × 30 cm each. Courtesy Exhibit 320, New Delhi.



NURJAHAN AKHLAQ: (left to right) *Seized Rhythm*, 2015, mixed media, acrylic on paper, 26.7 × 37 cm; *Broken Beauty*, 2015, mixed media, acrylic on paper, 26.7 × 37 cm; *Coded Weave*, 2015, mixed media, acrylic on paper, 26.7 × 37 cm. Courtesy Exhibit 320, New Delhi.

As a counterpoint to this taciturnity, Akhlaq's style is more robustly realistic. In her collage-like appropriations of Mughal miniatures, the interplay between the notions of the "part" and the "whole" opens up new ways of looking at the traditional genre, though the appeal of her collages themselves remains relatively transient. In spite of its clever juxtapositions and experiments, Akhlaq's body of work never quite succeeds in shedding its baggage of self-consciousness and fails to relinquish the chance to convey political messages. As a result, it lacks the confident ease that is more strongly evident in the work of the other two artists.

Among the three, eloquence is most mellifluously expressed in the work of Nupur. A wall filled with lush, red roses made of velvet provides a rather kitschy initiation into her paintings, which are reminiscent of the Op art paintings by British artist Bridget Riley. From the outbursts of intense colors to the wild choreography of brushstrokes, the giddy rhythm of Nupur's style is a feast for the eyes, as is her inclination to transgress, push the limits and take risks with form. The exuberance of her artistic language, its bold and unaffected vocabulary, tends to stay with viewers—long after they have left the gallery.

"Phenomenology of Perception" is on view at Exhibit 320, New Delhi, until September 15, 2015.

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