

**JANAVI MAHIMTURA AND MUMBAI**

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There are only one or two overt pictorial references to Mumbai spaces and landmarks in Janavi Mahimtura's *Perceptual Perception* series. However the themes covered—police corruption, religious plurality, cosmopolitanism—make it clear in which Indian city these paintings are set. The seventeen oil paintings which she presented at the Museum Gallery, a well-lit facility in the artsy Kala Ghoda area, are an honest tribute to Mumbai, the city in which the artist grew up.

Mahimtura tends to paint in layers, from foreground to back. Typically, in the background, she features working-class Indians: a lime seller squatting behind an impossibly large basket of fruit; an ice-cream vendor; or a fish monger awaiting slicing instruction. In the foreground, invariably, she places a slightly larger-than-life *non* Indian figure.

The viewing public's reaction to this series was mixed, she conceded.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this has to do with the incongruity and repeated depiction of "the other" in most of her paintings. Although figurative paintings have been the mainstay of modern Indian artists (particularly in the first half of the twentieth century), sightings of foreigners—European or not—in these works are rare.<sup>2</sup> This is understandable, given the context of India's colonial past, and the relations between ruler and ruled.<sup>3</sup>

"I like to put people in places they don't belong," the 22-year-old artist told me, as if anticipating the question, when we talked about this aspect of her work. "I painted Caucasian figures to portray the 'perception' aspect of my series. . .[it] is always in the foreground." She seemed to view it as nothing out of the ordinary to portray foreigners in her paintings because "in an increasingly global environment, foreign people have become part of the 'people landscape' of Mumbai." Certainly, this is true for this part of South Mumbai, where museums and cultural centers flourish, and hotels, restaurants, boutiques, and shops thrive.

In *Taste My Sweetness*, a vertical-format oil on canvas, Mahimtura placed a young blonde in the foreground, her arms unnaturally long for her body, making a "flying-kiss" gesture. Behind her lies a row of neatly arranged fish with cut slits suggestive of female genitalia. A fish seller standing behind the counter holds an ominous carving tool in his right hand, the index finger of which points to the dead, suggestively slit fish. At first glance, the mind converts this picture into one of foreboding, but the portent is reversed after closer inspection. If the fish seller's facial expression betrays fear—not lust—for the seductive blonde in the foreground, the villain becomes the hero. Many of Mahimtura's paintings are open to delayed interpretational readings such as this.

The artist readily admits to having been influenced by the work and techniques of artists such as Chaim Soutine, Alex Katz and Will Cotton,<sup>4</sup> but she also employs strategies of her own: to draw the viewer's eye to her desired point of focus, she deliberately exaggerates the length of the blonde girl's arms. Thus, the viewer's eye forms a path along those long arms to the hands—and to the flying kiss.



Janavi Mahimtura, *Taste My Sweetness*, c2009.

Multiple messages are communicated in *We've All Seen Worse Things in Life*, the largest canvas displayed, in which a butcher mechanically chops meat, oblivious to the couple making out on the bench in the foreground. When I commented that this seemed counter to what one might expect in a crowded developing-world metropolis, Mahimtura only half agreed. "It *is* as if there are two scenes not completely integrated... On the other hand, Mumbai has changed. Today, you can wear a short skirt and walk around, and nobody seems to notice." In any case, she said, her focus for this painting was on the various symbolic meanings of blood. "Blood signifies the three stages of womanhood: there is blood during menstruation, the loss of virginity, and childbirth. The girl in the painting is at the loss-of-virginity stage." She indicated that this scene might be a case in which art imitates life. "The Internet, TV, consumerism, all of these influences have changed the city's culture, and now we're seeing these changes creeping into art."



Janavi Mahimtura, *We've All Seen Worse Things In Life*, c2009.

In the absence of plot-driven pictorial storylines, narratives can be elusive. When asked how she feels if critics and observers interpret her paintings in ways she did not intend, the artist responds matter-of-factly:

"I do conceptual paintings that are meant to be interpretational. I may nudge people to where my thought process is, but what they see in the painting, or think it is about is entirely up to them."

Mahimtura speaks with fondness for the "nonsensical confusion" that comprises daily life in Mumbai. "Mumbai was my muse for this series . . . there is so much diversity here. . . so many stories to tell." The religious diversity is best highlighted in *Every Lane in Mumbai is a Village*. The sleeping man may be interpreted—by way of clothing and facial hair—to be Muslim; the crosses reflected in the motorbike's mirrors represent Christianity; and the *lungi*, worn by the youth in the foreground is a reference to Hinduism. Mahimtura says this work reflects her positive take on the city's residents, who work together daily without giving pronounced religious or cultural differences a second thought.



Janavi Mahimtura, *Every Lane in Mumbai is a Village*, c2009.

It should be noted that Mumbai's reputation as "diverse and cosmopolitan" has taken a hit from fundamental quarters in recent times. Over the past few months, the Shiv Sena party's rigid chauvinistic stance has seen its leadership question a celebrated cricketer's patriotism,<sup>5</sup> incite vandalism at a leading film star's latest movie release, and attempt to bar politician Rahul Gandhi from visiting Mumbai.<sup>6</sup> *Perceptual Perceptions* opened on February 2010 against this backdrop of riot and mayhem. In this series, the artist depicts both the good and bad aspects of Mumbai city life, reflecting truth the way she sees it. Mahimtura's Mumbai is a megacity in which the poor and rich are juxtaposed, and in which the lives of the local fruit vendor, international businessman, and foreign tourist continue to coverge and collide under the shadow of - and in opposition to - the Shiv Sena.

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Endnotes

1 I spoke with Mahimtura briefly at her exhibit on February 6, 2010, and again in a long telephone conversation on March 8, 2010. Quotes are gleaned from these conversations, or taken from her exhibit catalog, Janavi Mahimtura. *Perceptual Perception: A Conceptual Series*, published by Gallery Art & Soul (Worli: Mumbai, 2010).

2 With notable exceptions: (a) Ravi Verma was commissioned to paint King Edward VII's portrait, which he copied from a photograph, see Mitter, "Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922," p. 190. Almost all his other paintings were of Indians, real or mythological. (b) Some of the light-toned women of Hemandranath Mazumdar's nudes and "wet-sari" paintings might be construed to be western women, but they were probably modeled after his (Indian) wife, or other Bengali society women, see Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism*, p. 138. (c) Most of the nudes in Amrita Sher Gil's oeuvre were fashioned after herself or her sister (Ibid, p. 51). (d) Although it is hard to discern if the figures in F N Souza's ink sketches are Indian, he has painted winged angels that appear to be Caucasian, see Neville Tuli, *Indian Contemporary Painting*, p. 167. (e) M F Husain's "The Raj" paintings contain depictions of British royals; however, all these figures are devoid of facial features—they are not realistic paintings (see Shyamlal Bagchee, "Augmented Nationalism," figures 4, 5, and 6). Whether the early modernists and modern artists consciously chose not to paint Caucasians is moot. The fact is they very seldom did.

3 In 1878, the Raj began to censor the vernacular press following publication of a cartoon that highlighted colonial injustice. The cartoon was deemed "seditious," see Mitter, "Cartoons of the Raj," p. 16.

4 Janavi Mahimtura. *Perceptual Perception: A Conceptual Series*.

5 The cricketer was chastised for declaring Mumbai a city "for all Indians." See "Sachin not a Loyal Maharashtiran: Shiv Sena," *Outlook India*, Pune, November 22, 2009.

Stable URL: <http://news.outlookindia.com/item.aspx?669917>, accessed March 10, 2010.

6 Film star Shah Rukh Khan raised the Sena's ire over a freedom-of-speech issue; Rahul Gandhi, had credited NSG commandos from northern states with helping protect Mumbai during the terrorist siege of 2008—a statement that offended Sena sensibilities. See "The Isle of Manos: Parochial Politics is turning many a Bombay dream into a nightmare, killing the city's character," *Outlook India*, Mumbai, February 15, 2010. Stable URL: <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?264137>, accessed March 10, 2010.

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