

## AGENDAMETRO

Film hoarding artists are belatedly gaining recognition in an exhibition on Indian contemporary art, writes Victoria Finlay

India's most famous post-colonial artist started his career painting cinema hoardings. Today, 50 years since Maqbool Fida (MF) Hussain and the other five members of his Progressive Artists Group of Bombay turned the Indian art scene on its head in a historical exhibition, Hong Kong hosts an Indian jubilee art exhibition, including a small tribute to those artists who are India's least celebrated but most exhibited: the film poster painters.

"These guys sit on bamboo constructions high above the street all day with no safety harnesses," said Jaideep Mehrotra, one of the youngest artists exhibiting in the *Spirit And Soul* show at the Exchange Square Rotunda this month.

"They don't get the chance to step back from their work, but use little bits of squared paper to work out what they're doing," he said, talking about one of his most recent paintings called *Image Makers* - which with its themes of homage, iconography, India nostalgia, social comment and figurativism, could be said to represent some of the main threads of Indian contemporary art today.

"They risk their lives for this, and get paid almost nothing," Mehrotra said.

The painting is both a homage to the men who paint movie hoardings and also a comment on the way India has been so affected by the film industry that its icons become religious icons.

"In the south of India there are even temples to film stars. And many of the new politicians have been film actors.

"People see them playing Hindu gods, and they think they really are the gods."

The nine artists exhibiting in the Exchange Square show are not especially representative of Indian art, said Jehangir Sabavala, 75, who with Akbar Padamsee and S H Raza is one of the earlier generations of India's contemporary artists.

But he acknowledged that representation of the subcontinent's contemporary art history would be a hard task to achieve with the work of even 90 artists.

However, these 30 works do reveal some of the interests, or obsessions, of some of the artists who have emerged since that historical Bombay show half a century ago. And also illustrate how strongly figurative Indian art still tends to be. A major underlying theme of the show is spirituality - obvious in some of the works, less so in others, and ranging from Sabavala's quietly poetic semi-cubist figures to Mehrotra's noisy depiction of Holi, the festival of colours.

The one member of the Progressive Artists Group represented here is Syed Haider Raza, who paints highly meditative works based on traditional Indian mandalas but pared down to their square minimum.

It is an example of how modern Indian art differs dramatically from modern Western art. While Western artists were progressing busily through modernism, cubism and post-modernism, their Indian contemporaries were spurred by independence to look into the roots of their own culture.

Anjolie Ela Menon is one of India's best-known women artists, and one of three women exhibiting. She too has been strongly influenced by traditional iconography - although not always of the strictly Indian tradition.

"I'm very moved by Romanesque and Byzantine art," she said. She uses those Russian icon patterns of glowing colours emerging from sombre darkness to create her abstract Buddhist works. So *Feet Of The Buddha* includes tempera-like oranges and greens - faded but with

an inner glow. And her recent *Bodhisattva* series was inspired by ancient paintings she saw in the Buddhist mountain region of Ladakh, northern India. Yellow triangles represent the 10,000 Buddha designs that she saw there.

"The triangles are like a mantra - a word which gives strength by being repeated," she said.

A second thread woven through the show is nostalgia for those parts of India that will be forever India, but which are at the same time disappearing.

"Am I nostalgic?" asked Sabavala rhetorically, when I asked him.

"It's not that I'm being fusty or old-fashioned. I believe we must live in our own time. But there are some things I miss."

Sabavala, who speaks English in a flawlessly British accent ("you must remember, I am an Indian product of the Raj"), said he missed old colonial buildings, the quieter life, writing letters with ink on paper.

And he admits there is nostalgia in his style as well as his spirit.

"Yes, I personalise both the landscapes and the figures, so everything I am feeling is there in my paintings."

"It has taken me many years to move away from the various schools of artistic thought: I trained in impressionism, cubism and academic art, and it takes a long time to turn that into something that's individual," he said.

"To describe my style now? Well, I prefer the evening light and the sun to the moon," he said, explaining his desire for a subtly soft gold in his paintings.

"I come from the generation where beauty is not a dirty word, it isn't a sentimental pretty thing, but something fundamental to life."

The third important thread running through the show is social commentary. The contrast between India's rich and poor, or its men and women, has attracted the attention of many artists and writers through the centuries.

Arpana Caur is a figurative artist who usually incorporates social commentary into her work, and indeed was one of five Asian artists commissioned by the Hiroshima Museum of Art to create a painting to mark 50 years since the atomic bomb.

One small piece, *Potter Becomes Pot*, is a homage to a potter, Gurcharan Singh, who died recently. When Singh started to work with clay before the war there was no artistic pottery culture in India, Caur said.

Indeed, potters were among the lowest castes, because they worked with the "dirty" earth, and were forced to live on the edges of the villages. Yet Singh, after going to Japan to learn about their ceramic tradition, returned to establish India's first art pottery school - Blue Art.

Pottery making was quite a democratic business, Caur pointed out. "A little pinch of clay could end up as something for a king, or for the poorest of the poor."

Another of her works depicts two women, a mirror reflection, except that the top one is green and is making an embroidery of golden thread, and the lower one is blue (the colour of Shiva the destroyer



ANTHONY DICKS

# Homage to movie poster painters

and creator) and is cutting the same thread with huge scissors.

Menon is showing just one figurative piece in the show: also an unambiguous social comment. *Canonisation* shows Mother Teresa, with golden halo, carrying an infant wearing a crown of thorns. She was particularly moved, she said, at the moment after the nun's funeral where her body was taken into the nunnery, to be buried in a simple corner.

"After all that pomp, she was buried in an ordinary little garden."

Menon lived in Calcutta for many years when she was younger, she said. "My father was head of a hospital and he took me to see her once. She wasn't so famous then but I remember being drawn almost irresistibly to touch her feet." Mehrotra's paintings are all ex-

PLICIT social comments, with layers of decodable symbolism - the colours of the Indian flag are used in one, to create rather ill-looking fleshy hues; in another a uniform blends with a door, to show how uniforms give power to those who wear them.

*Mates* is more straightforward social comment, showing a peasant woman standing next to a pedigree German Shepherd, painted in the style of a standard portrait of owner-with-pet.

"People don't walk their own dogs in India, but employ someone to do it for them. I used to see these two on the seafloor, walking together. It's interesting to think about which one gets the better treatment."

Hong Kong-based Indian artist Anjolie Sowani also deals with the subject of duality with her huge abstracted oil depictions of figures blending with each other. She is red, he is blue, and between the two they represent the universe, shown by Parvati and Shiva.



SPRITUAL: from left, Anjolie Sowani, Jehangir Sabavala, Arpana Caur, Jaideep Mehrotra and Anjolie Menon; Sowani's *Duality I*, left, and Mehrotra's *Transition*, below



"I am fascinated by the way people have so many different sides to them," said Sowani, who has lived in Hong Kong for nearly three years. Her husband works for Jardine's, and the two have moved around a great deal over the past few years.

"Perhaps the duality thing is about having to explore different parts of myself as I find myself in

different countries," she said. It is not so much that Sowani is influenced by the culture of Hong Kong, just that "when you're away is when you realise how Indian you are".

*Spirit And Soul* The Rotunda, One Exchange Square, Central, 8am-8pm daily. Ends on February 15 (open January 28-30).