The Shape of Things to Come

Flashback/ Flashforward, an attempt to capture moments of dynamism in art from the past and present, opened at the Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai, in April. **Samira Sheth** reviews the show.

At the opening of the RPG show at Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai.

A mass of wreckage grows skyward in the second of the three pyramids that comprise Prithpal Singh Ladi's work, *The Tribute*. Conceptualised as representative of the present, the second pyramid holds a contradiction within. Ladi has recycled fused tubelights to build the wonderfully translucent, strong yet delicate structure. Inside, one glimpses shattered glass. Ideas of permanence and of renewal, suggested by the choice of form and material, counter those of fragility and transience. Ladi's installation formed the perfect metaphor for *Flashback/ Flashforward*, the RPG art exhibition which sought to reaffirm the past and yet to shatter tradition and rejuvenate practices of art making. Anupa Mehta helped to conceptualise the show which opened on April 7 with two distinct sections, *Turning Point* and *New Millennium, New Media*.

Opting to use the 'the most basic shape, that of a pyramid, as a reference from the past,' Ladi consciously chose the passage of time as his subject, keeping the edge of the millennium in mind. Used as milestones, and graded in size, his pyramids represented the past, the present and the future. Scripted sand and fibre-glass made up the blurred lines of the past, the smallest of the three structures. One walked past it to the present, which had symbols like a drawing of the planetary system, a double helix, a satellite dish and an atom inscribed on its four sides. The concept of evolving technology was carried into the future, a half-pyramid with a suspended CD-ROM and a glass backdrop. The futurist pyramid contained a mirror, which reflected the viewer's image along with the number 2000, which Ladi had written on the base of the structure.

The exhibition offered one a chance to sense the exciting possibilities offered by a variety of new media ranging from photography, assemblage and installation to computer imagery and video. Karl Antao's quirky installation, *Garden of Eden and Mental Cloning*, a rickshaw-like cycle embellished with a toilet seat and flush, stood ready to take today's mobility conscious viewer for a ride. More playful than powerful, the work nevertheless managed to convey a loss of innocence and an increasing frustration with the concept of living a re-cycled life in a world suffering from a visual overload . A quest for identity and originality also seemed to inform Sunil Padwal's untitled work, done in wood, acrylic and fibreglass, where a sculpted figure broke free from the confines of what resembled billboard hoardings. Allusions to cloning were again in evidence, yet the work itself lacked a strong aesthetic presence of its own. Energy and enthusiasm had transformed the usually staid Jehangir art gallery. Space being at a premium, Jaideep Mehrotra and Subodh Gupta's installations benefited from having a room to themselves as the very nature of their work demanded a space of their own. The work of both these artists centred upon the sacrosanct. Mehrotra's *In the Company of Five Saints* was in a space that one had to climb a few stairs to enter, reinforcing the idea

Prithpal Singh Ladi. The Tribute. Installation. Acrylic sheets, sand and polyester film.

of a hallowed area. Computer imagery was projected through an LCD panel with an audio track in the background which varied from Vedic chants to modern music. Earthen pots laden with flowers hung around a deep pot which doubled as a monitor for the computer images. Swiftly changing images of the Miss Universe pageant in progress; of ancient sculptures; of fire; and of various newspapers flashed across the monitor. Perceptual chaos combined with the disjointed audio track to convey the sense of fragmentation prevalent in our lives today. Natural and synthetic elements, the slow drag of ceremonial ritual and the fast pace of technology came together in Mehrotra's work. A *yagna* progressed at the same site as that of a high-tech video presentation. Mehrotra's work seemed to be emancipating art from ritual while at the same time questioning the way technology has transformed the arts.

Subodh Gupta placed jute bags with various objects on them, like dolls, coins, kumkum, rice, transparencies with images of lesbians or movie stars, condoms and thread among other things, in a room he called *Devata Ghar*. Traditional offerings to deities were juxtaposed with everyday items. The very notion of a defined and reserved space was brought under critical scrutiny. Gupta freed the 'devata ghar,' bringing in commercialism, play, sex, fantasy, illusion or in other words all the things that make up our lives.

Ramesh Kalkur used photography to seamlessly connect the human torso with the trunk of a tree while Subba Ghosh's installation, *How Was I to Know Your Body was Made for Me?* explored the body as a site for public visitation. Radhika Vaidyanathan constructed a labyrinth from wood, industrial paper, wire, plastic and 'found' visuals to convey the tangled synthetic web of a city. *Myth, Memory, Metropolis – An Exploration in Space* works partly because of the title. By itself, the work failed to make a strong visual impact. Sudarshan Shetty's work formed a pretty picture. Titled *Six Ways to Embalm Your Dead*, the colours and shapes of the pink rexine clothes and the rows of black and white toy elephants created a marvellous visual pattern. Toy

binoculars on stands looked on . Ideas of memory, of ways of seeing and of magnification come to mind.

Bikash Bhattacharjee, M.F. Husain, Somnath Hore, Bhupen Khakhar, Tyeb Mehta, Anjolie Ela Menon, Akbar Padamsee, Ganesh Pyne, S.H. Raza, Jehangir Sabavala and Laxman Shreshtha were the artists featured in *Turning Point*. Five works of each artist were on display; four of the works marked distinct turning points in the artist's career while the fifth was a new work. It was a rare opportunity to see the artists transiting different phases. Sabavala's work shows a marked change from the impressionistic *Still Life with Apples*, an oil on canvas done in 1949, to a highly stylised post-cubist landscape, *The Waterfall*, in 1974. Raza shifts from doing a subdued French landscape, *Eglise et Calvaite Breton* in 1956 to painting a compellingly hypnotic *Kundalini*, his leitmotif, in 1998.

The effulgent expanse of an untitled oil on canvas by Shreshtha, done in 1974, takes one's breath away. However, his figurative work, done very early in his artistic career, found no representation. M.F.Husain's best work was missing from the selection on display. It was gratifying to see some of these artists' early work from the vantage of the present. Bikash Bhattacharjee's malevolent dwarf-prince from an untitled collage on board done in 1970 is a powerful work; maybe more so than some of his later canvases.

Flashback/ Flashforward, with its two inextricably linked sections provided a coherent summary of art practices of the past while heralding those to come. Unlike huge group shows that are overwhelmed by their space, this exhibition was neatly slotted and economically spaced with benches being thoughtfully provided for the viewers. Catalogues were available for sale while a brief history of each artist's career and development accompanied his/ her work. Well-curated and well attended, the exhibition was gratifying in that it combined style with substance and marked an exciting turning point for group shows in India. Perhaps, this is the shape of things to come. 🔲
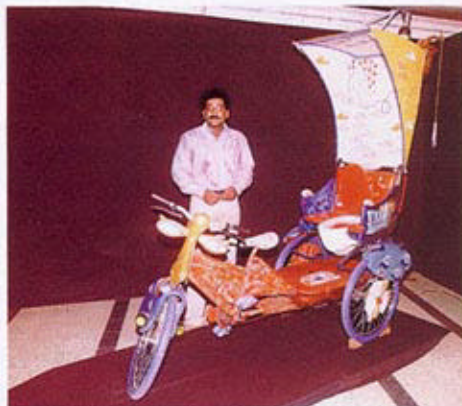
Karl Antao. Garden of Eden and Mental Cloning.

Sunil Padwal. Untitled. *Installation. Wood, acrylic and fibreglass.*

Jaideep Mehrotra. In the Company of Five Saints. (Panch Sant Ke Sang) *Computer imagery projected through an LCD panel with audio effects in the background.*

HIGH RESOLVE, LOW RESOLUTION

Girish Shahane discusses the obstacles faced by artists who use new, technologically oriented media in a country which, despite isolated advances, is not on the cutting edge of technology.

M.F. Husain. Metamorphosis. *Acrylic ink on canvas. 1990. 189 cm x 187 cm.*

The use of relatively new technology in art, particularly digital imagery and video, raises a number of issues related to the production, marketing and politics of art, which are not normally faced by more conventional forms of art practice. Some of these issues are universal in their applicability, while others are particularly relevant to the Indian context. The aim of this article is to discuss issues relevant to the Indian situation through a consideration of a few exhibitions which can be said to constitute watersheds in the development of art based on new technologies in India.

It is convenient to begin this account with an exhibition called *State of the Art*, which we can call the first coming of high technology to contemporary art in India, though it was not really, truly that. In 1990 Abhay Mangaldas and Sonal Jhaveri hit upon an interesting idea: they would persuade well-known artists to create paintings on a Macintosh computer at Prism Graphics, an art studio that Mangaldas ran, and print these on large canvases using a process which had recently become available. The novelty of this project would, they believed, generate enough publicity to bring in the punters and make the project financially viable. Many painters were asked to take a bite of the Apple and finally eight of them – M.F.Husain, S.H.Raza, Akbar Padamsee, Prabhakar Barwe, Laxman Shreshtha, Manjit Bawa, Navjot and Atul Dodiya, – actually created works, which were exhibited in early 1991 at the Jehangir Art Gallery in Bombay.

The canvases were printed in England on an inkjet printer using acrylic inks of the best quality available at the time. The huge expenses involved in the creation of the works and in their innovative display within the gallery resulted in the printouts being priced higher than conventional works by the artists would have been. Potential buyers who were worried that there could be more than one print made of each painting were informed that the participants had worked upon most of the canvases manually, rendering each painting an unrepeatable original.

Despite the hype accompanying the show and despite the big names involved, the paintings did not sell as well as Mangaldas and Jhaveri had anticipated. The pair exhibited *State of the Art* at the National Gallery of Modern Art in February 1993. Manu Parekh was included in the artists' roster this time round, but apart from this addition it was the same show which had been seen in Bombay two years earlier, presumably resurrected in an effort to sell a few more of the paintings.

The show itself was a mixed bag. The memory required to print large canvases at extremely high resolutions would have cost an absurd amount. The compromise arrived at did not allow for any nuances of shading or blending.The artists who tried to do exactly what they normally did in oils and acrylics, like Raza and Manjit Bawa, produced heavily pixillated parodies of their best work. But some artists like M.F.Husain quickly learnt the strengths of the new medium and used it effectively. Ironically the work that really stood out was Prabhakar Barwe's *Smog and the Leaf*, which had been worked on manually so much by the artist that one could hardly recognise it as a printout. Despite the months of hard work put in by Mangaldas and Jhaveri, *State of the Art* could not be called either a creative or a commercial success.

One of the painters who had been a part of the *State of the Art* project and had dropped out mid-way was Jaideep Mehrotra. Mehrotra had been frustrated by his lack of skill in handling the mouse and pen. Sonal Jhaveri, who was acquainted with the possibilities of the 'Paint' software on the Mac, would sit with the artists, instructing them on what the options were at every step. Mehrotra likes to work in complete solitude and did not find the instruction process congenial. But Mehrotra was also attracted to the possibilities offered by computers and bought himself a PC soon after his experience at the Prism Studio. What he could afford was an XT with 2 megabytes of RAM, 10 Megabytes on the hard disk and a mono monitor. Several upgrades later Mehrotra was more than proficient with the mouse but had yet to produce a significant body of work on the computer. This changed dramatically when he moved to a

Macintosh platform. Bill Gates may have become the richest man in the world by ripping off the Mac's functions, but a Windows-based PC still didn't offer the speed and versatility of an Apple Macintosh computer. A major obstacle still remained before Mehrotra: the quality of printouts was still not sharp enough to match conventional painting. Besides, the inks available tended to fade after a few years, so a buyer would not be guaranteed a lifelong investment if he bought a standard printout.

Both these sticking points were removed by a printer called the Iris, which could print at extremely high resolutions using special inks which, if used on pH neutral paper, would last a minimum of 50-100 years without fading.

The catch was that the Iris printers available in India could not print images in the size Mehrotra required. So in 1996, Mehrotra travelled to New York with many gigabytes of images stored on zip cartridges and CD-ROMs. He printed a limited edition of each of the eight images on Arches acid-free paper, planning for a maximum of 60 prints per image, though he never actually printed that many. Signed and numbered, these printouts were exhibited at the Bombay gallery J51. Mehrotra received a lot of attention in the press and one question he was repeatedly asked was, "What are these things you are selling called?" A 'printout' did not seem like a dignified enough term for what Mehrotra was exhibiting: few people would be inclined to shell out 10-15,000 rupees for a printout. After pondering upon the issue for a while, Mehrotra coined the term 'digital lithographs' to define his prints.

Most of Mehrotra's output was sold during the show at J51, but he still did not make a profit on the exhibition. As with *State of the Art*, the expense involved in travelling abroad
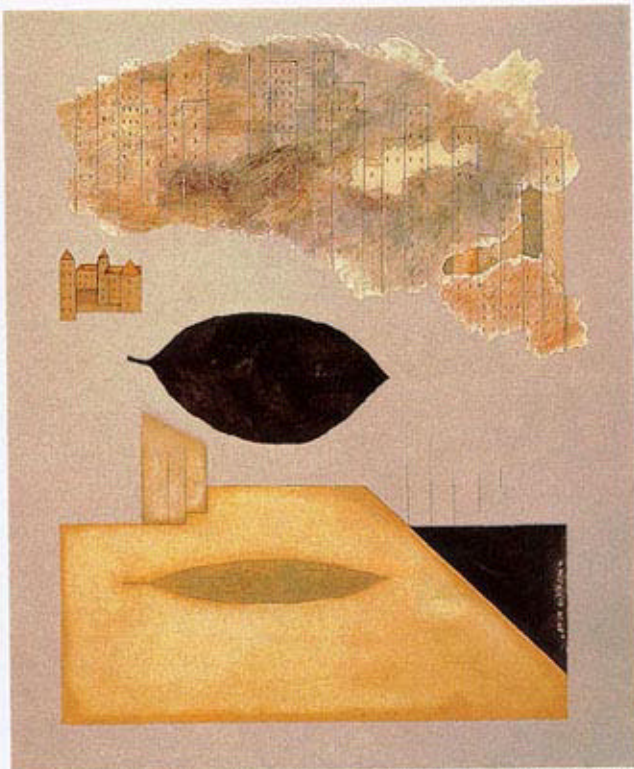
Prabhakar Barwe. Smog and the Leaf. *Enamel on canvas. 1990. 150 cm x 120 cm.*
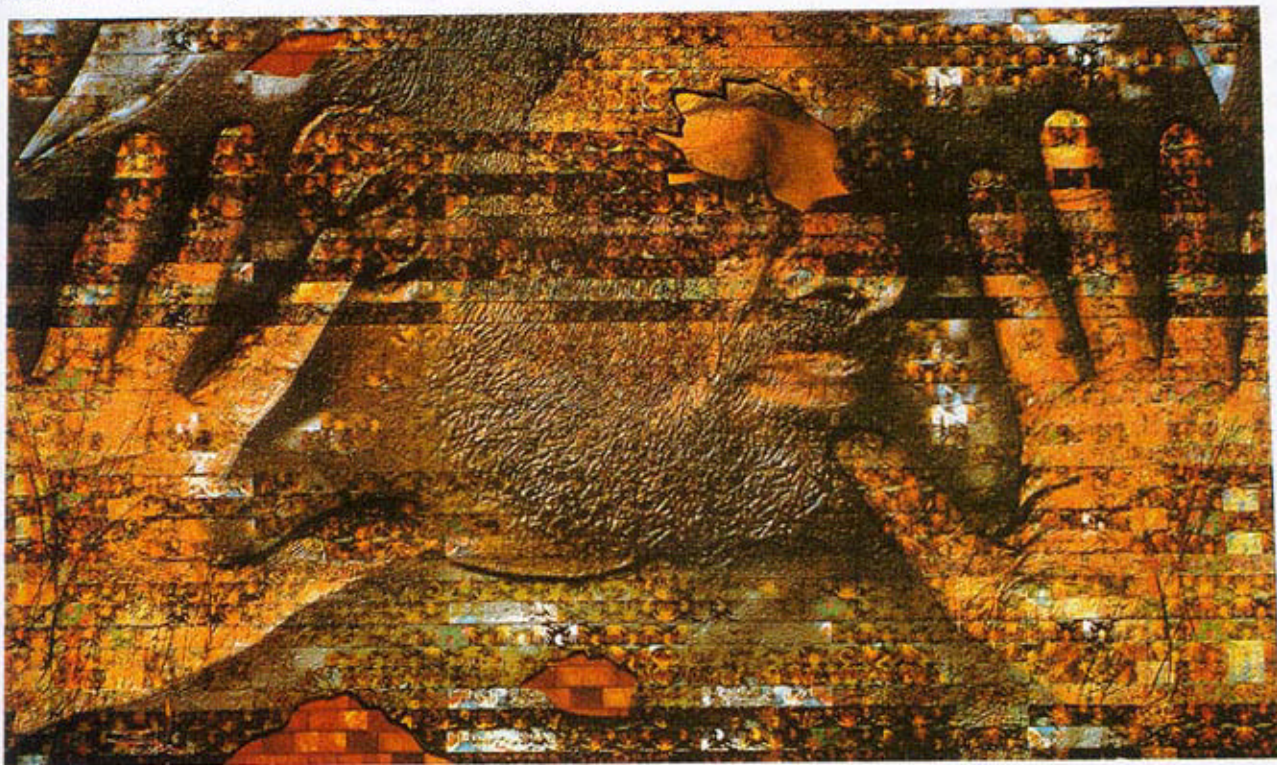
Jaideep Mehrotra. Wall of Emotions. *Digital lithograph in limited editions. 20 inches x 30 inches.*

Sudarshan Shetty, Vinay Mahidhar and Sunitha Kumar. Manu, *one of the images used in the photoinstallation* A Brisk Walk Makes You Feel Good.

and the high price paid for each print scuttled any possibility of a healthy return on the initial investment.

Mehrotra believes the whole experience was worthwhile because he wasn't looking at it as a profit-making opportunity in the first place. The importance of his exhibition lay in the fact that it proved that digital art could be sold like limited edition prints and it offered, for the first time in India, a digital work of art guaranteed to last a lifetime at the very least.

Jaideep Mehrotra is possibly the only Indian artist working in digital media who has given serious thought to the longevity of his prints and gone out of his way to produce work that incorporated the best technology available in the market. Yet, even he recently succumbed to the pressure imposed by budgetary constraints. This happened at *Flashback / Flashforward*, the show organised by the RPG group in Bombay which provided a showcase for works in unusual media. Mehrotra decided to create an installation which used video images juxtaposed with ritual chanting and fusion music. Since he had to bear the costs of the work himself and the installation could not be sold, he was forced to cut corners. Having worked on the imagery of the video on his home computer, he wanted to transfer the contents to an AVID editing system. Rather than hiring a spare hard disk or a Betacam player for the purpose of the transfer, he took a VHS output, digitised that onto the AVID, and then transferred the final edit onto another VHS, which was projected as part of the installation. The loss in visual

resolution resulting from the low-grade equipment he used meant that the contrast he played with in his installation, between contemporary media and traditional ritual, did not acquire the force it might otherwise have done.

A recent exhibition by Sudarshan Shetty, in collaboration with the photographer Vinay Mahidhar and the apparel designer Sunitha Kumar, called *A Brisk Walk Makes You Feel Good* provides another instance of how cost-cutting forced upon artists by an unreceptive market can dilute the impact of their work. *A Brisk Walk...,* described as a photoinstallation, took off from the advertising imagery which surrounds us in metropolitan environments. Shetty created nine installations within Mahidhar's studio, each with one dominant colour. These installations were then photographed by Mahidhar, with a female model placed within the frame in each case, usually in a contorted posture. The models were dressed in clothes which used the dominant colour of the installation.

Shetty, Mahidhar and Kumar planned to use lightboxes, which have increasingly featured in outdoor advertising in recent years. But the printing used in most lightboxes is of a relatively low resolution, meant to be seen from a distance. Shetty and his collaborators realised that a gallery space demands images which would stand up to close scrutiny and settled on a material called Duratrans which is capable of registering extremely high resolutions through a special printing process. The Duratrans is supposed to be sandwiched between acrylic sheets before being placed in

front of the light source, but the budget for *A Brisk Walk...* did not stretch far enough to allow for these sheets. Perhaps as a result of the missing acrylic sheets or perhaps because the artists had not made enough allowance for the white light, some of the lightbox images did not retain the depth and intensity of colour that they had as photographic prints.

Moreover, there was no machine available in India which could print Duratrans in the size required for the large lightboxes. The images had to be printed on three strips which were then stuck onto the surface of each lightbox. Unfortunately India is so technologically backward that no adhesive tape available here sticks one plastic surface to another well enough. Within a short while of the photoinstallation being put up, cracks began to appear between the Duratrans strips through which the white surface of the lightbox showed, ruining the unity of the image.

A Brisk Walk Makes You Feel Good also suffered from problems that ran deeper than those considered so far. The banal title suggested an attempt to replicate the bland uniformity of glossy advertising with an essentially satirical purpose. If this was the case, practice ran foul of intentions since the actual images were not consistently prosaic. In fact they seemed most effective when the models actually displayed a personality and when Shetty's installations used his preoccupation with precarious balance and startling juxtapositions to good effect.

The feminist perspective offers itself instantly when one deals with the use of the female body in selling products. There were one or two images in the show which could be profitably read from such a perspective but, taken as a whole, *A Brisk Walk...* was far from being a protest against the objectification of women. Perhaps the market, then? Was it a protest against the aesthetics of commerce? Well, it partook of advertising imagery too deeply to be an effective protest against the aesthetics of advertising and the hardsell required to break even with such a project put paid to any idea that it was questioning the commercialisation of art. Finally, if there was a desire to open up the art market to such imagery and media, the images did not make an adequate case for themselves. It was depressing to walk through the exhibition, because Shetty's work is usually conceptually convincing but this was a rather muddled show and because the collaborators had put up a lot of money with little hope of any monetary gains.

In contrast, Nalini Malani's video installation, *Remembering Toba Tek Singh*, made for the World Wide Video Festival, Amsterdam, in 1998 and first shown in India at the Coomaraswamy Hall in Bombay this March had a crystal clear concept. It was a protest against nuclear bombs in general and India's nuclear tests last year in particular, within the context of the fiftieth anniversary of partition. *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* was a technically impeccable installation, at least on the visual side. The audio accompaniment (a reading of the English and Hindi versions of Manto's over-anthologised short-story which gives the installation its name and of Indian school texts preaching the virtues of nuclear power) consisted of an occasionally-inaudible speaker placed outside the installation space. Malani had three screens covering three sides of a quadrilateral, and 12 video monitors

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placed inside aluminium trunks on the floor. The monitors on the floor used footage the artist had picked from other sources, from Anand Patwardhan's documentary about the consequences of communalism to archival material showing an American (?) nuclear test at sea. Images of exile, sectarian conflict, radiation-affected births and normal births were looped in eight of the monitors, while an image of a pure blue sky was common to the remaining four. The two screens facing each other showed two women, presumably parallels to the partitioned countries, acting out elaborate mimes, while the central screen carried a blood-soaked vision of a nuclear explosion.

Malani is a subtle painter, whose paintings are often full of evocative details. One small figure, almost unnoticeable at first, or an unexpected gesture can draw the viewer's attention over and over again. One often feels that the whole of a Malani painting is somehow less than the sum of its

Nalini Malani. Remembering Toba Tek Singh. Video installation. 1998.

parts. In *Remembering Toba Tek Singh*, however, most of the details were not her own, they were like flowers plucked from different fields and placed together in a severe arrangement. Malani's video installation ended up as an encapsulation of history which was banal in the extreme, ironically fulfilling the condition to which *A Brisk Walk Makes You Feel Good* might have aspired. Clearly, it is difficult to transfer the mastery one has in one medium to a new one.

One factor in Malani's favour compared to the other works considered here was that she received a generous sponsorship which allowed her to actualise her ideas. The sponsorship came from at least four Dutch organisations, one a quasi-governmental body, the Prince Claus fund, and three private organisations. The latter included Philips, which provided the video monitors and all the other technical inputs Malani needed. Given that art which uses computer or video technology tends to be expensive and unremunerative, getting material sponsorship from manufacturers of electronics products seems a natural option. Now, such products are almost exclusively the preserve of a few trans-national companies, giants like Hewlett-Packard, Sony, IBM, Microsoft or smaller organisations such as TechNova Imaging Systems, which was one of the sponsors of recent shows by Pritish Nandy and Bernadette DaCunha. Given that art in new media is often explicitly or implicitly political and given that most political protest today is, at some level, a protest against big international organisations, is there an inbuilt contradiction in the making of video and computer art in India?

To concretise the issue, one can take Nalini Malani's 1996 installation in Copenhagen, called *Free Trade* as a starting point. *Free Trade* was an explicit critique of globalisation and its effect on third world economies. Given this fact, is it problematic from an ethical viewpoint if Nalini Malani


Gaurish Savant. "Honey, I am apart from it, but still a part of it". *Computer generated collage. 1999. 38 inches x 45 inches.*

receives sponsorship from Philips, a multinational company with a notorious track record in labour relations in India?

This question is genuinely open-ended, it is certainly not intended as a rhetorical device. To provide a counter-example from another field, virtually all serious criticism of the Indian state in Indian cinema in the 1980s was actually funded by the government. And this was certainly not because the government was interested in being criticised; in fact, the state tied itself in knots trying to prevent the telecast on Doordarshan (a government channel) of films funded by the NFDC (a government body), which had received National Awards (given by the government) and which, therefore, under rules laid down by the government, had to be telecast on Doordarshan.

Art can be relatively autonomous of its sources of funding, but these should, at the very least, remain a focus of debate.

The tone of this article might seem negative, but that is only because the stakes are much higher in the kind of art under discussion, the risks proportionately greater and success, therefore, much more difficult to achieve. But all the artworks discussed do represent important moments in contemporary art during this decade. And there are a number of creations that have perhaps been less ambitious, but have fulfilled their goals effectively. Shilpa Gupta's *Untitled* (1998) successfully incorporated video imagery into an installation; Akbar Padamsee, consigned to the 'flashback' section of the RPG show, decided he could flash forward with the best of them and produced some uncomplicated CorelDraw abstracts; and Vivan Sundaram, Gaurish Savant, Ramesh Kalkur, Subodh Gupta, Sheba Chhachhi and Subba Ghosh, among others, have attempted to add a dimension to Indian art by using photography, translites, video or digital imagery to charge their works with energy and vitality. There is reason to hope that contemporary Indian artists will produce a truly significant body of work using electronic media in the next decade. ▮
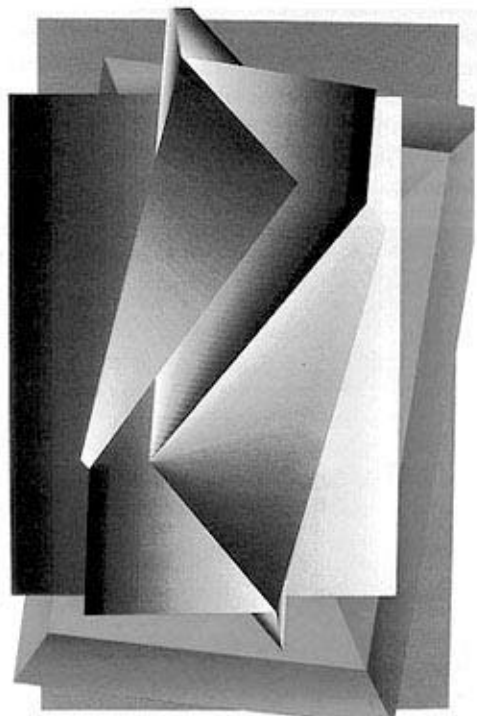
Akbar Padamsee. Computer generated limited edition print.