Of Faith and Hunger

Abhay Sardesai appreciates Reena Saini's philosophical explorations pertaining to the redemption of the soul in a cruel economy, in her recent works exhibited at Gallery Chemould, Bombay.

Reena Saini's new body of work, showing at Gallery Chemould, goes under the evocative title, Skin. And as such, it invites us not only to respect all surfaces but also to witness and empathise with what happens under them: the intense business of living, conducted at a simmer, in the submerged realms of the subcutaneous and the subconscious.

Plumbing the material world for potent resources, Saini gives us constructions that inspire meditations on liminality: borrowed lives lived on the frayed edges of time, suspended between privileged spaces, wasted, extinguished and wished away. In her acrylics on canvas, bread-slices, the eternal signifiers of the continuous struggle against hunger and deprivation are assembled in a pyramidal, assuming therefore, a more sinister skeletal shape — that of a triangle. One of the most deceptive geometrical forms, it holds within its grid, an apparently functional representation of order and at the same time hides under its skin, the absolute truth of a hierarchy.

Saini has in fact, used the triangular form extensively — especially in the House of Cards sequences which made up a substantial part of her earlier work exhibited in her first solo at Gallery Chemould in 1998. In this recent work, she achieves an intelligent echo-planting as she continues with her philosophical explorations on the theme of shelter for the dispossessed. Through these images, she simultaneously conducts an inquiry into the inequalities that go into the political construction of the idea of food — its openly unequal production, distribution and consumption patterns.

Whether it is the man lying prostrate with the burden of the bread-pyramid on his back or it is the shadow-lit figure separated from the pyramidal bread slices by a fence of money-plants, only gradually do we realise the true import of the painting. At the end of our viewery journey, we infer that this bread-monument is actually a huge candle of faith.

Saini leads us into one critical investigation after another. And then again, whether it is the moribund economy dragging itself on its last legs or the rites of passage that a crisis-stricken soul has to undergo, Saini manages to keep most of the discussions within her paintings open-ended.

The slice of bread is transformed into a slice of life even as it becomes a canvas against which memory leaves many traces. In her four paper works, we are led most effectively into the back alleys of the mind as trophies from childhood — thin, black-stemmed flowers with pressed petals, medallions with bright floral inscriptions, family photographs fraying against the burst of termite spoor, spirogyroid strands mating with vehemence — are all delicately presented against the background that the leavened surface of a painted bread-slice offers. Beyond the obvious
signs of material decay, memories continue their valiant struggle, aspiring for an imperishability that is temporary at its best.

In the painting, *Bridge/Root*, a triangle, carefully composed of bread-slices is supported precariously on a tangle of threads cautiously drawn out between the outstretched fingers of two hands. The import of the image, in more ways than one, establishes the larger concerns of the artist in a definitive manner. However, this depiction of the tightrope walk that has become a condition of everyday life for many of us is important for other reasons. It involves, for the first time, the image-apparatus of hands, which are seen performing various roles; various movements, involved as they are, at various levels in the politics of the ‘gesture’. In fact, for Saini, this allows for another of those abiding images that are invoked in various capacities at distinct junctures in the course of the exhibition.

As you enter the gallery, fibreglass hand-moulds are seen in an array of *danamudras*, installed against the facing wall. Arranged in rows, one below the other, to approximate the shape of a triangle, these moulds bear stigmata-like insets, dug deep in the palms, bearing images of the homotriangular compositions culled from the artist’s earlier work. Almost as an incentive to negotiate the act of participation as a viewer in the *mudranatake* at a different plane, in the second or third person, so to say, there is a photograph of this very installation hung on the wall to the left. This play of interactivity draws us into experiencing an assortment of images at various levels of awareness, even as the virtual reality quotient keeps on altering steadily.

As most interesting artworks do, these installations and paintings actually help guide the viewers in their ways of seeing. The next painting of a hand being studied under the scouring eye of the palmist’s magnifying glass comes to you as showcasing yet another effect of distance, as the desperate search for knowing about the future continues in close-up, in the criss-cross-hatch of the lines of fame and fortune.

In most of these recent works, Saini aims to confirm her own private language by referring to various images that she has relentlessly invested with specific gravities in the course of her previous work — coiled up snakes, bottles within bottles, and peepal leaves — being some among them. The idea of re-scaling an image seems to offer a range of possibilities to Saini. You have a diptych, where in the first frame, a child with a happy face is presented with a slightly outsized white rose bracketed by green curlicues. In the next frame, this image of the white rose springs to life: it is a huge maze of mottled whoirs now, having shed its whiteness, with petals overlapping one over the other.

Similarly, a boy staring at his own reflection in the mirror is made into a subject of a painting by an artist who sits with his back to us. In the next frame, the finished painting of the boy is on display and can be seen through the speckled frame of a huge pair of spectacles. Saini’s disposition to play with the idea of reperspectivation is, in fact, an indication of her larger abiding curiosity about the dialogue that exists between converging contexts.

Whether it is raising questions about the overwhelming idea of balance or it is interrogating oneself about the erasure of memories, there is a genuine newness to her approach of seeking answers. The fresh breeze that blew through her *Orchard of Homegrown Secrets*, still continues its run unhindered two years after it first announced her arrival.