The Imaginary Institution of India: Art 1975–1998

Barbican Art Gallery, London, 5 October to 5 January

A ghoulish lake of ant-size souls, train tracks to nowhere and the boulder-like feet of a crowd form the landscape over which gargantuan commanders loom. This is *Gang of Three*, 1976, from Vivan Sundaram's series of black-and-white drawings, 'The Indian Emergency-II', 1976–77, and the seventh of 150 works in 'The Imaginary Institution of India' at the Barbican. By this point, the 30-artist group exhibition has already established a pattern: the juxtaposition, to surreal effect, of different scales and perspectives within a single artwork. This artistic device is found in the opening work, Gieve Patel's painting *Two Men with Hand Cart*, 1979, in which two men stand in front of a mural on the side of a bungalow that depicts a flattened aerial map of an expanding, modern metropolis. It is also found in Gulammohammed Sheikh's oil-on-canvas *Speechless City*, 1975, which depicts two avenues seemingly hovering over boxy houses in a disorienting melange of angles. Skipping ahead, in Nalini Malani's video installation *Remembering Toba Tek Singh*, 1998, we see three room-sized projections and 12 monitors displaying scenes that range from women folding saris to mushroom clouds from nuclear explosions.

Although making for a somewhat repetitive viewing experience across the overlapping thematic sections, this compositional trope of mish-mashed vantages leads audiences into the radical core of the works. The artworks were made between 1975, when Indira Gandhi declared an 'emergency' and suspended civil liberties across India, and the 1998 Pokhran-II nuclear tests, when the nation bolstered itself on the world stage as a possessor of atomic weaponry. This turbulent period was marked by state violence, civil strife and economic liberalisation. In this context, the mixing of perspectives effectively captures the conflicts and transformations of the time, but not only that: it is a fitting tactic for resisting monopolising forces, asserting and modelling narratives that are inherently pluralistic to drive at how varying views can co-exist.

A standout example of this is Bhupen Khakhar's *Two Men in Benares*, 1982, where the left of the canvas is dominated by two naked men embracing while, on the right, a disjointed landscape contains smaller pockets of activity: a devotee praying at the base of a tree, a pilgrim performing ablutions, a masseuse at work and Sadhus meditating on the ghat of the Ganges.

'The Imaginary Institution of India: Art 1975–1998', installation view

Supersizing the unabashed lovers, Khakhar asserts their right to take up space alongside the pious figures, defying the social conservatism of India in the 1980s, when homosexuality was still a crime. Similarly foregrounding the lives of gay men in the public domain is Sunil Gupta's *Exiles*, 1987, a series of eight photographs placed in the immediately preceding bay. Each image captures an individual or couple in front of cruising spots and landmarks in New Delhi. The accompanying captions are fascinating, first-person statements that tell of the harassment the men faced: 'Police operate here ... sometimes they just want a blowjob.' More importantly, they hint at the wide-ranging values and worldviews within the gay community, spanning anti-West sentiments, 'Americans ... They're always trying to tell us what to do', to hetero-patriarchal ideals, 'Even if you have a lover you should get married and have children. Who will look after you in old age?

The show's visually stunning centrepiece likewise enfolds a diversity of stories, but here those stories are of women. Swooping over the staircase in the middle of the gallery is Nilima Sheikh's installation *Shamiana*, 1996, a sunset-orange canopy painted with vibrant cloud and animal motifs. A rotunda sits underneath, made up of six canvases each collating vignettes large and small. On one 'wall', three women sing, converse and eat. What resembles a comic strip runs down the right edge, framing the stages of a woman birthing new life. On an opposing canvas, a figure dances as tears stream down her face, at once embodying both joy and despair. These seasons and experiences of womanhood unfold simultaneously, side by side, all possible and celebrated. True to the temporary structures for

ANNUAL OPEN 2024

SOUTHWARK PARK GALLERIES
2 November – 14 December
Preview: 2 November, 1 – 4 pm
Closing Event: 14 December, 1 – 4pm

SOUTHWARK PARK GALLERIES
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND
BRECKMAN & COMPANY chartered certified accountants

ceremonies and gatherings that it is named after, *Shamiana* also holds space for the experiences of those who step within.

Punctuating the exhibition are works that are not compositionally multi-perspectival but nevertheless add vital aspects to the exhibition's overall tapestry. Near *Shamiana*, for instance, is another striking shelter: *House*, 1994, by Vivan Sundaram. There is an insidious sense of brutality to the installation. Embossed onto one of its richly textured walls, fashioned from pulpy handmade paper, are ammunition belts, a severed arm and an industrial hook. The window on an adjacent wall is bolted shut and another facade appears worn through to its rebar mesh. Far from offering the plush comforts of a home, the structure instead invokes the violence that pounded at the doors of Indian families during the exhibition's tempestuous period, whether in communal clashes between Muslims and Hindus or state-led operations such as the forced sterilisation of seven million citizens.

The show closes with a watercolour by Khakhar that is modestly sized and straightforwardly composed compared with the other works, including the artist's earlier paintings. *Grey Blanket*, 1998, simply centres two figures staring into each other's eyes. The linchpin here is Khakhar's use of colour. One man has bright red skin, the other cool grey. Yet a patch of muddy red spreads over the latter's neck, as if he is being briefly transformed through this intimate exchange. *Grey Blanket* succinctly affirms that difference can result in a kind of beauty as much as it can be the source of hatred.

'The Imaginary Institution of India' puts forward a portrait of India's poly-dimensional character, the very trait that remains under threat today amid the continued rise of Hindu-centric nationalism peddled by a right-leaning government. Daring and heartfelt, the artists' strategies are thus as urgent and vital as ever.

Chloe Chu is a writer based in London.

Dexter Dalwood: English Painting

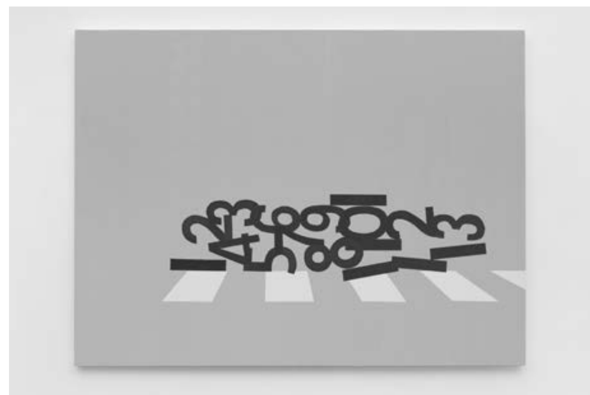
Lisson Gallery, London, 27 September to 9 November

Dexter Dalwood's ambitious, witty show of new works, his first at Lisson Gallery, samples and channels history, art history and music memory in an attempt to define 'English' painting. His composite methods have developed out of a distinctive use of collage and fragments, but here the visual architecture feels more personal and internal in mood. Did the stylistic and conceptual roots of this show start with his residency in Oaxaca in 2017 or 40 years earlier in 1977, when Dalwood headlined London's legendary Roxy Club playing bass in the short-lived Bristol-based punk band The Cortinas? It is evident that the artist's subsequent move to Mexico provided vital distance for him to make sense of what he left with and what he left behind. In a recent series called 'This Does Not Belong to Me', 2021–22, Dalwood tried to understand a painted history of Mexico, from ancient Mixtec Codices to specially commissioned 20th-century murals; he was particularly drawn to David Alfaro Siqueiros' mural *Mexican History or the Right for Culture*, 1952–56, which highlights the dates that shaped the country's independence. This prompted Dalwood to create a contemporary timeline that included a massacre in 1968 and the disappearance of 43 students in 1994. At a moment of increased violent nationalism and the decolonising of images, could he apply a similar method to interrogating a painted history of England?

Dalwood's first painting sets up a satirical tone: *English Painting*, 2023, simply offers these two white cursive words on a black ground. It's a wry introduction to an exhibition that channels David Bowie as Lytton Strachey (as painted by Henry Lamb in 1914) and samples King Arthur (modelled on William Morris) from Edward Burne-Jones's epic painting *The Last Sleep of Arthur at Avalon*, 1881–98. *Landscape*, 2023, presents an English pastoral scene, à la Thomas Gainsborough, into which pokes a leg wearing a period white stocking and a pointy black buckled shoe. *Portrait*, 2023, shows a man hefting a shotgun, wearing a black neckerchief and a touch of menace, all rendered in a Frank Auerbach-like impasto. But the apex of colonial, aristocratic power comes crashing down in *Bloody Sunday*, 2023. Here, against a ground of pale orange, a bunch of dark green numbers appear on a zebra crossing. There's a flash of *Abbey Road*, until you realise that the numbers are piling up, their edges softened to make them seem more human. Provoked by the 50th anniversary of the killings of 13 civilians in Derry by the British Army, Dalwood's tricolour image radiates illegibility: it's hard to read, because few want to read it. It emits a similar, stark painfulness as his *Death of David Kelly* painting from 2008 (Interview *AM*425).

Numbers coalesce and float free of coherent dates in several other paintings. In *The Blitz*, 2024, the black-and-red numerals 4–1–9–0 march horizontally and inexorably across a green ground over ghosted rectangles of grey. Two framed paintings lean partially out of sight. Although inspired by the emptying of the National Gallery during the Second World War, Dalwood suggestively questions who decides which works are treasured and displayed; the precariousness of taste, aesthetic values and material accumulation; and the digital threat to painting. In another typical Dalwoodian layer, I discover that the elegant 1930s font was once used by Lyons' coffeehouses and later taken up by the National Socialists – who certainly knew how to make numbers vanish.

Dalwood also remixes his musical past in *Punk is Dead*, 2023, where the red Roxy sign slides somewhere between a black window and a green mirror, into evaporation. *Northern Pop*, 2023, salutes Jasper Johns's *grisaille* checkerboard where abbreviations of northern counties are embossed in black oil and twilight puddles on a grey wintry street. These paintings are too



Dexter Dalwood, *Bloody Sunday*, 2023