

Art changes 'haat' in Delhi

society that is inimical to women. The manner in which the work is arranged is climactic -- the viewer moves across apparently disjointed screens that show single women in a state of confinement and duress. The idea of obstruction is created at different levels from a door that resists opening to the overpowering claustrophobic buildings of Bombay. One waits for a sliver of tension to climb up the spine, that must surely come from the shock of recognition. But the dominant impression that I came away with is that this work recalls theatre and film in a way that suggests a mediatic cut and paste approach. And the integration of the varied images, with its somewhat predictable apotheosis, leaves behind a bland aftertaste.

What comes as a surprise in this exhibition is that spaces have actually been constructed within it to contain rather than disperse the images. While the all glass frontage allows for multiple fields of projection it is only Navjot who does not work in a darkened interior space.

'Between Memory and History' is a conceptually strong work: it uses video, installation and a soundtrack to locate the entrenchment of violence in

Indian social history. The video footage is thus culled from archival material -- including historical documents, writing from catalogues of artists, journals and psychoanalytic studies -- that record the testimony of survivors. The content is undifferentiated, even somewhat blurred, perhaps deliberately, to drive home the sameness of social violence, and to interrogate the position of the witness. As a spectator he is guilty of both apathy and forgetfulness. The truly poetic part of the work is an installation created virtually from small paper testimonies, tied on it like ribbons. Evoking as it does the prayer shrine at a Japanese Shinto temple, the effect is luminous and peaceable.

Shilpa Gupta is probably one of the most savvy artists in the new media who examines a sociological given with a well-honed sense of irony. Her work diamondsandyou.com, a take on the Internet as an immoral or perhaps an amoral sales conduit is designed like a web page in cheery bubblegum pink. The content surrounds the 'blood diamonds' of Sierra Leone, painfully smuggled out of the country, often through swallowing or hidden in deliberately made incisions on the body. These are

then cut by child labour in Indian cities in degrading working conditions. The language of the text, with its objective choices is blithely inhuman, compelling a reaction with every click of the mouse.

'Neelkanth', a video installation by Sheba Chhachhi, assumes a more layered approach to visual linguistics. Like Nalini Malani in her video work 'The Sacred and the Profane', Chhachhi investigates mythic corollaries for contemporary society. The work in itself is very neat: slim translites illuminate a single sense organ -- the panchindriyan -- of the body. These are arranged like a mandala on the ground and we gain the effect of looking down on city skyscrapers. In the centre, on a screen there is a fairly literal image of Neelkanth, the one that swallows elements so poisonous that they finally affect their own physical transformation.

Chhachhi's images locate these poisons in the area of ecology, and perhaps thereby limit the interpretive power of the work. Nevertheless, Neelkanth is a highly realised work. In moving from the microcosm of the single human organ to massive poisonous wastes it evokes the great distance between personal and ritual acts

of cleansing that are so well enshrined in India's religious discourse, and the unclaimed public wastes that we live with. It also forces and perhaps seeks to fix the question of proactive responsibility. Issues around new media are so inchoate that any such exhibition actually serves to stir up a wider debate.

It is notable that barring Shaktantala Kulkarni, all the other works have been seen abroad before they were exhibited in India. Perhaps the reasons lie in the inhospitable climate in terms of huge costs, relatively few artists and even fewer viewing opportunities. In the context of the Technopark, if there is concern for the social use of such art, then perhaps the dissonance between the cacophony of a regular evening in Badarpur, with its vast, mobile viewership and the select audiences within the gallery could be bridged. One obvious way perhaps is to use the very considerable glass frontage of the gallery which has dramatic viewing possibilities. The other supplement which a new media concern could employ is to use electronic hypertext -- perhaps in the form of an art journal -- to proliferate the art works, and to sustain interaction between the shows.