

Through the looking glass

Sonal Shah peeks into artist S Ayesha's shiny paper and plastic wonderland.

S Ayesha's show at the Visual Arts Gallery this fortnight is titled *Different Faces*, but each of the multimedia works is actually a self-portrait – “different sides of me”, according to the artist. The seven to eight large pieces in this show are formally framed as a “preview” to a larger show slated for next April, which will include portraits of friends and other people.

Meant to illuminate different facets of the artist's personality, the collages are as reflective as mirrors and as deeply layered as a mountain landscape.

Not strictly a painter, Ayesha – her real name is Ayesha Seth, but she uses S Ayesha as her artist's name – uses a wide array of material to achieve that layered, reflective effect. Ayesha combines plastic transparencies with glass paint, any paper she can get her hands on, packing materials, photographs and holographic surfaces, transforming wooden boards to sparkly stretches of kitsch-abstract collages that give the effect of digital manipulation even though they are totally hand-made.

Different Faces is Ayesha's first high-profile solo show. Trained as a lawyer in Wales, then as a graphic designer at Parsons in New York, she returned to India to pursue design. Her first show was an exhibition of smaller works, a foray into some of the materials she uses now and an exploration of her experience with dyslexia. When approached to do a larger show at the Habitat, Ayesha took six months off steady design work to paint full-time.

The result is an exhibition that is perhaps best encapsulated by the brand name of a toy (the packaging of which is used in one of the works). The name is “OK Play” and it is perfectly suited to the attitude of these collages. Other products whose wrappers are used include whisky, various brands of cigarettes, matches, candy and sundry other materials.



It's ok to play, insists this detail from one of Ayesha's collages

The photographs used are mainly self-portraits of the artist, usually wearing sunglasses. This grants anonymity to the subject, as well as deflecting importance from the visual representation of the face. Ayesha even uses a projector

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to cast images onto the body of the subject while taking her photographs.

The frames are wide, spray-painted plexiglass sheets that are screwed over the works, compacting them “like a flower press”, according to Ayesha. This enforces the sense of each collage as a facet of a person's life, captured for a moment as art.

One of the largest works, “Red Angel”, portrays its forceful subject as larger-than-life. Done

predominantly in shades of translucent blood red with Dupont Light cigarette packets visible in places, the work is centred around two mirror image black-and-white self-portraits. Across the wrappers and packets, holographic lines spread synapse-like from the sunglass-shaded eyes, structuring the work into open rectangles and squares that seem to echo the human capacity to order the world according to individual perception.

In contrast, “Princess” is a romantic collage that seems to celebrate love and capture a moment of sheer ecstasy. With a pink-and-gold colour scheme, the work includes a full-body photograph of a man who is “flying” upside down and a photograph of the artist, atypically without her sunglasses but with eyes closed. Butterflies that fly alongside the man suggest the feeling of the first flush of love, and the whole composition surges with a happy – if somewhat sugary – assertion of passion that singles out one person as special. The last collage is a portrait of the artist with her two sisters, adding yet

more faces to the bouquet.

A series of self-portraits could veer towards solipsism. Yet these works speak not only for the artist, but for a certain generation of urban Indians who are growing up in an environment where constant bombardment by the advertisement and packaging of temptation is all-pervasive. Is this a generation of babes in the wood? Ayesha's work suggests otherwise.

It's not hard to imagine a day when people will be adding their names to a list to commission a portrait by Ayesha. In June, she is participating in a *Tehelka* auction that has artists pairing up with celebrities, in which she will be depicting Karan Johar. This convergence of her background in commercial graphic art and fine art (which is becoming more and more commercial) is a potent confluence, but one that could also provide a dangerous temptation to stick to a branded style. However, if Ayesha follows her own “OK Play” adage, she'll be just fine. See *India Habitat Centre in Exhibitions* for details.