



"Untouchable I"

Vasudha Thozhur's intriguing works weave together personal loss and national tragedy, says **Sonal Shah**.

Vasudha Thozhur has always been interested in collating disparate elements in her work. She paints panels that draw together current events, memory, observations and symbols to create combinations that are sometimes startling and always intriguing. Hence, it is appropriate that this exhibition brings together separate but often connected series from Thozhur's work over the last six years.

The exhibition consists of large paintings, scrolls, series of small paintings and photographs. Several of the seven big works are themselves diptychs or triptychs, though Thozhur preferred to call them montages in her catalogue essay because "the links [between the panels] are conceptual and intellectual rather than being direct, visual connections".

Some of these works make up the "Untouchable" series of paintings. Thozhur draws on the many

connotations of this loaded term, but specifically taps into its meaning as someone with the potential to be "used as an intermediary who provides access to the darker, mysterious forces of life" – a role she said has relevance to social practices connected to outcast status. "Untouchable III" is a depiction of sati with a self-portrait of Thozhur as a widow atop a burning pyre. Symbols and writing in different scripts are painted in brilliant red on a grey wall and hands with stigmata spread umbrella-like over the central figure. Thozhur wrote that the hands can signify touch and healing in contrast to the notion of the untouchable, but also that "stigmata carry specific religious associations; there is a deliberate overlap with mudras as in classical dance."

"Untouchable I" is a four-panel work that expands on the notion of outcast status to include the role of the nation in enforcing untouchability. The second panel is based on a press photograph of a man having his head shaved in mourning following the Gujarat earthquake. Thozhur's own face is

substituted for his, once again recalling the theme of widowhood. The first panel reintroduces the hieroglyphic symbols in "a letter... in vermilion and gold". The third panel is a magnificent peacock that invokes nationhood and masculinity, in colours that jar with Thozhur's usually dim palette. The fourth panel is of a leg with the words "jaanewale ko mat roko" – the message scratched by a young girl trapped under rubble during rescue attempts following the earthquake. In these works, personal loss and national tragedy repeatedly cross paths.

"An untouchable is an intermediary who provides access to the darker forces of life."

Thozhur further explores the gloomy territory of loss in "Immaculate Consumption or Love in the Time of Absence", a triptych that speaks of debauchery and death in shades of brothel red. This red takes on a cheerier turn in "Lost

Years: A Reconstruction". A portrait of Thozhur's son, the painting incorporates a figure of the child from a photograph and the Brindavan fountain near Mysore, where Thozhur grew up.

The four large scrolls "Four Ways of Reconstructing Pain or Re-casting Cybermaps for the Old Economy" are self-portraits framed by scanned collages of newsprint and nylon saris. Two portraits are reprisals of the widow paintings. The other two are also taken from previous work – the first from a self-portrait of Thozhur with a tiger at her feet and the second with her painting. Though these are the only strictly multimedia works in the show, other pieces – such as the series "Of Journeys and Emptiness" – dovetail oil paintings with photos on silk.

Much of Thozhur's work is dark, dwelling on heavy themes with only the unglamorous wattage of a fluorescent tubelight and her violent red to illuminate her subjects. Her recent work in "Of Journeys and Emptiness" – despite its lonesome title – is refreshingly random. A collection of paintings and photographs function as found objects: a cinema poster off a wall, a sketched study of a flower, a copy of a chalk drawing of a pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey on a wall. Even here, Thozhur finds a larger picture that ties together the series – citing a connection between her small painting "hieroglyphs" and the cave paintings near Pachmarhi where the work was created.

One of the most intriguing works is Thozhur's "Sanctum", in which her use of red recalls paan-stained walls in three panels. This self-portrait captures a moment of reflection that is hidden from the viewer, who faces the artist's back. The painting suggests that Thozhur shares an intensely personal relationship with her art. "[It is] some sort of manifestation of faith within my own studio, that forsaken space – a writing on the wall, even if it [is] nothing more profound than my name, nothing more than a pledge: Vasudha." See *Vadehra Art Gallery in Exhibitions for details*.