

JEHANGIR JANI, THE MAKING OF 'PEERS'

Mortimer Chatterjee



Untitled
Lifesize. Fibreglass, resin, goldleaf, mild steel and photograph.
2005



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Enter the makeshift studio of Jehangir Jani, in central Mumbai, in early August 2005. Here is El Greco's *Christ from the Spoliation*, a hand held to his chest and an arm swept outward. Next to him is Masaccio's distraught Adam, hands clasped to face, a soul in anguish. Lastly, Titian's St. Sebastian lies prone on the floor, waiting for martyrdom. Faithful representations of the originals, save two elements: each has developed a paunch, and none have faces that bear any similarity to their originals, but, instead, have been tweaked into the likeness of the polymath artist responsible for this growing collection of fibreglass models, tentatively titled *Peers*.

With three projects running concurrently in 2005, JJ is a busy man. Not that this should surprise us, given his career graph since the beginning of the 1990s. The self-taught artist, fiercely independent of cliques or trends, has been a whirlwind of activity since he exhibited his first canvases in 1991. To place in order the primary media employed in his shows since 2000 makes impressive reading: watercolour, sculpture, mixed media, oil on canvas, metal, cement, latex, carpets, mixed media, metal, oil on canvas, steel, and fibreglass.

In the beginning there were the canvas works. His popular series of veiled figures, that date back to the early 90s, were essentially portraits of women from his own community of Bohra Muslims. The twist was that the heavy massing of the musculature under the veils was largely based on JJ's own body. The artist notes that "the figures were coming from a position of authority," and this is clear from the bold sweeps of paint applied to build up the veils. The ambiguous gender of the subjects signposted, at the outset of JJ's career, his interest in critiquing cultures' need to assign and fix roles. By 1993, though, he felt he had said all that he wanted to

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on the subject, and it was not until 2004 that JJ returned to canvas with a show of portraits at the Guild Gallery, Mumbai. “Coming back into painting,” in JJ’s words, “was an act of exuberance.” He was keen to create works more gestural in feel, and to that extent, the 2004 works show a distinct maturing in his abilities as a painter, particularly in his effective use of light. As he says, “My figures (in the earlier canvas works) blocked air: the logical result was sculpture without the baggage of a pictorial frame.”

It is testament to Jehangir’s self-awareness that he possesses the critical engagement with his work to know when a particular medium is unable to express concepts with which he is concerned with at any particular moment, “I choose the medium of making work and exhibiting for what I want to say; psychologically I hate being bound.” So it was that Jehangir broke from painting in the early 90s and moved towards sculpture and installation. Between 1994 and 2001 the most ambitious projects included the seminal *Fairie Tales...A Reread* of 1998 at Jehangir Art Gallery, and the 2001 show, *Stories*, at Gallery Chemould.

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If JJ’s pre-eminent quest is for beauty, it is to the body that he constantly refers, to explore this theme. “My concern



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