

GRAPHICSWALLAH: GRAPHICS IN INDIA

The hoarding painter

Not many living artists can claim to have exhibited at the Tate and the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, as well as other prestigious venues in Vienna, Florence and Zurich. For Balkrishna Vaidya, who lives and works in Mumbai (Bombay), trips abroad are becoming increasingly regular. He is usually accompanied by his son, Ujjwal, who helps him with translation and technical demonstrations. The West, it seems, now regards Indian cinema poster painting as a bona-fide art form and will dedicate important exhibition space to its unique and vibrant style.

Balkrishna is a Maharashtran – these are the ancestral fishing folk of the state of Maharashtra of which Mumbai is the state capital. In 1952, he started his apprenticeship at the Modern Arts hoarding-painting studio and spent three years sketching in charcoal before advancing to the paint brush. He now runs Balkrishna Arts, one of the few remaining film poster painting studios. His studio in northwest Mumbai is tucked away in a relatively quiet alley, away from the bustling commercial traffic of Ranade Road. It is difficult to imagine how the enormous hoardings can be produced in such a small space. Most film hoardings are about 8 by 16 feet. The largest that Balkrishna has produced is 60 by 40 feet, which his team made in six pieces. His studio consists of two open-fronted spaces, each of about 200 square feet with a 15-foot-high ceiling. A ladder ascends into the darkness at the back of one of the rooms into a space that is off-limits to everyone except Balkrishna. Canvases stretched over recycled wood frames are stacked on either side of the ground-floor spaces – some are finished posters and others are works-in-progress. The smell of oil paint offers a welcome respite after the traffic fumes of the busy streets. At the back of the studio, Dexion shelves provide storage for dozens of tins of oil and acrylic paint. Years of spillage have left an amalgam of multi-coloured, solidified globules on the floor that resemble the candle-wax drippings on an ancient temple altar. Above the desk a picture of a garlanded baba (a kind of guru figure) evokes religious and philosophical devotion.

The largest of the painted posters promotes the 1957 Oscar-nominated epic *Mother India*. Its strong typography complements the image of the film's courageous protagonist, Radha. She is a young bride whose gruelling trials against both man and nature result in her elevation to the position of esteemed 'Mother' of her village. Her outstretched arm and tortured pose set against a backdrop of fiery sky and distant horizon illustrate her strength and moral resolve and offer an iconic symbol of the power of social tradition. A wiry, white-haired studiowallah and his young apprentice are instructed to move the *Mother India* poster so that I can see a smaller canvas promoting the 2002 remake of the 1935 and 1955 film *Devdas*. The tragic story is taken from Saratchandra Chatterjee's novel of the same name, published in 1917. The painting features the three main characters played by Miss Universe-winner turned actress Aishwaraya Rai, heart-throb Shah Rukh Khan, and the undisputed queen of Indian cinema for over a decade, Madhuri Dixit, as the eternal enchantress Chandramukhi. The rendering of Dixit's classically beautiful face is exceptional, vividly capturing the spirit of this 'embodiment of Indian womanhood', as she is considered to be by millions of adoring fans. The oil-paint portrait is at least three times lifesize and has been copied from a small photographic postcard pinned to Balkrishna's cupboard. The process begins with a horizontal, vertical and diagonal grid being applied to the virgin canvas. In bricklayer fashion, a taut string has been immersed in a tin of blue chalk dust, stretched across the canvas and plucked to make its mark. When the grid is complete, an enlarged freehand charcoal line drawing is made from the miniature postcard. Meanwhile, another studiowallah prepares a large, translucent acrylic palette on a table top and lays out the brushes in ascending order of size. Large, fist-sized blobs of oil or acrylic paint are spooned onto the palette and Balkrishna is ready to put brush to canvas. Background and base colours are applied with a wide four-inch brush, and the famous faces, dramatic landscapes and bold typography take shape with a confidence that comes from decades of practice. Acrylic paint is used more often these days; vinyl is starting to replace canvas as a painting surface but has a tendency to tear. Traditional canvas is Balkrishna's preference.

I sit in the welcome half-light at the back of the studio, sipping hot, sweet tea, the perspiration being dried out of my shirt by a small but noisy desk fan that is fixed to the ceiling. Outside, in the narrow alley, another of Balkrishna's studiowallahs is stretching another fresh canvas over another recycled wood

frame in the bright heat of the midday sun. This is low-tech commercial art, and I am revelling in its rawness and the lack of computer hardware and microchip-aided design programmes. The lithographic and laser inkjet-printed hoardings displayed on either side of Mumbai's wide avenues hint at the diminishing role of the film poster hoarding artist in the marketing of India's most profitable entertainment industry. But the painted renditions of the heroes, heroines and villains of Indian cinema exude so much more soul and character than the computer software-retouched photographs of the laser inkjet poster.

India's most redundant sign

India's 11 million daily passengers experience the hard reality of train travel: chaotic queues, overcrowding, discomfort and accidents. Alighting from a homeward-bound local commuter train in Mumbai is literally an uplifting experience; you can avoid stumbling off the train with other passengers at your appointed stop by simply not walking – the tightly huddled crowd will lift and move anything that is stationary, so rucksack, tripod and foreigner pass from train to platform without touching the ground. In any city on earth local commuters always look as though they know where they are going, but in India everyone is in an almost trance-like state as they embark and disembark. The information signs seem redundant as passengers file past in oblivious recognition. With the added dimension of a widespread failure to implement signage systems' first rule of corporate design identity – consistency – Indian railway signs assume an artistic personality of their own. Is the clip-art representation of the station master on the yellow acrylic swing sign actually meant to resemble the man behind the freshly painted door with a discreet 'Please Knock' rendered in freestyle italic? Is the big 'Platform 1' sign in bright-red gloss painted on white plywood hanging over this platform or the one opposite?

Earlier in the day the local train from West Dadar to Mahim is relatively empty. As we approach Mahim railway station, a sprawling encampment of dwellings stretches into the hazy distance. This is the edge of Dharavi, dubbed the largest slum in Asia. Over half of Mumbai's population lives in slums or on the street amidst discomfort, squalor and fear of disease. Dharavi has over three-quarters of a million residents, and they survive with minimal government support. Most of the populace are self-reliant. Dharavi doubles as an industrial estate and produces some of the best leatherwork and furniture in Mumbai. Those who require 'welfare assistance' take to the pavements and railway stations to beg. The limbless and blind line the platform access bridges at Mahim railway station to entreat the benevolent commuter.

Some commuters walk down the sloping ends of the platforms to the railway sidings, and wedge umbrellas and briefcases under their arms as they relieve themselves in the open-air public toilet. Naked children play at the edge of the railway track among human excrement where flies mass. The poor survive on the leftovers of Mumbai's commercial growth, and there is plenty of unwanted material to recycle, from food to building materials. Some homes are no more than tents fashioned from tarpaulins, while others are constructed partly from breeze blocks and corrugated iron. Municipal leftovers are also used in domestic construction: broken pavement slabs create an open hearth for cooking and in one particular case a mother and baby sit on the ground before a low, circular homemade table. The mother moves a cooking pot to reveal a metal 'No Horn' traffic sign – India's most redundant sign has found a use.

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