

MEERA DEVIDAYAL



‘TUM KAB AAOGE’



Anant Art Gallery
D 299, Defence Colony
New Delhi 110024
Tel. (011) 51554775, 51554776
mail@anantart.com

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6.30pm to 8.30pm

Exhibition on view till 21st October, 2005
Open daily 11am to 7pm, except Mondays.



'Tum Kab Aaoge'... 'When will you come?' — the downcast woman seems to be asking. Is she every man's dream-wife, waiting for him in a fairytale landscape while he sweats it out in a distant city? Very romantic. But it takes a little dreaming and romance to survive life.

This image first caught my eye as a small sticker on a taxi's dashboard. Then, I started seeing it everywhere, with minor variations — as a painted mud-guard behind auto-rickshaws, as a glossy poster being sold with pin-ups of gods, cricketers and film-stars, and etched on every other taxi's rear windscreen. There seemed to be a magical untold story lurking in the picture.

My paintings almost always begin from an image. I try to turn the 'found image' into a visual metaphor which forces the mind out of its usual rut, and charges it with new meaning. The recurring image was my take-off for an imaginary trip into the mind of a taxi driver.

Why taxi driver? Because with its 50,000 strong fleet, the taxi is an ubiquitous presence in Mumbai, and a constant reminder that its driver is a metaphor for the migrant people who flock from village to city, to make it their home while never really leaving the home they leave behind. The dream home, the home away from home, the home on wheels, resonate with memories of family, embellished with messages and prayers, the whole glued together with the magic of fantasy. The yellow-and-black contains it all.

— Meera Devidayal

September, 2005



Gaman/Agaman: The Interstitial Spaces between Departure and Arrival

BY NANCY ADAJANIA

*"Seene mein jalan,
Aankhon mein toofaan sa kyon hai,
Is shahr mein har shaks pareshaan sa
kyon hai?..."*

*("This burning in the heart,
This storm burst in the eyes?
Why is everyone so anxious in this
city?...")*

THIS MOVING LYRIC from Muzaffar Ali's film *Gaman*, about the travails of a migrant taxi driver in Bombay, has haunted me for more than two decades. You could almost reach out and touch the miasma of loneliness that exudes from each frame. The taxi driver, played sensitively by Farooque Shaikh, has short spells of fantasy which are crushed by the unremitting routine of work. The film ends with a tight clinch of railings as yet another train leaves for his village in Uttar Pradesh, while he continues to stare at the platform from the confines of his taxi.

We fast-forward to 2005, 26 years after *Gaman* was made, to witness Bombay's changed landscape. Speed shapes the era of globalisation; privatisation has broken the monopoly of the State; TNCs and MNCs overwhelm the city's topography and the crush of rural poverty and desire for betterment brings ever more people to the cosmopolitan city of Bombay, the sixth largest metropolis in the world. The taxi drivers fight for their survival among the 17 million people who inhabit Bombay. They cope with a world of competing surfaces as everything from products to advertisements is consumed instantly and evaporates in the blink of an eye, only to morph miraculously and multiply further.

In the visual arts, the politics and poetics of migration and migrant labour have

been addressed variously by contemporary artists such as Subodh Gupta through his sculptures and paintings, Navjot in her video films and now by Meera Devidayal through her paintings. These expressions need to be mapped against the incidents of violence and intolerance against migrants, their precarious existence threatened by chauvinist regional politics. Two years ago, helpless migrant Bihari labourers were demonised as aliens and assaulted by fanatical regionalists in Maharashtra and Assam. And yet people stream in everyday because the risk is worth the gain.

The artist Meera Devidayal's current suite of mixed media works engages with the life-world of taxi drivers. But hers is not an embedded journalistic take which tries to authenticate the experience by insinuating herself into the reality of her subjects. Nor is it an anthropological case study approach based on the evidentiary material provided by her subjects in the first person. It is a pictorial take based on a play of signs which morph from reality into fantasy and back, fluidly erasing the boundaries between the two. The visual trigger for this series began with a tiny sticker, '*Tum kab aaoge*' (When will you return?), which Devidayal casually chanced upon while travelling in a cab. Strategically stuck on the dashboard where normally you might find a picture of a deity

For Hire, 2005
Fabric and acrylic on canvas,
58.5" x 48"





or a shrine, this sticker showed a woman dressed in a *salwar kameez*. Striking a dejected filmi pose, her chin pressed to her knees, she sat against a vast, lush green field. The pathos was only too apparent: the sticker signalled a rurality that was exotic and well-ordered, free of the demonic marks of caste-class rivalries. And as a corollary, it pointed to an urbanity that was unfamiliar, chaotic and explosive in terms of people and spaces.

Devidayal may have been attracted to this image because her vision is ironic, yet warm and humorous. Hers is never a sparring vision that is unrelenting in its criticism of the other. She stashed away this image, which declared the taxi driver's vulnerability, in her memory. Vivacious by nature, Devidayal started looking for roadside vendors who would sell her these taxi stickers which turned out to be reproductions of what was essentially a template with a few variations in costume and locale. She realised that each taxi was a self-contained home away from

home on wheels. And the taxi drivers decorated their mobile homes with the materials available to their subculture: a wide range of tapestries with floral prints, velveteen and embossed; *rangoli* stickers for the borders of the windshield; readymade shrines with flickering flames for the dashboard and tassels of glittering silver coins.

Devidayal does not celebrate this vibrant visuality of popular culture for its own sake: her paintings are not symbolic of the genre of kitsch, rather they are evocative of an inner world. In one of the works, the fuzzy black and pink upholstery on the door seamlessly extends into a landscape. In its extended form, the upholstery grows into an ominous terrain of charred flesh. A train appears on this singed scape to deliver the driver to his loved ones, even as the sign on the door announces crisply 'No Exit.' Inside the taxi, the dreaming driver is branded by the sign, 'For Hire.' In a flash he and the car become interchangeable, their bodies



objectified, reduced to a function. In another work, a stylised pattern of swans on gently undulating water spreads all over the car and on the roof the driver dreams his child into existence. Nearby a door opens, and his wife appears. Space and time become superfluous,

all the characters in the frame exist in a transfixed Now.

In Devidayal's hands, a simple rule of physics — 'Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear' — meant to caution drivers turns to poetry. A mundane instruction aimed

'Objects in the Mirror are Closer Than they Appear', 2005
Mixed media on canvas,
30" x 42"

Flight, 2004
Mixed media on canvas,
40" x 35"

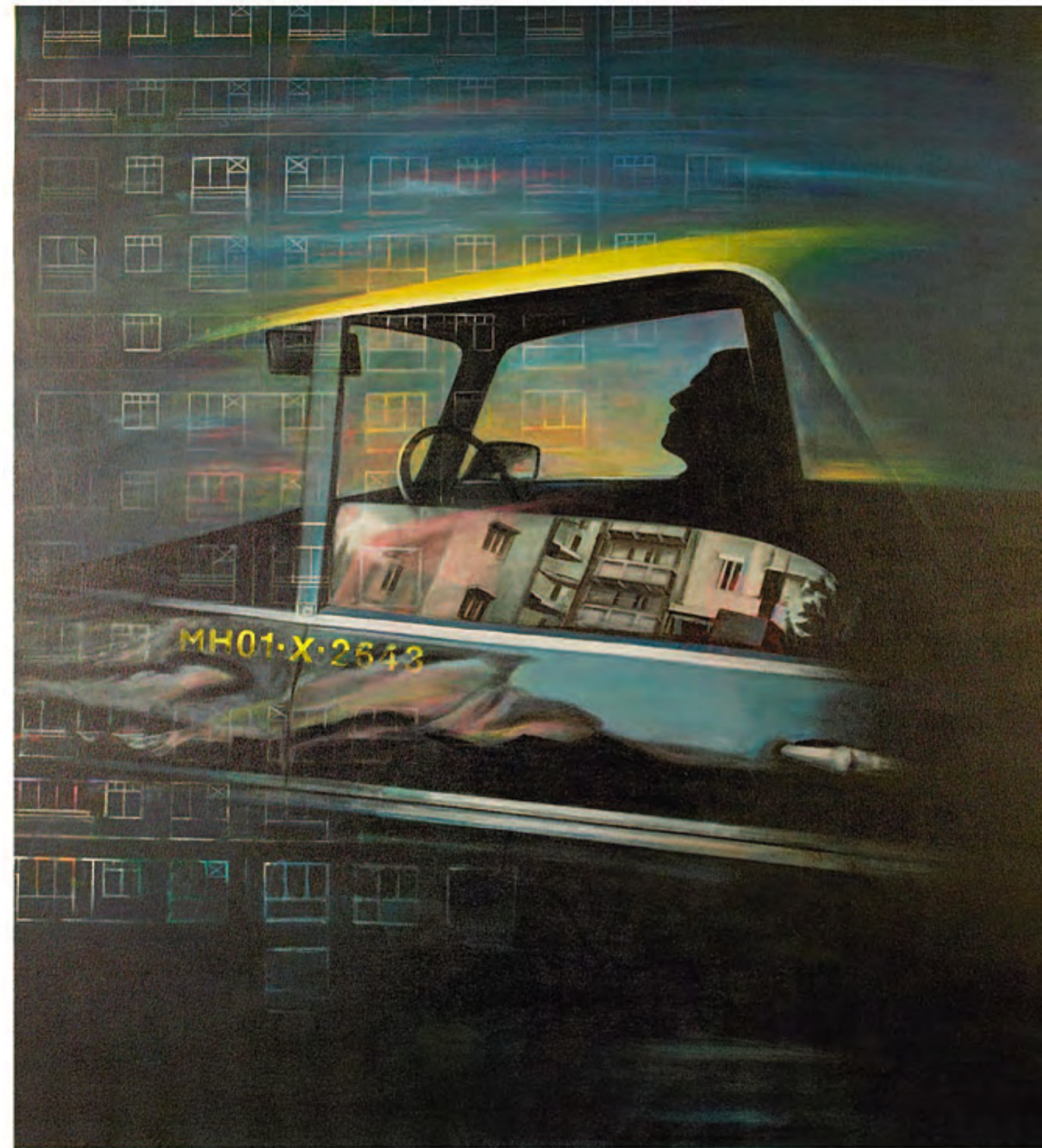


at the driver or his passengers becomes a contestation between the verifiable principles of optics and the unresolved nature of nostalgia. An accident is waiting to happen because the driver cannot gauge the distance between reality and memory.

Devidayal also includes birds and animals extracted from roadside posters and popular calendar images to communicate both the taxi driver's sense of entrapment and his flights of fancy. Swans and doves, deer and rabbits haunt the driver's dreamscapes. While the deer cries in confusion, the rabbit glows like a siren in the dark, a signal of emergency. The red rabbit mirrors the anxious flicker of a miniature readymade shrine which the artist has placed in a niche cut into the painting. Devidayal

has also attached a taxi door to one of her works, hoping that people would interact with the painting and in the physical act of opening the door would be transported into a dream-crossed twilight zone where sleep is as good as death and dreams act as the magic potion of rejuvenation. In another painting, she has created an interior with a chandelier and leopardskin upholstery. It looks like a hunter's salon with animal heads for trophy. The work creates a weird sense of displacement, only the leopardskin is an actual artefact, the rest of the work is painted. While one might empathise with the incarceration of the taxi driver in such a time-warp, it also amusingly reminds one of cabs that have leopardskin-patterned upholstery and bulky plastic chandeliers casting a lurid

Home, 2004
Mixed media on canvas,
30" x 40"



Reflection, 2005
Mixed media on canvas
40" x 36"





green light, a throwback to 1970s smuggler-dominated Hindi film sets.

Throughout her artistic career, Devidayal has attempted to dissolve the boundaries between contradictory states, whether that between the sacred and the

profane, the temporal and the spiritual, or reality and fantasy. She has played through the years with the ingenious props and artefacts associated with each: the kitsch of religious icons and marketplace oleographs, Hindi film posters and calendar art, as well

Night-charge, 2004
Mixed media on canvas,
40" x 30"

as the aesthetics of corporate brochures. In Devidayal's last exhibition, based on the search for a dream home in the city of Bombay with its glaring economic asymmetries, she superimposed hyperbolic real estate brochures

and exotic calendar landscapes on dilapidated buildings and a decaying urban landscape. While she did not meld together the realms of the real and the fantastic in these paintings, in the current show, *the two*



Visitation, 2005
Mixed media on canvas,
50" x 44"



Velvet, 2004
Taxi door and acrylic on canvas,
5'6" x 5'3"



realms are inter-locked and interdependent, leaving the viewer with a sense of ambivalence.

The key to Devidayal's recent works lies in the tension generated by *the highly rich and enhanced materiality of the dreamscapes and the spectrality of the taxi driver* who becomes almost invisible, not a person so much as an embodiment of convenience. On one occasion we see his

face, but as soon as we look for the man his body disappears leaving an outline of his uniform. Cars whiz through his body and nearby an inert woman whispers, *'Tum kab aaoge'*. The cycle of *Gaman* and *Aagaman* (departure and arrival) continues, but life is rarely lived in neat contrasts; rather, it is interstitial, woven from paradoxes and distances.

Morning, 2005
Mixed media on canvas,
48" x 58"



Journey, 2003
Mixed media on canvas,
40" x 36"



MEERA DEVIDAYAL

1947 Born in Delhi
1966 BA in English Literature, Loreto House, Kolkata
1971-1974 JJ School of Art, Mumbai

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2003 *Dream Home*, Gallery Chemould, Mumbai
2000 *Mythescape*, Prithvi Gallery and Cymroza Art Gallery, Mumbai
1998 *The Secret Garden*, Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai
1995 Cymroza Art Gallery, Mumbai
1994 Vithi, Baroda
1992 Art Heritage, Delhi
1991 Gallery Chemould, Mumbai
1990 Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai
1986 Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai
1981 Gallery Chemould, Mumbai and Urja Art Gallery, Baroda
1978 Art Heritage, Delhi
1977 Taj Art Gallery, Mumbai
1975 Taj Art Gallery, Mumbai

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2005 Tao Art Gallery, Pune
2004 *Tribute to Bhupen Khakkar*, Tao Art Gallery, Mumbai
A New Mediatic Realism, Uttarayan, Baroda
The Search – Paintings from NGMA Mumbai, in Muscat, Oman
2002 Triangle Artists Workshop, New York
Icons & Symbols, CIMA, Delhi and Kolkata
2001 *Kitsch Kitsch Hota Hai*, Gallery Espace, Delhi
The Nude, Guild Art Gallery, Mumbai
Birla Art Gallery, Mumbai
2000 *Nayika*, Tao Art Gallery, Mumbai
1999 *Icons of the Millenium*, Lakeeren, Mumbai
1998-1999 *The Miniature Format Show*, Sans Tache, Mumbai
1997 *The Looking-Glass Self*, Lakeeren, Mumbai
1996 *Art & Cinema*, Lakeeren, Mumbai
1995 *Bombay*, (RPG) Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai
1995, 1998 *Art for Cry*, Mumbai and Delhi
1994 *Contemporary Miniatures*, CIMA, Kolkata
1992 Birla Academy, Kolkata
1989 *Artists Alert for Sahmat*, Delhi
1983 *Seven Women Artists*, Art Heritage, Delhi

OTHER WORKS

2001, 2003 Worked with underprivileged children to create joint paintings for charity auctions
2004 Painted a train carriage with 'Open Circle' a group of activist artists, during the World Social Forum



FOR HIRE

PHOTOGRAPHER

of paintings: PRAKASH RAO

of artist: DAVID DE SOUZA

CATALOGUE DESIGNER: RACHANA DEVIDAYAL

