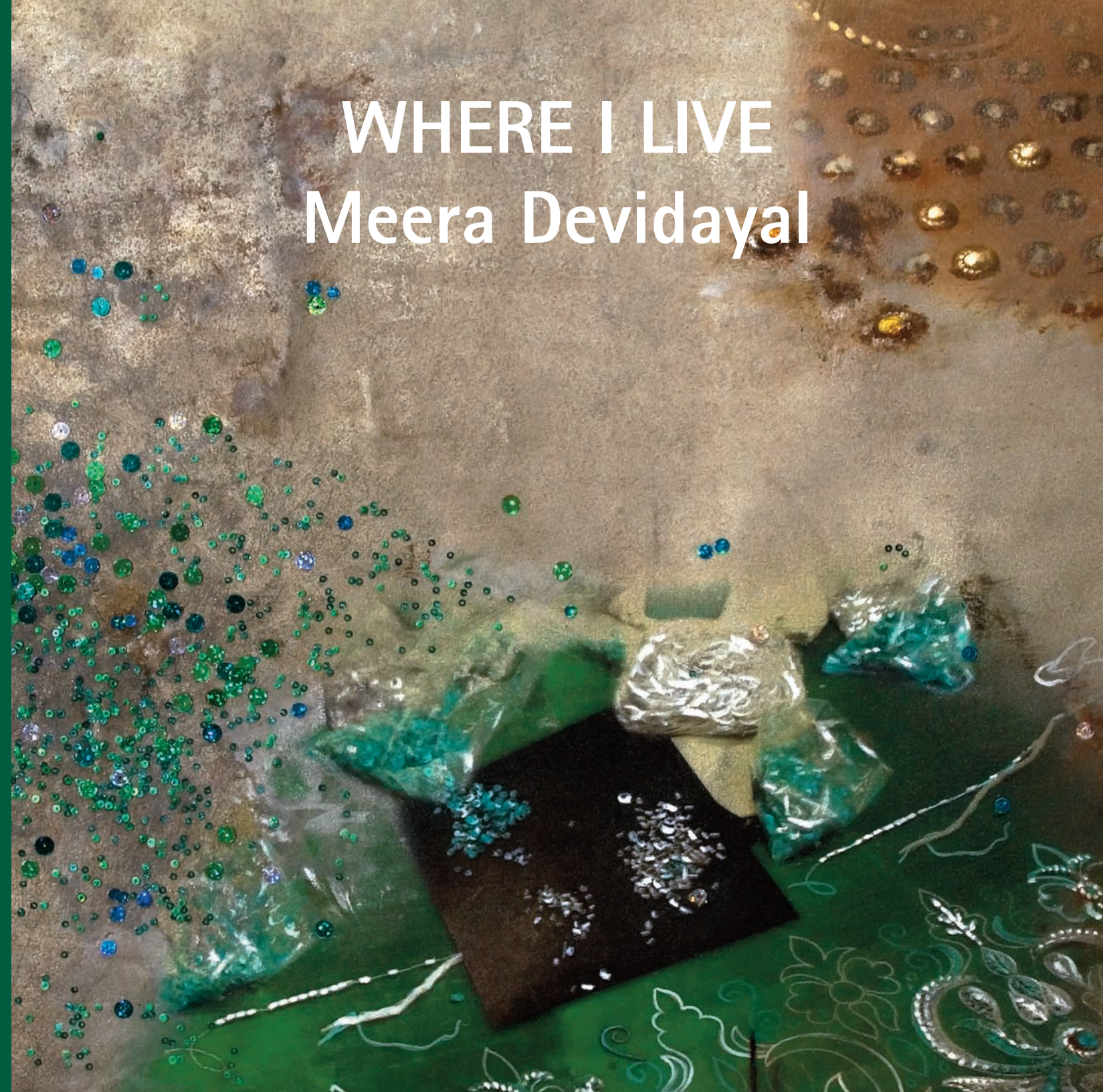


WHERE I LIVE

Meera Devidayal



Chemould Prescott Road
CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERY

Queens Mansion | 3rd floor
G. Talwatkar Marg
Fort | Mumbai 400001
T : +91 22 22000211/2 | F : +91 22 22000213
E : art@gallerychemould.com | www.gallerychemould.com

WHERE I LIVE

Meera Devidayal

2009

Hirji Jehangir Gallery
Jehangir Art Gallery
161-B Mahatma Gandhi Rd
Mumbai 400001



WHERE I LIVE

For several years, the city as 'Dream-World' has been at the core of my paintings. How hapless migrants from across the country get lured into its neon-lit web of seemingly limitless opportunity — without seeing its swampy underbelly. Though the 'WELCOME' shining gold from afar turns to rusty iron as they draw near, they manage to survive the ever-present hostility of the cityscape, by living the waking dream of success, in a city filled with promises.

This ability to transfer reality into dreams, the 'spirit of an urban imagination', is what turns a sprawling abysmal landscape called a slum into an 'inner-city village', pulsating with aspiration, enterprise, resourcefulness, and above all, resilience — albeit in precariously-perched homes created from recycled tin sheets and blue plastic. Interestingly, the structure of these dwellings creates its own style of interior décor. The city is also a space where vastly different lives merge, overlap, enmesh, and get inextricably entwined with each other.

The space between these contradictions is what I'm exploring.

The works in this collection grew out of my interaction with people close to home, but living very different lives from mine, who graciously opened their doors to me and my camera. The photographs, digitally printed on galvanized steel sheets, form the base of my paintings, the starting-point for each work. The wild juxtaposition of irreconcilables provides me with a plethora of 'found' images and materials — the same recycled metal sheets and blue plastic, newspaper photographs, film posters, stickers, and glitter — which I attempt to turn into a visual metaphor, to prod the viewer into experiencing something he normally sees without seeing, in a different way.

Meera Devidayal,
Mumbai, April 2009

All works in this collection are: digital print, oil, enamel and epoxy on recycled galvanized steel sheet

WHERE I LIVE

I live on a wedge of land reclaimed from a tired ocean
somewhere at the edge of the universe.

Greetings from this city
of L'Oreal sunsets
and diesel afternoons,
deciduous with concrete,
botoxed with vanity.

City of septic magenta hair-clips,
of garrulous sewers and tight-lipped taps,
of '80s film tunes buzzing near the left temple,
of ranting TV soaps and monsoon melodramas.

City wracked by hope and bulimia.
City uncontained
by movie screen and epigram.
City condemned to unspool
in an eternal hysteria
of lurid nylon dream.

City where you can drop off
a swollen local
and never be noticed.
City where you're a part
of every imli-soaked bhelpuri.

City of the Mahalaxmi beggar
peering up through
a gorse-bush of splayed limbs.

City of dark alleys,
city of mistrust,
city of forsaken tube-lit rooms.

City that coats the lungs
stiffens the spine
chills the gut
with memory

City suspended between
flesh
and mortar
and foam rubber
and delirium

where it is perfectly historical
to be looking out
on a sooty handkerchief of ocean,
searching for God.

— Arundhathi Subramaniam

Narrative Geographies:
Meera Devidayal's Map of Bombay
Nancy Adajania

In the course of an artistic journey of more than three decades, Meera Devidayal has explored the many hidden cities folded within the metropolis. She has opened up the fractal that is Bombay and immersed herself in the lattices of its constituencies. As early as the 1970s, she chose to paint such everyday incongruities of urban life as roadside shrines built with bathroom tiles. The maps of temple-towns, as well as the beehive-like public life of shrines, served her as points of departure. This phase in Devidayal's work has gone unremarked. Although her concerns with the visualities of demotic expression, especially the images and languages of the urban street, were analogous to those of the avant-garde then emerging in Baroda – I think, especially, of Bhupen Khakhar and Gulammohammed Sheikh – she was not formally aligned with this group. [1]

Over the years, Devidayal's work has expanded to include an encyclopaedia of found materials from popular culture: the ubiquitous Hindi film poster, calendar prints, newspaper photographs, car stickers, digitally manipulated family portraits, and real-estate brochures that sell the delirium of dream and mirage. In her current suite of mixed-media works, 'Where I Live', Devidayal examines the

logarithmic processes of growth by which neighbourhoods, vicinities, zones, intersections and relics of villages pile up together to form a metropolis. [2]

The leitmotif of such an examination would inevitably be the range of diversely constituted yet structurally related habitations generically described as 'slums'. The slums are often the first and last halting station for that other leitmotif of the metropolis, the migrant worker, who also provides Devidayal with a focus of observation, meditation and fellow feeling. Although far removed, in terms of social location, from the subaltern figures she paints and photographs, Devidayal is also a migrant: she moved from Calcutta to Bombay following her marriage, a shift that re-shaped her life.

Over the years, the artist has borne empathetic witness to the crisis and sensibility of migrant workers, and the layers of linguistic and pictorial representation by which they negotiate reality and fantasy. Helped initially by the non-governmental organisation, SPARC, she tapped into an informal network of women living in the shanty towns of the megalopolis. Devidayal began to shoot the interiors of migrant workers' homes located in faraway suburbs such as Govandi, but also in shanties closer home, near Altamount Road, or in that (in)famous hub of 'slum tourism', Dharavi.

The artist has developed her community research methods intuitively rather than through academic application. Her methods are not modelled on the systematic



DHARAVI, 48.5"x 40"

data-gathering tools of a sociological survey or the voyeuristic approach of the Reality Tours that guide tourists around places like Dharavi, through 'the fetid alleys of the fly-infested slum areas to learn about the real India'. [3]

Devidayal has grasped, through practical engagement, the truth that sociologists and researchers of urban culture like Matias Echanove and Rahul Srivastava have pointed out: that all shanty towns cannot generically be clubbed together as slums. Echanove and Srivastava correctly argue that to call Dharavi a slum is to ignore the complexity, dynamism and patterns of organic growth that distinguish such a site. The people of Dharavi have created a sense of self and place for themselves without any help from State policy or the authorised agencies of development. [4]

It is no surprise, then, that Devidayal's medium of choice for this exhibition is recycled galvanised steel sheets. Recycling is both an important economic activity in the megalopolis, and an important metaphor for its collective life. The everyday alchemies of Bombay's informal sector turn dross into gold, giving a second life to the broken and redundant objects of daily use. Devidayal embedded her photographs into the scarred and gouged landscape of her steel sheets. Healing the battered metal into wholeness, she sutured its surface with epoxy and re-tooled the photographs with enamel and oil paint to prevent them from fading into the coldness of metal and oblivion.

These works are infused with a low-key phantasmagoria to alleviate the difficult lives with which they engage. In a sweatshop interior displaying the dismembered hand of an embroiderer, a shower of sequins erupts on the metal like a spurt of green after the first rains. The artist picks out details such as the talismanic CD, which glows like a silver moon, and a swathe of blue plastic that looks like the sky gathered into a curtain. A ladder casually placed outside what is called a duplex slum metamorphoses into Jacob's ladder, propped up against a wall but leading to heaven.

The artist re-animates the classical genres of still life and women in interiors in a startling manner. In one of the subaltern still life works, which recalls a sombre but vibrant still life by the Spanish painter Zurbaran, we witness the fundamentals of existence neatly stacked up: a bucket, a pan, a can of water, and a television set. The ubiquitous TV set is a sign of the vitality of the recycling economy, which keeps goods in circulation between one set of users and the next, each investing these goods with a specific symbolic value.

Devidayal's portrayal of working-class reality is not abject. It is a compassionate tribute to the resourcefulness of the big city's denizens, a tribute that complements the tenor of their improvisation. The women protagonists, especially, are framed in their kitchen interiors in a liberatory manner. Without romanticising their drudgery, the artist is able to gently blur the edges of the walls into the metal sheets, releasing the

pent-up emotions of these protagonists, dissolving their fixed status as domestic subjects. One of the women protagonists looks as though she has been framed by a light-sieve. Standing against her kitchen window, she brings to mind the enigmatic figures in Vermeer's 'Milkmaid' or 'Woman Reading a Letter'.

Ever enthusiastic about experimenting with new materials, Devidayal has introduced a tragi-comic video in this exhibition. Instructively, she chose to juxtapose her photographs of workers' barracks and slumscapes with a Bhojpuri track, 'Sarkari Bhauji', playing on that window of illusions, the TV monitor omnipresent in shanties. Such escapist Bhojpuri numbers are the lifeline of migrants from

Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. In Devidayal's palimpsest, a couple dances in verdant fields, dreaming of the gastronomic delights offered by Bombay and Delhi, while a lone woman labourer stands against the backdrop of ghostly barracks abandoned by their inmates.

In 'Where I Live', Devidayal maps the narrative geographies of Bombay from her own location. Neither a Marxist nor a socialist nor a feminist, she brings to her practice her deep, experiential knowledge of other people's lives. Devidayal's art is a wager on solidarity that transcends all forms of discrimination.

Bombay, March 2009

Notes & References

[1] For a contextualisation of Devidayal's early artistic phase, see Nancy Adajania, 'On Meera Devidayal' (exhibition catalogue; (Bombay: Prithvi Art Gallery, 2000).

[2] The title of this exhibition is borrowed from the title poem of Arundhati Subramaniam's collection 'Where I Live' (*Bombay: Allied*, 2005).

[3] See the website: <http://www.shubhyatra.com/maharashtra/slum-tourism.html>

[4] See Matias Echanove and Rahul Srivastava, 'Taking the Slum Out of 'Slumdog' (*New York Times*, February 21, 2009): "Over 60 years ago, [Dharavi] started off as a small village in the marshlands and grew, with no government support, to become a million-dollar economic miracle providing food to Mumbai and exporting crafts and manufactured goods to places as far away as Sweden."



FORT, 54.5"x 43"



ASHA, 49"x 40"



KUMBHARWADA, 48"x 40.25"



THANE, 48"x 39.5"



MOTI, 47.25"x 38"



SADIQ, 48"x 38"



CARNAC BUNDER, 49"x 35"



PAREL, 49"x 35"



RIZWANA, 47"x 40"



ALTAMOUNT ROAD, 49"x 36"



CHHODO DEHATI GAON

*Come with me to the city, he says, and I will show you places like you've never seen before;
you will taste goodies you have never eaten...
In fact, I will turn you into a heroine...like Karishma...and with you I will become a hero like Govinda...!
But she knows better...*

*Video duration: 3.08 minutes
Clip from T-Series Bhojpuri song
Concept: Meera Devidayal
Production: Jethu Mundul*



MEERA DEVIDAYAL

1947 Born in Delhi
1966 BA in English Literature, Loreto House, Kolkata
1971-74 JJ School of Art, Mumbai

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2006 *Dream/Reality*, Gallery Chemould, Mumbai
2005 *Tum Kab Aoge*, Anant Art Gallery, Delhi
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
1978 Art Heritage, Delhi
1977 Taj Art Gallery, Mumbai
1975 Taj Art Gallery, Mumbai

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2008 Cymroza Art Gallery, Mumbai
2007 Bombay Art Gallery, Mumbai
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 and Birla Art
Gallery, Mumbai
2000 *Nayika*, Tao Art Gallery, Mumbai
1999 *Icons of the Millennium*, Lakeeren, Mumbai
1998 *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 *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

2007 Designed a 54 ft. mural for Tardeo Police Station,
Mumbai
2004 Painted a train bogey with 'Open Circle', a group
of activist artists, during the World Social Forum
2001 Worked with underprivileged children to create
& 2003 collaborative paintings for charity auctions.

The artist lives in Mumbai



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Digital prints on metal: Prince Digi-Graphics

My thanks to Arundhathi Subramaniam for letting me use her poem in my catalogue, and for providing the title of my exhibition.