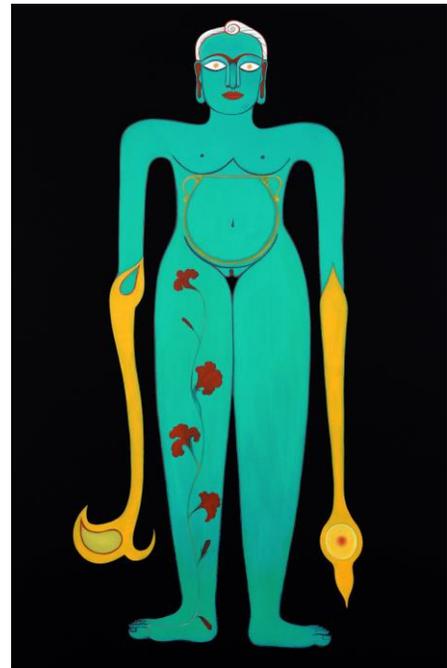


HYPERALLERGIC

‘Talismanic and Tenacious Goddesses that Resist Femininity’

By **Bansie Vasvani** on February 18, 2016

Rekha Rodwittiya’s iconic female figures loom large. An amalgamation of Indian classical and tribal images, Rodwittiya’s asexual goddesses evade easy categorization. Currently in her solo exhibition *Rituals of Memory* at Aicon Gallery, they command an uncanny presence and beg scrutiny. In her *Rekha@50 series*, oversized, naked female figures take center stage in large canvases measuring 84 by 60 inches. Striking oddly playful and audacious postures with lamps in their hands or a snake wound around their legs, or even freezing in the midst of a yogic posture, these unconventional female depictions portrayed in strident colors are brimful of poise and empowerment. Rodwittiya’s inspiration for these tenacious, talismanic subjects began with her early inquiry into gender politics as an art student in the 1970s when figuration was at the height of being reinvented, and a personal quest about her own identity as a highly independent Indian woman took shape.



In a Q&A at the gallery with Daniel Herwitz, a professor of humanities at the University of Michigan, Rodwittiya spoke of her time at the Royal College of Art in London and temporary distance from India that led her to the idea of creating a “static but animated figure” that incorporated her desire to address the violent gender politics in her home country. Her figures came to embody a unique sense of identity that not only represent her own conception of Indian culture, but also devised a “space of resistance,” against female subjugation. No matter whether they’re holding a scythe, tending to cows, or blowing a trumpet, these partly decorative, partly traditional medleys in the *Rekha@50 series* that reference Indian mythology and classical portrayals become archetypal images of female strength.

In a way, she builds a unique iconography that reminds one of Russian Matryoska nesting dolls, whose repetitive imagery represents motherhood. And unlike the famous Indian sculptor Ravinder Reddy whose large, gold leaf-covered female sculptures symbolizing fertility are often voluptuous and well formed, Rodwittiya’s are not sexually suggestive in their rigid poses. Devoid of any sort of eroticism, the central characters in *Rekha@50 (Orange)* (2008) and *Rekha@50 (Teal)* (2008) stand out as much for their orange- and teal-colored bodies, augmented by a severe black background, as they do for the way they hold their own.

In the *Matters of the Heart series*, Rodwittiya’s figures appear against a pure white backdrop. Her earlier bright and sharply contrasting hues become relics of yesteryear. Women outlined in red

with serene Buddha-like faces stand tall. Rodwittiya's mature middle-aged female figures with experience and wisdom exude a new kind of elegance. In *Matters of the Heart*, (Figure III) (2014), a statuesque woman stands with her legs crossed in a dancer's pose. Filled with three-dimensional inkjet prints of landscapes and images taken from the artist's personal travelogue, the woman's body becomes a highly personal repository of memories.



Similarly, in *Matters of the Heart* (Figure IV) (2014), a seated figure with a sword in her hand is replete with images of lush landscapes and golden facades that adorn her like a garb. Reminiscent of the sword-bearing Rani of Jhansi — who led the Indian Rebellion of 1857 against the British Raj — the fearless Indian Joan of Arc comes through. Drawn with great attention to proportion, symmetry, and balance, handbags, paintbrushes, keys, tools, and pets embellish Rodwittiya's subjects like ornaments. While some figures in the *Matters of the Heart* series appear to be more masculine than others, Rodwittiya's lack of concern with overt femininity seeps through.



Gigantic heads in the least successful *Matters of the Heart* (Head) series take on a different avatar. Appearing decorative and somewhat contrived, elaborate digital images that fill each face become cacophonous and fail to resonate with the same impact as the standing figures and sparingly used digital pictures in the *Matters of the Heart* (Figure) series.

It is interesting to see her early 1980s watercolors from the Chester and Davida Herwitz family collection, where it is clear that Rodwittiya's signature use of bold colors and robust female figures begin to take shape. Angry, volatile images are harnessed into the dynamic notion of womanhood that she developed in full force in the late 1990s. For Rodwittiya — from her images that reference ancient Indian temple iconography to her own personal photographs — it is imperative for the viewer to engage on a personal level and to consider the contemporary place of woman, mainly the idea of her being “entitled to hold that place of resistance.” It is only then that one can begin to understand the genesis of Rodwittiya's notion of the modern Indian woman as someone who can evolve into her own person and resist being pushed aside. Such a woman, as in her paintings, stands “as a testimony,” and “a witness to time.”

Rekha Rodwittiya: *The Rituals of Memory: Personal Folklores and Other Tales* continues at Aicon Gallery (35 Great Jones St., East Village, Manhattan) through February 27.