

All the Raja's artists



PUSHPAMALA (52), the diva of self-portraiture, comes up with 'Blue Dance' — to bid goodbye to 2009 with élan, dressed in Thai costume. "This is an 'arty' calendar, the works are not kitsch. It is artists referring to, or using popular forms," she says to differentiate this calendar from Ravi Varma comparisons. How did she conceive the work? The answer is typically Pushpamala — it had more to do with the artist than with art. "The Lafore studio in Bangkok is an all-woman studio. When I went in, I saw they had a green room full of costumes and props. They did the hairstyle and make-up and made me do 'traditional Thai poses'. They were very excited because I was their first Indian customer."



ARJUNA (36) is a painter, a Shaolin student and a Drupad singer. The Delhi-based painter calls himself a 'transform artist' whose practice of art cuts across all forms. Not surprisingly, he shrugs off 'influences' and interprets the world with new images. "Calendar art, established in the 50s and 60s used pictures of gods and goddesses but only in one way. Contemporary artists talk of the past to describe the present in a different idiom," he says. He has used mathematics and the chaos theory as the background of Saraswati, because god-as-energy and maths-as-reason to describe the universe are two languages describing the same thing.



RAJENDRA KAPSE (46) is a humourist. The Mumbai-based artist has changed the language of Baba-Raja-Rani calendar art by placing himself at its centre. "This is a self-portrait but I'm playing a character, a bespectacled, laughing Peshwa. I've introduced a new rasa (mood) in calendar art." The colours still shout out loud; this is a Peshwa in parrot green and maroon turban. The new generation calendars use the kitsch form that's true, but not the kitsch story, he explains. It's a different reality, it's *ulta-art*. "Unlike the classic calendars where not a hair is out of place and the eyes are limpid and dewy, our calendar characters use powder and kajal — but they get smudged."



DILEEP SHARMA (34) keeps to the calendar art genre with 'Shall We Dance II', but brings in a new goddess, Mallika Sherawat. "The new generation wants to see alternatives to Shiva-Parvati," says the artist from Rajasthan who works out of Mumbai. He establishes the goddess look by painting her in monochrome (a green Kali if you please) and using her sexual boldness as a symbol of power.



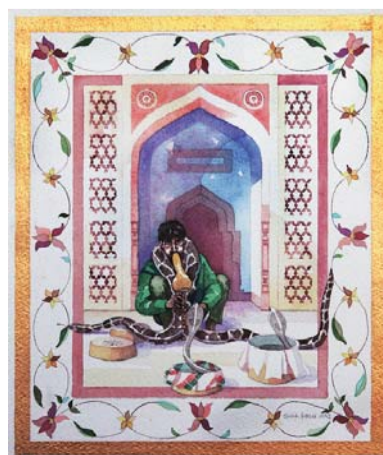
WASWO X WASWO'S (55) 'I See Myself as Laxmi' is autobiography, comment and pop-art rolled into one. "I love India but sometimes, being a foreigner, I want to say 'I'm not Laxmi, I'm not a bank,'" says the American artist who lives in Rajasthan. So he had himself painted like a Ravi Varma goddess, with coins streaming down his hands. Note the American flag in one hand.



BIPLAB MUZIBAR RAHMAN'S (39) 'Durga' is not a painting of a god but a question about god. "I did not paint this picture," says the Bangladeshi, now a resident of Delhi. "I just chose the moment. Durga was there. The girl was there. And Kumari puja was on. It was then I asked — which of them is god?" In Ravi Varma's pictures a bird was a bird, a flower, a flower. "To me, he is a photographer."



BIBHU PATNAIK (35) is an artist who has chosen another 'master'. "I greatly regard Raja Ravi Varma as an artist but I'm fascinated by the nationalistic style and attitude of the Bengal school of art," says the artist from Bhubaneswar. "That is the reason why I wanted to do a patriotic subject for my calendar. Conceptually, Abanindranath Tagore's Bharat Mata was my source of inspiration." But then he thought that painting was too serene, so he armed her (his goddess carries eight weapons) to comment on the "present-day situation and the violence in Orissa".



OLIVIA FRASER (36) is a Scottish artist whose painting on the Nag Panchami theme, says the curatorial note, "pays homage to the snakes with a charming watercolour, foregrounding the much exoticised and stereotyped figure of the snake charmer". Fraser admits that it's "a painting from a western perspective". Her intention, "in those days, was to capture India in its everydayness. I would go out on the streets to sketch the buildings of Delhi when I saw this snake charmer under the Safdarjung tomb." It's a self-conscious work in which the artist has mixed the 3-D technique of western art with the two-dimensional style of Indian calendar art.



ALEXIS KERSEY (36) offers a new mythology, new age punk yogis meditating on Louis Vuitton mats and an Indianisation of the myth of David and Goliath by showing the killing of a rakshasa... "The parallel is obviously the struggle to slay your own inner demons in the quest for self-realisation," says the British artist who lives in Mysore. 'Mythologies II', his painting, may recall elements of Ravi Varma, but he was "more directly influenced by Robert Crumb's Mister Natural" he says. "It's fun to mix up metaphors." The graphic artists working in Sivakasi and the signboard hoardings in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka, were also an inspiration, he says.



FARHAN MUJIB (63), a former professor at the Aligarh Muslim University, doesn't suffer from an anxiety of influences. And there are many: from Indian and Persian miniature painting and Indian carpet-making to painters Matisse and Gustav Klimt. *The Room with Blue Walls* nods at Ravi Varma who, he says, was a "serious artist, but doesn't have the tongue-in-cheek quality this work has".



JITEN THUKRAL (32) and **SUMIR TAGRA (29)** paint a quirky landscape of pseudo-baroque houses with Gurgaon in mind. *Dominus Aeris* is, one assumes, their response to the month of Chaitra (April) when rose buds blossom all over north India. "The focus is on the style commonly called 'Punjabi Baroque'."



AMRIT AND RABINDRA KAUR SINGH, openly admit that the mass-produced imagery of Indian calendar art has played an important role in their development as artists. Their painting, 'Arts Matters', based on their home city Liverpool especially the celebrations to mark its official status as European Capital of Culture, addresses contemporary debates around art, heritage and identity.

Portraits & the annual wheel: ABHIMANYU SINHA