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Search

Restaurants & Cafés	Bars, Pubs & Clubs	Shopping	Music	Film	Around Town	Art	Kids
---------------------	--------------------	----------	-------	------	-------------	-----	------

## Art

Features | Events

### Art of faith

*Patrizia Maimouna Guerresi seeks to capture Indian spirituality in her portraits*



Much of Patrizia Maimouna Guerresi's practice is shaped by her conversion to Islam in 1991. The Italian artist, who works with photography, video and sculpture, often reflects upon the position of women in a society through her images of veiled women in domestic contexts. *Silent Dialogues*, her first exhibition in India (organised by the Tasveer gallery and Tod's) opens in Delhi this fortnight. In the show, Guerresi responds to Indian cultural and religious traditions in several new series, while also developing the themes of her earlier work. In an email interview, Guerresi told Jaideep Sen about the relationship between religion, her art and the exhibition.

**Could you briefly take us through the time when you converted to Islam? What manner of new direction did you find your work taking?**  
At a certain point in my life, I began to feel an openness to a new spiritual understanding and that my spirit was ready for change. Destiny led me to Islamic Africa, where I joined the Muslim Murid community, from whom I acquired a new identity, along with the name Maimouna – the name of my spiritual mother. This spiritual change marked my life, but also my artistic choices and modes of expression. At first it was not easy to talk about Islam in the Western world, and especially in Western contemporary art, where spirituality is often considered rhetorical and ineffective, and where Islam is often considered with preconceptions and clichés. My journey down this path was therefore not always simple, as I was trying to represent a concept of beauty that combines ethics, aesthetics and mysticism. Through my artistic sensibilities, I now try and express the similarities rather than the differences between cultures and religions.

**What was the idea behind the "Indian Cosmos" series?**  
"Indian Red Cosmos" reconfirms my interest in the transformation and identification of the universe. These photographs represent a feminine image seen from above. They appear to spin, thus suggesting planets in the cosmic space. The red recalls the colour of blood, life and sacrifice. It's also a tribute to the carmine red of the bindi of Indian women. What I try to do in much of my work is to underline the strength of female spirit, represented in this case by an Indian woman.

**What was the intention, and message, in the scale of the models and their clothes in works like "Amita", "Darlinger", the "Gatka" triptych, "Heavenly Malki", "Kalindi's Dream"?**  
Through the photographic image, I want to represent surreal and metaphysical situations. The characters come from my imagination and my sensitive experiences. As a result, the final works often appear quite abstracted from reality. The models I use are friends, relatives and common people, who became the interpreters and characters of my personal vision. Through my photographs they become not really people, but emotional architectures, galaxies and cosmic spaces from new and different worlds; they become strangers from the heaviness of reality. They become fragile, suspended and light – the protagonists of a new vision of a philosophical art.

**In many of your earlier works, you bring in elements such as the hijab or those related to the household or kitchen to convey the impression of the female archetype. How did these change in the context of Indian women?**

Not all my works follow the same themes or the same routes. In fact, I have made several themes. As an example, I made "The Sisters" where I represent two sisters of two different religions but with a common mother, as they perform their daily chores. This is, in fact, a very personal theme, the two characters represented are my daughters, and I developed this work at a certain time of my life. This is a theme that I could only represent with different situations and characters.

**Do you see yourself as an activist, a photographer or an artist? Is there a particularly political stand that you look to make in many of your works?**

I am an artist, not a photo-reporter. Through my work, I try to interpret my visions and my imagination in a way that also relates to the real world. Mine is a mystic language, not a report or a chronicle, even though my subjects connect to themes of hard reality such as different religions and different cultures. What interests me most is to unarm peoples' fears of the unknown, of that which is "different", such things, I believe, are the main causes of both personal and social conflicts. I think that the artist's job is to make the viewer reflective, and to amplify their vision of the world. Sometimes my images can seem provocative, but I believe that I can communicate my message with calmer images too.

**How much of your thoughts for this show were based in the history of Islam in India (as reflected in "Indian Minarets"), versus the presence of Islam in modern-day India?**

Islamic architecture has been, and still is, a fundamental part of India's art history. Islamic buildings are also part of the inspiration for many of the photographs in my "Minarets" series. These works were designed to be metaphorical, but also to have a strong and clear impact. They are not meant to be provocative or irreverent. They are instead a personal attempt to get closer to the symbols of different cultures – as a way of exorcising fear.

**My work on the subject of India is a continuation of my research regarding the mystic body. Only the hands and face, and in some cases the feet, are visible, while the body remains empty and covered with a cloak, which defines and signifies the body. This void evinces the metaphor of fear of that which is different and unknown.**

In these recent works, I am trying to concentrate on the highest and most exposed part of the body: the head. I cover and crown the head with a series of objects in the shape of hats/minarets which are made by hand in a ritualistic manner, with simple materials and pieces of fabric collected and then composed according to the Sufi Muslim tradition of manually producing their own clothes. The minaret hats are tall and narrow architectural forms that I then photograph. The models in my photographs sometimes hide their faces with a hand gesture, or are blindfolded, or simply have their eyes closed. They seem to detach themselves from the world in order to tune into the divine cosmic spirit. The minaret hats are like castles, fortresses which protect the head and, at the same time, an extension of the body itself like antennas – channels which conduct and transmit spiritual energy.

**Was there any reason that you also introduced dance postures and mudras in this show?**

Hands have always been a part of my work; indeed, they are my most recurrent theme. For this series on India for Tasveer, I have tried to represent them as sensuous mudra dance movements, adding a painted yellow sign as sunlight.

**Is it important for average viewers in India to take into consideration the strong religious concerns that define your works?**

The images I present are timeless, rigorous, and classic. They do not depict ancient India or a new India in constant development. They are inner representations of a greater Indian spirituality. I hope my work is interpreted in the ecumenical spirit with which it was produced, that is, as a collection of values, cultures and religions coexisting within the Indian population, and that it evokes reflection beyond aesthetic pleasure.

By Jaideep Sen on October 12 2012 7.42am

Back

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Back