

Inverting tired myths

The artist's canvas covers a terrain where the feudal past and industrial present appears to be locked in a suicidal embrace. Suneet Chopra on her exhibition.

FOR ONE WHO lives in a contemporary metropolis, as do most lovers of contemporary art, I at least breathed a sign of relief to see an artist handle industrial realities as well as the survivals of the past, communal violence and male dominance, firmly and unflinchingly.

dustrial present appear to be locked in a suicidal embrace. Both Rummana and Bruegel feel the oppressiveness of such state affairs so it is not surprising that the language of the latter should appeal to the former.

Some of her most powerful works, like the *Parable of the Blind*,

reflect his biblical allegories. This one alludes to the saying that "if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch." But it is her imagery that is fascinating. The leader among the three blind men is a flute player, the Pied Piper of the fable or equally, could he not be Krishna, for

tiger leaves the Devi and attacks the people. In fact, in the former we see a female figure holding on to the tail of the animal desperately. However, this dysfunction between the tiger and the goddess who rides it reminds one of the origin of these Devis. The benevolent mother goddess of the tribal past become the Durga and Vaishno Devi of the feudal lords and acquire terrifying mounts. From fertility goddesses of the fields they become the vengeful protectors of landlords in their palaces and fortresses. By tearing them apart from their horrific mounts, Rummana reminds one there is nothing sacrosanct about the myths as we have them today. That in itself is a sharp enough comment. But Rummana goes further. In her study of the rulers and masses of a crisis-ridden society she equates the two in a work entitled *The Narcissists and the Blind*.

This is a step ahead from Bruegel's allegories. Here we have those who are condemned to blindness by their incapacity to see and those who, having eyes, refuse to see.

The next step is to look for the way out of the crisis. Rummana is obviously not content to leave us in confusion. And there is her apocalyptic canvas, *The Summoning*, to remind us that this state of affairs is not eternal.

Where then is the hope? Not *In the Dark Times* where a labourer carries a metropolis on his back, contemplating ants. Nor is it his other incarnation in Pandora's Box where his alienation makes him a tormentor of his woman. But in *Resurrection and Hope*, where the woman has successfully fought back oppression and reminded him of the humanity he has lost at the hands of his exploiter. In a world where men and women are true companions and work together for a future when the fruits of their labour will be theirs.

Of course, Rummana is not the only artist to use such imagery. One sees similar images in the work of other women artists like Nalini Malani or Arpana Caur. But that should not surprise us. Similar concerns find similar forms of expression. And indeed, seeing that there is a whole trend in art of this sort, one can be glad that we are producing truly contemporary works and not merely ethnographic knick-knacks. Artists like Rummana carry forward our art into the future far more convincingly than those who follow the Pied Piper into the land of dreams.



(Clockwise from far left) 'A Story of Violence', Rummana with 'Pandora's Box' and 'The Summoning': truly contemporary

Rummana's exhibition of five major canvases and a number of small watercolours at Delhi's CCA gallery is a major statement.

Of course, her use of pure colours and theatrical postures and structure, involving a protagonist in the forefront and subsidiary figures as a backdrop strike one almost at once. But there is much more to her work than that.

As she says, "I draw upon established mythological sources, and attempt to recreate new myths which arise from the reality around me."

It is this interpretation of myth and reality that sometimes uses the myth as an allegory and sometimes uses reality to analyse the myth itself. It is no accident that her allegories find a source in the work of Bruegel who painted his canvases when feudal society has not quite died and capitalist society was about to be born. Rummana paints in a place where feudal past and the in-

