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‘Rekha Rodwittiya Back in New York After Two Decades with Exhibition at Aicon Gallery’

Prominent Baroda-based feminist artist Rekha Rodwittiya, who is the founder of The Collective Studio Baroda, is back here after two decades with a major exhibition at the Aicon Gallery, ‘The Rituals of Memory: Personal Folklores and Other Tales’, which runs from Feb. 4 through Feb. 27th.

Rodwittiya rose to prominence throughout the 80s and 90s through her strikingly idiosyncratic depictions of female forms, rituals and spaces. Drawn from both the personal experiences and memories of her own feminist journey and the larger historical struggles of women through the centuries, her work was an early rejection of the tropes of a male dominated South Asian art world and its traditionally voyeuristic treatment of the female subject.

Born in Bangalore, Rodwittiya, 58, studied painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda, and at the Royal College of Art, London. She has held solo exhibitions in New Delhi, Mumbai, Singapore, New York, London, Venice and Stockholm, among other locations. Her work has been included in several group exhibitions in India and internationally, including the VI International Triennial, New Delhi (1986), India in Switzerland: Six Young Contemporaries, Geneva (1987), Dialogues of Peace, Geneva to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the United Nations, Geneva, Inside Out: Women Artists of India, a touring exhibition in the UK (1995-96) and many others.



Rekha Rodwittiya, *Rekha @ 50 (Pink)*, 2008, Acrylic and oil on canvas, 84 x 60 in.

The exhibition is the second in a series of exhibitions re-examining figuration in Modern and Contemporary South Asian art to be held at Aicon Gallery, New York, over the next two years.

Rodwittiya’s iconic, starkly delineated female figures are often viewed as concrete embodiments of the artist’s complex psychological insights into the personal and historical struggles and day-to-day challenges of modern womanhood. The simply rendered yet powerful, sometimes confrontational, figures in these works seem to simultaneously stand as symbols of an ongoing struggle in the feminist realm, while refusing to be reduced to objects for visual consumption or easy interpretation.

The classically poised figures carry or are surrounded by everyday household objects, reminiscent of the mythical attributes of deities found accompanying ancient sculpture. By deliberately calling attention to both the trappings and traditions of viewing the naked female body, stretching from antiquity straight through to early modernism, Rodwittiya re-appropriates these familiar archetypes and their objects of domesticity for use in her highly individual interpretation of feminist art practice.

Key to this practice and central to the striking group of a dozen or so works on canvas in this exhibition is the tension created between Rodwittiya's confrontational avatars and the viewer. Imbued with both a deeply personal cache of experience and ideology as well as centuries of feminist history, the figures often directly stare down the viewer, demanding a reckoning with the past struggles and injustices they embody rather than a simple aesthetic assessment as objects of visual art.

However, these figures are not here solely to intimidate or confront, but also seek to engage empathy and appreciation for the deeper meanings behind their existence. Rodwittiya herself provides some context into her desires surrounding this delicate interplay, stating that "the female figure, often in isolation, becomes the presence that bears witness to the passage of time. Embodied through the centuries with the energies that hold the continuums of being a life-giving force, I place the female figure as the central focus to be encountered...like protective guardians of the universe."

In addition to this central group of works on canvas, the exhibition features a large body of mixed media works combining Rodwittiya's iconic figures with intricately woven collage work derived from her personal photography. Significantly, this represents the first use of photography in the artist's work in over twenty-eight years and marks the return of yet another important layer to the complex autobiographical nature of her process. The outlines of these new figures are derived from those used in past paintings, while the montaged photographs function as elements of dress or in some cases a second skin. Once again these new works use the female form to create a site of retrieval for both personal and shared histories, "retraced liked mapped terrains...archived like from an archaeological survey."

Also on view will be a rarely seen suite of Rodwittiya's early works drawn from the Chester and Davida Herwitz Collection, providing a retrospective view into the artist's formative years. Assembled during trips to India from the 1960s through 1980s, the Herwitz Collection represents the largest and most comprehensive collection of Indian Modern Art ever assembled outside of India. The collection includes masterworks by M. F. Husain, Tyeb Mehta, Jamini Roy and countless other modern masters from the subcontinent.