

Shining Lights

PROFILE As India experiences an exciting revival in printmaking, Waswo X. Waswo highlights two young

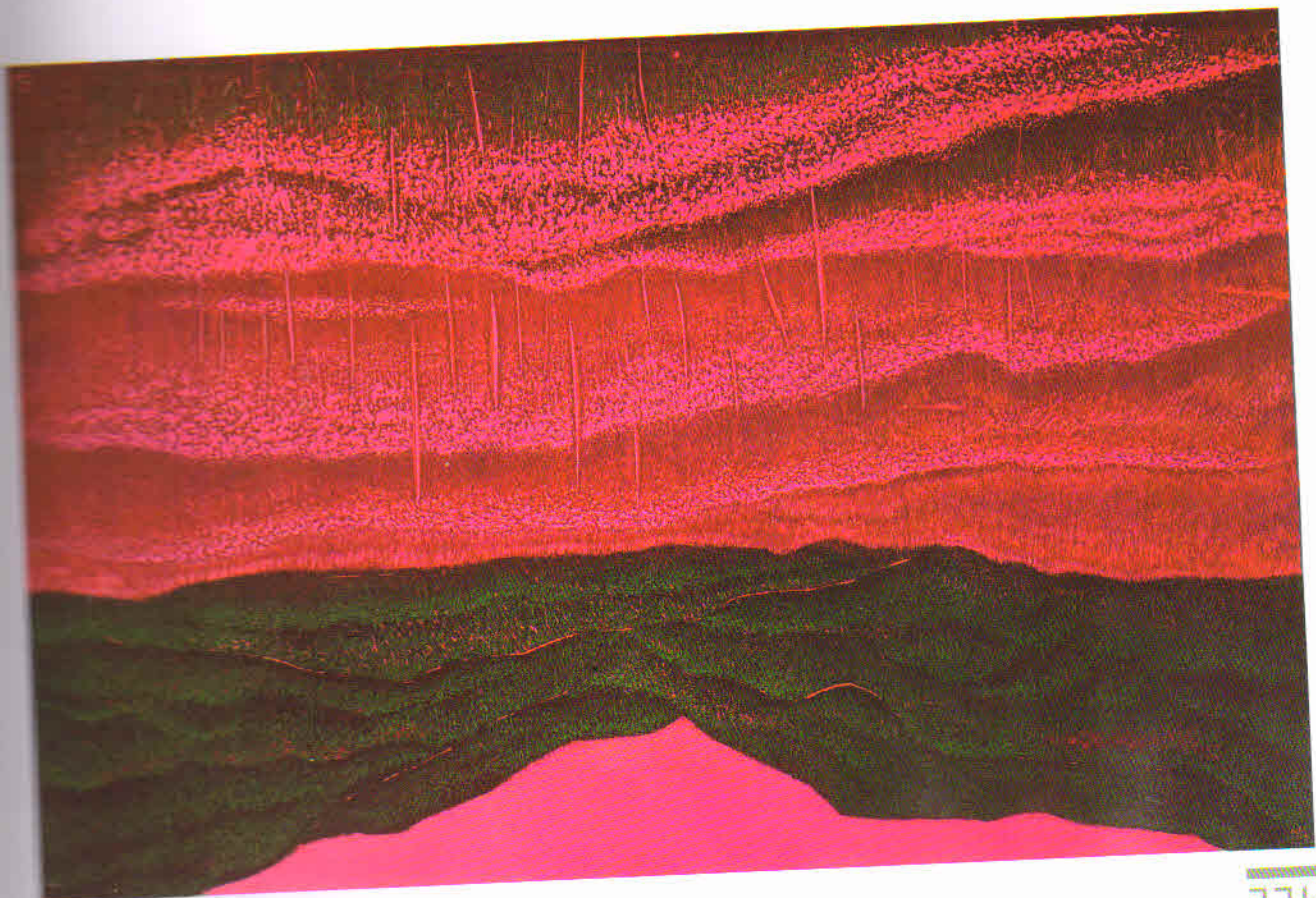
artists, **Soghra Khurasani** and **Subrat Behera**, making a big impression

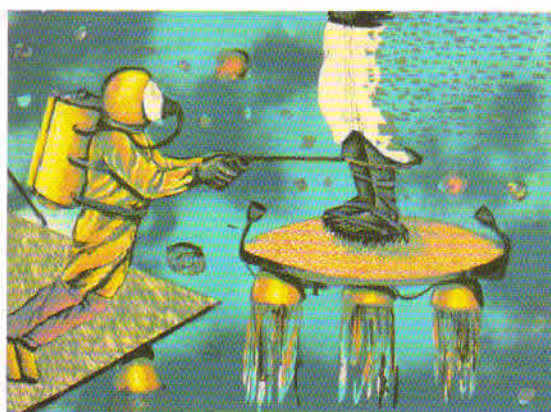
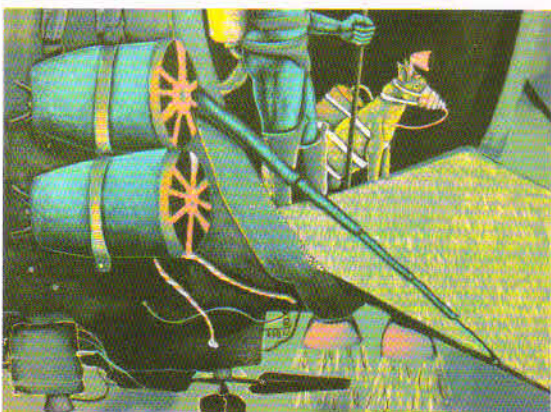
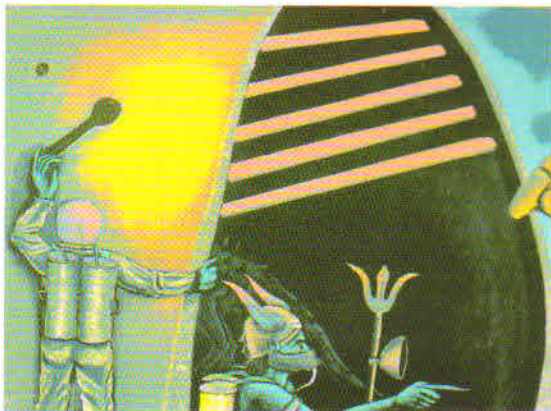
It was not that long ago that artists primarily involved in printmaking were viewed as de facto second-class citizens in India's art world. Reasons for that are multifold, but largely stem from the association of lithography, wood engraving, and silkscreen with the trades of commercial reproduction. Etching too, though often seen as a bit higher in the hierarchy of fine art, was still largely thought of as a method with which to illustrate books. The Indian public has often times confused fine art printmaking with photographic reproduction, a situation exacerbated by unscrupulous dealers and entrepreneurs. All of this, however, is changing.

Soghra Khurasani and Subrat Behera are two of the new breed of Indian printmakers: thinking out of the box, exercising enterprise on its own terms. Their rise in India was at least in part facilitated by two large travelling exhibitions of historical and contemporary printmaking that caught India's attention: *Between the Lines: Identity, Place and Power* (curated by Lina Vincent Sunish), and *The Printed Picture, Four Centuries of Indian Printmaking*, a blockbuster exhibition curated by noted historian and printmaker Paula Sengupta. Both of these travelling shows garnered accolades in 2012, making the outlook for India's print artists far more positive.

Born in the south Indian city of Visakhapatnam, Soghra Khurasani studied painting at Andhra University, later taking a master's degree in printmaking from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Maharaja Sayajirao University in Vadodara. Living and studying in the state of Gujarat,

and being a young woman with a Muslim background, her emotional reactions to the communal tensions that had plagued the state, and had at one time resulted in the massacre of entire Hindu communities by Hindu fanatics, could not be ignored. That early woodcuts were nearly always populated by trees of blood, the corpuses that exploded from angry volcanoes, or poured in swarming pable floods like sanguine waterfalls noisily seeking an outlet, was not calm. Shown at Mumbai's TARG Gallery in 2014, and accompanied by the heels of a renewed interest in Indian printmaking, the exhibition *One Day It Will Come Out* not only obtained some critical attention from what had previously been an uninterested art audience, but also sold out. The success of this show was followed in the same year by *Centered Fiction*, a return to crimson hued landscapes, the devoid of her signature corpuses. Instead, we find dramatic, hollow and lifeless, ringed with deceptive beauty, but also empty, ening to explode. Critics suggested these forms speak to the repressed violence, but also to a feminist meditation on the power of supposed emptiness. Large scale woodcut is Khurasani's forte, but she is also a master of dry point, aquatint, and linocut. Subrat Behera hails from the Indian state of Odisha. He has spent a long time long felt to have been culturally overlooked by the state. Receiving a B.F.A in Printmaking from the National Institute of Design, New Delhi and Mumbai. Receiving a Post-Diploma in Printmaking from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Utkal University of Culture, Bhubaneswar, Subrat went on to earn a Post-Diploma in Printmaking from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda University, Baroda. He was awarded the National Young Artist Scholarship by the Ministry of Culture in 2010, for his young performance in printmaking. Behera has become increasingly young master of Indian lithography, a practice and technique that is a country where usable litho stones and natural short supply. His imagery is dreamlike and surreal, but also a village Indianness rather than the western tradition of landscape as typified by Daal. Time warps emerge in his works as figures to cross wormholes (sometimes literal tubes) traversing the time with gleeful nods to historical figures and events.





indulging witty anachronisms. Like Khurasani, Behera was a benefactor of the Indian printmaking revival of 2012. In 2016 he was offered a space at the prestigious Kochi-Muziris Biennale, an honour seldom bestowed upon artists who faithfully adhere to the medium. Just as Khurasani is known for her large-scale woodcuts, Behera is known for his multi-panelled lithographic suites, a format that allows him to explore narratives and themes over vast stretches of wall. For the biennale he produced *Mythological Paradigm Prophesied*, a 58 panel magnum opus, printed in five colours, that takes the viewer on a topsy-turvy trip through colonialism, post-colonialism, and a futurism that is ironically connected to the past.

Both Khurasani and Behera have set about to solve a perennial problem for young Indian printmakers: the dearth of proper presses and facilities once they have graduated. In the past this lack of infrastructure has been addressed by numerous camps and workshops, where large numbers of printmakers competed over scarce tools to actualise creations that were inevitably sold in jumbled and poorly-conceived portfolios. However, over the past few years ambitious artists, newly financially confident, have begun to set up and build their own facilities. This has happened not only in Vadodara, which holds India's most prestigious art school, but also in places such as Goa, where private printmaking studios are also becoming the norm. For Khurasani, the solution has been to build (with her artist husband Shaik Azghar Ali) a mammoth concrete structure complete with loft on the outskirts of the city. Still under construction, the couple envisions it as a workspace that will be large enough to also display framed artwork and even sculpture. Making this undertaking a reality has taken an immense leap of faith: the purchase of land and initial construction funded by Soghra's first two sold out exhibitions, the sale of several of Shaik's paintings at exhibitions abroad, and hours of their own manual labour.

Subrat has gone the route of renting a well-lit studio space, in a quiet, shade-filled neighbourhood. There he has established *Litholekha*, a studio devoted to the art of lithography. This was only accom-



Young artists using Litholekha. Photo by Subrat Behara

plished by Subrat's undying commitment to search out the best of materials, even going so far as to import functional litho stones all the way from a defunct commercial lithographer in Kolkata. He has also worked to import finer grade printing papers and inks; a costly endeavour considering India's abnormally high duties on imported goods. Litholekha is imagined as not only Behera's private workspace, but also an open studio, available for residencies and workshops and the creation of specialised, high quality print portfolios.

Though these artists work independently, Subrat Behara and Soghra Khurasani represent a major shift in the paradigm of Indian printmaking. Long thought of as a purely collectivist practice in a country historically grounded in socialism, the old ways of continuing printmaking practices after graduation, and seeking to find an audience, are being supplanted by new and more innovative, individualistic, means. Part of India's printmaking resurgence is the realisation that the old ways no longer fulfil the artists' or the mediums' needs.

Waswo X. Waswo is an American artist living in India.

Images

Skin Beneath (2015) by Soghra Khurasani. Woodcut. 812 x 1220 mm

Mythological Paradigm Prophesied (detail, panels 31-34) (2016) by Subrat Behara. Lithograph, each panel measures 355 x 480 mm, 58 panels in total