

A BOX OF WONDERS

Contemporary Art and Vintage Optical Devices

Nicole Mollett

Entering Frieze London art fair is not for the faint-hearted. Corridors of blindingly white walls are hung with a vast array of dazzling artworks, many loud, vibrantly colourful, giant, messy and/or abstract paintings, with the scent of poverty-filtered extravagance lingering in the air. It is a contemporary art limbo filled with trendy galleries and collectors. So I was relieved when I discovered an incongruous wooden box, with knee cushions for comfort, quietly resting in a seating area. The artwork, *Prequel/Sequel* by Kinnari Saraiya, was commissioned by Frieze London and Deutsche Bank Emerging Curators Fellowship, and consisted of two separate short films presented inside a digitally-altered bioscope.

A bioscope is a portable viewing device, operated by travelling showmen both in Europe and India since the late 19th century. They took multiple forms and were an integral part of Indian street culture and entertainment during the 1960s and 1970s. On first appearance the machine looks much like a magic lantern or peepshow – a dark wooden box embellished with an array of brass



appendages and protrusions, including a series of circular glass viewfinders. Looking inside the box you can see a small screen, around which an audience of up to six people can watch a show together. Many models came with a gramophone attached, and later record or cassette players, providing musical accompaniment. This particular machine is 'hand-cranked' with the operator controlling the speed of the images on the digital screen.

Both films on show were a curious mixture of layered images and narratives. The first film *Painted Diagram of a Future Voyage (Who Believes the Lens?)* is by Mochu. Initially what appears is a slow-moving Victorian painted panorama of a harmonious natural landscape, which is interrupted by distorted fragments of classical architecture, hovering menacingly in the sky. The second film by Sangram Mukhopadhyay and Kinnari Saraiya shows a frantically moving dancer, onto whose body a kaleidoscope of images (possibly ancient stone carvings) are being projected, evoking the old magic lantern pose slides. Accompanying these films is a



Nicole and Mary look through the lens The landscape through the lens



All ages enjoy operating the Bioscope

specially pressed vinyl EP that plays a crackly recording of overheard conversations from a street market in India.

As a viewer I felt transported, both by the physicality of the analogue machinery and the curiosity it inspired in me. The bioscope creates a communal experience; viewers are huddled together like a gang of children in a playground. We became aware of the act of looking itself. The way in which the images and sound are interwoven together creates the illusion of a fantasy world, where myth and reality collide. The word 'bioscope' comes from the Greek 'bíos' meaning life, and 'skopeō' meaning 'I look at'; prior to the invention of cinema, it meant 'a view or survey of life'. Kinnari has repurposed this ancient optical device and made it reveal a new and unseen view of diasporic life.

Kinnari describes the project as: "an attempt to hold on to the ingrained presence of these travelling cinemas, the experience of watching films in the interstices of everyday life with an organic unity of communal experiences. It is an attempt to protect its simple values as passed down to me in oral accounts by a generation that witnessed its decline."

For more about the project go to: www.kinnarisaraiya.com/bioscope