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Art | Carefully charted chaos

Artist Avantika Bawa's solo show questions what Mumbai's frenetic constructions achieve and underlines their irony

Zehra Jumabhoy

Mumbai's perennial construction projects might engender irritation for many, insomnia for some and road rage for a few. But artist Avantika Bawa, who lives between Portland, Oregon, US, and New Delhi, channels her ambivalent feelings into *Another Documentation*.

Bawa's second solo show at Gallery Maskara in Mumbai will present five sculptures (called "weasels", these pale grey objects are a cross between "easels" and "workhorses"), photographs (of the aforementioned "weasels" posing near half-completed high-rises in Mumbai and Delhi) and drawings that ape architectural blueprints. While these artworks look like they belong on a construction site, none of them are intended to be helpful there. Ditto Bawa's pièce de résistance, a 24ft scaffold painted "caution orange". The latter might boast "one bar in yellow for kicks; to disturb the perfection; to behave like *nazarbattu* (charm)", Bawa confides.

Disturbing perfection is something of a life mission for this 1973-born powerhouse; she also happens to be assistant professor of fine arts at the Washington State University, Vancouver, Washington and a curator, and her last appearance at Maskara was as co-curator for the group show *Hold On* in 2011. In all her roles, she seeks to defy expectations. Tellingly, *Another Documentation* doesn't promise to minimize the stresses of the street, just to make us rethink our reactions: "In a gallery, everything is usually perfected for the ultimate viewing experience. I want to tamper with this way of presenting the art; when you walk through semi-obstructions, you start paying attention to what is around you."



Concrete thoughts: A work from *Another Documentation*.

Bawa is busy booby-trapping the space: grey and orange duct tape is being stuck on the floor and "weasels" arranged to make us pause. Nevertheless, even as it provides a vast impediment to earth-bound progress, her vivid scaffold offers an unexpected escape: Its sturdy beams construct a ladder-like edifice. "It allows me to get to places I can't get to—both literally and figuratively," admits Bawa. And the giant grid is more than a metaphor for travel networks.

"There's both playfulness and seriousness in orange. It contains the idea of danger and risk as well as Disney cartoons, like Mickey Mouse," explains gallery-owner-cum-curator Abhay Maskara. The beams will cast deep shadows so that "playfulness" is counterpointed with

something more sinister; the neat contours of the grid offset by the disarray of its shivery shadows in ambient lighting. In fact, Bawa's multi-part centrepiece, with its double-edged symbolism, extends her predilection for enmeshing contradictory ideas. Her previous solo at Gallery Maskara took the form of *Mathesis: dub, dub, dub*, in 2009. Here, stacked blue-grey cardboard boxes and corrugated metal stood tall, conjoining references to stasis and transit. From a distance they looked like the solid high-rises populating the skyline, yet their transitory nature (the boxes were borrowed from neighbouring galleries and were dismantled after the show) implied impending motion.

Another Documentation will serve a similarly schizophrenic function; poised somewhere between the promise of Utopia and its ruin. "It stands for urbanization, just as Tatlin's Memorial, which was never constructed, was going to be a bastion of civilization; or the fabled Tower of Babel a repository of many languages. It's the irony of Mumbai's construction projects I'm interested in. What are they actually achieving?" queries Bawa.

Perhaps Bawa's impish affection for ambiguity mirrors her status as a so-called "diaspora artist". "The US is very organized but there's no method to the order, yet in India there's a method to the chaos! My exhibition is about navigating what seems logical, and then messing with it," she laughs. Luckily, her style of "messing" with boundaries gives us a break from what we have come to expect from such in-between artists (the term made famous by cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha)—there are no glittery hybrid creatures à la New Yorker Rina Banerjee here. Instead, Bawa shares affinities with north Londoner Rana Begum's abstract installations (think neon-painted metal beams pulsing with clashing colours). Both of them draw from the 1960s and 1970s Minimalism of American artists, like Donald Judd and John McCracken, only to add their own *masala*.

Bawa's scaffold hopes to include an audio element with snippets of Bollywood music. She says this is a reference to the way "construction workers hang their mobiles and radios on to scaffolds. The work will be like a walk through Mumbai, each unit an individual auditory space." And unlike the more staid (and drab-looking) *Mathesis*, *Another Documentation* should be shot through with fun. "We've created a Jungle Jim atmosphere," she says, gleefully waving to one of the (orange-suited) construction workers operating on the bars. Care to swing along? Just hold on.

Another Documentation will be on at Gallery Maskara, Colaba, Mumbai, from 10 August-13 September.

Write to lounge@livemint.com