

BOMBAY

Redefining body politics

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Discuss the male gaze in art, while propo

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ince time immemorial, art has not only captivated the human imagination, but it has also triggered intellectual thought and discussion.

This evening, in a new edition of Bellevue Salons (a platform for intellectual dialogue), its curator Sharmistha Ray will conduct a discussion with author and art-critic Rosalyn D'Mello at

the Piramal Museum of Art in Body Politics: Deconstructing the Male Gaze in the Visual, Literary, and Performative Arts.

The event will mark the end of Pages of a Mind, Raja Ravi Varma: Life and Expressions, an exhibition of the late painter's work, which will conclude on April 30. Varma, known for painting the woman as seductress or temptress, as is reflected in his depictions of Shakuntala or Damyanti, for example, has often been criticised by scholars and social thinkers. The need for such a discussion thus, stems from the greater need to subvert stereotypical depictions of women in art.

Ray and D'Mello's colloquy will be followed by Sangeet Bari, a Lavani performance directed by the eminent documentary filmmaker Savitri Medhatul, who has earlier documented the lives of Lavani dancers.

While studying in the US, Ray was introduced to the idea of the 'male gaze' as part of understanding contemporary art history and the feminist movement's impact. Women have been depicted in submissive roles that have entirely been defined by men; this voyeuristic view of women has been understood to be the male gaze. "As an artist interested in the notions of gender and sexuality, it's impossible to avoid the topic of the 'male gaze,'" says Ray, who adds that while the phenomenon has been somewhat deconstructed in the west, India still has a long way to go.

Viewing Varma's exhibition while simultaneously reading a book by Rosalyn D'Mello was a "serendipitous juxtaposition of ideas" for Ray, who decided to engage the writer in this discourse.

When asked about the curious mix of a feminist dialogue on the body followed by a Lavani performance, Ray says that the latter was the event organiser Rashmi Dhanwani's idea. The suggestion piqued Ray's curiosity; having never experienced a Lavani performance, Ray researched it and was intrigued by the contemporary propositions advanced by Sangeet Bari in inviting a kind of self-criticality to itself. "That is the spirit of modernity," says Ray. Mentioning her enthusiasm for cross-pollinating art forms, Ray hopes "this session brings awareness to the folk tradition of Lavani that's slowly ebbing away."

Since its inception in 2014, Bellevue Salons has been addressing subjects that are close to Ray's heart such as gender and sexuality.

This idea for conversations and collaborations between artistes from diverse fields emerged out of a need to push the visual arts out of a 'rarefied space'. "This was my way of breaking the mould and seeking new interactions," says Ray.

While she would like to keep Friday's discussion less academic, Ray would also like to touch upon the theoretical works of Georges Bataille, Judith Butler and Sara Ahmed, who have hugely influenced her own work.

The session will primarily be an interaction of ideas between a visual artist, Ray, and a literary writer, D'Mello.

Ray hopes to talk about the current state of gender politics in our society paying attention to media, advertising and films. "With the salons, we like to generate new ways of thinking, rather than trying to solve problems," says Ray.

Talking about Bollywood, Ray agrees that the male gaze is alive and evident in mainstream cinema, and for the most part, also reflects what the public wants. She says that the Indian film industry portrays women as objects of desire, while depicting men as primates; lustful, and unable to contain their emotions.

D'Mello, who recently made her literary debut with her non-fictional voluke of erotica, *A Handbook for my Lover*, is known for her daring stance on gender, sexuality, and identity. She says that she often wonders whether we govern our bodies or whether our bodies govern us.

A self-proclaimed feminist, D'Mello fervently hopes that more men and women will have the courage to reclaim their bodies and identities, and embrace feminism. "I'm looking forward to conversing with Sharmistha, who has a rich and nuanced understanding of both gender and the subject of the gaze, and body politics," she says. "I'm keen to observe how she steers the conversation by engendering the concept of the gaze the way it is articulated in Ravi Varma's work and in my book."

Ray, in turn, would like to leave the audience with a fresh perspective, to examine their own lives and that of others. She insists upon the need to change the culture around women and open up the potential for the feminine to define itself, rather than being defined through a patriarchal lens. “In a way, a revolution has already begun, and this is just one small step in that direction, albeit an educative one.”

The event will take place at the Piramal Museum of Art, Lower Parel, from 7pm onwards. Entry is free, registration is compulsory. Please RSVP at info@art-x.co.

The writer is an intern at The Hindu

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