

All that glitters

Marion Colomer splits her time between Paris and New Delhi and is a self-styled modern-day court painter. This fortnight, she's part of Francophonie Weeks. Colomer spoke to **Sonal Shah** about her upcoming show, *Portraits 2007: from Maharajas to Glitterati*.



Marion Colomer's portraits of Alyque Padamsee (left) and Sandeep Khosla and Abu Jani

Why does the title of your show tie maharajas and glitterati together?

The title refers both to what it is to be a maharaja today as well as the glitter work I do with embroidery. I came to India for the third time in 2005 with the intention of painting maharajas. Earlier, I had done some street portraits in Malviya Nagar and in Tamil Nadu. I wanted to change the context and work around this idea of court portraits. After some time, I realised this subject was a little dated and close to the exoticism that I try to avoid. I decided to paint modern India, through cities like Delhi, Mumbai and Hyderabad. My models are maharajas by historical title as well as new maharajas – that is, the glitterati of actors and artists...

What's the criterion in choosing who to paint?

They could be friends (as with fashion

designer Gaurav Gupta, actress Sonya Jehan and artist Baba Anand). They could be city personalities: politicians, actors, artists, fashion designers. Somehow, they are all connected – one introduces me to another. I try to show a complete panel of my own vision of modern India.

Has anyone commissioned a portrait by you?

Not yet. I come to the models I'm interested in painting. In Bombay, the magazine *Beautiful People* gave me a list of people who represent the city – that's how I met Abu Jani, Sandeep Khosla and Alyque Padamsee.

Do you have a background in portrait painting?

While at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, I studied the Western masters such as Diego Velázquez, Francisco de Goya, Leonardo da

Vinci and Édouard Manet. I specifically worked around Velázquez's "Las Meninas". Later, in New York City, I was interested in doing portraits of basketball players. Generally speaking, I am interested in portraying the people and personalities that represent the core spirit of the country I am in.

What similarities or differences do you see between Western and Indian court painting?

Western masters compose their paintings to show the greatness and power of the king. The background is usually empty to focus on the portrait. The colours are dark, and give a dramatic effect in the portraits. Miniature



Pretty as a picture: a portrait of the artist herself

paintings are also figurative, but play more with details. Light is natural and less dramatic, but the composition is extremely complicated by the ornamentation. I look often at the

work of Raja Ravi Varma, who embellished his paintings with stones and cloths.

I try to mix all these aspects in my paintings. I work as the Western masters did: sketching the models in their homes, and then going back to my studio to paint from those drawings. I usually spend a couple of hours with my models, because more than making a close likeness of their face, I try to be open to who they are. I like adding animals, like dogs belonging to them (as in Velásquez paintings, for example), and I've done one horse portrait. My palette is usually dark, to give a dramatic ambience.

I have a deep interest in oriental ornamental decoration. I work with layers, which in some way signifies the India I live in. I put silicon on my canvas before painting with oils, and then remove it so the canvas appears blank in places. After that, I work with another layer of embroidery. The silicon is kind of an interface, like a jali, which obstructs the view of the spectator, and gives him a lot of motifs to look at before the portrait.

Do you sew onto your canvas, or use cloth and embroidery like a collage?

I sew on directly. I work with a French/Indian factory (Lecoanet Hemant India). The masterji is Ajmal Khan, and the embroiderers are Afzal and Wahid Ali. I guide them and sometimes they interpret their own designs into the canvas. I stay with them every day that they work on placing thread, sequins and buttons. I cherish this collaboration, where I share a lot in the creative aspect. This is again a synthesis of my own culture of French embroidery and Indian Mughal embroidery techniques. This work makes me closer to a craftswoman than an artist. In terms of court portraits, the word artist didn't exist – they were craftsmen – and this is important in my perception of my own place in India.

Having a Gaul

The Francophonie Weeks brings programmes from across the French-speaking world to Delhi, finds **Margot Bigg**, and cinema is the big highlight.

Francophiles, rejoice. The French Embassy in India, along with a number of other embassies and the Alliance Française de Delhi, is bringing a French language cultural programme – aptly titled “Francophonie Weeks” – to the capital. For those not familiar with the French language, Francophonie refers to the regions where French is spoken. Officially, there are 63 states that belong to the Francophone Community, an organisation that brings together French-speaking countries all over the world.

Francophonie Weeks commences with two film festivals, cooperatively showcasing some of France's most topical films, along with pieces from other parts of the French-speaking world. “Vivre Ensemble” (or Living Together), the first of the two festivals, sticks purely to the French beat, whereas the Francophone Film Festival features French language films from outside Western Europe.

Many of the films playing in “Living Together” address issues pertaining to French youth of foreign origin living in the working-class suburbs and housing estates of French metropolitan areas. These films give viewers a glimpse of estate life beyond the negative stories of indiscriminate violence and car-burning in the French and international news media.

At first glance, it's natural to suspect that some sort of greater public relations plan is at play, but the films were not selected to offset current notions about life in France's underprivileged urban areas. “The intention is not to correct impressions,” said Philippe Martinet, Counsellor for Culture and Cooperation at the French Embassy in India. Martinet points out that the diversity of the films selected for the festival simply reflects twenty-first century France, a country where the average citizen can no longer be assumed to be a Roman Catholic of Gallic descent. True to its title, the festival uses the medium of film to examine harmonious living against a backdrop of diversity.

The Francophone Film Festival includes movies from Belgium, Switzerland, Canada and, surprisingly, Romania. Disappointingly, though, it has no films from French-speaking Africa or the West Indies. Nevertheless, the festival promises some interesting viewing, including Christoph Kühn's *Nicolas Bouvier, 22 Hospital Street*, which follows the real life journey of a Swiss writer/photographer who travels from Europe to the southernmost tip of Sri Lanka, where he falls ill and is left to his own devices. A tribute to Bouvier will also be held at the Swiss Embassy on March 17.

While the two film festivals are perhaps the most eye-catching events of Francophonie Weeks, the cultural programme offers much more than just foreign flicks. Highlights include a performance by Yann Perreau, a self-taught poet, composer and performer from Canada, as well as *Hell and Illuminations*, a play based on the works of renowned nineteenth-century poet Arthur Rimbaud. Art enthusiasts can look forward to *Portraits 2007: From Maharajas to Glitterati*, an exhibition of the works of Marion Colomer, a 25-year-old French artist who divides her time between Delhi and Paris (see accompanying feature). If you can't make any of the other events, be sure not to miss the Francophonie Mela on March 15, a family-oriented fair presenting culinary delights from all over the French-speaking world. See *Around Town* for a cut-and-keep guide to Francophonie Weeks.

