Family, Photography, and Icon:

Vivan Sundaram's Re-take of 'Amrita'

Asian Art > India

Re-take of 'Amrita' is a recent series of digital photomontages by the Indian contemporary artist Vivan Sundaram. Sundaram's montages reinterpret the late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century photography of his grandfather, Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, to explore personal relationships in the Sher-Gil family and the powerful guise of Amrita Sher-Gil.

From _Re-take of 'Amrita': Digital Photomontages_, 2001. Interior of Sher-Gil flat at Rue de Bassano, Paris; self-portrait of Umrao Singh (1930); Amrita Sher-Gil in party dress (early 1930s); painting of Boris Taslitzky by Amrita Sher-Gil entitled _Portrait of a Young Man_ (1930).

By Kristy Phillips

Amrita Sher-Gil, one of India's more renowned modern artists, sits in a velvet-covered chair in her family's opulent Paris apartment, dressed in a white semi-diaphanous cocktail dress. Her father Umrao Singh Sher-Gil stands with his back to her, arms clasped behind his head in a meditative yogic pose, dressed only in a simple loincloth and staring towards a window with the drapes drawn. An image on the wall hangs between them, it is a portrait painted by Amrita of her lover and colleague in Paris, Boris Taslitzky. These three figures brought together in this photographic tableau evoke a sense of personal dialogue and interplay of intimate spaces. On a broader level, we can also read the image as a metaphor for what Amrita and her work would come to represent for art and for India: a nationalist image, European hybridity, and the interchange between desire and sorrow.

The artistic hand that composes these narratives and completes the genealogical framework is that of Vivan Sundaram, nephew of Amrita Sher-Gil and grandson of Umrao Singh. Sundaram is best known for his installation projects that have addressed issues of commemoration, memory, and death, and constructions of Indian modernity and nationalism. His recent series of digital photomontages entitled *Re-take of 'Amrita'* is an exploration of the intriguing persona of Amrita Sher-Gil. It is also his collaboration with the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century photographs taken by Umrao Singh, an innovator of modern Indian photography, aristocrat, and Indian nationalist. Sundaram's montages include photos from Amrita's life in India and as an art student in Paris in the early 1930s. Today, she is a notable figure in modern Indian art for her articulation of a national artistic voice that negotiated between European neo-realism and Indian aesthetics, and for her sensitive portrayals of rural women in India.

Through the manipulation of Umrao Singh's photos, Sundaram disassembles time. His *Re-take of 'Amrita'* catalogue (2001) describing the tragic death of Amrita at 29, and the subsequent suicide of her mother, adds a further dimension to his sequencing of life, death, youth, and age – all coexist and thus disarm the nature of the photo as a fixed document. Sundaram employs digital technology to juxtapose and layer photos from the Sher-Gil family archive, and so orchestrate the complexities that he sees in the near-iconic image of Amrita Sher-Gil. In the black and white starkness of the photos the intensity of her personality and hunger as socialite, as narcissist, and as sexual being is striking. Yet *Re-take* is also concerned with the story of Sundaram himself, and his images of his mother, Indira, sister to Amrita, seems to question her place – and by extension, his own – within Amrita's world. One particular photo, in which the two women face each other closely, playing perhaps with the notion of a 'mirror image', suggests confrontation and uneasiness between their identities.

Indeed mirrors are a prominent attribute of this series; they are symbols of introspection and exposure for the Sher-Gil family and for Sundaram personally. Three reflections are played out to great effect in a family photo in which Sundaram as a child, sitting on his grandfather's lap, stares directly from the mirror into which Indira gazes; Sundaram's grandmother as a young woman faces a mirror in the next frame, and in the final reflection, Amrita looks into

From _Re-take of 'Amrita': Digital Photomontages_, 2001. Painting by Amrita Sher-Gil entitled _The Bride's Toilet_ (1937); photograph of Amrita Sher-Gil taken at Lake Balaton by Victor Egan (1938).

From _Re-take of 'Amrita': Digital Photomontages_, 2001. Amrita and Indira Sher-Gil: photograph of Amrita by Karl Khandalavala (1936); photograph of Indira by Umrao Singh (early 1940s).

two mirror images of herself dressed to reflect her dual heritage: Indian and Hungarian. Sundaram and Amrita's gazes bracket the scene and the theatrical staging of the photo reinvents its subjects and time, as if these two intuitive artists can together sense foreboding tragedy and the eventual unraveling of this family unity.

If portrait photography is a practice that is shaped by the social personas of its sitters and photographers, then in manipulating the social accoutrements of Amrita and Umrao's lives, Sundaram separates their personal identities from their aristocratic societal roles and arrives at a deeper understanding of the intimate relations of family. In his exploration of this relationship, he also reinterprets the subjective gaze of Umrao's camera and reveals the dissonance between the protected, Indian femininity that Amrita portrayed in her paintings, and her own lived identity as an energetic, sensual bohemian. A photo juxtaposing a relaxed Amrita with her painting *The Bride's Toilet* presents her personal image as 'alter ego' to the women she sought to represent as an artist; it is a disconnection that Amrita herself was possibly conscious of evoking, her class and her exposure to Europe having presented her with alternatives of self-presentation. As Geeta Kapur has written, Amrita Sher-Gil had to 'act out the paradox of the oriental subject in the body of a woman designated as Eurasian – a hybrid body of unusual beauty' (Kapur 2000:7).

There is a vulnerability to be found in these family photos and in their 're-taking' that renders them as dynamic moments of living history. We are allowed to see the string that Umrao pulls to snap the photograph, the blurred or sometimes abrupt edges of Sundaram's digital tools, and the ghost-like outlines of overlapping images; all create narratives of fluctuating memories that live outside of the photographic paper. This exploration not only exposes intimate ambiguities of the Sher-Gil family's lives and deaths, but also broadly expands the symbolic image of Amrita Sher-Gil in the Indian national imagination. <

All photos: Vivan Sundaram (b. 1942) based on photographs by Umrao Singh Sher-Gil (1870-1954) and photographs from the Sher-Gil family archive.

From _Re-take of 'Amrita': Digital Photomontages_, 2001. From left to right: Umrao Singh and Vivan Sundaram as a child (1946), Indira Sher-Gil (1933), Marie Antoinette Sher-Gil (1912), Amrita Sher-Gil as Indian and Hungarian (1938/39).

Bibliography

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Note >

Re-take was on view in Mumbai and Paris earlier this year. This fall, part of the series will be shown in *Routes* at the Steirischer Herbst in Graz (26 October – 22 December), and in Paris at Galerie du Jour agnes b. from 16 November 2002 to 4 January 2003.