

NEW DELHI

“Phenomenology of Perception”

EXHIBIT 320

The thread was as taut as a tightrope, showing no hint of a quiver as it wound itself past two nails and turned a corner. Not even its shadowy doppelgänger dared heave. Elsewhere, a fine crack in the wall practiced to deceive. On closer examination, it revealed itself as a thread, blending in, chameleonlike, with its surroundings. It strung onlookers along, leading them to one of Parul Gupta's photographs. Then, as if by magic, it seemed to pop up briefly within the frame, only to vanish again.

These spatial drawings reflect Gupta's keen interest in observing what transpires when a line transcends the boundaries of a sheet of paper and continues its journey in space. Works from the Delhi-based artist's series “Extending the Line,” 2013–, were on view as one of three solo presentations put together by curator Meenakshi Thirukode in an exhibition of South Asian women artists under the umbrella title “Phenomenology of Perception.” Rounding out the trio were Nurjahan Akhlaq from Pakistan and Bangladeshi Yasmin Jahan Nupur. In juxtaposing these three artists, Thirukode

underlined their common concern with the link between drawing or collage and architectural spaces through abstraction and Minimalism.

The title of the show is taken from the 1945 book by French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in which he dwelt on the foundational role perception plays in understanding and engaging with the world, and the body's centrality to this encounter. We find a phenomenological bent in all three artists' work. Gupta experiments with movements of the body in relation to architectural spaces; her work evinces a preoccupation with the ways in which, as she puts it, “we perceive the environment we inhabit and what happens when a subtle shift is made in things which we have been used to see in a certain way. Does that subtle shift make us question our knowledge or our knowing, and how?”

These questions appear to find an echo in Akhlaq's use of collage, a technique that has historically denoted discontinuity and disjuncture. Her images are sourced from secondhand art books found in Lahore's old bazaars, which she splices into strips before putting them back together, albeit with subtle shifts. This reassembling can lead to an almost imperceptible displacement of the features of what might be a Mogul princess, as in *Broken Beauty*, 2015, or a more noticeable and orderly remix of a scene with courtiers and horses from a Persian miniature, as seen in *Coded Weave*, 2015. The structuring of some of the images evokes the modernist grid, with its resistance to narrative in favor of an aspiration toward an absolute visuality. But Akhlaq's approach also references the rigor of traditional miniature painting, in which the grid is used to achieve realistic perspectives.

A sensitive use of line also manifests itself in some *Untitled* drawings of 2015 by Jahan Nupur. Her amorphous or geometric objects,

enshrined in the center of the paper, are created with a painstaking application of paint. Subtle shading lends these ambiguous motifs a sculptural sense of volume and animal-like furriness. Her interest in ecology is reflected in her delicate watercolors *Memory of the Earth (Fire)*, 2015, and *Memory of the Earth (Frozen)*, 2014. In these works, evocative of tongues of fire and chunks of ice, her patient and almost meditative handling of paint speaks of a slowing-down of time as she goes about the process of reconstructing memories. All three artists use the nuanced play of light and line and shifts in shading and shadow to interrogate our very notions of perception. One starts to wonder: Are the tricks they play on our imagination through these devices in the service of some more elaborate deception?

—Meera Menezes

BEIJING

Hu Xiangqian

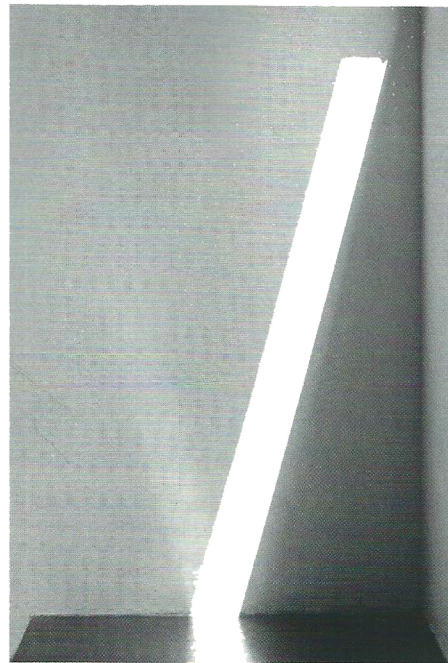
LONG MARCH SPACE

A central concern of Beijing-based artist Hu Xiangqian's oeuvre seems to be: Is the body a performance artist's only tool, and are the performative acts of a single body enough to constitute a resonantly critical practice? As if to explore these questions, Hu introduced a second body to *Reconstructing Michelangelo*, 2014–15, the predominant work in “A Performance a Day Keeps the Doctor Away,” his recent exhibition of four new projects.

Reconstructing Michelangelo considers what the relationship between a master and an apprentice might be in the context of performance art, and attempts to articulate what it even means to teach the discipline. The work consists of a live performance and five videos that follow Hu and his assistant, who wear matching red-and-blue 4S car shop uniforms, as they execute a number of mundane tasks: They eat, exercise, chat, and perform at two museums together as a sort of performance-art boot camp. By recording these activities, Hu transforms studio work into a kind of reality show, in which the exchanges between master and apprentice are almost indecipherable as either truth or as fiction.

In this way, Hu intends to mockingly challenge the professionalization of artistic practice: He short-circuits the master-apprentice formulation by allowing his student to collaborate on this work, and thus enjoy the attendant cachet; the interaction between the two recalls the way in which he reveals his “teachings” to an audience. Though he appears to demystify the often-ambiguous terms of performance-art production, Hu in fact further obfuscates them. His approach to the apprenticeship

View of “Hu Xiangqian,” 2015.



Parul Gupta. *Extending the Line*, 2013, ink-jet print, 36 x 32". From the series “Extending the Line,” 2013–. From “Phenomenology of Perception,” 2015.

