

ART REVIEW

Roses of India

DIGITAL ARTIST TEJAL SHAH DEPICTS TRANNY SEX WORKERS FROM MUMBAI

By Rafael Risemberg

JUST IN TIME FOR LGBT Pride month—with an emphasis on the “T”—comes Tejal Shah’s video installation titled “What Are You?” at the Thomas Erben Gallery in Chelsea. Shah, a 27 year-old lesbian living in Mumbai (formerly called Bombay), is the face of the new Asian artist, who tends to work in the digital realm. The current show marks her first solo exhibit in the United States.

The theme of Shah’s current work—the deeply rooted need by transsexuals to undergo genital surgery and become gender concordant—cuts across culture and nationality. Yet, there are few places where this phenomenon is more interesting than in India, where “Hijra,” as trannies there are called, are widely accepted, and are even asked to perform in Hindu religious ceremonies. Indeed, they are also feared because of their supposed ability to cast powerful curses. A man in India can have sex with and

even marry a Hijra and not be thought of as gay himself, because the Hijra is considered a third sex.

Unlike other films cropping up recently that depict Indian transsexuals, most notably “Bombay Eunuch” (2001), Shah’s 11-minute video is less a straightforward documentary than an arty mosaic. It begins with shots of Mumbai’s beach breakers on the Arabian Sea, establishing a time and place. With 13 million residents in this teeming metropolis, Mumbai is India’s financial and arts capital, much as New York is here. And its red light district, where the artist spent much time with her subjects, is one of the world’s most infamous.

Cut to a scene of brief close-ups of human skin—folds, sensual undulations and all. Then appear five post-op tranny sex workers, all but one in traditional saris; the fifth wears a red Western-style dress. Following some graceful posing, one by one they read passages from the Indian constitution pertaining to

equal rights based on gender. Though queer Indian citizens are not legally protected from discrimination, their constitution (unlike ours) forbids prejudice based on gender, and this text will be the basis of future political progress.

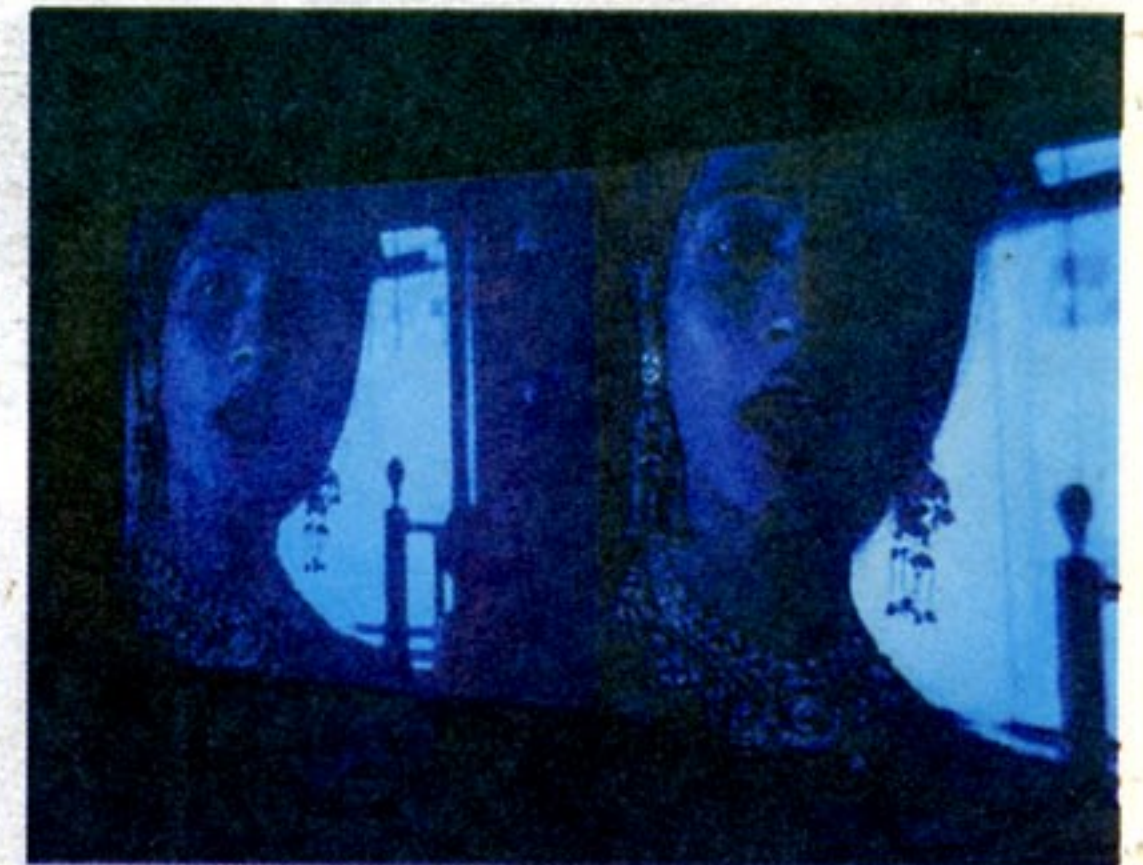
Cut again to a series of clips from government-produced films from the ’70s on medicine and the human body. By now, the far-ranging styles evidenced in Shah’s work are curiously discordant. But the longest segment of the video, and its centerpiece, follows a split-screen account of a sex change operation. On one side is a sequence of very graphic photographs of the operation itself (be warned: This is not for the squeamish). On the other screen, an Indian doctor gives a play-by-play account, in accented English, of that same MTF (male to female) surgical procedure.

The doctor’s narrative is one of the more unexpectedly compelling aspects of the video. Though not telegenic, he exudes an endearing pride in his handiwork, and he shows

no moral judgment toward his patient. Calmly and methodically, he instructs us about all the blood vessels and muscles that he cut through, the formation of the vaginal opening, and which nerve endings he avoided. In fact, sex reassignment surgery is relatively new; in years past, an Indian midwife would perform an un-anaesthetized castration by severing the testes and penis, resulting in a eunuch rather than a transsexual.

Finally, the sex workers are seen performing a slow-moving dance. The scene is colorful and hypnotic, and the feeling is one of communal celebration—a good note on which to end. Tejal Shah vividly and artfully captures this exotic world.

“What Are You,” 10am–6pm, Tues.–Sat., until June 24, at Thomas Erben Gallery, 526 W. 26th St., No. 412, thomaserben.com, 212-645-8701. Rafael Risemberg, Ph.D., leads gay & lesbian art gallery tours through New York Gallery Tours, nygallerytours.com, 212-946-1548.



TEJAL SHAH’s “What are You?” 2006, installation with two channel video, color, sound, 11 min, edition of 5 + 1 AP + 1 installation copy. Courtesy The Thomas Erben Gallery.