

Anjolie Ela Menon:

PILGRIMAGE: A SELECTION OF PAINTINGS
ASIAN ART MUSEUM



Sandwiched between a display case of devotional sculptures to the Hindu god Vishnu and a selection of artifacts decorated with Islamic calligraphy, Anjolie Ela Menon's small exhibition at the Asian Art Museum (AAM) is in good company, emanating an aura of treasured timelessness. Breaking through the fence separating traditional and contemporary Asian art, the AAM prompts its audiences to appreciate the continuum between old and new.

Born in 1940, Menon, who started exhibiting in 1958 as a teenager, is one of India's most celebrated realist painters, honored with the Padma Shri, one of the country's highest cultural distinctions, in 2000. This exhibition of 11 oil on masonite paintings is her first solo show

in a U.S. museum, and was complemented by a concurrent solo show at bicoastal gallery Arts India's Palo Alto branch. Two mid-size works depict lovers together, with rich colors and patterned textures enlivening her characteristically flat drawing style. Most of the smaller paintings are from Menon's ongoing "Yatra" series, inspired by the Kavadiyas, a sect of Shiva devotees who make yearly pilgrimages to bathe in the Ganges. These in turn seem to be preparation pieces for the feature work in exhibition—the life-size triptych, *Yatra*, completed in 2004 and donated to the museum by Arts India, New York.

Like a Mercator map that skews the earth to portray it on paper, *Yatra* is a surface rendition of a circular life cycle, its use of the Western triptych form evoking Christ-like associations of righteous suffering. The central panel shows a man toting a wooden carrying frame festooned with marigolds and shiny ribbons accentuated with metallic paint. The left panel shows half the body of a second devotee exiting the painting and a mother swaddling her child. Mirroring the form on the left, the right panel depicts an old man squatting in the posture of the mother and another parading devotee half-entering the scene.

In all three frames, a strange outlined object vibrates luminously from the background, a rectangular scaffold, unsettlingly built to human size. Is it a cradle or a grave? A bed or a table? Its function hovers at the edge of viewers' consciousness and adds a hint of abstraction to what is otherwise a realistic tableau. It also adds a puzzling element for viewers struggling to understand the painting's perspective. The side panels show the same strange object from different angles, begging the question, do the two halves of the second man belong to the same person? Is this really a circular scene? Does life, or the painting, ever end? Or ever begin? Raised in India, but trained at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris, Menon has a cunning way of incorporating Hindu philosophy into her Renaissance-inspired works. ■ JESSICA KRAFT

Anjolie Ela Menon ■ *Yatra* ■ 2004 ■ Oil on masonite board ■ Courtesy Asian Art Museum