

SPOTLIGHT

Clare Arni taps into the inner hoodlum with surprisingly fun results

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Rowdy

BY TEJAL PANDEY

The official definition of the word rowdy is a 'noisy and disorderly person'. But a rowdy in Bengaluru-based British photographer Clare Arni's world could be anybody or anything. From a brothel owner to the butterfly effect, the choices that fit your idea of what a rowdy could be are endlessly exciting. In her third solo show at Tarq, titled 'Notorious Rowdies', Arni invites her friends and family to reinterpret the term for themselves and then enact their findings out for her camera.

What we get as a result is a variety of colourful portraits, each with a narrative of its own.

What started out as a "purely personal experiment", when Arni stumbled across interesting 'rowdy' characters in the crime section of newspapers, ended up as an elaborate photography project.

"They're all friends and family, yes. So there is an amount of trust... because in a way it's a sort of a whole cathartic experience, being a rowdy. It's not just an image," says Arni. "These people transform... and it almost releases something within [them]. That was what was so interesting about it."

She explains how the process is extremely "collaborative" as the rapport between the photographer and subject plays an important role in what the final image looks like. If the subject isn't comfortable enough to bare all, emotionally and mentally, the frame will be weak and bland.

Catwoman on the prowl

It's a show where the more you know about each portrait, the more layered it gets. A closer look and the nuances come through. An expression or a gaze, a certain turn of the wrist, all moments caught at the exact fraction that make a photograph.

Arni's sister, Oriole Henry, whose rowdy persona is Greek goddess Fury, has four images. She recollects how she "...didn't really know what to do, because I'm not a rowdy," but she confesses it was strangely liberating. "I was thinking... it should sell as therapy!" She poses a part that is a complete antithesis to her normal self where psychotic Gothic grunge meets ladylike, gentle and polite.

Since none of her subjects is a professional actor, the direction and guidance of body behaviour and angles usually came from Arni. The shoot normally went into hours and it was only when



the subject came into her own that they "started to play", as Henry puts it, acting out the stories in their heads.

Henry's outdoor shots show her walking the streets at night, owning them in a way and at an hour that "as a woman" made her feel "liberated." Arni's rowdies are not all black and white. They're also the good guys who take to crime for vengeance and to fight for justice à la Batman or in, Henry's case, Catwoman.

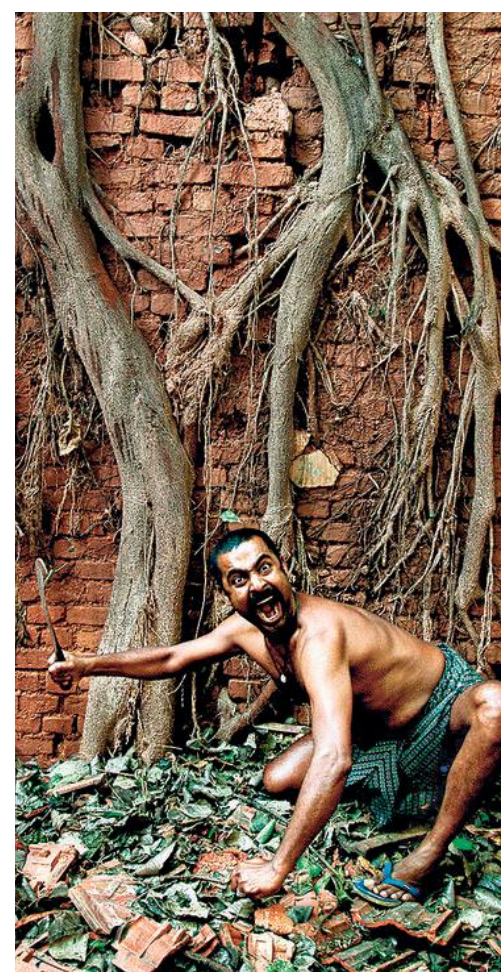
This is reflected again in Arni's image of the man in the black cape, re-enacting Zorro, from the *Mask of Zorro* fame. Shot within the stunning white arches of Tipu Sultan's palace in Mysore, one realises how the spaces used – the forests, the abandoned, semi-collapsed homes, the traditional mud-pits of Bengaluru's old quarters, an old dilapidated factory – are important to how Arni lets her rowdies unravel their fantasies.

Poster colours

Besides the locale, Arni draws inspiration for this series from the aesthetic of the garish movie poster that one can find in not just Bengaluru's but in all of India's streets. Action-packed and in your face, the actors in these posters jump out at the viewer with no room for subtleties. Her series on the madam who runs a brothel, the munshiji counting money, and the pimp bring out the flashy tackiness of the film poster.

Patrick Wilson, who plays the role of the madam, is unrecognisable in this fe-

What's real (Clockwise from left) 'The Foreign Hand 1'; 'Cop Shiva 2'; and 'The Furies 1'. CLARE ARNI/TARQ



male avatar. Arni reminisces how he took longer than most women would to get dressed, diligently painting his finger and toenails, making sure he got a bit of the lipstick on his teeth as well. "You get so caught up in your own play," says Wilson, referring to how he forgot the make-up and almost answered the doorbell at home before stopping midway and saving his food delivery guy from what would have clearly been a rude shock.

The only giveaway, for lack of a touch-up, was the bit of green stubble. "It's part of the whole thing... you don't want to completely pretend. It has to have artifice about it... that's the idea," says Wilson.

The idea behind keeping the shoot basic and functional, so that there is a certain connect with reality, was also in a way to question what is real and what is not. Or how much of yourself you retain while playing another.

All about the journey

Hence, at the same time questioning pretence versus reality or truth. The process of arriving at end results was probably not as important as the journey getting there.

It was a journey where the photographer was part director, part observer and sometimes also participant. Because photographers work alone most of the time, a team project like this, where you are required to lean on and learn from one another, comes as a welcome change.

The demands of a photo project like this do not end at location scouting or convincing friends to play their roles but go deeper into production logistics. Arni had to hunt for props from local markets. From costumes to weapons like the 'long', a sword-like object made from a car's chassis (and a popular item with rowdies of the area), Arni found a way to acquire them all.

Her dedication was paralleled by her rowdies, people like writer Zac O'Yeah and Vinayak Varma, the CEO of mixtape.in, who got so swayed by their roles that she feared they might actually end up causing grievous injury to one another while playing their parts in the mud-pit.

Just as her characters who created entire imagined stories from scratch with just an inkling of what their inner rowdy was like, Arni is eager to know what contexts the viewers can spin around these vivid frames.

"Perhaps there's a latent rowdy in each of us, wanting to be released," she says. The show in a sense hopes that we will "search within ourselves" and push our hidden rowdies to the front, even if in only imaging their tales of adventure and debauchery.

ON SHOW Notorious Rowdies, Till October 21, Tarq, Colaba, Mumbai

The author is an independent photographer-cum-writer based in Mumbai.

An expression or a gaze, a certain turn of the wrist, all moments caught at the exact fraction that make a photograph

SCANNER



Earth song

Tarq is presenting, 'This Burning Land Belongs To You', at Swiss Cottage Gallery, London, as part of Camden Kalā, from September 21 to November 4. The exhibition brings together the works of three contemporary Indian artists, Soghra Khurasani, Rithika Merchant and Ronny Sen, who work across printmaking, painting and photography, respectively. The artists' lives and individual practices are reflected in their works. There are musings on notions of land, and

on how domestic and international conflicts complicate our relationship with the piece of earth on which we live. Sen's photographs look at environmental degradation (picture), which has made life tougher in some parts of the world; Khurasani examines changing realities for minorities in the place of their birth; Merchant contemplates the journey of migration, asking us whether a move from one place to the other can save us.

Personal archaeology



Gallery Espace, New Delhi, is hosting 'Apologue and Archaeology', a solo exhibition by artist Samit Das, from September 8 to October 7. Through his works, Das has been examining the idea of "personal archaeology/ personal archives". The aim is to get a better understanding of the present by revisiting the past. It is a project that brings into focus the importance of archives. Das began by experimenting with photocopies, which now feature in his work as 'painted sculptures', based on ideas of archaeology and

ethnography. The standalone pieces are a combination of a variety of materials – iron, paint, archival images, found objects and wood – adding to a narrative that is both conceptual and historical.

Finding freedom



Samarth Theatre Group presents 'Tagore's Women', a play in Hindi based on two short stories of Rabindranath Tagore. The relevance of these stories, written about 80 years ago, exhorts us to ask, have we really changed? The play tries to answer this

question. The story revolves around two characters, Giribala and Mrinal, who are very different from each other and yet alike in their search for a sense of individuality and liberty. The women rise above the limiting circumstances of their lives to find freedom. On show October 7, 5:00 p.m.-6:00 p.m., at Akshara Theatre, central Delhi.

FRAMED

A requiem for Old India

The smell of spices lingers in the chaotic bylanes of Purani Dilli's Khari Baoli



GAYATRI SINHA is an art critic and curator who, while preoccupied with her art website www.criticalcollective.in, is also contemplating a book on the Middle Ages

By now as you all must know we have moved to New India. It's difficult to time precisely when this momentous shift took place, if we all moved at the same time, where we have moved to and what exactly is new in India, but we are assured that we have made the transition. So perhaps this column can be a requiem for Old India, which seems to have been consigned to another time, much like an old sweater that had started to unravel.

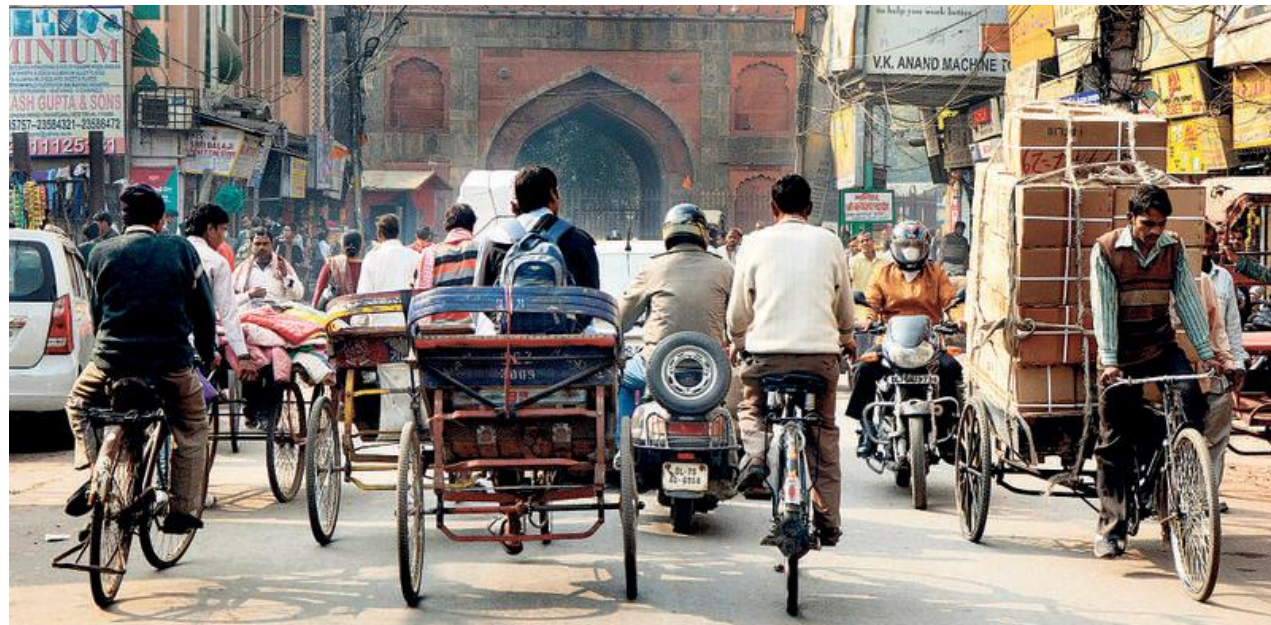
If places can age and have a sell-by date, then they must have an interface between new and old. Like Old Delhi you might think, which bore the name of Old until it was dignified by becoming simply Delhi, although in Hindi it continues stubbornly to be *Purani Dilli*.

Smell of jalebis

Described as 'Old' in contrast to Lutyens' Delhi, it continues to bear the marks of age, such as the lingering association with Urdu that wafts in the air, like the smell of *jalebis* frying in ghee. Even in its overcrowded narrow *galis*, a few *havelis* survive, with their *tehkhanas* or basements, stories of buried wells and murmurs of resident ghosts of past begums.

If the original number of 500 *havelis* has dwindled to barely 50 habitable ones, we are presented with a memory of a magnanimous past and a cruel reminder of how the old is allowed to crumble and self-destruct.

The sections of Old Delhi which are nurtured however, bearing the power of the state, recall the imprint of the still older cities: Shahjahanabad and its magnificent Red Fort still signify the seat of power, from which the ruler of India addresses the nation. The symbolic value of the old thus remains, to reinforce and validate the present.



Stubbornly yours Ajmeri Gate in the Chandni Chowk area of Old Delhi. MONICA TIWARI

Nevertheless, Old Delhi, first isolated by Lutyens and then the aggressive growth of South, East and North, has proved surprisingly resilient. In the age of the high-rise apartment and panoramic view, Old Delhi still commands the highest commercial price for the ground floor of the smallest stall or *khoka* to the largest shop floor.

Despite the burgeoning NCR, it has maintained its supremacy as a leading Asian market – congested and chaotic – but the nerve centre for the trade of silver and gold, grains and spices and dry fruit, saris and textiles, paper and sanitary ware. For over 400 years, Shahjahanabad with its apparent chaos, is the largest whole sale market in India.

The fragrant spice bylanes of Khari

Baoli, and Naya Baans, the market for the export of betel leaf and nut across South Asia and the U.K., are unique for the manner in which they have adapted to global trade, led by the traders of Ballimaran and Kucha Mahajani, the nerve centre of deal-making in Old Delhi.

Where are the books?

What has not fared so well is the sterling image that Old Delhi once had as a centre for learning. The nearly 20 libraries here stocked with rare manuscripts seem to have been relegated to another time.

Wedged between Old Delhi railway station and the Chandni Chowk cluster, the Hardayal Municipal Public Library, named after freedom fighter Lala Hardayal, has nearly 7,000 rare books,

including a handwritten Quran by Aurangzeb. But it has been squeezed for funds, unable to buy new books.

A recent infusion has given the library a facelift but much needs to be done to redress the condition of the nearly 20 smaller libraries in the area, such as Marwari Library, a nearly 100-year-old repository of Hindi writing that enumerated Gandhi and Madan Mohan Malviya among its visitors.

Perhaps these centres were like another extension of the cultural life of the old city such as the famed Sir Shankar Lal *mushairas*, which brought together leading poets Jigar Moradabadi, Firaq Gorakhpuri and Majrooh Sultanpuri. Or the publishing industry on Nai Sarak, which had its heyday with an influx of booksellers from Lahore after Partition. With the digital revolution, this industry is gasping for survival. But the architecture of Old Delhi, its food, language and crafts, have so much to give, so long as New India can accommodate the old.

Even in the overcrowded narrow galis of Old Delhi, a few havelis survive, with stories of buried wells and murmurs of ghosts