

Gangs of Bengaluru

Clare Arni's photographs, featuring people dressed as menacing hoodlums, draw from sensationalised crime reports and lurid gangster flicks, states **Marta Jakimowicz**.

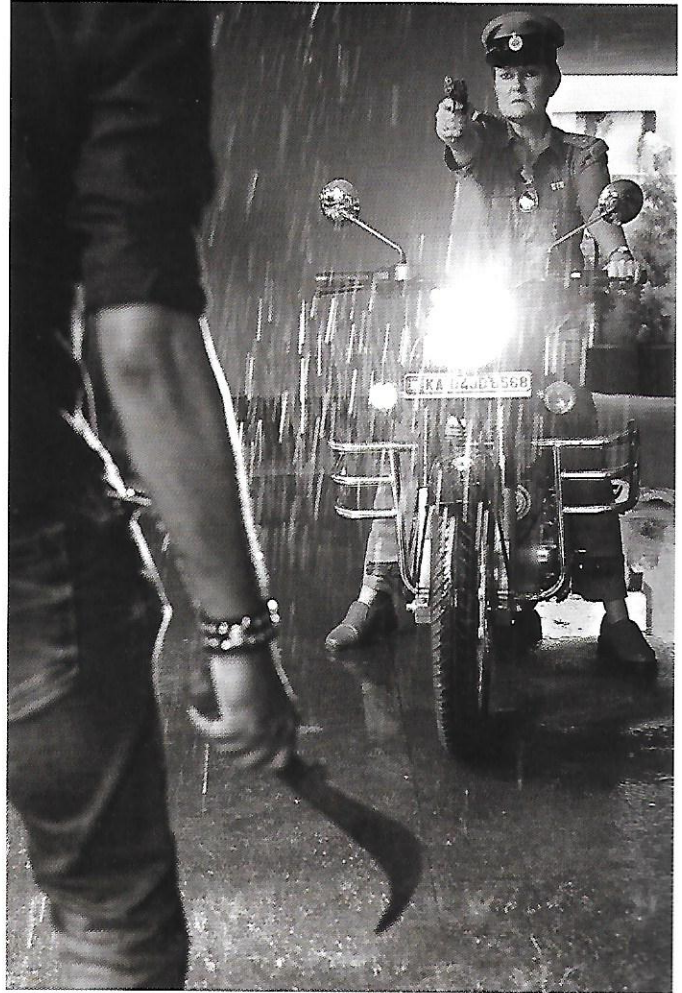
Clare Arni, a photographer more Indian than British, has been making classic images of heritage architecture besides documenting marginal and dying communities and trades in India, especially in Karnataka and its capital, Bengaluru, where she is based. Arni has consistently responded through her work to transforming social situations; her empathic approach does not temper her sharpness but makes the work poetic and humorous.

Arni's latest show of photographs, titled *Notorious Rowdies*, was mounted at Gallery Sumukha, Bengaluru, from November 17th to December 31st. It had been on display in 2017 at Tarq, Mumbai. The project's starting point was Arni's interest in sensationalised crime reports, bizarre in their loud tone, that portrayed the cockiness of gangsters and relayed the admiration for them at a popular level. You find the glorification of the underworld in films and film posters as well – the garish allure of criminals is part of the widespread voyeuristic pleasure taken by some people in violent events and characters.

This phenomenon made Arni wonder whether brutality, aggression and dramatic hyperbole, barely masked by a superficial civility, were relished by everyone. The best way to probe this was to make artists and writers act as rowdies caught in different situations; the performers' inner secrets and personalities could also be revealed in the process. Here was visual language that recalled the exaggerated, kitschy theatricality of low-grade films.

Images of a mysterious Phantom Lady in a black cloak and hat, posing against arches, brandishing a weapon, jumping from a tree, remind you of Arni's early association with Pushpamala N. In many photographs, Arni gets people to pose but also temporarily identify with nefarious characters. Her single figures include a handsome, dagger-wielding Kodava warrior wearing a thick necklace cluster and a ghostly woman with a painted face in a room with smoke and candles, wearing a long, black dress that fans into a star. There is a screaming man with a machete as well, gesturing violently against a brick wall covered with powerful tree roots and there are men engaged in an intense brawl, their clothes splattered with blood.

Arni also arranges group scenes featuring figures sharing unclear but complex relationships that suggest larger



Clare Arni. *Inspector Kodhai 2.* Digital print on archival paper. 33" x 22". 2017. Image courtesy the artist and Gallery Sumukha. © Clare Arni.

background narratives. They are often involved in activities like gambling and scheming. In one photograph, two men lock hands in a challenging manner over a carrom board game; in another image, a madam reclining on a sofa frowns and a beturbanned boor sneers as a hapless man fishes out money from a casket, wearing a stricken expression. Are they angry at being caught in the act, you wonder?

Arni makes an entry as well – as a police officer talking on a phone while a sword-wielding goon jumps in the air behind her and as a grim-faced inspector astride a motorcycle aiming her revolver at a thug with a sickle. It is only the sheet of rain that separates the bullet from felling the goonda. /