

When Art Foretells a Grim Reality

By Lauren Hasty

The avant-garde artist Prune Nourry seems to have a sixth sense. Her ongoing project, *Holy Daughters*, brings to light the dark secrets of one of Asia's largest countries and questions the grim consequences of misogynic parenting. Though ludic and playful, her installations, sculptures and videos now strike a deafly resonating chord in all who follow her work. Coincidence you say? I think not.

Today, a British tourist in India leapt from a third-floor hotel balcony, narrowly escaping a suspected gang rape after a man tried to burst into her room. The incident, which further tarnishes India's reputation as a relatively safe place for female travelers, happened only days after a Swiss tourist travelling with her husband was jumped, gang raped and beaten. Unfortunately, these frightening stories are becoming almost common.

A gang rape that occurred in New Delhi in December 2012, when a 23 year-old woman on the way home from the movies with her male companion in a city bus, was brutally attacked and murdered, led to huge protestations and demonstrations highlighting this frightening cultural and societal phenomenon. These incidents leave us wondering why so many men in a historically docile culture seem to be pushed to a breaking point over sexual tension.

The number of reported rapes in India's capital has risen from an average of two a day to four a day in 2013. 181 rapes were reported in Delhi between January 1 and February 15. Part of the increase, the Home Minister said, announcing the findings in parliament, could be attributed to a greater level of reporting of attacks. But could it also be linked to the falling numbers of women?

In India, because many families, both rich and poor, choose to select their child's sex before birth, over sixty million women are missing^[1] (https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?shva=1#13d89755db56d142__ftn1). The high number of single men has dramatic consequences on the status of women who are sold for marriage, abducted, forced into prostitution, victims of polyandry, and raped.

Nourry, a New York based visual artist, exposes *Holy Daughters* and questions the place of woman in Indian society. The angle chosen for this exhibition puts into perspective the problems of "in kind" selection, that is to say selective abortions practiced to the detriment of female fetuses, offering a lucid, poetic perspective and powerful aesthetics while underlining the harsh relevance of the artist's work.



Performance Holy Daughters, New Delhi 2010 © Prune Nourry Studio

The reason for intensifying sex-selection abortion in India can be seen through history and cultural background. Generally, before the information era, male babies were preferred because they provided manual labor and succession for the family lineage. Labor is still important in developing nations such as China and India, but when it comes to family lineage, it is of great importance. The selective abortion of female fetuses is most common in areas where cultural norms value male children over female children. A son is often preferred as an "asset" since he can earn and support the family; a daughter is a "liability" since she will be married off to another family, and so will not contribute financially to her parents. The patriarchal structure of a society is the single most important factor skewing the sex ratio in favor of males, accentuated in some cultures by the burden of raising a dowry for a daughter's marriage.



Performance Holy Daughters, New Delhi 2010 © Prune Nourry Studio

The exhibition revolves around three performances orchestrated by the artist in India, in New Delhi and Calcutta, between 2010 and 2011. Nourry filmed and documented the reactions of passerbys challenged by these hybrid statues, halfway between the sacred cow - the symbol of fertility in India - and the girl – the fertility vector, exposing the inferior position of so many women in India.

Conceived entirely around milk, the exhibition *Holy Daughters*, presented at the Flux Laboratory, explores this phenomenon through a multitude of mediums: bronze, silicone, porcelain, aluminum, video projections and photography. Through this monumental installation, Prune Nourry convenes the public and invites them to question this tragic reality.



Performance Holy Holi, New Delhi 2010 © Prune Nourry Studio

Nourry affirms her works and singular vision by using her imagination to transform the material into sculptures and photographs. There is something extreme reflected in her work: a purity going beyond unusual sculptures, installations, and photographs highlighting the hybrid character and paradoxical modernity.

She probes our representations and behaviors. With great respect and affection for Indian culture, she questions the social constraints that threaten the natural balance and endanger Indian women.

On March 8th 2013, within the framework of the *International Women's Day*, FLUX Laboratory presented an ephemeral work entitled "The procreative Dinner", a performance mixing art, science and gastronomy which included a tasting of dishes devised around milk.

Prune Nourry partnered with Chef Jean Imbert and medical geneticist Dr. Ariane Giacobino, to reflect on the idea of a baby "a la carte", or how the new assisted reproductive technologies are leading us towards an artificial evolution through human selection.

The artist orchestrated the meal around the "clinical process" of IVF and choosing the sex of her unborn child in order to create the "perfect child."



The Procreative Dinner, Flux Laboratory, Geneva

If you haven't yet seen the exhibition *Holy Daughters*, curated by Tatyana Franck, going into its last week at Geneva's FLUX Laboratory you don't want to miss it. Like the problems addressed in the artist's work, some things are too important to ignore until it's too late.

***Holy Daughters* at Geneva's FLUX Laboratory, from March 6th until March 28th, 2013
13 rue Jacques Dalphin, 1224 Chene Bougeries**

[1] (https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?shva=1#13d89755db56d142__ftnref) See Interview with Bénédicte Manier, author of "When Women will have Disappeared: the Elimination of Girls in India and Asia", Ed. de la Découverte, 2008, Article from *India Today*, January 23, 2009

<http://artyparade.com/en/flash-news/83>