

SUSANNE KESSLER IN INDIA AND PAKISTAN
INNER ENERGIES AND OUTER SPACE

“The man who finds his country sweet is only a row beginner; the man for whom each country is as his own is already strong, only the man for whom the whole world is like a foreign country is perfect”. Hugh of S. Victor, 12 century

Susanne Kessler’s long cherished plan to come to India as (in artist in residence had been stimulated by previous short journeys the sub-continent which deeply inspired her in earlier works such as the „carrousel“ series. Pursued with quiet perseverance and with flexible adjustment, the plan was eventually realized between December 1995 and March 1996 under the aegis at the Goethe Institut in India, the Max Mueller Bhavan. Subsequently, in autumn 1996, she was invited by the Goethe-Institut in Lahore, Pakistan.

The works she created in Hyderabad, Madras, Delhi, Bombay, and later in Lahore trace the stages of a journey – movements in inner and outer space:

The Universe Moves, Max Mueller Bhavan Madras, December 95, and Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, January 96

Recording Disappearance, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, January 96

The Broken Image, Max Mueller Bhavan Hyderabad, February 96

Conserving Memories, Max Mueller Bhavan, Gallery Chemauld, Bombay, March 96

Only to Vanish Once More, National College of Arts, Lahore, November 96



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The phenomenon of impermanence and constant change is an experience which has had specific articulations in both Eastern Western, ancient as well as modern, philosophical concepts. Susanne Kessler shaped her pre-considered concept “The Univers moves” after observing manual work processes in India, like those of scaffolders tying together bamboo poles with coconut fibres and fishermen thickening the seams of their nets with tar patches.

Her first work originating in India, an upright construction consisting of bamboo stays staggered in a row, and fishing nets fixed with forms pointed in a rhythmic cadence hung in an echelon formation, retains, in the upright position, the beauty and elegance of the bamboo. At the some time, it is charged with symbols evoking evolution: The fish-bone pattern reminds us of life’s aquatic origins; the diagonal line suggests a roof, and thus a human dwelling. The calligraphic drawings pointed on the nets, images the human inner ear and organ of equilibrium, may be read as metaphors for a significant step towards human evolution. They condense in their wheel form, the wheel of fortune or the cycle of rebirth, a universal movement. The natural elements, air and wind, have a free interplay in the nets, which are light in weight, fragile and hardly visible, like the delicate structure of cobwebs, and so the drawings vibrate with life and dissolve their contours in the echelon. The work is replete with the natural nuances of air, and wind, and fleeting time.

The title of the second work, "Recording Disappearance", reminding us of Cézanne's words that everything is disappearing and that one has to hurry up if one wants to see something, is the artist's expression of the driving and violent power of change. Its force permits only (3 temporary halt, a brief moment of awareness and discernment when perceptions are stilled and weighted. The work is a reaction to chaotic urban life and the common sight of the pavement as habitat and living space. The dwelling under the poorest of roofs, evoking nomadic tents, remains for a Western observer an insoluble paradox of misery and vitality, poverty and dignity – which, as paradox, can arouse feelings of repulsion as well as admiration, inducing rejection as well as fascination, fraught with myriad shades of alienation and eeriness.

Susanne Kessler took up one of her previous motifs, the tent, and used as her medium the tarpaulin found strapped over Indian trucks. Crowded with bird-like creatures made of wire hangers, the tent seethes with an inner life and seems to waft away. It can be held onto the ground only with a lot of effort and heavy stones. Corresponding to the indications of flickering life in a degree of unknown potency inside the tent, block drawings on the outside encode enigmatic messages for another sphere.



The Broken Image, Max Mueller Bhavan Hyderabad, February 96

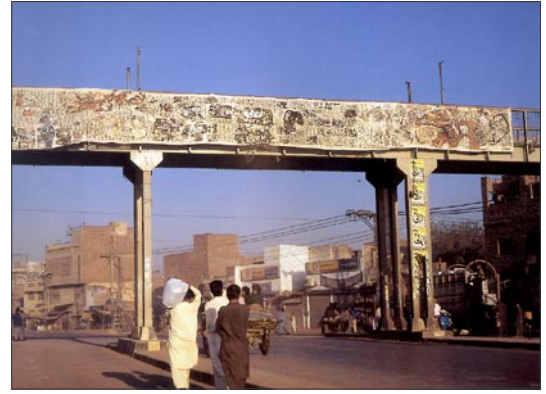


Conserving Memories, Max Mueller Bhavan, Gallery Che-mauld, Bombay, March 96

The antagonisms and tensions, inherent in an attempt to capture the essence of movement while fixing it to a particular medium, are given yet another dimension in Kessler's third work "The Broken image". This installation reflects the experience of otherness and the artist's quest to situate herself in the Indian context. It referred in a particularly multilayered, even foreboding manner to its environment, which was the inner courtyard, with its dried-up well of the since-closed Max Mueller Bhavan in Hyderabad. This time the bamboo sticks are broken and sawn up to suggest the broken Masts of a shipwreck. Yet the delicacy of the fishing nets, The beauty of the composition and the restrained earthy tones soften the terminal character of the fragments and pieces of paintings, and confer upon them a frail and poetic appeal.

"Conserving Memories", an exhibition consisting of multiple series of small pictures, was shown in Bombay before going back to Germany. They testify to the complexity of the personal and artistic experiences in India. These abstract and colourful forms full of fantasy are creations having all the intimacy of a diary, artistic expression of spontaneous sensations and feelings. They preserve, even in their abstractness, a treasure of memories which would always, like any Indian story, continue to narrate past, present and future.

In their totality these works of Susanne Kessler collect, as if in a burning glass, the energies and inspirations India can offer. The sensuous impressions of light and colour, warmth, wind and water, are interwoven and merge with an exploration of the qualities of local material and objets trouvés. They entwine themselves with encounters and interactions in India, reactions to new ways of life, work and art, and transform the experiences into visionary creations which integrate



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artistic decisions as well as emotions. Whosoever could watch and accompany Susanne Kessler in the course of her work were impressed with her openness and candour and her willingness to extend herself beyond narrow confines, while simultaneously retaining the attitude of a craftsman full of sensitivity and respect for his material. They will remember a feminine quality in her way of relating to nature and human beings, a quality of receiving while maintaining her own identity.

Her three-dimensional projections of form and colour into space and movement invite the viewer to discover the work, the world and the Self.

Returning to Germany, Susanne Kessler knew that her forthcoming residency in Pakistan would soon add another chapter to a never-ending story of involvement with the East. "Only to Vanish Once More", the work created for the courtyard of the National College of Arts in Lahore piles layers upon layers of colours and forms, sedimentations of explorations and discoveries, onto a huge canvas. Painting, sketches, drawings, symbols, hieroglyphs, scriptures – all these grow into clusters, dissolve and crystallise again. The attempt to express through two-dimensional images the creative force active in the principles of change, transition and metamorphosis is simultaneously the impetus for various spatial constructions, always using the same, ever-versatile canvas and bamboo. Folded in different shapes and put up in different environments, the work transforms itself into a snake in the garden of the Goethe-Institut, (in obstruction on the River Ravi, a wind shelter for herdsmen tending buffaloes on the banks of the river, a banner over a congested road intersection. Hung vertically the work reveals an elaborate Urdu text interlacing the beauty of script and the meaning of words. Covered with excerpts of Iqbal's writings, exquisitely calligraphed by Asif Reza Naqvi, it works like a scroll honoring the great poet and philosopher. Finally, "Only to Vanish Once More" returns to a more familiar aesthetic environ, the College of Arts. Bearing traces of its exposure at various sites, fissures as well as cracks, covered with dust and with sand, it is an installation filled with memories of the past, incarnating lives suggested or perhaps only dreamt.

November 1996

Petra Matusche, Max Mueller Bhavan New Delhi