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By Jaideep Sen

Can gaps in people's memory result in altered histories? That's just what a Norwegian artist is exploring in her work

Unni Gjertsen is in some ways a modern-day wayfarer – not quite a drifting hitchhiker or dauntless explorer, but rather more like a pilgrim, intent on retracing a historic path. The travels that she set out on a few years back have wound through Iran, parts of West Asia and Afghanistan, along a route followed by the British historian Robert Byron in the early 1930s, which he documented in *The Road to Oxiana* (Oxiana being the northern Afghan region skirting the river Amu Darya). Gjertsen revisiting that journey resulted in a four-part project, titled *Beyond Oxiana*, as part of which she has hosted shows in Cairo and Istanbul (in 2007-'08), and also conducted a research visit to Armenia.

Gjertsen will complete her *Oxiana* project with a show in Bangalore this fortnight, which will be based on a series of interviews that she conducted in Beijing in 2009. The idea of the entire project was to reconstruct a few “historical epochs”, and examine “how we relate to them now”, explained the Norwegian artist over a Skype call from Oslo, where she's based. In the Beijing interviews, Gjertsen spoke with a handful of people born between 1940 and '79 about their recollections of World War 2, the Cultural Revolution of the '60s and the '70s, and the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square protests of '89.

This fourth leg of *Beyond Oxiana* (after Cairo, Istanbul and Armania) is made particularly compelling by the apparent grey areas and gaps in the accounts of Gjertsen's interviewees. At the show at 1, Shanthi Road, Gjertsen will present those responses in verse, enlarged on the walls of the studio-gallery. The Cultural Revolution figures prominently in these pieces, albeit more in the form of *ad hominem* recollections than attempts at factually accurate descriptions. In “Tea and Time”, for instance, Sui Jian Guo (born '56) offers an innocent recollection: “In third grade the Cultural Revolution/ Our teacher was young/ The soldiers took her away/ I was happy free to leave”, while Xiao Ke (born '79) reflects on “Watching the Tiananmen Revolution on TV/ Confused that anyone could hurt a soldier”, in “Army Nostalgia”.

Gjertsen explained that she was keen on the idea of “mapping history and identity” through “an alternative form of archaeology”, to produce a sort of “spatial organisation of memories”. The show dealt with “how people want to believe certain things”, she said. Factors of selective human perception, self-reflection and cultural influence, therefore, played large roles in shaping these maps, said the artist. The reason she was drawn to Robert Byron's travelogue was because of its structure of a “British colonial” narrative, she added, and because it reflects the manner in which some accounts of “fictional writing can be interpreted as though they are truthful”. Zhuang Hui (born '63) elaborates on some of those sentiments in “Smell of Soup”: “Propaganda colours my recollection of the past/ I prefer memories of taste and smell/ The smell of draft, noodles and sausages/ From a damp public cantina”.

In “Tiananmen Square And Back Again”, Mu Chen (born '70) recalls, “My parents never talked about the past/ A trauma”, while Jin Lianying (born '55) adds, “People think China is strong/ It is weak, very weak”, in “Teaching Marx to Deaf Ears”. Bao Pao (born '40), in “Frogs to Catch”, speaks of a time closer to the forced reforms of the '70s, of discovering “Keepsakes and remnants/ Objects with tired Mao red colour”. He adds, “Until 1980 personal experiences did not exist/ Propaganda from loudspeakers morning till night”.

“Some of the interviewees were defining [history] as they wanted to,” said Gjersten. “This had to do with their living in times when there was no freedom of speech, and there always was an official truth to everything. Some of them were rejecting aspects in their memories.”

Gjertsen has toyed with the idea of selective – and discriminatory – histories in her previous work. *Creative History* (2003-'04) consisted of silk screen prints emblazoned with text, such as: “Meret

Oppenheim invented surrealism”, “Virginia Woolf is immortal”, “Yoko Ono created Fluxus”, and “Hannah Arendt is the most read Western Philosopher”. Gjertsen explained that those works were meant to be provocative, by introducing half-truths, falsities, and even lies and prevarications, alongside facts. She had sought to project “a balance between realism and falsehood” in those earlier works, said Gjertsen, even as the pieces were expressly designed to preserve a handful of feminist legacies.

“All those women artists and intellectuals are quite famous, but they’re never mentioned as creators and pioneers. I was frustrated because they were almost left out of history,” said the artist. “*Creative History* created a false history of the public recognition, and celebration, of some well-known women artists and intellectuals.” As a bunch of fabricated assertions – such as that Ono led the Fluxus movement of the ’60s, when, in fact, she was a part of it, along with the artists Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell, apart from musicians and composers like La Monte Young and Joseph Byrd – *Creative History* did irk some of her own contemporaries, but therein lay that show’s success, added Gjertsen.

A large part of her work was “about affirmative strategies and the potential of [falsehoods] becoming truths – to say, ‘If I believe it, it’s the truth’,” Gjertsen explained. *Beyond Oxiana*, in particular, was about “an affirmative reaction to nationalism – of wanting to over-focus on [or reject] aspects of one’s history.”

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‘Our teacher was young, the soldiers took her away.’

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