

The Art of Secularism: The Cultural Politics of Modernist Art in Contemporary India.* Karin Zitzewitz. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 206 pp.

Reviewed by Kenneth M. George

Karin Zitzewitz's smart, discerning, and welcome new book, *The Art of Secularism*, is a study of Indian modernism and modern art in a time of crisis. The crisis is a broadly political one—the rise of Hindu nationalism and religious communal politics since the 1980s and with them the continued erosion of a Nehruvian secular nation-state dedicated to religious pluralism and tolerance. It is Zitzewitz's view that “art is one of the most publicly prominent domains of secular cultural expression in India” and a “uniquely important site from which to explore the thickness of the epistemic category of the secular in India, including its constraints and productivities” (154-55). Given the relatively limited scale and reach of India's art public (mentioned or hinted at a few times in the book), I wonder if other fields of sociopolitical or intellectual activity (e.g., jurisprudence, feminism) go somewhat farther than the art world in setting the terms of debate about secularism (and its defense) in that country. More soundly persuasive, I think, is Zitzewitz's success in showing the special vulnerability of India's modernist art world to communalist and sectarian sentiments, especially in its handling of Hindu and Muslim religious iconographies. So, too, her demonstration of the ways modernist art practices, art ideologies, and art institutions have contributed to the field of Indian secularism. Readers will come away from the book firmly convinced of art's role in the formation of the secular, and secularism's role in the formation of art.

The book features five distinguished figures who came into prominence in India's early postcolonial period—when Nehruvian secularism was in its heyday—and who were principally associated with the art scenes in Mumbai (Bombay) and Vadodara (Baroda): painters M. F. Husain (1915–2011), K. G. Subramanyan (1924–), Gulammohammed Sheikh (1937–), Bhupen Khakhar (1934–2003), and gallerist Kekoo Gandhi (1920 – 2012). These five stand out as renowned exemplars and spokesmen for the aesthetic and ethical venture of modern secular art, as well as public figures who, with exception of Gandhi, have suffered assault or censorship by religious hardliners. The book is richly peopled, too, with art writers, art historians, anthropologists, and public intellectuals who have debated or critiqued the epistemic foundations, character, and challenges of Indian secularism. Husain, Subramanyan, Sheikh, and Khakhar and have long enjoyed scholarly and critical attention, both nationally and internationally; and all have captured attention for having suffered attacks from the religious right or for having defended secularism. Their work and writings indeed lend themselves well to the book's aim of writing a history of modern secularist art—and artful secularism—in India. At the same time, women artists are missing from the book's pages (though not women art critics and art historians), and so readers may reasonably question whether India's world of modern art, and that world's defense of secularism, have a largely masculinist slant.

Zitzewitz herself worked as a curator and art critic during her doctoral fieldwork in Vadodara and Mumbai (2001-2003)—the book is a reworking of her 2006 Ph.D. dissertation—and she

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would witness the sectarian riots of 2002 in Gujarat; help organize the posthumous celebration of Khakhar's life and work at the National Gallery of Modern Art in 2003; attend the Kala Ghoda Art Fair of 2003 having authored a book based on Kekoo Gandhi's memories; follow the 2006-2008 Hindutva campaign against M. F. Husain (which drove him into exile in Qatar); and later document the 2011 assaults on students and faculty at the Vadodara art academy where Subramanyan and Sheikh had long taught and wrote. How Zitzewitz draws from both art history and anthropology—with their entangled secular roots and orientations—is of special interest to me. She explains that she set out to “develop a genre of writing . . . that embeds narratives of art historical development within frames of ethnographic description” and claims that the book's methodological breakthrough is to use “ethnography to forefront the historical contingency of artistic subjectivity, art practice, and the meanings of works of art” (13). The disciplinary ratio in her work leans mostly in the direction of art history, and serves exceptionally well in capturing the modernist engagements with India's traditions of Hindu and Muslim religious iconography. Taking on a single art world figure, each chapter of the book locates him within past episodes of crisis or threat; retrieval and analysis rest primarily on oral (art) historical interviews with the artists (or gallerist), or on writings by Indian critics and intellectuals, rather than on revealing glimpses in moments of ethnographic witness or encounter *per se*. Each chapter also features interpretive framings of paintings and iconographies that demonstrate how secular dispositions manifest in the material work of each artist, or how particular images come to represent the secular terrain of India, or its possibilities. The painters and their lives do not stand in ironic or contradictory relationship to their work, but are of a piece with it. How the paintings (and lives?) might elude, exceed, or subvert interpretive framing by the artists or Zitzewitz herself is a question that will have to be addressed in subsequent studies, and through more thorough cultivation or application of ethnographic sensibilities.

I greatly admire the author's bold approach to drafting a history of secular modernist art in India, as well as her commitment to the artistic freedoms made possible by secularism and cosmopolitanism. I found the book richest and most rewarding when Zitzewitz offers theoretical or interpretive insights about artistic subjectivity, truth, and self-fashioning, about corporetics and the affective bonds between viewers and religious images, and about the ethical imperatives driving modernist creativity. As a compass to the aspirations and demands of India's modernism and first generation of postcolonial artists, it offers uncommon insight and utility.

Kenneth M. George is Professor of Cultural Anthropology and Director of the School of Culture, History, and Language in the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University. He is a specialist on Indonesia, and Past Editor of the Journal of Asian Studies (2005-2008). His most recent book, Picturing Islam: Art and Ethics in a Muslim Lifeworld (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), combines ethnographic and art historical research in a look at the cultural politics of contemporary Indonesian Islamic art (reviewed by Karin Zitzewitz for Museum Anthropology Review in 2011.) Ken's work also has appeared in Comparative Studies in Society and History, Material Religion, and Cultural Anthropology.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14434/mar.v9i1-2.13634>