Resistance & refuge

VISUAL ARTS

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Smoke billows above a row of cannons; fragments of bodies interrupt the sky. In *Blowing Mutinous Sepoys from the Guns* (picture), the neat arrangement of soldiers makes the violence chilling. Execution becomes a military procedure, presented with the compositional care of a ceremonial parade. This tension between pictorial order and human catastrophe ran through *1857: The First War of Independence — An Archival Visual Journey* curated by Jyotirmoy Bhattacharya. Conceived as a tribute to the uprising's participants, the exhibition brought together images whose ways of seeing deserve as much attention as the events they depict.

In the cavalry attack at Cawnpore, raised swords, rearing horses and fallen bodies form a turbulent foreground. Opposite them, British bayonets create a rigid horizontal barrier. The composition



distributes its sympathies through geometry: Indian movement appears unruly, British resistance disciplined. It invites a reading familiar from European battle paintings where staged conflict makes military power appear heroic. The capture of the king of Delhi offers a quieter theatre of authority. Beneath spreading foliage, the ruler stands among armed men, his lowered posture contrasting with the captors' upright bearing. Defeat takes the form of a group portrait. Nana Saheb's elephant procession supplies another register: decorated cloth, mounted escorts and palace architecture turn political leadership into an imposing spectacle.

Fine shading and crowded detail give these prints an air of documentary precision. Yet precision can disguise invention, selection and prejudice. Their captions, especially the designation, "mutinous", remind viewers that naming resistance is itself an exercise of power. The arranged display makes the uprising's people and places accessible. The exhibition is most compelling when its patriotic frame rubs against the colonial gaze preserved within the pictures. In that friction, the archive becomes unsettled, and looking becomes an argument.

At *Svikriti*, curated by Uma Ray at the Birla Academy of Art and Culture, seven artists explored line as contour, boundary and connection. The premise was expansive, and some of its strongest expressions arose from encounters with bodies and materials. Arnab Das Adhikari's *Sleeping Cat XVI* gave an ordinary domestic sight monumental scale, creating a tension between repose and movement. In *The Widow Woman III*, a curled figure occupied a patterned enclosure, bowed by the weight of confinement. Aishi Biswas's *Where I Long to Dwell* had pale, veiled figures hovering against dark grounds, their bodies interrupted by botanical fragments and tangled threads. Photographs become unstable beneath encaustic, a wax medium used in ancient funerary portraiture. That historical association made these meditations on decay resonant: preservation itself became an image of disappearance.

Indraagni Ghosh's *The Adventures of Panchangul* recalled Expressionist relief prints but in a mischievous way. Muskan Kaur's craggy terracotta made fragility tangible, its torn contours suggesting excavated remnants. Pralay Mistri's *Atlas* stacked coloured, organ-like forms into an unstable column. David Malaker's *Guardian* compressed structures into murky darkness beneath an acidic green sky, while Samir Das's paired silhouettes made recognition falter.

The curatorial idea occasionally felt a little too accommodating. Yet, the works gained coherence through a recurring uncertainty about shelter. What remained is a searching exhibition about the difficulty of finding somewhere to belong.