

A soldier's shoe, red, majestic and monumental. Its laces trim, neat, tidy and flowing. Beside it sits a round piece of ammunition, dwarfed, happy, used, with twigs sprouting out of it like it was left to live in the rain along with the soldier's shoe. This is not a painting but embroidery.

Timelines and recollections do not flutter across hurriedly, they crawl in artist Paula Sengupta's recent series of works, *The Gallery of Anxiety*, a collection of serigraphy and aquatint on paper and etching on acrylic on display at Gallery Espace. The regional representation in Paula's exhibition *Ly Pony*, a sequel to her series *River of Blood*, inches over a remarkable mix of thought and theory in a theatrical depiction of images of war through the running stitch in *kantha*, the embroidery popular in West Bengal and Bangladesh and its impression in serigraph.

She says, "I have done a lot of embroidery during my childhood. We were expected to know everything our mother and grandmother knew — the typical middle class thing. Though during my days at Santiniketan I was painting a lot, I realised that expressing myself through embroidery comes easily to me. Besides, the running stitch in *kantha* lends itself to a very pictorial expression."

The regional representation in her work is distinct, firm and impervious to trends, tastes and frivolities. In her work, you feel the presence of music, movement, theatre and a strong narrative. There is a song from the seamstress in every work — a song on her rootedness, a striking juxtaposition of the masculine voracity of war and ammunition and the feminine mindfulness of the circumstances, their effects and portrayal.

She says, "Serigraph is a great

Songs from a seamstress

Artist PAULA SENGUPTA'S new series is a remarkable mix of history, art and craftsmanship, says SUMATI MEHRISHI



media to work with. Focussing on textile has always been very important for me. But to transform it to a medium on this level and attach it to human identity, to work keeping in mind movements in art history, which I have shown great inclination for requires a lot of effort. I have taught at NIFT. Being trained at Santiniketan helped but teaching at NIFT helped me make a lot of changes in my work. Though I was always interested in textiles, garments and embroidery, I could look at everything differently. Then artist residencies in Bangladesh helped me explore *kantha*, especially the *Nakshi Kantha* of Bangladesh, which is more about the quilted, narrative technique, where the seamstress does everything impromptu. I was

quite drawn to it."

Thread work as the material, images and strokes blend in Sengupta's work, stringing and binding together the subcontinental wars. Memories and impressions linger, leisurely in circles, gyrations, in fractions and fractures, in bits over objects and images that Paula remembers and recreates with her needle and thread. No gore, no blood — nothing boisterously done. There is noise — of silence.

You don't expect a seamstress to be thinking international politics when she is busy poking needle into a piece of cloth, creating a picture, a pattern through stitches — oblique, straight, looping and round. Well, embroidery does make a woman think. The eyes on the thread, the mind does stray

over to pastures usually distant. Paula's use of embroidery beats a woman's imagination. While we would have liked to believe she designates the embroidery to other people (there are many artists who have assistants working out the canvases and other material for installations and paintings), she says, she does every bit on her own. "For me, the embroidery is my paint and brush. I cannot hand over the work to anyone else."

Her friendliness with stitches and years given to embroidery give her serigraphs an unparalleled dimension and texture. There is a peculiar bond between destruction and life, an underestimated co-existence of gunpowder, soot, flowers, twigs and fish motifs. She reflects, "There is a lot to be explored through serigraphs. Unfortunately, young artists spend lot of time and effort on getting the right technical finish. Instead of focussing on its artistic details and the artistic aspects and expression, they concentrate on the process. For 50 prints, I use 10 plates of five variations. So I get five varieties of prints, that's how it is. Also, serigraphs were never a great market. A lot of things have to be done in this direction. Somath Hore's work is a great inspiration."

Through her work, Paula reflects on the times when women, in war-torn India and its neighbours, would park themselves in a corner of the house, meditating over a tuft of colourful thread, trying to be calm as the world raged by. She adds, "I have been reading on the Indo-Pak wars for many years now. The Bangladesh context really caught my attention. People say that using the war theme is an old expressionist tool. But I do not agree. How much have we suffered because of the wars? How many neighbouring countries can we easily and safely go to today? How much are we suffering on account of terror wars? We have been recently struck by another bomb blast."

Her works from *The Gallery of Anxiety* have doodles on terror and war done by school children from Kolkata. The doodles are like stories and diaries from two generations nailed together. She adds, "I was intrigued by the fact that the kids I did the workshop with in Kolkata know what an IED means. To their generation an improvised Electronic Device is something they hear of so often. They have seen a war of terror."

Today, when women do not have the willigness, patience and the charm for

embroidery (in urban India it is a struggle to be able to find embroidery threads), Paula uses the medium with a vengeance. "I really have taken to the cross stitch," she adds. Will she venture into garments? "Well, going by my interests, that may happen soon," she smiles.

