

The Write Gallery at The Lighthouse

“Mr Chippa” and exhibition by Lee Fullarton.

3 – 29 November 2023.

“Observe the wonders as they occur around you. Don’t claim them. Feel the artistry moving through and be silent.”¹

These words written by Rumi, the thirteenth century poet, scholar, lover, and Sufi mystic find rapport with Lee Fullarton’s exhibition, “Mr Chippa”. The wonder is tangible, the artistry prolific, and silence encourages contemplation, generating an engagement with the artwork and its many levels of presentation. This body of work is about printmaking, sculpture, and painting. It is about storytelling, sharing experience, and meeting a village of renowned artisans struggling to keep craft and artforms alive. It is also about writing and illustrating a book, “Mr Chippa the Woodblock Carver of Bagru.”

The beguiling exhibition offers a kaleidoscope of colours from the quirky forest dressed in shimmering saris to the richly costumed *kathputli*, the puppets and dolls who act as visual commentators. It maps an artist’s journey to the Indian town of Bagru near Jaipur in the state of Rajasthan. This small town is the home of the Chhipa community whose members have been involved with fabric printing for many centuries. The fabric is printed using intricately hand carved woodblocks of teak or rosewood sourced from specialized wood cutters.

When Fullarton visited the town and met the hereditary artists, she saw the potential in utilizing the wood block process to create her book. After numerous cups of chai, a deal was struck with the Khan family to transcribe her drawings and text on to blocks. The lines were meticulously executed with punches, chisels, and a mallet. The foreign English words were treated as a series of delicate patterns that eventually were to tell a story.

The walls take us on a diverse voyage of discovery. Particularly fascinating is the juxtaposition of the actual carved woodblocks with the pages of the book they illustrate. As the story unfolds our interest is piqued by the puppet-dolls and the small glowing paintings of the “In between places” created from the visual notations captured in the artist’s sketchbooks. Fullarton’s book tells the story of a master printmaker who commissions the carver to create a mandala of the full moon. The connotations of cosmic wholeness and a spiritual journey to the moon’s core, hold the enchantment and mystery of folk lore set firmly within the local village. The exhibition with its colour and lyrical lines, its joy and whimsy recall something of the charm and fantasy associated with the floating figures in the dreamscapes by Chagall.

To visit this exhibition, to participate in the various workshops for adults and families, is to share the experience of walking in the footsteps of the artist, Lee Fullarton. It offers a magical “timeout”, and to quote gain from Rumi:

“The work of magic is this: that it breathes, and its every breath transforms reality.”²

Sandy Pottinger, November 2023

^{1,2}, *Gold, Rumi*, Translated by Haleh Liza Gafori, 2022, New York Review Books, New York.