



Multilayered City

German artist Mario Pfeifer looks at Mumbai through the complex prisms of his film

SANKHAYAN GHOSH

WHEN Mario Pfeifer decided to make a film on Mumbai, intrigued by its environment, his primary concern was the way he would represent it. He wanted to keep away from the innate Western gaze, but he also didn't want an inside perspective of someone from the city. To achieve a middle-ground of "reality", Pfeifer shunned the conventions of documentary film, wove in threads of a fictional story and let people interpret the film for themselves.

"Since childhood, travelling and experiencing diverse cultures shaped my sensibility towards questioning how adequately one can represent everyday life and its inherent culture," says Pfeifer, whose film, *A Formal Film in Nine Episodes, Prologue & Epilogue* is currently being shown at Mumbai's Project 88.

Pfeifer's is a conceptual film, one that is driven by an idea rather than a narrative. The idea, is to investigate the city's complexities by way of looking at it through the prisms of social,



urban, ethnographic, religious and cultural factors.

His days of research in the city led him to realise that there really couldn't be one way of seeing a city. "The interaction with local inhabitants, made me understand that there can be multiple readings and interpretations," says the German artist.

Displayed in the fashion of video installations in gallery space, the film is segregated into nine episodes. It follows its two protagonists — untrained actors from the city, who go through a somewhat mysterious journey. The camera captures their everyday life with striking clarity and gets



(Clockwise from above) A still from the film that explores the city through its social, urban, ethnographic, religious and cultural factors; Mario Pfeifer; a still from the film

into the city's varied architectures: from the hardened industrial interiors of an ice-factory, the urban hi-tech confines of a clinic to the sparse landscape of religious site.

"The visuals capture real time and ask the viewer to closely look and observe the entire frame. Any visual information indicates layers of information, and a spectator like myself needs time to analyse the images we conceived. I think and work slowly, so I wish to give an audience time to experience," he says.

As the films play simultaneously in the darkened gallery space, a viewer may switch between the

screens at will. This serves Pfeifer's purposes as he wants his audience to make their own connections. There are enduring images that remain etched in the mind. Like that of the head being shaven after the protagonist's father's demise, or the sheer audio-visual experience of an auto ride in the city's suburbs. In the latter, the camera follows the protagonist inside the neon-lit interiors of an autorickshaw, and captures the entire journey as a Hindi film song plays from a radio. "I heard a song in an autorickshaw myself, with a Dolby sound system in Juhu Beach. It took me three months to find it. But they were essential, as they indicate Bollywood-Music-Culture, a prominent culture in Mumbai and beyond," says the 32-year-old-artist, who had first come to Mumbai four years ago, on an editing assignment for two other filmmakers.