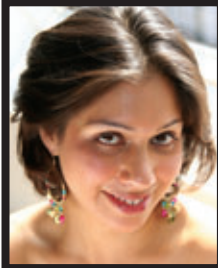


thearts



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An Indian in Paris



— PARIS

If you're a second-generation Indian American like me, you probably grew up hearing "Well, you know the concept of zero originated in India!" or "The Crown Jewels are all originally from India!" Only good things came out of India — family values, royal jewels, mathematical and scientific concepts, art. So you can imagine my shock meeting Modernist Indian artist Sakti Burman who openly and enthusiastically admitted that he and his contemporaries were inspired by "tremendous" French Impressionists such as Renoir and Monet. Born and raised in India, he "dreamed of moving to Paris." More than 50 years after moving to Paris as a graduate art student, he continues to live and work in the City of Lights.

I met Burman at the Aicon Gallery London, the best place in Europe to view and learn about contemporary Indian art. The London gallery opened in 2006 to serve as a "launch pad for Indian art in the capital" and showcase the works of radical and experimental artists rather than the Indian Modernists whose work is most commonly shown in the Aicon New York gallery.

Located in a swanky part of town, right off of Regent's Street, Aicon Gallery London is a cultural refuge amongst high-end stores such as Burberry and Ralph Lauren and restaurants where people dine to be seen. As an Indian-American Hindu who moved to London almost four years ago, I remain amazed at the city's established and well-developed South Asian cultural scene... the hip and friendly South Asians I've met who comprise the South-Asian art community.

I attended the gallery's private viewing of "Archetype: Two Solo Exhibitions by Ashish Avikunthak and Sakti Burman". Avikunthak, whose sole piece on display is an 18-minute film

about three girlfriends in India, is a "contemporary" artist whereas Burman, who had a dozen paintings on display, is considered a "modernist."

Niru Ratnam, the gallery's hip (as denoted by his beatnik glasses) and friendly director who also works as a curator of Indian art, explained to me how Burman's works include "Indian iconography in the style of Italian mural art." Jagroop Mehta, an equally hip (as denoted by her unapologetically orange dress) and friendly sales associate, distinguished between the two artists' works: Whereas Avikunthak's film symbolizes "contemporary" art, it has been inspired and informed by "modernist" works created by the likes of Burman. The show is meant to "marry modern and contemporary" art, Mehta continued, and inform people about the "history of Indian art in the West."

Burman stands out in a crowd. He is a diminutive man with little hair, but he has an aura of energy that emanates in a crowded room. I was struck with how he always appears to be moving, even while standing in a group and talking about his work. I found him refreshingly earnest, and was completely taken aback by his friendliness and humility.

Friendly demeanor aside, what I loved about Burman's art was not only the Western aesthetic (a pastel color palette and the juxtaposition of Hindu gods with ordinary people) but also his disarming charm when he spoke about how his work is informed by iconic European artists, painters whose countries were only tribal groups during the days when India was a set of scattered kingdoms ruled by maharajas. Talking to Burman reminded me that, as in literature, no art is created in a vacuum.

What captured my initial attention was Burman's use of mythological figures in his paintings: Hindu religious char-

Aicon Gallery, New York

Aicon Gallery, formerly known as Gallery ArtsIndia, originates in the United States, where it began as an online gallery of contemporary Indian art before opening the New York (2002) and Palo Alto (2004) gallery spaces. After exhibiting the works of established artists such as Laxma Goud, F.N. Souza and M.F. Husain, Aicon has collaborated with such artistic institutions such as Tate Britain, the San Francisco Asian Art Museum and the Peabody Essex Museum. Earlier in the summer, Aicon Gallery New York exhibited "Experiments with Truth," a collection of works by Debanjan Roy. This show included fiberglass sculptures of Gandhi engaged in modern activities such as listening to an iPod and working at a call center. This exhibition was meant to spur conversations about the growing middle class in India and the apathy that has resulted due to their increased material wealth. Aicon Gallery New York has also exhibited the works of Pakistani artists, including Hasnat Mahmood's "I Love Miniature" collection that comprises of miniaturist copies of Pakistan's greatest paintings. The accompanying captions are engraved in Braille to further drive home the idea that the viewer cannot fully comprehend these miniature works of art unaided. On both sides of the Atlantic, Aicon Gallery is noted for its mission of promoting contemporary Indian art.



acters are central in his works. Hanuman, Ganesha and Shiva function as the sun around which secondary characters and objects revolve on the fringes of the canvas. However, their dream-like qualities instigate questions about Freudian and Jungian concerns rather than spiritual ones.

The use of a pastel color palette and creating highly-textured canvas recall a European Modernist aesthetic and Italian fresco style. When I asked Burman about it, he freely admitted that while French Impressionism lured him to Paris, it is "Marc Chagall's works in conjunction with the Ajanta murals" which inspire his paintings.

After completing his art education in Paris, Burman tried his hand at having an art career in India. However, when he realized he couldn't sell his work, he returned to Paris where, he tells me, "I thought I might succeed... It is a not an easy job". Of course, Burman is not the first artist to flee to Paris to establish himself as an artist. Following World War I, African-American musicians settled in the capital where their music and identity were embraced rather than rejected.

In writing about contemporary Indian-ethnic culture, I have picked up on a trend. I recently wrote about Nina Paley's "Sita Sings the Blues", a film that re-imagines the myth of Sita and Rama through Sita's perspective.

Likewise, in Burman's art, he presents Hindu mythological figures with a European Modernist sensibility, another twist on East-meets-West. A successful Indian artist in Paris, Burman's work is an experiment in incubating ideas about Hindu mythology in a tandoori oven filled with European scents and spices. I wonder what other examples of fusion art and culture will come my way in exploring popular South Asian culture in London.