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The Medium of Memory

By VIBHUTI PATEL

Malleable Memory

Aicon Gallery

35 Great Jones St., (212) 725-6092

Through Sept. 11

Walk down Manhattan's Great Jones Street and you'll come upon a large storefront window that frames a floor-to-ceiling, gravity-defying tower. The tower is made of long, slim wooden slats in pastel green and blue. A small, wheeled barrel rests upon a bed of slats on the floor.



[Full Image](#)

Aicon Gallery

Chitra Ganesh's 'Playboy' digital print

Passing pedestrians stop to gaze for a moment, then enter the Aicon Gallery and discover that what pulled them in is a site-specific installation, "Autoretrato: Looking Out, Looking In," by New York-born Latina artist Gisela Insuaste. Inspired by her father's vacuum-cleaner factory—the barrel is an antique Pow-R-Vac—Ms. Insuaste is responding to the gallery's physical space and the tiered parking lot across the street, importing the "greenery" and blue of the sky from outside.

Normally, Aicon gives a platform to young local artists of the South Asian diaspora. With its current show, "Malleable Memory," the gallery has broadened its mission. Curator Nitin Mukul has assembled an exhibit that reflects diversity not only

in the varied international backgrounds of its 15 young New York artists, but also in its assortment of media, ideas and perspectives—all of which are loosely connected by the theme of recollection.

Thus, Brooklyn artist Chitra Ganesh's digital print, "Exquisite Cruelty of Time," harks to a childhood of reading illustrated Grimm's Fairy Tales and comics retelling Indian and Greek myths. But her take is distinctly political and feminist. She mocks the white skins of the brown heroes in Indian comics and their "pious heroines with seductive skimpy outfits." Her deconstruction is surreal, her colors brilliant, her imagery overtly sexual, her characters all women. It's childhood memory transfigured by an adult sensibility.

Equally political are three pieces in cast gunpowder and plaster by another Brooklynite, John Jurayj: "Woman's Travel Case," "Luggage" and "Evening Bag." It is "luggage that my parents used to travel through the Middle East," Mr. Jurayj explained, "ghost objects, evoking tombstones and memorials; untransportable baggage ... playing on the psychological term 'family baggage.'"

Casting these relics in gunpowder, Mr. Jurayj alludes to the violence now implicit in travel. The sculptures are ominously textured in black on black. His memory turns the romance of '60s-era adventure travel into something grim and contemporaneous.

On a more playful note, Anjali Srinivasan's "Mirror Painting #4" recalls the Sheesh Mahal (glass palaces) of 17th century India, where mirrored glass mosaics created intricate light and figure patterns. Ms. Srinivasan, who attended Alfred University and worked at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, said her work, made of convexed, mirrored glass and silicon on canvas, "evokes a malleable memory of all that surrounds it. The painting itself holds no image of its own and gathers up what the viewer has to offer. Images form, warp and dissolve fluidly—just as memories do."

With fluid images and landscapes, in acrylic on linen, Mala Iqbal reflects "a collective cultural memory, culled from Sunday morning cartoons and Hudson River School paintings." They present airbrushed backgrounds with graffiti-like splatters and drips. "Alien Encounter," with its warm desert colors, seems to evoke memories of Roswell, N.M., a far cry from the picket fences of Staten Island, where Ms. Iqbal grew up.

Far, too, from where he grew up (Massachusetts), Mr. Mukul, the show's curator and participating artist, turns to the "Celebration" of Dussehra in New Delhi, India, where he witnessed this auspicious festival depicted in his stunning triptych of oil, acrylic and tea stains on huge canvases. Mr. Mukul, who lives and works in Jackson Heights, took hundreds of photographs of the ritual burning of a mythic villain's effigy, which then morphed into this cinematic series with its ironic title. The pictures' vibrant colors—gold, black, crimson—dramatize the destructiveness of fire. Challenging the happy memories of Hindus who "celebrate" this festival, Mr. Mukul instead evokes war and disaster. He encapsulates a personal modern memory through photographs that, zooming in and out, were (later) recollected on canvas. Technically, his distinctive use of the ancient Persian-art practice of incorporating tea stains adds interest to these dynamic works.

When Aicon's London branch held a recent show of young British South Asian artists, one of that group was selected by the "School of Saatchi," a British reality TV show that showcases young artists and promises the winner a London studio. If American TV were to air such a show, one of these New Yorkers might well make the cut and go on to make an instant bid for fame and success. "American Artist," anyone?

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