



Indian Summer: Views From The Subcontinent

It's a massive nation in South Asia, with a booming economy, and a vibrant emerging art scene that is as yet barely known to Western viewers. Of course, the contemporary art coming out of India is not nearly as well-known or trendy (or expensive) as that of its Olympian neighbor to the east. But Indian art is experiencing a flowering of its own. This summer, a pair of concurrent shows at two Culver City galleries—d.e.n. contemporary art and Western Project—collectively titled "Contradictions and Complexities: Contemporary Art From India," gave a telling glimpse of what is going on in the Subcontinent. Offering six female artists working in a variety of media, the show was at once impressive and startling in its diverse range of approaches, and exploration of cultural hybridization. Spanning from surreal cartoony narratives to digital photography to painted abstraction, the show evinced a dreamlike sensation, of being at once alien and oddly familiar. One could be tempted to call it a rich marsala of flavors, except that to exoticize

the work sets it apart in a way that would be distinctly opposite to the show's intent. In a globally interconnected culture of constant hybridization and cross-cultural exchange, what constitutes "the other" anyway? More immediately, what is "other" and what is implicitly understood to the artists who created the works? Although the traditions, mythologies and social issues referred to by these very different artists may be specific to India, their work invokes themes that are universal, often in a language that is highly influenced by Western practice.

For instance, the works of Chitra Ganesh employ the lexicon of a comic book or graphic novel, even using text panels and cartoon composition, yet the language and imagery they employ is deeply personal and lyrical: in *Sugar and Milk*, a girl reading a book has roses for eyes while displaced eyes gaze out from a book cover and another (multi-armed) woman's breasts. Also featured in the



d.e.n. show were Mithu Sen, who creates mixed media drawings and photographic collage with elements of human hair and embroidery, often depicting women in ways that seem at once glamorous and unsettling; Anita Dube, a sculptor, photographer and video artist, whose works include a video monologue by a bearded fundamentalist businessman who is played by the artist herself in drag; and Sheba Chhachhi, whose photographic works include portraits of Indian female ascetics, who, while embracing tradition, live their lives outside the normal parameters of female domestic roles. The sister show at Western Project, by contrast, featured the works of two abstractionists whose work fuses Modernist forms with Indian spiritual concerns. Shobha Broota, born in 1943, before India itself achieved nationhood, is a highly regarded abstract painter and sculptor whose subtly modulated forms and deeply infused colors suggest a quest for the divine through basic pictorial language. Santana Gohain merges text and texture, using a willfully austere formal language; adorned with what appears to be inscriptions in some obscure tongue, her works resemble a Modernist reimagining of ancient stone tablets.

The show was curated by Peter Nagy and Patricia Hamilton. Hamilton is a private dealer in L.A. who used to run her own gallery in New York; Nagy is the founder of Gallery Nature Morte in New York's East Village, who moved to India in 1992 where he now runs Gallery Nature Morte in New Delhi. During a panel discussion on June 22, with Betty Seid—who recently curated "New Narratives: Contemporary Art from India" at the Chicago Cultural Center—the three discussed the growth of the Indian art scene. As Betty Seid observed, "Modernism didn't happen the same way there." In the wake of their country's political emergence in 1947, artists were often forced to ask "'Am I Indian? Or am I Modern?'" They would go to indigenous sources and then go to the west, and it kept going back and forth like that." Noted Nagy, of India's contemporary art scene, "I've seen it grow tremendously in the 16 years I've been there... Most of the artists I've worked with have studied abroad. It's the talented and smart artists who get these grants and they go to Europe and run around like maniacs and suck it up. Then they get back to India... Not only do they want to make their own art better, they want to make the Indian art scene better."

Which is to say, for decades Indian artists have sought out, and sought inspiration from, Western artmodes of art-making. By exposing L.A. artists, critics, curators and collectors to these artists, shows like "Contradictions and Complexities" help complete the circuit. Few Americans make it to Bombay, Delhi or Calcutta to see their burgeoning art scenes; but odds are, given the increasing globalization of the art world, their visions will be coming more frequently to us, in forms at once recognizable and foreign, and all the more provocative for both.

—GEORGE MELROD

OPPOSITE TOP:

"UNTITLED"

2008

Shobha Broota

OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS

72" x 72"

PHOTO COURTESY OF WESTERN PROJECT

BELOW:

"SUGAR AND MILK"

2008

Chitra Ganesh

DIGITAL COLLAGE

EDITION SIZE: 5 + 1AP

25½" x 41½"

PHOTO COURTESY OF D.E.N. CONTEMPORARY ART