

No Place like Home

Karin Miller-Lewis looks at the recent work of a few South Asian expatriate artists and discovers a common effort towards redefining individual and cultural identity.



Ongoing examination of identity. Tara Sabharwal. *Open Path*. Monotype and Watercolour. 1999. 18 x 22 inches. Image courtesy the artist.

A year ago last fall, a small monitor sat on a floor in lower Manhattan continuously displaying an IV hooked up to Rummana Hussain, her head cropped by the frame. Set amongst a cluster of black veils, the loop quietly contemplated the paradox of preserving that vulnerable vessel, a diseased body, by making it permeable. Nearby were photographs, lit from behind like airport advertisements for tourist destinations and travel services, and a second video of the artist's passage across the Queensboro Bridge to New York's south Asian immigrant neighbourhood, Jackson Heights. Together, they considered the differences and disorienting similarities between New York and Bombay. The video flashed a crowded subway before a solarised shot of Bombay's jam-packed commuter train. In an unnamed urban setting the visually isolated hands of a woman chopped vegetables before grabbing a briefcase and hurrying out to work. When a case of sweets left you dizzyingly uncertain of its location, you knew only that you were on the unfirm

ground of our age where the dislocations of mass migration threaten and liberate a sense of self, and require us to rethink the possibility of personal and cultural integrity.

The issues Rummana Hussain raised in *In Order to Join*, her installation at New York's pioneering gallery, Art in General, continue to reverberate in the current projects of artists of south Asian descent living in the United States. Artists who moved to the US as young adults are making newly mature and probing works on the experience of migration and the impact of globalisation, past and present, on national and world culture. A promising new generation of artists raised in the United States is introducing new terms of identity through their work in video, digital media, and in installation. With more work on view around the country than ever before, it is finally possible to appreciate the range of south Asian perspectives and artistic practices that vary and intersect as subtly as do the artists' experiences of their journeys.

Identity and Culture

For many émigré artists, the move from or between cultures initiates an ongoing examination of identity. In new monotypes, Tara Sabharwal forges symbols that seek the universal meaning of her bicultural existence. The ephemerality of her process itself conveys the frailty of memory in the work *Open Path* (1999). The spiral and tube, like organs on display, suggest that the dual needs for change and safe harbour emanate from the body itself.

Exhibited at the School 33 Art Centre in May 1999 and represented by the Gomez Gallery in Baltimore, MD, 28-year-old Dhruvi Acharya's canvases are allegories of self-consciousness awakened and fragmented by the move from home. On indeterminate ground of dusky blue or ochre washes – reminiscent of Ajanta's hues and



Catalogues of cultural convergence. Dhruvi Acharya. *Watching*. Oil on canvas. 1999. 30 x 30 inches. Image courtesy the artist.

fluid space as well as the surfaces in flux by American artist Larry Pittman – Acharya's paintings inventory the fleeting ciphers of the places, people and events of her past in Bombay played among symbols of her present in America. With a humorous edge gleaned from American pop art, her most recent paintings acknowledge the way home culture is always with her despite – or because of – the time- and space-shattering effects of modern life.

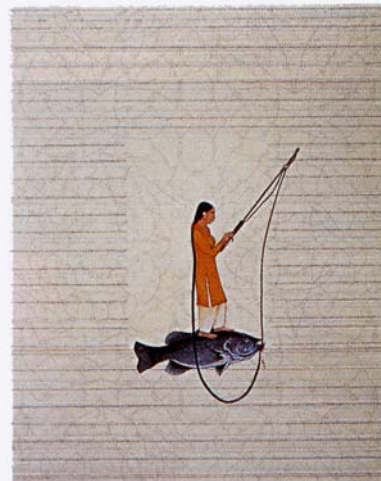
In contrast to Acharya's catalogues of cultural convergence, self-explorations by the young Pakistani émigré Ambreen Butt invoke the delicate work of a diplomat urging two contestant cultures to confront differences and build upon common ground. Honouring the value of restraint in her aesthetic and cultural tradition, she depicts herself as a stock female figure from the Indo-Persian tradition in which she was trained at the National College of Art. She fastens the figure between a loose skein of lines recalling the vegetal arabesques of Mughal ornamentation and dotted rows related to the fine, hand-drawn lines of American minimal abstraction executed on mylar sheets. Frequently in the 1999 series *Bed of My Own Making*, exhibited this fall at Columbia University's Leroy Neiman Print Study Center in NY, the drama that unfolds on this ambiguous space cautions that her efforts at compromise may be self-defeating. Such ambivalence is not the hesitant withdrawal from a full assertion of independence that it might seem from an American point of view. Rather, it registers the artist's characteristically quiet yet firm rejection of her host culture's faith in individual liberty. Butt's self-depiction within the parameters of her cultural traditions maintains an Islamic outlook in which identity is not just a matter of individual determination, but an enactment of broader historical imperatives. (Later this fall, Butt created an installation on the obstacles to cross-cultural communication at Boston, Massachusetts's Institute of Contemporary Art as the winner of its first annual Artist's Prize).

In contrast, cultural history cannot be a matter of inheritance for Sonya Shah. Having lived continuously

away from the place her family calls home, establishing ties to tradition necessitates questioning them. In *The Gita*, a 1999 video work in progress, the New York bred artist is a feminist Arjuna, dressed in a white blazer and skirt, arguing the advisability of detachment with a friendly, intellectual adversary, the disembodied voice of an off-screen Krishna. In shadowy black and white, the artist draws near to the camera, slips out of the frame and reappears to repeat her questions and defend her ethos of passion.

Growing up an immigrant makes identity a matter of will and desire, as well as a source of anxiety in *Two Thick Braids*, a video by 24-year-old Swati Khurana. In the first of its two parts, the artist of Punjabi parentage raised in rural New York lyrically retells a favourite family anecdote of her mother's uncomprehending, but tireless attempt to satisfy her two-year-old daughter's inchoate demands for "bahuth sara pani" (a lot of water). The sensitively edited collage of animated drawings, videotaped photographs, allusive natural imagery and poetic text acquires the poignancy of an explanatory myth as she evokes the way family and culture is created by shaping mere fragments into a story.

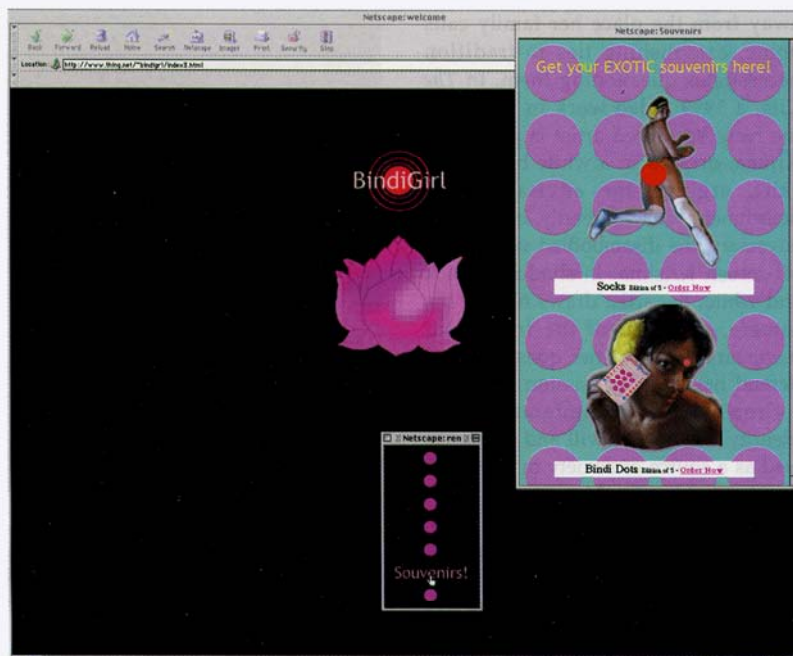
A sense of rootlessness and hybridity



Confronting differences. Ambreen Butt. Untitled from the series *Bed of My Own Making*. Watercolour and white gouache on mylar. 18 x 15 inches. Image courtesy Bernard Toale Gallery, Boston, MA.



An explanatory myth. Swati Khurana. *Two Thick Braids*. Video. 1999. Image courtesy the artist.



Uncertainty of identity. Prema Murthy. Still from BindiGirl. Web Project. 1999.
Image courtesy the artist.

has prompted other south Asian artists raised in the US to embrace the uncertainty of identity. The earliest works of 30-year-old digital artist Prema Murthy (the daughter of an Indian father and Filipina mother, born and raised in Seattle, Washington state) explored new technology's facilitation of an identity released from the social codes that constrict it according to ethnicity and gender. *Recombinant Model 2.002* (1996) was inspired by the German Surrealist Hans Bellmer's photographic portraits of tortured desire in the age of mechanical reproduction. One in a series of digital printouts made from photographs of segments of the artist's body replicated and montaged by software, it aims to free eroticism from gender stereotypes and reinvents the woman's relationship to the machine replacing, all the way, Georgia O'Keeffe's painted archetypes of woman-as-nature. Murthy's most recent projects have abandoned this utopian vision to confront the Internet as but another environment where ethnic and gender prejudices are formulated, re-enacted and given social legitimisation. *Bindigirl*, a 1999 web project for Thing.net (now archived and viewable at <http://www.thing.net/~bindigirl/>), aims to

intervene in the misuses of technology (and religion) to petrify stereotypes of south Asian women. Slyly casting herself as a porn site star named BindiGirl, her virtual avatar critiques the fantasies by mockingly embodying them. Rina Banerjee is another artist who makes identity formation a process of intervention and resistance. Raised in Queens, NY since the age of seven, Banerjee makes mixed media installations that invoke for her the migrant's existential condition. Her assemblages ply the pre-histories of her found objects; they acknowledge the role dislocation plays in their transformation into art. *The Nature of Illness*, 1999, Banerjee's newest installation for *Bodies of Resistance* (an exhibition for the upcoming international AIDS conference in South Africa, shown this November at

Hartford, Connecticut's gallery of contemporary art, Real Art Ways), was inspired by an article on the AIDS crisis in India that described the blame borne by rural wives of migrant workers for the spread of the HIV virus. From the desultorily shrouded shrine, tubes like roots or entrails protrude, limp and tangled. It might be a damning image of the gaudily unclean lassitude of death were it not also so vibrantly, so insistently sensual.

Capped with Krishna's peacock feathers, it refuses to concede its own idea of pleasure and beauty to a hostile judgement. Like Butt, Shahzia Sikander was raised in Pakistan and trained at the National College of Art. But in contrast to her compatriot, Sikander desires to challenge the restricted place of women within tradition. (With Prema Murthy and Swati Khurana, the Pakistani emigre is a member of the 300-strong South Asian Women's Creative Collective, one of a number of support organisations which foster effective links between art, political activism and social change). As a result, Sikander engages contrasting traditions in her work to cause each to transgress its own boundaries. Her early miniatures interposed blood-red, loosely painted female torsos inspired by Durga imagery into the highly crafted landscapes and hierarchical



Intervention and resistance. Rina Banerjee.
Nature of Illness. Mixed Media Installation.
1999. Image courtesy the artist.

social settings borrowed from Mughal painting. Recent wall drawings and drawing installations such as *Structure 1+*, 1999, (exhibited at the Jack S. Blanton Museum in Austin, Texas as part of *Negotiating Small Truths*; Sikander is also the one Asian/American artist in the Whitney Museum of American Art's centennial show), harness the centrifugal energy of visual contradictions and ambiguous spatial relationships to explode feminine archetypes and herald new, unnamed configurations of feminine identity. Ciphers of veils, sketchy emphatic female nudes, ringed or floating free, intersect and overlap across billowing layers of irregularly sized, skin-thin tissue paper.

The Future of Culture

The works of Prema Murthy, Rina Banerjee and Shahzia Sikander suggest that it is the special insight of the migrant, marked in the public sphere as the 'other' by the dominant culture, that personal identity is always a political and cultural matter. For south Asian women in the US, the body has been the primary site of that cultural contest. In his similarly interventionist camerawork, the Kenyan-born Allan deSouza, now residing in Los Angeles, takes a close look at the relationship between the body and culture to reveal the formative impact of cultural phenomena on what we think of as primal, private, personal. His project opens up a deep uncertainty about the future of human culture itself.

In his 1999 series of C-prints, *Terrain*, deSouza makes a joke of our visceral identification with the homeland and exposes the ideological and technological processes to which that desire for a place of origin is so vulnerable. With help from the viewer's trust and pleasure in the camera's realistic representations, deSouza transforms an assembly of common household and bodily debris into what appear to be romantic photos of Ireland's rolling hills and the pink deserts of the American southwest.

With a light but resonant blow, these little human offerings of earwax, eyelashes, fingernail clippings and

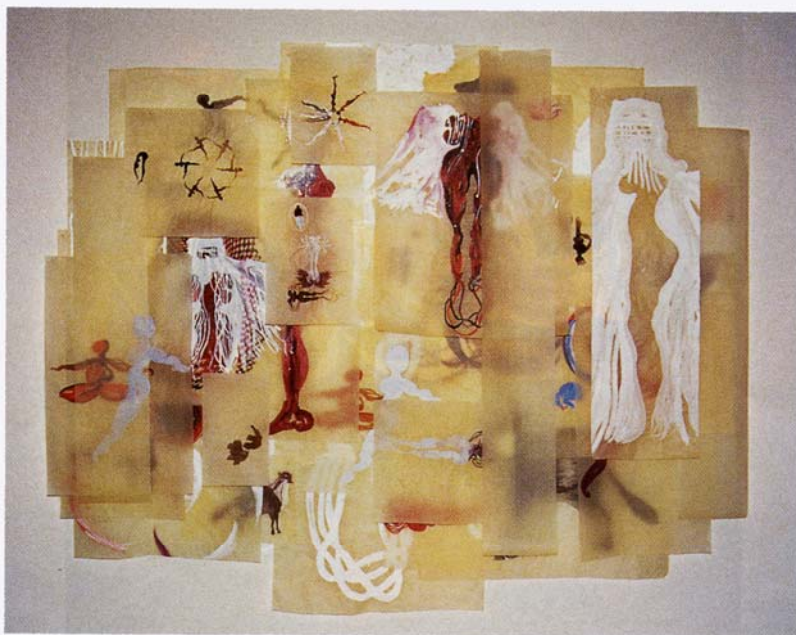
carpet grippers mimic nationalism's romanticisation of the patriot's relationship to his homeland and spoof its encouragement of self-sacrifice in the name of self-love. Neither dismissing the compelling force of these desires, nor seeking some realm of "authentic" feeling beyond the reach of ideology and technology, the photographs suggest that we may no longer be able to liberate our imaginations and longings from the societal operations that shape them. However, in light of the horrors committed in the name of nationalism, it is imperative that we protect such significant needs from manipulation.

DeSouza, working on the critical ground of his existence outside the dominant culture, forges and offers the tools of consciousness to do so.

From outside the borders of the nation he still identifies with, Vinod Dave advises that the future also turns on the capacity to accept history's contradictions and its cultural mutations. In *The Divine Witness*, 1998, Dave embeds his own photographs of villagers dressed for Nataraj in rich hues that bespeak his own longing for a life left behind. The grainy quality of the black and white photo transfers, recalling nineteenth century ethnographic documents, also link his



Light but resonant. Allan deSouza. Number 7 from Terrain series. C-print. 1999. Approx. 12 x 18 inches. Image courtesy the artist.



Exploding feminine archetypes. Shahzia Sikander. Structure 1+. Ink, gouache and acrylic on tissue paper of variable dimensions. Image courtesy the artist and Deitch Projects, New York.



Narrative of self-alienation. Vinod Dave. The Divine Witness. Photo transfer and mixed media on canvas. 1998. 68.5 x 59 inches. Image courtesy the artist and Bose Pacia Modern, New York.

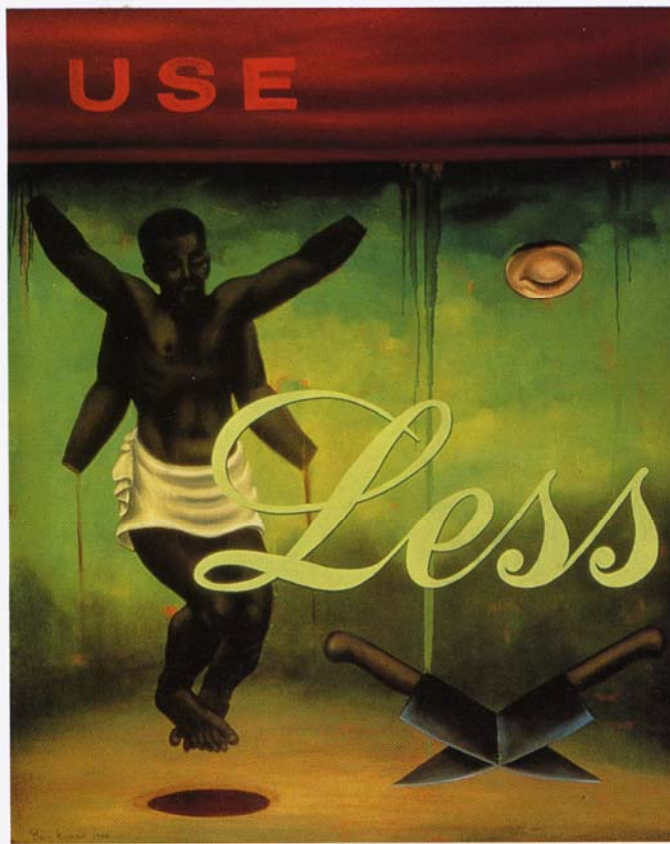
personal narrative of self-alienation to its origins in the fragmenting historical experience of colonisation. Superimposed upon these surfaces, cartoons of swords, tigers, and open-beaked birds indeterminately classical and kitschy threaten imminent violence. In the most explicit works, they remind us that the dream of cultural purity has proved a mortal danger when wedded to nationalism. But, in the most complex and satisfying of Dave's pictures, their integration in the composition suggest that while India may not be able to recover what has been lost, it may yet redeem history by a bold – and risky – kind of cultural miscegenation.

Bari Kumar's baroque palettes and blurry backgrounds, reminiscent of unfinished seventeenth century European landscapes, also imply that the profound cultural incoherence we suffer originates in the age of imperialism. But his prognosis for our future is far less hopeful than Dave's.

In contrast to Baudrillard's critique of post-modernist culture, this crisis is not caused by the arbitrariness or meaninglessness of symbols. Rather, according to the Nellore-born artist, it is the *surplus* of meanings that symbols bear in this age of global interchange that threatens to make communication impossible. His surrealistic stage sets are littered with pairs of entwined snakes referring contradictorily to western symbols of mortality and Hindu figures of nature's life force. In his 1998 oil painting, *Useless*, a set of crossed cleavers is also a mutilated swastika ominously accompanying the dark, maimed and multi-armed body of a man. Suspended between the idealised human form of Indian art history and the mortified flesh of Christian art, he is a potent figure of powerlessness and the despair that accompanies inefficacy.

Like Dave, Kumar is far too realistic to desire a return to a period of cultural purity. Rather, his outlook and his compositions recall Giorgio de Chirico's mournful assessments of modernity's land out of time. Like the Italian whose engagement with modern life gave modernism one of its most enduring languages for self-criticism, Kumar enters his own era's rush to transcend history and erase cultural boundaries in order to offer, at least, an effective critique of it.

At the end of this incomplete catalogue of distinct positions and practices, I am struck by what they have in common. They all unflinchingly confront the conditions of their environment, however variously defined as a result of their particular points of origin. Beyond the variety of media and practices they use to embody and respond to the forces of instability, the artworks similarly demand that their American audiences struggle to join them. They make the viewers part of their passages toward the necessarily dynamic ground upon which personal and cultural integrity may be re-established. These artworks remind us that we must complete this passage jointly. For as yet it remains as essential and as tenuous as was that tremulous tube carrying plasma to an itinerant, searingly prescient patient.



Profound cultural incoherence. Bari Kumar. Useless. Oil on canvas. 1998. 60 x 48 inches. Image courtesy Patricia Correia Gallery, Santa Monica, California.