

India: *moving out into the world*

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Above: Pushpamala N. Lakshmi (detail) from *Native Women of South India*, 2000–2004. C-print on metallic paper, 51x61 cm

Below: Samaraendra Raj Singh, *Untitled #2*, 2007. Oil and metallic foil on canvas; 122x152 cm

CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE IN INDIA TODAY REFLECTS THE DIVERSITY OF THE COUNTRY ITSELF. FROM ITS NORTHERN TIP OF KASHMIR TO ITS SOUTHERN STATE OF KERALA, THE DIVERSITY MIRRORS THE DIFFERENCES TO BE FOUND BETWEEN, FOR EXAMPLE, LAPLAND AND SICILY. AS LARGE AS ALL OF EUROPE, THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT EMBODIES AN UNEQUALED RANGE OF CULTURAL PLURALISM. RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS AND POLITICS, CLOTHING AND ARCHITECTURAL STYLES, CUISINES, LANGUAGES, FACES AND MUSIC ALL CHANGE DRAMATICALLY FROM STATE TO STATE.





Above: Thukral & Tagra, *Condoms Are Sexy 1*, 2007. Acrylic and oil on canvas, diptych, overall dims. 188x365 cm

Centre: Sheba Chhachhi, *Crow* (detail from *Winged Pilgrims*), 2006. moving-image lightbox; 101x51 cm

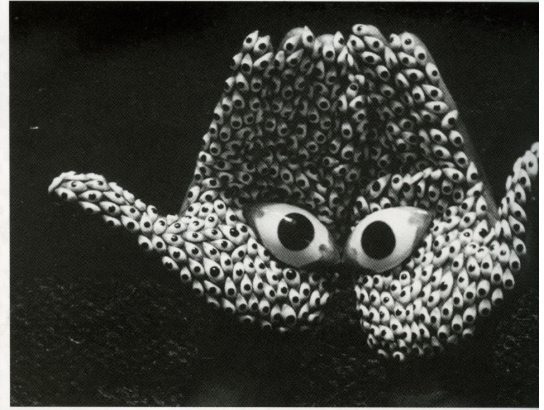
Below: Subodh Gupta: *Hungry God*, 2005. Mixed media installation, dimensions variable



Long out of both sight and mind for the international art community, India has, in recent years, become increasingly visible. Economics, of course, are the primary cause. With a rapidly expanding middle-class market for consumer goods, an inexhaustible labor force and a talent in the applied sciences, the country and its people are poised on the verge of regional domination, aggressive competition with China, and an increased respect from the powers-that-be.

But culture plays a role in this as well. The 1990s saw an appreciation of Indian writers who used the English language as their medium, insuring wide distribution and a healthy readership. Next came an infatuation from the world of fashion. In the major cities of the world, brocade saris done up with sequins became ubiquitous. The Indian influence was heard in music as the sound of sitars and tablas got laid onto dance tracks and the surprising addition of Punjabi folk instruments peppered American gangsta-rap. The "foodies" followed suit with Indian recipes and the country's regional cuisines were rediscovered, adapted and re-contextualized. Arguably, yoga may now be the predominant form of exercise practiced the world over.





Today the spotlight is turning towards the country's contemporary arts. A bit late, one might say, but seems that a globalized art scene first had to digest ample amounts of product from China and Japan, even South America and Africa, before it could begin to focus on India. If globalization is, in its economic and capitalist mechanisms, usually exploitative and insidious, in the culture industry it fortunately comes after decades of dialogue concerning multiculturalism, post-colonialism and Marxist analysis. A number of Indian artists working in lens-based or new media disciplines and addressing socio-political subjects while posturing aggressively left agendas are now exhibiting their works throughout the world. Back at home, however, interest and opportunity remain scant at best. The internal Indian art market is imperceptive yet conservative, fixated on painting and narrow recognition. While private galleries multiply in the major cities there is almost no institutional support for experimental contemporary art of any kind, resulting in a lack of guidance or legitimization for private collectors.

As the nation of India assumes a prominent role on the international stage, her culture becomes increasingly relevant to the rest of the world. As the noted art critic Thomas McEvilley stated many years ago in *Artforum* magazine, "India was a post-modern nation before it became

modern one." Still in many ways struggling with the "modern," India today becomes the post-modern exemplar *par excellence*, a model for how other nations may negotiate the anxieties and difficulties associated with internalized hybridity, complexity, contradiction and diversity.

This diversity is reflected in the contemporary art being produced in India today. Viewers will encounter works that, often simultaneously, reference classical mythology, folk and tribal traditions, information and high-tech industries, popular culture, religious iconographies, craft techniques, social inequalities, political dialogue, and even the histories of Western Modern Art and European Philosophy. It is a heady and tangled mix which provides both pleasure and consternation while thoroughly confounding any simplistic reading of what constitutes contemporary art practice within India today.

The artists who are beginning to receive international recognition seem to have intuitively found the right balance of both the local and the global in their works, a mix akin to that found in the best art being "globalized" from any location. How many references to traditional culture do we expect contemporary art to include; be it Indian, Chinese, African or even American? Just how many signifiers of the folk, the popular or the vernacular does the international audience crave, or find naïve? Francesco Clemente is deemed "visionary" when he appropriates from India but Indian artists are seen as "derivative" if they refer to Arte Povera. Just how accepting are we of the whirligig of influence which propels contemporary culture around the world, and how conscious are we of our prejudices about the directions in which we think such influences should travel? □

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Samavaendra Raj Singh, Untitled Centre: #3, 2007. Oil and metallic foil on canvas, 152x122 cm; Anita Dube: Offering, 2000–2006; three black-and-white photographs as one work, edition of 5, each print 76x114 cm; Pushpamala N. Nurse, 2000–2003. Sepia toned B/W photograph, 51x66 cm; Samavaendra Raj Singh, Untitled #1, 2007. Oil and metallic foil on canvas, 122x183 cm

This page, top right: Suhasini Kejriwal, Untitled, 2007, Mixed media on canvas; 178x238 cm; Centre: Suhasini Kejriwal, Untitled #13, 2007. Mixed media on canvas, 43x33 cm; Below: Jagannath Panda, Broken Wing, 2008. Acrylic and fabric on canvas, 183x320 cm

All artwork courtesy Nature Morte, New Delhi

