

# ARTPULSE

## A Place of Their Own



Yamini Nayar, Cleo, 2009, 30" x 40", C-Print, Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery.

By Sharmistha Ray

South Asian-American Diaspora art in the United States has undergone a critical ideological evolution not to mention a radical integration into the American context from the 1990s to the present day. In the Nineties - with the exception of an artist like Pakistani-American Shahzia Sikander, who broke into the art mainstream early on - South Asian-American artists were unable to even exhibit in galleries that focused on Indian art let alone mainstream galleries. New York-based galleries like Bose Pacia and Talwar for example, which are both owned by non-resident Indians, preferred to promote star artists from the Indian mainland like Atul Dodiya and Jitish Kallat. Whereas Indian artists found a platform in a western context, simply by virtue of their country's rising position in the world (not to mention the sentimental attachments of most South Asian-Americans to their homeland), conversely their counterparts who had left India for American shores were seen as a small minority with a set of marginalized concerns in the country they now called home (America).

Yet today, the work of South Asian-American Diaspora artists finds venues in exhibitions at galleries and museums widespread across the globe. New York-based mid-career artists like Rina Banerjee and Chitra Ganesh, both of whom explore cultural and historical stereotypes, have broken into the global mainstream critically and commercially, while resident New Yorker and vanguard of early diaspora art, Zarina Hashmi, has just had her first solo exhibition with the leading New York gallery Luhring Augustine this summer. Although Contemporary Indian and Pakistani artists – Subodh Gupta and Rashid Rana most notable among them - have been elevated to great heights in India and abroad over the past few years, the entry into mainstream exhibition venues is a major achievement for artists from the South Asian-American Diaspora, who just a few years ago, could not find receptive audiences for their work.

In the 1990s, diaspora art occupied a nebulous terrain that wove together personal narratives and political rhetoric. Zarina Hashmi's woodcut print *Dividing Line* (2001) is a signature work that reflects this rhetoric. The jagged line is a representation of the border between India and Pakistan and is symbolic of the fractured state of affairs between the two neighboring countries that were once united. The artist's family lives in Karachi but she, having left India decades before, still identifies as an Indian. So, the dividing line refers to a personal, familial separation as much as it does the political overture between the two countries. Another work by Hashmi made just two years later, shows the development of the artist's global concerns that are nonetheless firmly rooted in personal politics....*These cities blotted into the wilderness* (2003) extrapolates on the political angle putting her oeuvre squarely in a more global context. The woodcut depicts nine cities around the world with Muslim populations including Grozny, Srebrenica, Beirut, Baghdad and Kabul that have been devastated by conflict. The last print in the portfolio is an abstraction of New York City, the place that has been home to Hashmi for three decades. The twin lines on a black background refer to the Twin Towers that once dominated the New York City skyline, and recall the destruction that was unleashed on the city during 9/11.

The politics of post-colonial discourse as expounded by the likes of Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak had, from the 1980s onwards, gained a foothold in New York's intellectual circles and was adopted by cultural minorities to call attention to the struggles over cultural rights, issues of belonging and identity politics, which in turn legitimized Diasporic concerns and gave them an ethical platform. Around the same time, postmodernism was becoming a buzzword in the contemporary art arena. Postmodernism required, among other things, a self-reflexive approach to deconstructing the art of the past with an ironic disengagement from history. For cultural minorities like South Asian-Americans, this involved an investigation of existing cultural stereotypes and a reinvention of history on one's own terms. Artists even outside the South Asian contingent, like Iranian-American Shirin Neshat and African-American Kara Walker, who projected these concerns effectively, gained momentum in the late 1990s.

In the South Asian-American Diaspora, artists like Rina Banerjee and Chitra Ganesh engaged, and continue to engage, such post-colonialist positions. Banerjee's installation *Pink Eye* (2003), shown in the exhibition "Yankee Remix" at MassMoCA in North

Adams, Mass., recreates a Victorian-style tea party with a collection of photographs and letters from the nineteenth century. Toy tea sets and a dollhouse are placed on a cluster of tea tables covered with pink plastic tablecloths, which in turn rest on a lotus-shaped wooden platform. In this context, Banerjee critically examines the divisions of class and caste between the colonizer and the colonized using the ritual of high tea as an artistic trope. *Pink Eye* makes intimate connections in the historical relationship between the colonizer (England) and the colonized (India) while bringing to the forefront the sentimental dreams of the immigrant who views the iconic markers of his homeland through a rose-tinted screen. Banerjee's exotic representations of Eastern icons further cast the Indian as a passive recipient of the foreigner's gaze – which in the context of post-colonialism is the position occupied by the colonizer. The gaze is of an imperialist and patriarchal nature. The artist further compares the historical context of India and England to America's global preeminence as symbolized by the portrait of George Washington who oversees the whole set-up. Evident as well is the reference to the Boston Tea Party of 1773, which is one of the key events in the development of the American Revolution that signaled the demise of British hegemony in North America.

Chitra Ganesh started to appropriate *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books in 2001 as a means to invert traditional representations of sexuality and gender. *Amar Chitra Katha*, which is the most popular comic book in India, draws upon fables and folktales, history, mythology and epics to communicate moral tales and stories to youth. The comic book was introduced in the late 1960s at a time when the joint-family system was weakening in the Indian social structure due to urbanization and other socio-economic reasons. The comic book thereby filled a void that was left in the generational relationship of grandparents to grandchildren for the passing on of stories. Incidentally, the comic books also became popular amongst non-resident Indians, who would carry them back from their trips to India. The comic books provided a link for the immigrant to Indian popular culture. It is no coincidence that the comic books endorsed the notion of India as a fantasyland, which mirrored the immigrant's sentimental daydreams of their "Lost Land." By digitally manipulating the images and text of the original comic books, Ganesh subverts every stereotype, turning the narrative inside out, and upside down, so what emerges are fairytales gone grotesquely wrong. Instead of the sweet and saccharine comic books, one gets female hybrids, mutated bodies and bloodied violence, and a stream of consciousness and whimsy. Commonly, a pig-tailed, female warrior is the leading protagonist. Is she also Ganesh's alter ego?

A surge of diaspora artists have emerged after Hashmi, Banerjee and Ganesh who are exploring a breadth of media to mine conceptual and aesthetic concerns that range from interpersonal, familial investigations through video art (Gautam Kansara) to paintings of post-apocalyptic scenes that come out of a post-9/11 landscape (Kanishka Raja). In a single-channel video piece titled *Grandma, Gautam and Ghalib* (2006) by Kansara, the subject is the artist's grandmother who translates classic Hindi and Urdu love songs for her grandson, Gautam. Using the first person, she often addresses Gautam as though he were her lover, and sometimes she drifts into a reverie, and it appears as if Gautam were not even there at all. Kansara's grandmother who was a first-generation immigrant to England, like many immigrants of her generation, held onto certain behaviors and rituals

to forge a connection to her homeland. Even decades later, these habits persisted, like the sentimental attachment to Ghalib's music, which she listened to often. As she weaves between the past and the present, reality and fiction, memory and lived experience, a powerful narrative of separation and loss is established. In this context, Kansara becomes the recipient of generational, as well as cultural, experience.

Calcutta-born, U.S.-raised painter Kanishka Raja posits his intellectual concerns in a framework that interfaces his cultural roots with a broader political spectrum that is global rather than local in its dimension. For artists like him, the canvas for theoretical exploration has transcended personal excavations of self and identity to contextualization of the individual and societies within a myriad, globalized world. The ideological shift can be, in part, attributed to the events of 9/11 as well as the gross and immeasurable effect it had on the American psyche. The vacant interior spaces that Raja depicts are abandoned environments, which are primarily places of transit like hotel lobbies and airport lounges. There are never any people, just stuff strewn about or carefully planted objects with portentous undertones. Empty transitory spaces hold a certain psychological import: they invite recollection of the past and (unwanted) memories and (forgotten) moments as well as reveal the uncertainty of the future. With 9/11, a nation was left vulnerable and its denizens, fearful. Drawing from news reportage and media images, Raja's canvases reveal the fragmented realities created by the destabilization of society by current events.

Kansara and Kanishka are just two artists from a spectrum of diaspora artists who are living and working across the United States today. Strains of identity politics also continue in the works of an artist like Texas-based Mequitta Ahuja, for example, who plays with racial stereotypes and brings to the forefront social issues related to ethnic representations in large-format drawings and watercolors. Brooklyn-based photographer Yamini Nayar fabricates miniature environments that are culturally symbolic; she then discards the models after she photographs them. Pakistani-American artist Fawad Khan draws upon personal experiences of oppressive military cultures and depicts brilliant explosions of vintage and foreign-model automotive vehicles in large-format works on paper and installations. We are left to view violent displays, but not as bloody events but as elegiac transformations that seem almost choreographed. Khan's work comments upon the media-saturated images of war and violence that spill out of TV screens, video games and movies in contemporary culture and our subsequent desensitization to them.

This brief essay has outlined some of the practices of major and upcoming practitioners from the South-Asian American Diaspora. It should be noted however, that many of these artists reject the usage of the word "diaspora" in relation to their artistic oeuvres, although decidedly an engagement with the phenomena of migration is a common thread that links them together. It should also be recognized that the breadth of South Asian-American Diaspora art is constantly expanding and changing its shape. In the new world scenario where globalization is usurping the traditional model of nation states, the investigation of migration and dispossession becomes ever more complex and entangled. It remains to be seen how these artists tackle rapidly shifting paradigms that threaten to obfuscate the socio-political borders from which they speak.

Sharmistha Ray received her BA from Williams College and followed this with a dual degree MS/MFA from Pratt Institute in Art History and Painting. She writes for Indian and foreign magazines and journals on art and continues her own painting practice. She is currently Director of Bodhi Art, a leading gallery for Contemporary Indian art in Mumbai and is considered a leading expert in the field. She has been interviewed by The Financial Times, NZZ and other radio and TV media in India and abroad.