

South Asian art is exploding, and New York's *Bose Pacia gallery* is ground zero. The first venue devoted entirely to the sector, it's been both a showcase for emerging talent as well as a test in determining whether the work can find commercial success. After thirteen years of laying the groundwork, the results are coming in, and they are astounding. A recent exhibition by New Delhi artist Bharti Kher sold out within days of opening, and the figures being bandied about by collectors, critics, and wide-eyed art students are in the six figures (per piece). It is truly amazing that in the scramble to capitalize on the vast amounts of product exiting the country, where a rock star like M.F. Husain makes headlines by selling 100 new pieces for the sum of 1 billion rupees, sky-high sales are becoming par for the course. But will it last, or is this merely the latest fad in a notoriously fickle field?

"Can it fizzle out?" asks Arani Bose, co-owner of Bose Pacia alongside his wife, Mita. "Absolutely. A certain amount of

More importantly, it spoke to the possibility that, with the right mandate in place, something big might develop. Instead of taking the proceeds and paying themselves back, they chose to let the money ride and leased their first permanent venue. A gallery was born, on little more than a wing and prayer, and the couple, who frequently make references to the achievements of the Indian Diaspora, had undertaken a challenge to rival its most daring.

"When obsessive personalities meet such a glaring need, you're going to get this kind of action," Arani says. But there's something



Bari Kumar | Esse, 2007 | Cloth, cardboard, and clear acrylic frame

Beyond Hype: The Battle to Establish South Asian Art

By: Anish Majumdar



Bari Kumar | Vikriti, 2007 | Oil on canvas | 48 x 72 inches

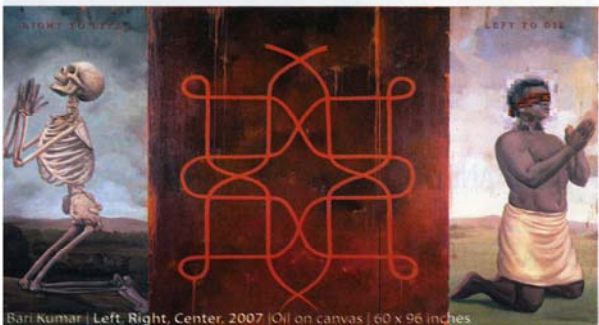
silly activity comes with the territory—its part of the reason we have dealers and galleries in the first place!" he says with a laugh. "But if you look at what's driving interest in the work, you'll see that it's because the artists aren't dealing with regional or national issues, but global ones. That can only continue."

A pragmatist's eye meets an optimist's heart in the soft-spoken couple, who seem to have made a concerted effort to distance themselves from the frenetic activity. Sitting in the kitchen nook of their Gramercy Park home, as the tea kettle whistles and their three-month old daughter coos from the living room, the disparity between the two worlds is startling. When I bring up the topic of their first showing in 1994, they make betting on the unknown almost seem like common sense.

"I'd seen the kind of work going on in India through my uncle [noted painter Arun Bose], but if you had asked anyone there or abroad about the country's art scene, the answer was always the same: what art scene?"

Out of that realization came the seeds of what the couple refer to as their "second life"; though as they are quick to point out, it wasn't planned that way. Already coping with the pressures of burgeoning neurology and software engineering careers, they chose, alongside Steve Pacia, a fellow resident of Arani's, to funnel money ear-marked for a much-needed vacation into renting a space for two weeks and exhibiting a few paintings.

"It got some attention, and we sold some work," he says.



Bari Kumar | Left, Right, Center, 2007 | Oil on canvas | 60 x 96 inches

about the couple that tells you it's about more than just the tics of personality, a kind of secret relishing of the risks involved, and not feeling truly engaged unless the challenges faced border on the insurmountable. It echoes the drive that propelled the initial wave of South Asian immigrants half-way around the world to carve out lives abroad, and it's carried over into their children.

Their first gallery, little more than a "closet with windows" according to Mita, faced the Soho Guggenheim, and served as both a planted flag for the old boy's club they were trying to crack, and a kind of thumbing of the nose against it. Innovation went hand in hand with their sister galleries in New Delhi and Calcutta, Bose Pacia touted the virtues of more established figures such as Atul Dodiya and Manjit Bawa, while quietly slipping the next wave in under the radar. Their reputation as a small gallery with large aspirations was cemented through attention from critics such as Hollan Cotter of *The New York Times*, and releasing art catalogs, the bait used to lure in big-game collectors, on par with the field's best. Sell prices rose, other South Asian-centric galleries sprang up, and auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's entered the fray. As Arani stated in a July 2003 interview, "It's as if something has gotten into the air and starts to reverberate, from one to the other—from the gallery perspectives, from museums, from auction houses."

Demand is fertile ground for the provocative, and the couple's current space in Chelsea is dedicated to nurturing it. Bari Kumar, whose exhibition, titled acceptance of denial, marks the third collaboration between venue and artist, is of the new breed gaining attention through blazing a new path. Embodying, in Mita's words, "what's compelling about Indian art," the Los Angeles expat weaves together influences like Sanskrit lettering, street graffiti and Dalí-like grotesqueries in the service of multilayered pieces that form a kind of language of the space between cultures, countries, and people. He's mapping the unknown, and doing it to frustrating, revelatory effect.

"In one piece, [Esse, pictured] he's taken hundreds of pieces of cloth that have been subjected to the traditional tie-dyeing of women's clothing in India, and re-assembled them to create an image. This is astonishing to me, because the [dyeing] process is something that only has resonance in India, yet the way he uses it is altogether new, and universal."

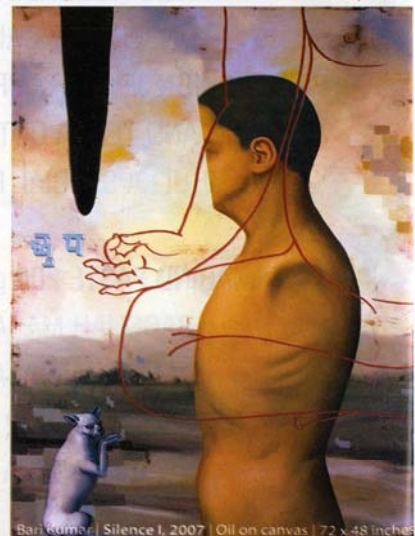
Finding new meaning in the old links the work of South Asian artists, many of whom understand firsthand the sacrifices made for opportunities abroad. Now enjoying the fruits of that sacrifice, they are determined to bridge the divide and prove that economic success and ancestral connection need

not be mutually exclusive. Recent years have seen a wide cross-section of the Diaspora returning home to participate in the struggle to bring India, kicking and screaming, into the modern age. But in a country of a billion, change comes slow, and when much of the population is still trying to procure the basics, what hope is there for an inessential like art appreciation?

"This is about how India sees itself," says Arani. "Will it be viewed as a provider of support, a kind of back office, or a place where intellectual discourse is encouraged? Because art is the forum where that kind of discourse takes place. Does India have a seat at the head table, or will they be forced to be nothing more than a manufacturer?" He believes that it's the responsibility of the country's business elite, the new Rockefellers and Astors, to foster a national arts core with the fervor of their forebears. India's captains of industry have neither recognized the value of the work culturally, or as a financial investment. "They could do it, easily, but most consider it to be elitist, or an extravagance." Frustration mounts, and for once the calm exterior is pushed aside and I am afforded a glimpse of the dissatisfaction that spurred in a "second life" firsthand, a drive that arises from holding those you care about to the highest possible standards, and refusing to accept anything other than their reaching them. "It's about more than art. It's about having that outlet, so outsiders can no longer come in, spend anywhere from 24 hours to 24 days in country, and feel like they have the right to pass judgment on the merits of the work. We need to be the ones to validate it. We need to ordain it." A tall order for a country in the process of discovering its powers. But despite the pragmatism with which he lays out the dilemma, it is optimism that wins out. And ultimately, this may be the secret weapon which propels India to a seat at that table.

"Is it possible?" he asks. "Yes, I think it is. We've made huge inroads in the space of a single generation. This is the next fight to be fought. And I think it's one we can win."

Anish Majumdar is a freelance writer based in New York City.



Bari Kumar | Silence I, 2007 | Oil on canvas | 72 x 48 inches