

## PROFILES

# Four reasons to art-shop abroad

With Indian prices out of kilter, we looked to the South Asian art world to find far-flung talent. The four young artists were chosen on the basis of their exhibiting histories and future prospects, and with coveted spots in Saatchi Gallery's 'The Empire Strikes Back' show in 2009, their stars (and prices) are only slated to brighten further



**In the air (above)**  
Schandra Singh; *The Dreamer*, an oil on linen.



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## Schandra Singh

When the second plane flew into Tower 2 on 11 September 2001, Schandra Singh's studio and apartment, like many in the vicinity of the World Trade Center, was destroyed. Covered in a thick layer of sooty ash, nothing was salvageable except an 8ft-high white canvas that remained miraculously unscathed.

At the time, Singh, 30, a teacher at a community centre for underprivileged kids, had been applying for a Fulbright scholarship to Sri Lanka. A widowed blonde of Austrian and Indian descent, Singh managed to escape with her life intact, and what could be considered a torturous and even masochistic endeavour, she set out to gather the names, photographs and biographies of everyone who died that day. The information was compiled in thick dossiers and over the next year, used as the basis of a startling memorial: The 8ft canvas became a ghostly oil of the Twin Towers, the right tower a pale composite of Muslims at prayer, the left of each of the 2,915 victims of 9/11.

"People say why make a pattern of Muslims, why not make the entire thing of people who died," Singh says. "Well, because I want the painting to

be a question. And to me the painting is very much about innocence and I had the images of the people who passed away on the left, but I don't have the images of the right side and there is a right side."

Now propped against a wall in her upstate New York studio, the painting helped her get into Yale University's fine arts programme, from where Singh began branching out into vibrant and unsettling oils of tourists seemingly engaged in leisurely activities. Her works have attracted much attention, including that of art collector Charles Saatchi, who asked to see everything that came out of her studio.

Her method is painstaking and laboured, but curiously enough neither precious nor pretty. Her portly travellers are sturdy and languid, the kind of white-sneakered, sunburnt bumbling tourists so instantly recognizable from any mise en scène at an airport or beach resort. In *The Dreamer*, men in Hawaiian print trunks float lazily in the air; in *The Lazy River*, they are perched indolently on blown-up tubes. "It's about how we relax, and I choose silly situations to talk about something quite serious," Singh says. "One day you can wake up and 3,000 people can die. Are you truly escaping? Are you relaxing or

are you not alive?"

**Vote of confidence:** "In some of the works she really captures the kind of dislocation and tension that people feel around being a tourist, around travelling, around airports, around pleasure resorts... I really can't think of any other contemporary artist who is dealing with

the notion of the tourist as subject in quite that way," says former Yale University professor Greg Tate.

**What's next:** Oils on linen of people on the beach, including a young Indian beach bum called Neha, at Galerie Bertrand & Gruner in Geneva, Switzerland, in November; *The Empty*

*Strikes Back* at the Saatchi Gallery in 2009.

**Prices:** From \$15,000 to \$25,000 (around Rs6.40 lakh to Rs10.6 lakh).

## Huma Mulji

When Huma Mulji, 37, stuffed a dead camel in a suitcase and called it *Arabian Delight*, she imagined it to be a searing but conical comment on the glitzy emirate's art fair where it would be displayed. The work, after all, was headed for Art Dubai, where camels, stuffed or not, are a much beloved denizen of its sandy shores. "The art fair in Dubai is very much about delighting the audience in this new way," says Mulji, who whacked the name from a sweet

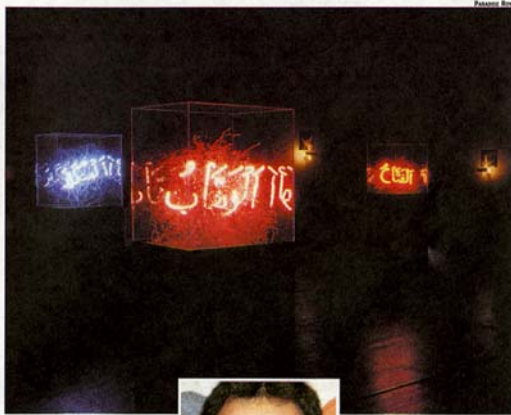


**Pocket:** (above) Mulji used a real camel for her work *Arabian Delight*; the artist teaches at a university in Lahore.





**Taking a stand (left)**  
Fugitives and Assassins by Chitra Ganesh.



**Lit up (above)** A gallery view of *If I Should Fall From Grace With God* by Dawood.



shop in Lahore. In short order, however, a day before the fair opened, the camel was asked to be removed.

But it was on display at the Pakistani pavilion long enough to receive a pat on the head from ruler Sheikh Muhammad, and a nod of approval from a Saatchi broker, who bought the work for *The Empire Strikes Back* show planned for next year. For an artist who refuses to take up the profession full-time—she is a fine arts teacher at Beacon House National University in Lahore—Mulji has made impressive inroads. Between 2000 and 2002, she worked with Shilpa Gupta on *AarPaar*, a cross-cultural artistic endeavor that saw artists on both sides come together to foster controversial dialogue. In 2001, the two had sets of posters by Indian and Pakistani artists printed and distributed in the two countries at a time when post between Pakistan and India was banned.

Given her late start, Mulji is admittedly not prolific, labouring over her works, which have been shown at the NGMA, Mumbai, in 2005, and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York, in 2007. Her most intriguing installations have centred around the theme of unsettling, travel and migration, as with *1001 Stories*, where Muslim showers or "bidders" were coiled into a suitcase and plated in gold. "It's

something Pakistanis miss when they're travelling," notes Mulji, who upended the notion by fitting the bidets with speakers that broadcast interviews with people in Lahore and Dubai expressing their longing for the other country. Having worked with camels, Mulji is already on to her next taxidermy project, involving monkeys and water buffaloes. "It's about the element of underlying humour, laughing at oneself, and ironic comment."

**Vote of confidence:** "Usually academics abroad are very staid and conservative. In Pakistan, that has not been the case, and it has helped produce fertile ground for artists who are practitioners as well as teachers. Huma is a very good example of a gifted teacher who is also an unusual practitioner. She is not one of the top names in contemporary Pakistani artists. But she will be in the Top 10 in the next five years," says Salima Hashmi, curator and dean of Beacon House's Visual Arts School.

**What's next:** Mechanized monkeys at the Guangzhou Triennale currently on display until 16 November; Taxidermy buffaloes on fake marble columns at the Asia Society in New York, in June 2009; *The Empire Strikes Back* at



**Collector (right)**  
Ganesh finds materials from shops frequented by immigrants.

the Saatchi Gallery in 2009.  
**Prices:** From \$600 to \$1,000 for photos; \$1,500-8,000 for installations.

**Chitra Ganesh**  
On the face of it, Chitra Ganesh's panels look very much like the benign technicoloured line drawings favoured by the authors of Amar Chitra Katha comics. Women in clingy saris bounce around baring their eyelids, ruing their cruel fate. Yet Ganesh's women, though buxom enough to rival the curviest Bollywood starlets, are, on deeper inspection, fierce, ass-kicking she-warriors who wield their weapons, and sexual prowess with dangerous intent. Decapitated heads, streams of blood and gore abound, but according to Ganesh, her panels remain true to their fictional roots. "What I noticed is that mythology has this interest and tendency to celebrate sex and violence and then repress it in order to create a normative order and explain to us how things should

be and what's supposed to happen," she says. "But there's no mythological story I've read where there's no decapitation or dismemberment."

Ganesh, 33, like many in the South Asian diaspora, grew up more immersed in her south Indian roots than the cousins she had left behind. She learnt Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam, and later, as expected of the daughter of hard-working immigrant parents, attended Ivy League universities for her bachelor's and master's degrees. Her interest in deconstructing comics started in 2001, when during a residency someone sent her a care package, which included copies from the Amar Chitra Katha series. From then interest emerged a 24-page comic book, *Tales of Amnesia*, which, though really about nothing at all, appeared to follow the exploits of a character called Amnesia, a story that lacked any semblance of a conventional narrative.

Amnesia goes through a series of dream-like panels, usually self-made, and engaged in dialogues penned by Ganesh. In one panel, she wonders, "Why are insects always crawling under my skin?" while groping a naked cohort; in another disembodied arms and legs fondle and fight with titillating frequency. "It's trying to work with these images and move beyond the notion that any kind of nudity is automatically pornographic because that immediately centres on the male gaze and a certain way of looking," says Ganesh, whose works also include complex tactile installations composed of objects often found in shops frequented by immigrants.

Having already exhibited at Nature Morte in New Delhi, Ganesh has recently begun cropping up at auctions (a panel from *Tales of Amnesia* recently sold at a Saffronart auction for \$17,394), and was named in a survey by London-based ArtTactic as one of five contemporary South Asian artists to watch out for in the coming years.

**Vote of confidence:** "When those comics came out, I was quite taken with the pop-y characterization of traditional myths. What she's been able to do is integrate that with a strong feminist perspective and what's very interesting about her is that she has a queer sensibility mixed with traditional folkloric culture," says Shaheen Merali, art director, Bodhi Art.

**What's next:** Bucking her usual style, Ganesh collaborated with New York-based artist Marjiam Ghani to create a neon sign of the Urdu line "The Thread Still Remains", part of *Everywhere is*

*War (and rumours of war)*, currently showing at Bodhi Mumbai; *Democracy in America* at the Park Avenue Armory, New York City from 21-27 September; *The Empire Strikes Back* show at the Saatchi Gallery in 2009.

**Prices:** From \$3,000 to \$7,000 for comic prints, photos and works on paper.

#### Shehzad Dawood

Shehzad Dawood first realized the delicious possibilities of becoming an artist when at age 7 his uncle's girlfriend bought his first work. "I think it was then that I put two and two together, and realized it's possible to do what I wanted to do," he says. Since then the London-based 33-year-old artist, born of a Pakistani mother and an Indian father, has carved for himself an impressive niche in negotiating the dilemmas of belonging to a host of duelling identities across the worlds of art, race and status. In the decades since his first sell, Dawood has participated in a group show at White Chapel gallery in London, *AarPaar* with Shilpa Gupta, made and starred in a movie, and converted a posh Knightsbridge town house in London into a live-in art project that had many of the neighbourhood's residents more than a little confused.

In the coming months, Dawood, whose recent solo show in London earlier this year, *If I Should Fall From Grace With God*, earned critical plaudits, will be seen at Chatterjee & Lal, and Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai, and at the Tate Triennale, London, where he will debut his latest project, a crazy "Western zombie" film. Having grown up with a foot in each world—of immigrant and Brit sub-cultures—Dawood plays with a host of playful imagery, taking the iconic and subverting them in unfamiliar contexts. Thus neonsigned names of god in Arabic strewn in a bed of tumbleweed, and oils of Wild West cowboys battling on the frontier are meant to evoke the battles of contemporary Islamic culture, while a garish neon sign of the word "tan-

door!" touches on the lingual identity of an Indian word now so intrinsically British. "Tandoori means cooked in a clay oven, but now in England it is projected to mean Indian food and beyond that, to Indian culture," Dawood says. "So, language gets taken out of context. At what point did it explode into a much larger reference, into a candy-coloured presentation of it?"

Dawood applied the same unsettling prism to his work *Militant Snoopy*, an eerily prescient work he made before 9/11 showing a plastic snoopy toy armed with a Kalashnikov that became a surprise hit at the Gulf Art Fair in 2007. In a similar fashion, Dawood explored the tangential and tenuous relationship of art to real estate by risking near-bankruptcy converting a crumbling East End house into a live-in art project, artfully flinging his work round the house in a bid to make it look like a "real" studio. Viewers had to book appointments through a broker, and more than a couple of interior decorating magazines showcased the house in their pages. "I'm interested in how real estate manages its relationship with the arts—as a new edgy area gets colonized by the developers, artists can't afford to stay there," says Dawood, who was surprised and motivated by its success to eventually continue the project in a Victorian structure in tony Knightsbridge. "It extended the idea of subversion," Dawood says. "In Knightsbridge, the collectors live, in East End, it's where the artists live. We reversed it."

**Vote of confidence:** "He has a very strong reading of India and Pakistan. But at the same time has an absolute understanding of what the Western culture imperially is about," says Shaheen Merali, art director, Bodhi Art.

**What's next:** For his solo at Riccardo Crepsi in Milan from 19 September to 31 October, he will show a combination of paintings and installations that explore the relationship between "the Italian Renaissance and Persian miniatures"; as part of a group show at Chatterjee & Lal in January 2009, Dawood will convert part of the gallery into an old English pub, complete "with a neo-fascist barman serving beer on tap"; he will debut a new film called *Frontier* at the Tate Triennale in February; *The Empire Strikes Back* show at Saatchi Gallery in 2009.

**Prices:** From £2,500 (about \$2 lakh) to £30,000.