

## Contradictions and Complexities: Contemporary Art from India

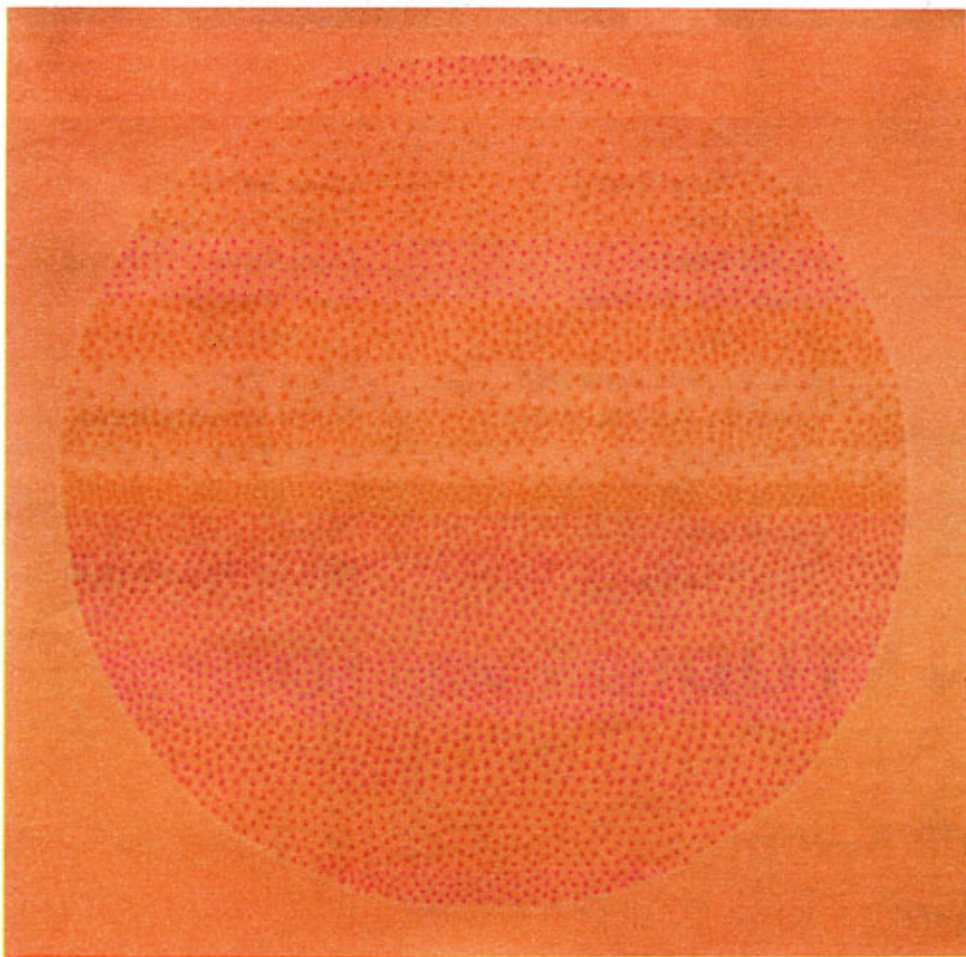
Western Project, 3830 Main Street, Culver City

d.e.n. contemporary, 6023 W. Washington Boulevard, Culver City

**W**ith the world's largest democracy awakening from its Third-World slumber, the international art world is eager to find itself reflected in India's contemporary art. As with China, we're finding that the production of art in India we westerners recognize as "contemporary" addresses and reveals the strains of its society's evolution, hybridizes local folk and (especially) pop sources with western late-modernism — thus determining a homegrown Postmodernism — and, thus, asserts a readily recognizable national identity even as it meets contemporary western standards with increasing sophistication.

This was the impression conveyed by a two-gallery survey limited to six artists; there have been comprehensive overviews, but not in these parts. It is better to think of *Contradictions and Complexities* as "focused" rather than "limited," as it chose its artists, and the work representing them, quite keenly. Notable is the fact that the show was assembled by two dealers, both ex-New Yorkers, one now based in Los Angeles and the other in New Delhi (indeed, the proprietor of India's leading contemporary gallery). More notable yet is the fact that all six artists are women — and that much of the work takes a self-consciously feminine, not to say feminist, point of view.

Our own 1970s-era feminist essentialists would find Shobha Broota's luminous abstractions redolent with vaginal imagery, organized as are their myriad points of color into symmetrically placed orbs. These ethereal, faceless icons also reward those looking for spiritual transport; Broota's formula can be understood as the latter-day equivalent of the mandala. But Hinduism, India's dominant religion, recognizes a reality in which the transcendent and the quotidian wrestle in constant ecstasy, and the other five artists — even Broota's fellow abstractionist Santana Gohain — address the realities around them, if sometimes in oblique terms. Gohain eschews color altogether in favor of a rock-like range of grays. Indeed, the irregular rectangles she piles on one another and inscribes with a hermetic notation suggest worn tablets recycled as paving stones.



from left: Shobha Broota, *Untitled*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 72" x 72", 2008. Courtesy of Western Project.

Sheba Chhachhi, *Shanti Giri*, color archival digital prints, 44" x 29", 1993–2001/2007. Courtesy of d.e.n. contemporary art.

The tenebrous ruminations of Broota and Gohain were segregated, reasonably enough, at Western Project from the tumultuous figuration of the other four artists at d.e.n. Here, the best-known of the half-dozen artists, Anita Dube, showed off her proficiency with a variety of media in search of a distinctly urban poetry. By far her most riveting piece in *Contradictions* was the video *Kissa-e-Noor Mohammed (Garam Hawa)*, wherein Dube herself takes the identity of a Muslim shopkeeper neighbor and weaves a rambling and yet interesting monologue that speaks of and to India's eth-



nic tensions. More straightforwardly documentary, Sheba Chhachhi's photographs of women who have assumed the ascetic life of wandering sadhus record another layer of social friction on the sub-continent, that born of ancient religious traditions' persistence in the early twenty-first century.

Mithu Sen and Chitra Ganesh look at yet other social dissonances, which are resulting from the cultural slippages between East and West. Sen takes images lifted from (or made to seem like) magazine ads for consumer goods and adorns them with additional accessories. These glittering adornments contradict and satirize the stuff being advertised, often to the point of implied violence. Ganesh infuses romantic tropes of Indian pop culture with a healthy and knowing dose of Surrealism. *Real Surrealism*, right down to the florid speech balloons and dialogue boxes that accompany her equally febrile collaged images, all suggesting a South Asian take on the fantastical books of Max Ernst.

New Yorker Ganesh is the only artist here trained and living outside India, but her art is as tied to her heritage as that of her sister artists — and their art is as critically aware of western models, and as able to absorb and reformulate them, as hers. India knows us; it's time for us to know it. 🍷

— Peter Frank