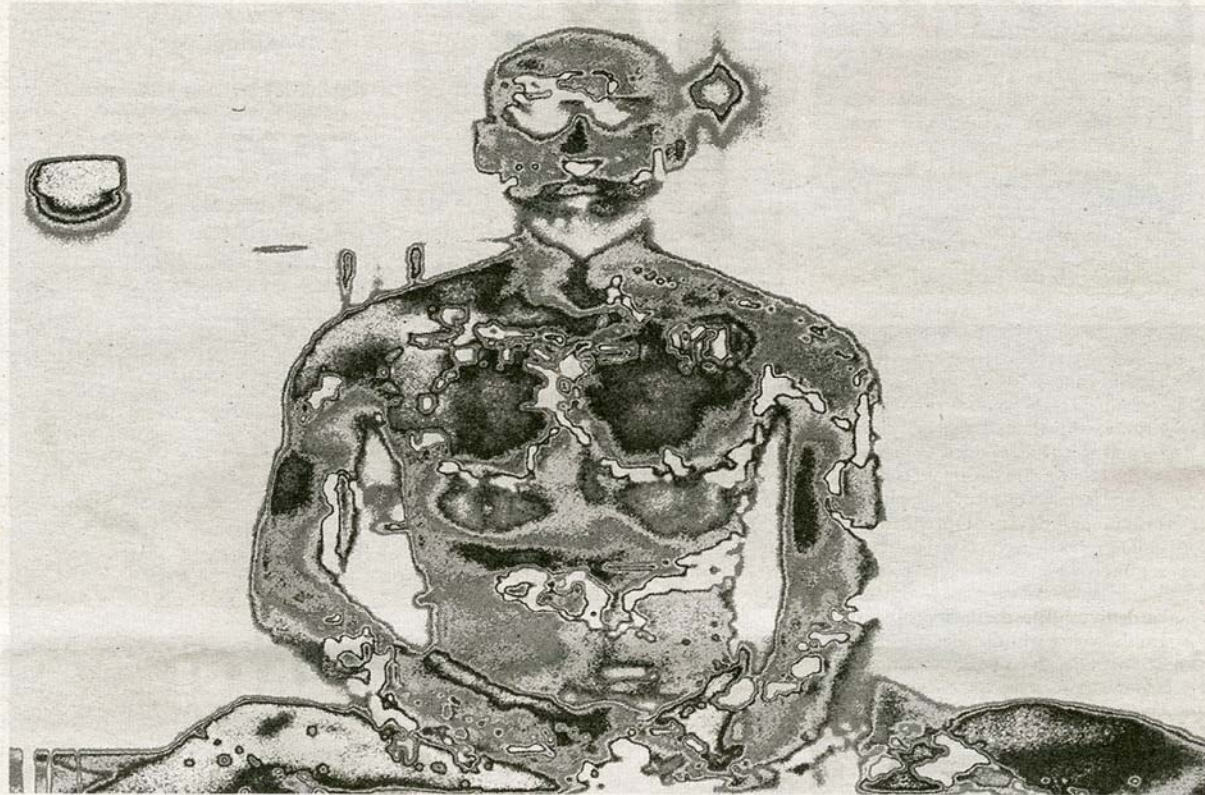


East Wind A'Blowin'

The South Asian artists in this show are so far out of the box they rattle the place



"Exploding the Lotus"

On display through May 25 at the Art and Culture Center of Hollywood, 1650 Harrison St., Hollywood; call 954-921-3274.

BY MICHAEL MILLS

Exploding the Lotus" is heavy on conceptual art—to the point, perhaps, of inducing a mild headache. The show, now at the Art and Culture Center of Hollywood, was jointly curated by the center's curator of exhibitions, Jane Hart, and the New York-based Jaishri Abichandani, who's also represented in the exhibition by a trio of works.

The participants are identified in the introductory wall text as 21 established and emerging artists from South Asia living primarily in the United States. Actually, they're all from the Indian subcontinent, with about two-thirds of them Indian or Indian-Filipino and most of the remainder from Pakistan. One artist is from Bangladesh, and two apparently declined to give details about their national origins. The art itself comes in a variety of media, including wall drawing, painting, works on paper, site-specific installations, photography, sculpture, and video.

I mention these details in an effort to get some sort of handle on this challeng-

ing show. Ditto this, from the promotional materials: "As this global hot-spot merges into mainstream Western Culture, methods of expression are re-examined, honored, and scrutinized, addressing fundamental issues of the region including war, feminism, and the endurance of spiritual practices—all issues at the forefront of South Asian contemporary life and culture."

Entering the main gallery, you'll immediately notice that this is a multimedia exhibition. Video screens of various sizes flicker, and sounds waft through the space. Works fill glass cases and dot the floor as well as line the walls. Let's start with a relatively easy piece, Vandana Jain's *GE Highway* (2006-08), which occupies a section of floor in more or less the center of the space. Made of cardboard, strapping tape, and chalk,

Biswas' self/portrait: Listen to the heartbeat.

it features eight interconnected General Electric logos that form a continuous loop of a miniature highway. Beyond its self-evident surface, it suggests a benign comment on corporate sponsorship and advertising, maybe even a subtle critique of colonialism.

A display case nearby houses a dozen trophies custom-designed by the artist Swati Khurana. They bear such titles as *Most Reluctant Housekeeper*, *Most Disheveled Child*, *Least Generous Sister*, *Most Mannish Granddaughter*, *Least Available Daughter*. These questionable awards, the text panel informs us, go to "South Asian women who collectively and independently have made choices to step outside of their own socially accepted

norms." Fair enough. Another easy one, with a sly sense of humor as a bonus.

From here on the going gets tougher. I was initially drawn to Rajkamal Kahlon's intriguingly titled acrylic *Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2005) because of the hot pinks and other bright colors associated with more traditional Indian art. The imagery, however, belies the seductive surfaces — flowers shaped like skulls, people with missing limbs, disembodied body parts, an instance of (non-consensual?) sodomy. I had to turn to the text for clues: "the use of violent imagery framed by psychedelia and the human body turned grotesque through its traumatic encounters with colonialism, military rule and torture."

Hmm. No such assistance is provided for many of the other pieces, or else the "help" proffered proves less than helpful. What to make, for instance, of Naeem Mohaiemen's *Red Ant Mother Chad Meet Starfish Nation* (2008), a pair of C-prints accompanied by cryptic text? Hint: The work apparently has to do with the 1975 military coup in Bangladesh, but aside from the superficial beauty of the stark, nearly abstract images, it remains opaque. Nor could I get much past

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the pretty ceramic tiles that make up Fariba Alam's *Car Top Picnic* and *The Night Journey*. And for some of us an appreciation of Sa'dia Rehman's *Fairy Tales* (2007) will no doubt be complicated by the "eew" factor that arises when we read that the ink drawing is adorned with snippets of the artist's pubic hair.

A handful of works are visually appealing without regard to their intellectual content. Among them are Kanishka Raja's *Nine/Ten* (2007), a kaleidoscopic graphite rendering of architectural elements; four C-prints by Yamini Nayar that use miniature sets to toy with notions of perspective and proportion; and Ansuman Biswas' *self/portrait* (1999), a still from an interactive video modulated by the artist's heart rate.

Inexplicably, the curators blunt the impact of a suite of six color photographs by Mareena Daredia — one of the show's strongest contributions — by breaking it into two groupings displayed in different areas of the museum. Entitled *Zahiba: Slaughter House*, it's from an ongoing series of images documenting the preparation and slaughter of *halal* (Arabic for "permissible") meat in the Muslim world.

And given how barbarically the creatures destined for our tables are often treated in American factory farms, the work is also a

rebuke to Western culture, as becomes clear from the accompanying text detailing a procedure designed to be more humane. The animal's eyes and ears are first checked to ensure that it's healthy, and the animal is given a drink of water to satisfy its thirst and to calm it. A prayer is recited. Finally, one cut of an unserrated blade severs the esophagus, trachea, and major arteries in the neck. The photos remain unsettling, but at least they chronicle a process intended to retain a measure of the animal's dignity and to minimize its suffering.

"Exploding the Lotus" made me suspicious when I noticed that the name of co-curator Jaishri Abichandani was attached to three works. There's always the possibility of an overinflated ego. But after a second pass through the galleries, I became convinced that Abichandani's participation is far from arbitrary — indeed, hers are among the show's most provocative pieces.

The curator-artist's two-and-a-half-minute video *Bijli: Heart of a Drag Queen* (2006) is hard not to notice. Its wailing soundtrack hits you as soon as you enter the main gallery, and the simple imagery — a fully made-up drag queen performing — is projected onto the curving wall at the far end of the gallery. The text describes Bijli's treatment at the hands of a culture not known to be sympathetic to gender bending.

A second Abichandani video, *Happily Never After* (2005), runs two minutes and 12 seconds and is shown on a tiny DVD player. It's a drily funny little vignette in which a fortune-telling robot delivers seven possible scenarios, none of which is especially appealing.

Abichandani's most satisfying work here is one that deftly conflates the traditional with the modern, the secular with the religious. *Untitled Camera Sculptures* (2003-06) presents a quartet of mixed-media works, each an ordinary camera rendered extraordinary by the application of dozens and dozens of tiny fake gemstones. Abichandani has also gutted the cameras and replaced their innards with tiny figures — including, for instance, a Buddha's head — that transform them into something like miniature makeshift altars. Unlike so much of "Exploding the Lotus," these unassuming little sculptures are heady without playing head games.