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ART REVIEW

Reaching Out With a Flourish of Indian Art

By [BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO](#)

In presenting “India: Public Places, Private Spaces — Contemporary Photography and Video Art,” the [Newark Museum](#) set an ambitious task for itself: to dazzle visitors while reaching out to New Jersey’s growing South Asian community. More than a quarter of a million South Asians live in New Jersey, an increase of 52 percent since 2000, according to 2006 American Community Survey estimates.

“We felt it was timely and appropriate for the museum to debut this groundbreaking exhibition, given the unprecedented growth and influence of the Indian diaspora,” said Mary Sue Sweeney Price, director of the museum.

What the museum came up with exceeded expectations: 100 works by 28 photographers and video artists, spread over 7,000 square feet. The 15-week run of the show will be augmented by music and dance, a fashion show, lectures, gallery tours and symposiums with Indian writers, artists, academics and filmmakers. Many of the events are being co-sponsored by and presented with other organizations, including [Rutgers University](#) and William Paterson University.

The timing of the show is a “happy coincidence,” Ms. Price said, coming as the 60th anniversary of Indian independence is putting a spotlight on the country’s economic development and rich cultural heritage.

Further augmenting this tasting menu of Indian culture, the Princeton University Art Museum is coincidentally presenting a show of photographs taken in India by Fazal Sheikh.

The Newark show is big, and a bit tough to navigate. The museum's entire downstairs has been put to use, which is terrific, but works in a couple of rooms upstairs off the Asian collection galleries are rather lost.

There is a lot to take in: intimate views of the rag-pickers who collect trash to sell; picturesque landscapes and architectural scenes; portraits of Bollywood stars and adolescent beauty pageant contestants. Some of this work is mundane, some traumatic; some makes for great art. Overall, this is a forceful and affecting show.

Photojournalism predominates, or at least a brand of photography that has its roots in photojournalistic traditions. Raghu Rai takes informal pictures of important people and events, providing insight into the social and the political, while Ram Rahman seeks to capture simple occasions and street scenes that charmed him but that also evoke broader aspects of Indian life.

The extensive use of black and white is one of the things distinguishing South Asian photography from the work of artists in East Asia and elsewhere. Another is scale: In an art world where everything is now huge, much of the work in this exhibition feels intimate.

While I was visiting the gallery, Mr. Rahman was looking over his work. He speculated that the popularity of black- and-white film was partly because it could be processed and printed at home, while until recently, color film was expensive to develop commercially. Another reason, he suggested, was that many Indian photographers had been photojournalists comfortable with shooting in black and white.

It may also have something to do with the subject matter, for a great deal of the imagery is socially and politically engaged. Some works even tackle dramatic national crises. Among these is Navjot Altaf's multiscreen video installation at the entrance to the exhibition dealing

with the 2002 religious riots in Gujarat that left more than 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, dead. Images and words relating to the violence scroll over the screens, building up a dreamy, fragmentary picture of the event.

But it is not all documentary art. The exhibition co-curators, Paul Sternberger, an art history professor at Rutgers, and Gayatri Sinha, an independent curator and critic in India, have tried to include examples of other photographic techniques, subjects and styles. Though the variety is perhaps not as broad as it could be, there are thematic groupings of pictures on issues like personal identity, the collision of public and private space and the Indian diaspora. Moving away from street scenes, these works take us to more private places.

“Playing Inside: Photography, Video and Personal Identity” is the most engaging of these sections, with the work of a dozen artists exploring video and photography as tools of expression.

Often their works are playful and whimsical. One piece, Vivan Sundaram’s theatrical restaging of scenes from his family archive of photographs, is a heartfelt if hilarious act of ancestral homage. Nearby is Ranbir Kaleka’s simple, poignant video of a man chasing and capturing an escaped cockerel. Then there is Atul Bhalla’s sequence of self-portraits showing him submerging his head into a pond. Coming to the end of this section, I wanted more.

As the exhibition of photographs by Fazal Sheikh being shown concurrently at the Princeton University Art Museum reminds us, while some aspects of Indian society are changing, others are not changing quickly enough.

Mr. Sheikh is presenting two series of recent documentary photos addressing the treatment of women in India. Having grown up in New York and studied photography at [Princeton University](#), he has devoted himself to photographing the poor and dispossessed.

One series, the more compelling one, documents the plight of dispossessed widows in the Indian holy city of Vrindavan, while the other examines the challenges confronting young Indian women, especially the poor. The two series together include about 150 pictures, mostly black-and-white photographs of people. Some of the subjects recall traumatic experiences that are described in text panels.

The plight of the widows of Vrindavan, who migrate there after being cast out or abandoned in a society where Hindu brides marry into their husbands' families, is profoundly affecting; Mr. Sheikh has alternated the women's portraits with street scenes giving a sense of context. Mist fills the air, for the photographs were often taken early in the morning as the women made their way to ashrams to pray.

It is difficult to think about people being so callously discarded, yet these pictures are so voyeuristic and intimate that they take your breath away. This is powerful photography.

"India: Public Places, Private Spaces — Contemporary Photography and Video Art," Newark Museum, through Jan. 6. Information: newarkmuseum.org or (973) 596-6550.

"Beloved Daughters: Photographs by Fazal Sheikh," Princeton University Art Museum, through Jan. 6. Information: www.princetonartmuseum.org or (609) 258-3788.