

## [Aakash Nihalani](#)

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"Untitled," Aakash Nihalani, Street Installation.

*By South Asian Art Expert, Meenakshi Thirukode*

Aakash Nihalani's works, especially the fluorescent geometric shapes that have come to be associated with him, enclose spaces or create an illusion of three-dimensionality within two-dimensional facets in and around New York City. The street presents a perfect canvas for an artist. The viewer is often left to wonder if what they are seeing or interacting with might just be a work of art. So much so that this subconscious awareness of Nihalani's practice made me stop for a fraction of a second somewhere between 25th and 23rd on 6th, when my eye caught a simple orange rectangle that bordered the inner periphery of a concrete slab along the pavement. I kept walking by the same route a couple of days because there was no way for me to know if it was his work.

Later I was at a recent group show that just closed called "Paraphrase" at ARARIO Gallery. I walked in to see one section of the vast and expansive gallery with Nihalani's work. The concept of the show instigated him to incorporate text and words in response to the space. Nihalani's work spontaneously responds to space without much planning. The word *EXIT* runs across the corner of the room with the letter "I" framing a door that

leads to another section of the gallery. *PULL*, made up of black tape, finds the strict linearity of its top half, flowing into a loose loop of white tape partly resembling a handle for you to put the word into action. Of the more interesting pieces were the tiny square glass works placed in the window panes that overlook the street below. A multitude of associations arise starting with looking at your reflection on the mirror placed on a window that looks onto the street - the street that Nihalani uses as his canvas bringing about an obvious interaction with space and dimensionality that is key to his work.

Bringing street art into a gallery space seems problematic; it almost defeats the purpose and there have been many debates and discussions about this fact. But what if the artist chooses to simultaneously use the street and the gallery in developing his aesthetic? What if the act of taping the streets, a style that is now associated with Nihalani, is an extension of doing the same within the white walls of a gallery? There exists no rebellion then in his work. It's not anti-corporate. It's not about being commercial either. Nihalani has been experimenting for a while with different media like canvas and sculpture, so there is also no question of him merely adapting what is essentially associated with ephemeral, anti-commercial, and perhaps anti-excess aesthetics into something that can be presented in a cookie cutter fashion within white walls.

This particular white-walled gallery, ARARIO, specializes in Indian, Korean and Chinese art. It's therefore hard not to think of Nihalani's South Asian background having some sort of relevance within the larger picture, even if it has pretty much nothing to do with his art. But if there is anything Indian you're looking for in Nihalani's work you're not going to find it. Yes, one could make associations with street, oral and performance art traditions that are still prevalent in the subcontinent but that is as relevant as associating Nihalani entirely to the lineage of street/graffiti artists in the Western world.

Some of his most interesting works are his collaborations with other street artists who do have a strong tie to the West's graffiti movement, like Poster Boy. That collaboration, found in and around subways brings together two very different aesthetics while creating a kind of urban folklore, fun to concoct within your mind as you go about your daily routine in the city. One work is a vile, mean looking poster of an ape (not in its entirety) pasted on the side of a trash bin (glaring teeth, bulbous eyes and all) with a bit of yellow tape stuck to its choppers, caught in the act ripping Nihalani's yellow tape geometric perfection. Building a story is quite key to Nihalani's work. As much as the lines and shapes seem to play with just the structural elements of a city, there exists in each piece a subtle narrative quality that's not brooding, but light hearted instead, and perhaps more often than not, witty and humorous.

Talking to the artist about his work, you get the feeling that he is really focused on what his practice is evolving into. His street work informs how his work is developing through other mediums like sculpture that will develop from the tape and mirror pieces seen at ARARIO. I think it's a positive sign when a young artist known for a certain aesthetic style seeks to continue that body of work while developing, exploring, and questioning his practice. I had a certain preconditioned notion initially, that made me cringe about his street practice coming into a white walled space. And I'm not entirely sure that it's an

opinion that people will get over even if the artist explains his intentions. The work is never going to escape the kind of obvious criticism it can be easily subjected to.

Eitherway Nihalani doesn't seem to be perturbed. And I am all for that. I can't wait to walk this block or catch the train at that avenue, just so I can continue to build my own stories and have "is-it-or-is-it-not" moments around what could potentially be his artwork.



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