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- CALENDAR**
- Place Listing
- Cultural
- Spiritual
- Yoga
- Event Previews
- ESSAYS**
- Bottom Line
- Desi Voices
- Personal Items
- Reflections
- Youth
- PROFILES**
- In Focus
- Not for Profit
- People
- Q & A
- ARTS**
- Books
- Fiction
- Films
- Music
- Performing Arts
- LIFESTYLE**
- Business
- Dear Doctor
- The Healthy Life
- Household Hints
- Recipes
- Travel
- CLASSIFIEDS**
- Read Classifieds
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- LETTERS**
- ARCHIVES**

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Yes, We Can

SHRUTI SWAMY, Feb 02, 2009

We might as well start with Obama. Since his election, a number of my family members have suggested I chuck the idea of being a writer and go into politics, where I can “make a real difference.”

Barack Obama has profoundly illustrated how far a person can come if s/he works hard enough, and politicians, non-profit founders, social workers, and many others are working to change the world in similar ways that can be observed, measured, and analyzed. Don't get me wrong; I think that's wonderful. But Obama's triumph has got me wondering about those people who are working just as hard to fight injustice and bring about change, but in ways that are harder to measure.

Yes, change can come from “the outside,” from people organizing and protesting, fighting unfair laws and societal practices, and running for office in order to make the big structural decisions that will affect our world. But change also comes from “the inside,” when a person sees a painting and something shifts within them, when they open up to a different perspective. It comes from listening to the voices of dissent, the critical and funny and outraged voices of our artists.

This article is about three people who are working from the inside to change our collective consciousness. People who start discussions, who provoke thought, who raise hell by raising issues. The individuals featured are working in a variety of mediums; each takes a unique approach to the project of changing the world. What links these individuals is not commonality of subject or genre, but rather a fierce commitment to transforming the world views of their audiences, readers, and viewers.

Schandra Singh is a visual artist tackling trauma and apathy in our media saturated society. Hari Kondabolu, whose stand-up comedy is smart, scathing, and fiercely political, has been featured on Jimmy Kimmel Live and Comedy Central's *Live at Gotham*, and was featured in the 2007 HBO U.S. Comedy Arts Festival. And Samhita Mukhopadhyay, writer for the widely read blog Feministing.com, explores the intersection between feminism and race.

The Seer

A graduate of the MFA program at Yale, visual artist Schandra Singh has had her work shown in the United States and internationally, including at the Saatchi gallery in London. She currently has a solo show at the Galerie Bertrand in Geneva. Singh's heritage is both Indian and Austrian, and she says she draws on each culture's rich artistic history for her own work.



Photo: Aparna Pechekar

It is clear from talking with Singh that painting is not a hobby or even a career, but rather a way of seeing the world; she describes so many of her thoughts and ideas in deeply felt images. Singh experienced September 11 firsthand, and describes the changes she experienced after living through the event: “Even if I lie on a beach, all day, and I'm happy, the color of the sky is not the same blue as it was on September 10.”

In “Untitled,” Singh confronts September 11. In the intricately detailed painting, she depicts two towers made up entirely of people—the left is comprised of all 2,915 people who died in the attacks. The pattern she uses is of Muslims at

prayer—the left tower is made of people with their arms open and faces lifted, the right of people kneeling in prayer and bowing their heads so their faces are obscured (this and other paintings can be viewed on Singh's website; “Untitled” will be having its first ever public viewing in March at the VOLTA fair in New York). The painting took a year to complete, and Singh worked in solitude for most of that time, not allowing anyone to look



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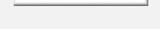
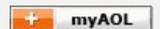
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at the work in progress. She surrounded herself with photographs of the victims of the attacks as well as biographies that their loved ones had written about them; each of their faces is rendered in the piece.

"Every day I'd go into this room and I'd paint," Singh says. "These were people—I'd watched people fall. It's not like I didn't see anything. I smelled it ... It took me a year to get up the courage, but I think if I never did that painting, I would never be a painter. I had to do it."

Singh describes her work as political, but not pointedly so. "I paint very honestly," she says. "I do think about major world issues, I'm very up to date, and I'm talking all the time about politics. I'm going to coin a phrase 'the politics of the human condition,' the politics of knowing about politics. It's about ... knowing what just happened in India (11/26). How do you know this is going on in another country and sit and eat your turkey?"

"I choose the exact opposite of politics to talk about politics," she continues. "I paint people who are in relaxing situations, but the way I paint them—something is not right, something isn't comfortable."

In an early series, Singh depicts grotesquely distorted vacationers lounging around in pools and on beaches, oblivious to their surroundings. There is a sense in all of the paintings of the larger world which is being ignored but cannot fully be suppressed. In "The Dreamer," three men lie with their eyes closed in a blanket of cerulean water, which opens in one spot to reveal the dark eyes of a tiger. "People really expose themselves when they are on vacation, in a lot of different ways—they show more skin, they act differently than they would when they are at home."

Singh is always looking for the moments that will trigger her paintings and has found many while on vacation: "The painting starts before I pick up a brush. The painting starts for me with my eyes, with seeing a moment. The moment where I can recognize 'there's something to be said here.' I get the moment, I draw it, I do an initial composition, and then I allow my emotions to take over. Then it becomes about the painting itself."

Singh joined the Peace Corps after college and has always been committed to community service. She relates a conversation she had with a friend about her work, during which she expressed her frustration with sitting in a room and painting while there were so many problems in the world that still needed to be addressed. "My friend said, 'I think that you struggle with the feeling that you need to go do something, but you don't see that your paintings are doing something.'"

"You are doing something," she said.



The Sayer

While Singh's work addresses politics through the absence of politics, comedian Hari Kondabolu's work seeks to directly challenge audiences to see their own lives and the world differently. Kondabolu addresses the political issues that outrage him, and as an artist, he thinks deeply about the messages he is presenting and the ways in which he is presenting them. His comedy moves away from the paradigm of South Asian comics before him in terms of both material and a larger outlook on comedy. For example, Kondabolu rarely makes jokes about his family, which for many comics, South Asian or otherwise, would be a rich vein to mine.

"I used to talk about my family much more," he says. "But I realized after a while that a lot of those jokes were 'my family is different from your family.' I want there to be some depth to their stories and lives. They are not just immigrants with thick accents who say goofy things. They are not caricatures."

Kondabolu became interested in stand-up during his mid-teens, and he started performing in high school. After college, he worked in Seattle for an immigrant rights organization before going to graduate school in London to study human rights. Many of his jokes speak to the issues that he has worked on in those capacities: jokes about racism, racial profiling, and the myriad of political injustices in America. In his comedy, Kondabolu talks about immigration detention and deportation, post 9/11 hate violence against brown people, inequality and poverty, colonialism, and neo-Colonialism (with a bit of pop culture and sports thrown in for good measure). These are grave issues, and when listed like that, they

hardly being funny. Even better, there are difficult topics to bring out into the open, never mind broaching them in a forum that's not exactly a meeting of your local anarchist knitting group.

This is the miracle of good comedy. "Because people are there to be entertained, people are willing to listen," says Kondabolu. "People are willing to see where things go because of the expectation of a laugh." Kondabolu cites comedian Paul Mooney as inspiration for using stand-up for more than just entertainment. He describes Mooney, an American comedian who at one time was a writer for the legendary Richard Pryor, as "aggressive and honest about race. He really showed me the potential and power in stand-up that I never saw before."

We live in a world of comedic discomfort. Shows like *The Office* or *30 Rock* revel in the awkward moments of every day life, when the invisible, but ever present factors of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class become suddenly, rudely visible. Skillful comedy lets us laugh at things that make us uncomfortable, brings things to the surface that would otherwise remain hidden and never talked about, lets us explore the outrageous or painful in a way that is bearable, interesting, and even entertaining.

Kondabolu has struggled with the balance between entertainment and raising issues that really matter to him without alienating his audience. He admits that some of his material is quite challenging, and that many people are still not open to the kind of work he wants to do (he has encountered fairly blatant racism at some of his shows, but was reluctant to talk about it). But, he says, "I like the way I write, I like my material. I'm proud of what I've put out."

Kondabolu's latest project is a short film, "Manoj," a mockumentary about an emerging and wildly popular Indian comedian whose jokes are stereotypical and offensive. ("Manoj" has been shown in various film festivals around the U.S. and Canada, most notably the "Just for Laughs" festival in Montreal. [View the film online.](#)) Kondabolu plays two roles: Manoj—who sports a beard, wears a kurta, and speaks with an Indian accent—as well as himself, clean shaven and bespectacled (many people have watched the film without recognizing Kondabolu as Manoj.) Some of Manoj's comedy routine is shown in the film, along with commentary from white fans, behind-the-scenes footage, and disgusted commentary by Kondabolu as himself. It is possible to watch the movie just for the jokes and have a good time; Kondabolu intentionally wrote Manoj's jokes to be funny. However, for Kondabolu, the film is about minstrelsy—the idea of making a caricature of your background, or playing into stereotypes, not to challenge them, but to reinforce them.

"I didn't make [the film] for a specifically South Asian audience," he says, "This is for all artists of color." To me, the film also speaks to the larger discomfort that comes along with being an artist from an ethnic or cultural minority; the expectation is always that you be representative of your entire community. At 13 minutes, the film is densely layered with ideas of a kind of modern racism. The ways in which Manoj's white fans talk about him and his material are sharply observed and subtle enough to ring true without being outlandish. Like much of Kondabolu's material, it is the kind of thing that is no more outrageous than real life.

But somehow, you're laughing.

The Troublemaker



Samhita Mukhopadhyay has always been something of a troublemaker. Feminism and punk rock helped. "When I was fifteen," she says, "my parents went to temple, and we got in a huge fight, and I thought, 'I'll show them' and I shaved my head into this totally punk rock haircut and dyed it purple. To this day, my mother says, 'your brother was bad, but there was nobody as bad as you!'"

Now Mukhopadhyay is a blogger for [Feministing.com](#), a website dedicated to promoting the discussion of feminism. The site provides sometimes funny, sometimes outraged

commentary on a broad range of women's issues. In the past, Mukhopadhyay has written posts alerting readers to new music, discussing political events like California's Proposition 8, analyzing movies and advertisements, as well as discussing her personal life. "All of us at Feministing do that, weaving between the personal and the political. I would call what I do journalistic feminism."

Mukhopadhyay, currently at work on a book about feminist dating, has also written articles for print publications like *Colorlines*, *New America Media*, and *The Nation*. She notes,

however, that there is something particularly dynamic about the medium of blogging: "It's allowed me to build a community very quickly in a way that I think would have taken years on the ground, through means of traditional publishing." Sexism is so ingrained in all parts of society that the flexibility and immediacy blogging offers seems a particularly effective way to address its various manifestations in our lives.

Much feminist work these days involves recognizing the sexism latent in the media. After becoming aware of underlying sexist, racist, or other offensive messages, we can choose to accept or reject them, and much potential damage is diffused. Blogs like Feministing take advantage not only of the flexibility of the medium, and the ability to respond quickly to current issues and events, but also the interactive nature of the internet. Discussions on Feministing are often passionate; some threads might include over 200 comments. Mukhopadhyay sums it up: "[Blogging has] given me a very powerful microphone to break down books, movies, the media."

As a South Asian American feminist, Mukhopadhyay has thought a lot about her role in her own community. "A lot of my work has been in the area of cross-cultural tension," she says. The intersections between race, culture, gender, and privilege are tricky to navigate, and I can vouch that many Indian Americans (especially those of us who are American-born) find ourselves on the edge of two cultures, feeling unsure of our place. Awareness of the principles of feminism can lead one to turn a critical eye on our parents' homeland. We are caught between politics and a desire to defend "our own" culture. Who hasn't been swept up into an uncomfortable discussion on how repressed and oppressed women in developing nations are, where *sati* and arranged marriages are trotted out to underscore the point? You find yourself sputtering, "Well, it's quite complicated, it's not really like that" to the pitying looks of your fellow (often white) conversationalists.

"White feminism has shown itself to overlook women of color," Mukhopadhyay says. "Understanding that tension has really affected how I interact with the Indian community. I used to be really judgmental—"You're all just really ignorant, you support arranged marriages." I didn't have the vocabulary to really talk about it. But looking at the pattern of colonization, the way cultures like India's are talked about [in the West], it makes more sense. It's far more complicated."

Mukhopadhyay knows there is no easy solution to questions of gender injustice and cultural difference. Ultimately, she says, "We are entitled to our opinions, as long as we are conscious of what affects and informs those opinions." And, she asserts, "Feminism exists very powerfully in Indian culture. Many major feminist scholars are Indian, and there's a huge, thriving feminist movement in India. It's not a foreign concept."

Mukhopadhyay started raising hell early: "I recently looked at my high school yearbook, and I guess I had started calling out privilege even then. A lot of people wrote things like, 'I know I'm just a lowly white male, but I had fun knowing you...' I thought, damn, I must have been crazy already!"

She's not quitting anytime soon.

Visionary artists see, create, and depict worlds into which their viewers or readers can enter. Much of the art that captures us, that truly holds our imaginations, whether a painting, a performance, or a piece of writing, is the art that shows us the dark corners of our society and ourselves. Art that brings what's darkest in our world into the light, and invites us to imagine the world that could be. The worlds that these artists dream for us are as different and distinct as their art forms, some nebulous, some clearly defined, but they are all urgent, driven by the same questions that drive our political figures.

Can we set aside our differences? Can we work through issues of race, gender, and class? Can we find the common thread that connects us all? Can America be better, can the world be better, can we be better?

Yes, we can.

Page 1 of 1

Shruti Swamy is working toward her Masters in Fine Arts in fiction at San Francisco State University.

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