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## Indian art: unique yet mainstream

The emergence of Indian art is further evidence of the country's influence. An L.A. exhibition takes a look.  
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IN INDIAN artist **Mithu Sen's** 2007 picture "Perhaps You," a dark-skinned woman smiles coyly beneath a blond, '60s-style up-do. The hair appears to be a wig -- until you notice the woman's pale neck. Is she wearing brown makeup? Then you realize that the image is a photocollage: an Indian face pasted atop a white model's.

"I grow wild in these images," Sen said of works like "Perhaps You" in 2007. "The wild woman is not subject to the rules that govern gender behavior in society."

That concept -- the "wild woman" who defies easy description -- runs through "Contradictions and Complexities: Contemporary Art From India," an exhibition on view at two Culver City galleries: d.e.n. contemporary and Western Project. It features Sen and five other artists, all female, whose work combines references to traditional Indian culture with present-day global concerns.

The show, however, is also the latest in a flurry of recent surveys -- others have gone up in New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Illinois and Kansas -- designed to introduce 21st century Indian art to U.S. audiences. They signal not only India's rising profile on the international art scene but also the emergence of a new generation of Indian artists.

In May, for example, **Subodh Gupta**, 44, became the youngest Indian artist to hit the \$1-million mark when his painting of a man with a luggage cart, "Saat Samundar Paar (10)" (Across the Seven Seas), sold at a Christie's auction in Hong Kong for nearly \$1.2 million. The following month, the auction house took in \$25.8 million at a sale of modern and contemporary Indian art -- up from what was then a record \$3.7 million at a similar sale in April 2005.

### **The factors at work**

Like the boom in contemporary art from China, the rising fortunes of Indian art are without doubt tied to the nation's emergence as a global economic power. But Saloni Mathur, a professor of art history at UCLA, sees two major developments at work.

The first, she agrees, is "the opening up of the Indian economy and in general the whole phenomenon of globalization that's spearheaded by the Internet." But the other is the growth of a wealthy Indian diaspora -- Indians living outside India -- who have started to collect art from the subcontinent.

Yet Mathur thinks there are other factors as well behind the success of Indian art in the West. In a course she teaches on modern and contemporary Indian art, she says, she is continually impressed by her students' enthusiasm. "There's something about modern and contemporary art from China, Africa, India that the generation of the 21st century identifies with," she says. Artists in these regions are dealing with "the problems of a traditional society in an era of globalization, or they're thematizing the questions of colonial history or, like Subodh Gupta, questions of international migration and travel. These are no longer themes that you can identify as uniquely Indian."

New Delhi gallery owner **Peter Nagy**, who co-curated "Contradictions and Complexities" with local dealer Patricia Hamilton, concurs. He says that "one of the reasons why Indian culture in general is becoming more important to the rest of the world -- especially the Western world -- is because the Western world is trying to deal now with inherent hybridity, complexity, contradiction. India's actually done it extremely successfully for generations." Indeed, he believes that India, with a diversity of religions, languages and cultures rivaling that of Europe, has always been a "postmodern" nation.

Some of the work in the Culver City show tackles such fragmented realities directly. **Anita Dube's** video "Kissa-e-Noor Mohammed (Garam Hawa)" is a monologue by a bearded Muslim businessman that starts benignly but culminates in a lament about religious fundamentalism and fascism. When the credits roll, they reveal that the man is in fact Dube herself in drag. The work's subtitle, "Garam Hawa" (Hot Winds), is also the title of a film about the 1947 partition of India, which separated Hindus from Muslims and resulted in the creation of the Muslim state of Pakistan.

Religious issues also figure in **Sheba Chhachhi's** photographs, which document a little-examined Indian population: women ascetics. Chhachhi became interested in these women because of their in-between, often androgynous status. "They seemed to be neither wives nor mothers nor daughters but women who defined themselves in relation to the metaphysical rather than the social," she said in a recent e-mail. "While operating within sanctioned religious codes, they challenged ideas about the domestication of traditional Indian women."

Then there's **Chitra Ganesh**, who plays with the codes of Hindu mythology to raise her own questions about feminine roles. Her digital collages remix 1970s Hindu comic-book iconography with subjective musings on sex and gender relationships to expose ingrained stereotypes and violence. Images of dismembered female bodies, lush foliage and floating deities are rendered in the cheerful colors and stylized lines of comic books.

"I'm sort of looking at the things that seem like contradictions or just the multiple layers of meaning," Ganesh said by phone from New York City, where she lives. "I definitely am interested in portraying alternate arrangements of power and sexuality, but it's more just trying to look at the other side of the coin which is already there."

Although of Indian descent, Ganesh was born in New York. She is the only artist in the show not based in India. But her inclusion suggests that the label "Indian" now transcends geographical boundaries. "Because there's a lot of India shows happening, I try to mess with it," says Nagy, meaning that he freely mixes artists from the diaspora with artists from India.

Deepak Talwar, owner of Gallery Talwar in New York, goes a step further. "I do not put exhibitions together where the artists are only put together because they're all Indian," he says. Although all the artists Talwar represents are of Indian descent, he feels it is more important that they enter the international exhibition circuit as individuals rather than as Indian artists. "Geographical boundaries today are becoming so much less relevant to creative art," he says. "It's art first, and then it is Indian."

Still, the category is a useful organizing principle for curators, says Mathur. "I don't think that those issues of identity are as limiting as they once were in, say, the '80s or early '90s," she says, when ethnic or national categories were often used to ghettoize artists who were not white, male and from the U.S. or Western Europe.

Nevertheless, she is concerned that the success of the Indian art market is fueling growth without a corresponding rise in scholarship and criticism. "The boom has on the one hand created incredible opportunities for Indian artists and visibility on a global scale and real value in monetary terms," she says. "On the other hand, it represents a kind of capitulation to conditions of the market." She jokes that the market may be increasingly driven by "Gujarati doctors in New Jersey buying paintings online to match their sofas."

### **Novelty and necessity**

Indeed, it remains to be seen whether contemporary Indian art is merely the latest trend -- to be summarily replaced by the next big thing -- or if it will become a staple of the mainstream art world.

"Markets need fresh meat," says Nagy. "They need novelty, they need exoticism. It's happened with the Chinese and now India. So that's to be cynical, but the world, especially the centers, are interested in these other places. And frankly, the Indian artists are sick to death of always being in India shows."