

THUKRAL AND TAGRA

Collaboration

ethos

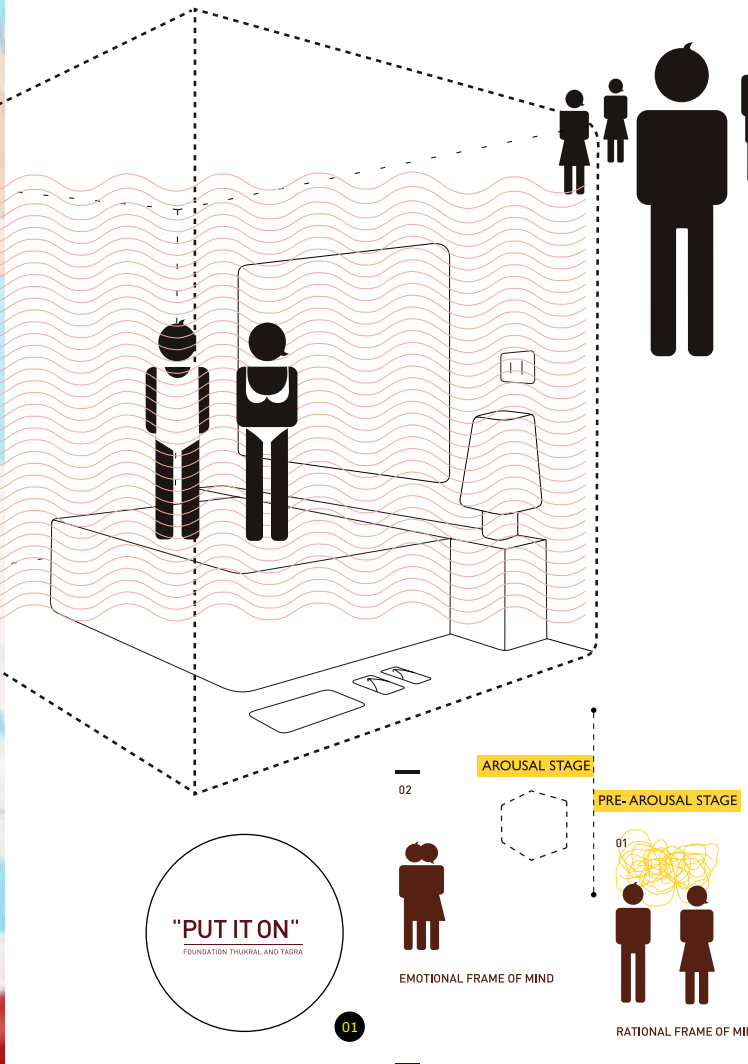
by Lucian Harris, edited by Bhawna Kakar

With their characteristic use of pop icons, graphic super-impositions, candy colors and insightful juxtapositions, Thukral & Tagra will be furthering their ongoing research project against HIV/AIDS with their upcoming show 'Put It On, Again!' at Gallery Nature Morte on January 29th 2011.

oeuvre:

Their new work *Science Mystery Magic Myth* witnesses the Superman hovering over the classic Indian monument of love, Khajuraho.

An increased sexual activity among Indian youth and vulnerability to epidemic is forestalled by the presence of Superman, who is perpetually wearing latex reiterating the fact that condom saves life. Against the backdrop of perceptions of sexuality and fantasy, the duo addresses serious subjects through a witty and bright façade, an eclectic mix of paintings and studio models as well as consumer products. Lucian traces the collaborative aesthetics and telepathic relation nurturing between the duo for a decade now, and just growing strong.



If one were to identify a single defining trait running through the work of Thukral & Tagra to date, it is surely that of collaboration. The very act of working as a creative duo has ensured that the collaborative spirit always remains an integral part of their practice. From the inception of ideas, through the technical processes of making art, to the task of presenting and explaining it, throughout their short and meteorically successful career, their work has taken the form of projects, commissions, residencies and interventions. Rather than propagate the traditional idea of art production, in which the work is conceived as the result of an artist's unique creative vision, their practice is more concerned with the application of a pre-conceived aesthetic and symbolic language in a variety of contexts, constantly expanding and evolving a unique expression.

As artists working together, reference is routinely made to similar established couplings, in particular the British artists Gilbert and George with their photographic codifications of a world revolving around them as a be-suited duo. In fact, despite various successful pairings, this way of working is surprisingly rare among artists and has been far more common in other creative fields such as architecture and advertising, where partnerships have proved more advantageous

in tackling formal and logistical considerations. Indeed, while the collaborative pattern in Thukral & Tagra's practice may not be entirely surprising, far more unique are their explorations of the interior realms of memory and the subconscious, themes that are usually associated with an individual mode of expression. With similar middle-class upbringings rooted in the north-western Indian state of Punjab and overlapping education, the taste and cultural outlook of Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra are based on many shared experiences. It is a remarkable friendship that allows them to live and work together in the same house along with their wives, who are also both artists in their own right. Such a unique artistic vision has been a major factor contributing to the originality of their work.

The partnership of Thukral & Tagra was founded while the pair was working together in the creative department of the New Delhi offices of the international advertising firm Ogilvy & Mather, an environment which opened their eyes to the mechanics of marketing and branding. Before arriving there, both artists had studied fine art as well as commercial design, leaving them well placed to draw on techniques and ideas from both worlds, blurring the boundaries between them. In the world of advertising, creative partnerships are commonly seen as a way of finding imaginative solutions in a pressurized environment. Thukral & Tagra have carried this ethos into their art practice and consequently have always looked for challenging commissions or



(left) Science, mystyry, magic and myth, 110x 84 inches. Oil on canvas, (detail)

01. Information design, "Put It On" (detail)

02. Flip-Flops

03. Pehno project at pushvihar, saket (khoj)

Image Courtesy: Thukral and Tagra studio.

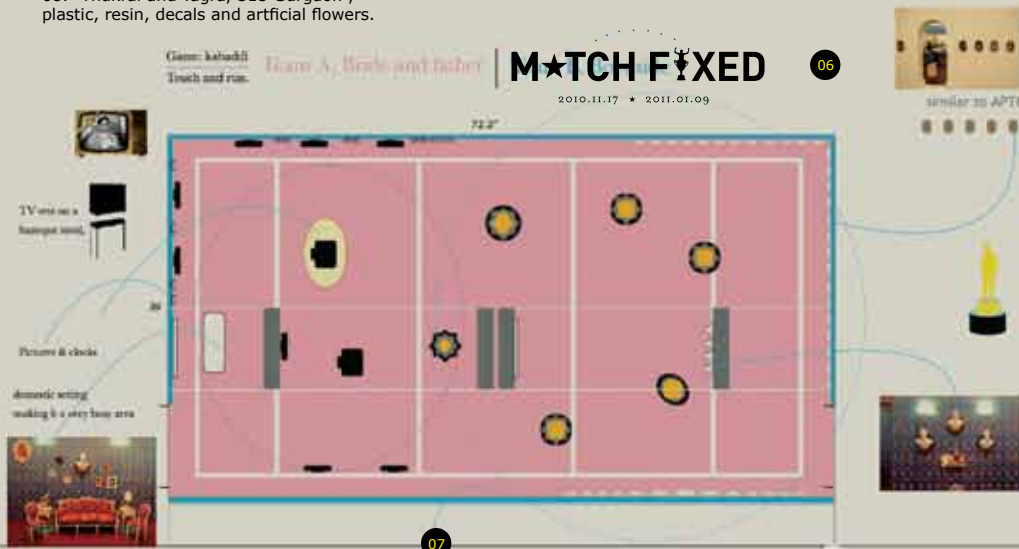


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- 04. Pictures from Punjab.
- 05. Working images of the sculptures.
- 06. Match-Fixed, layout plans/sketches.
- 07. Detailed studies of the sculptures.
- 08. "Thukral and Tagra, 315 Gurgaon", plastic, resin, decals and artificial flowers.

- 09. Detail of the wallpaper "Fixed-Match-Fixed"
- 10. Installation shots at UCCA, Beijing.



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07

wallpaper throughout, which includes images of the sport and writing



c- the guy in play act

b- the guy as play winner

e- the guy on the run.

a- the guy with the luggage

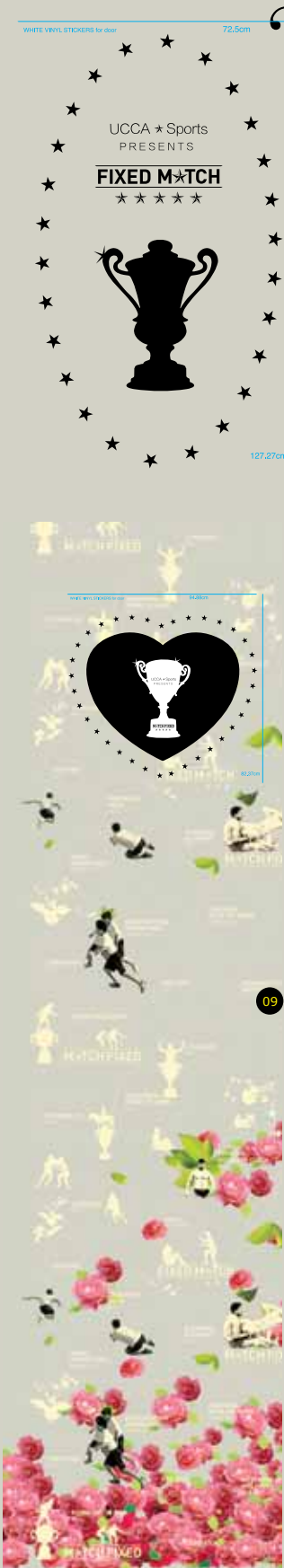
d- the groom on the horse.

white

gold

chocolate brown

10 feet



“Most of our works address the issues, cultural shifts, problems and beliefs of people living in India today. We grew up with the general acknowledgement that most Indians dream of leaving India and moving abroad. We are both of Punjabi descent: that is, our families come from the northern Indian state of Punjab, where the desire to immigrate to the United States, Canada or Germany has always been especially strong. After travelling to one of these countries, either for schooling or employment, Punjabi men often find themselves rather isolated, and stick close to their own community. At a certain point, the time comes to get married and they return to India where a marriage is usually arranged by their family. A “suitable girl” is found who meets all the necessary criteria. For her, the added bonus in this match is the expectation that she will join her husband when he returns to his new home outside of India. The wedding proceeds, the dowry is paid and the couple promises to live “happily ever after.”

However, a common scenario is that the husband then finds some excuse to return home without his bride, promising to take her there at a later date, when all the necessary paperwork has been completed.

Dreaming of life in a foreign land with her new husband, the new bride waits for him patiently in India. These “Runaway Grooms” may on occasion return to visit their wives, but the promise to take them abroad is never fulfilled. The groom enjoys

the best of both worlds (married in India but single abroad), while the deserted wives are humiliated within their own communities and left with little to look forward to in life. - Thukral and Tagra”

중산층의 꿈



MIDDLE CLASS
dreams



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11. "MATCH-FIXED", Installation image at UCCA, Beijing, 2010





12. "MIDDLE CLASS DREAMS", Installation image at Arario Gallery, Seoul, 2010



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13. "Where Are We Heading?(b)", -lithography, screen print, BFK, 300g, white and acrylic sheet, 81x107x3cm, 2010



14. "Everyday-Bosedk", installation image at Nature Morte, Delhi, 2007

16. Apoclytron at select city mall, - resin, irons and decals, 405 x 229 x 137cm, 2009, as part of KHOJ Public art project, 2010

17. "Now in your Neighbourhood" installation image at "Urban Manners II", SESC Pompeia, Sao Paulo, 2010

18. "Adolescere Domus", Installation image, at Art Statements/Art Basel 39, 2007

19. Phantoms XI-B, Oil on Canvas 144x72 inches, 2008

20. "Escape! for a dream land", installation image at Asia Pacific Triennale 6, 2009



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projects that will push them to expand their range of both technical and aesthetic possibilities. This process of continually upping the ante was very much a feature of their residency at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI) and the resulting works, with their marriage of handicraft and technology, deliberately challenged expected procedures.

The tension between digital and hand-guided techniques of art production explored by these works encapsulates an important aspect of Thukral & Tagra's art. A preliminary sketch or maquette is rendered digitally by using sophisticated graphic software. Once completed, this preliminary version of the work is then meticulously transposed onto a canvas using traditional painting techniques. In terms of skill and technique, no corners are cut and the process is not only time consuming but also demand the highest levels of skilled draughtsman-ship and brushwork. The process, like so many other aspects of their work, encapsulates an ideological ethos in which high art and low art meet, generating the kind of paradoxical tension on which they thrive. Their slick photorealism and meticulous application of paint act as an illusory device that cocks a snook at anyone doubting their fine art credentials on the basis of their advertising background and enthusiasm for the digital world..

Considering their substantial body of work and the sophistication of their visual aesthetic, it seems remarkable that it was only in 2005 that Thukral and

Tagra's art career began to take shape. There could not have been a more fortuitous moment to emerge into the art scene in India, when a young generation of artists such as Subodh Gupta, Sudarshan Shetty, Jitish Kallat, Shilpa Gupta and others, were beginning to attract the attention of an international contemporary art community which for decades had ignored the work of Indian artists. Though younger than many of their peers, Thukral & Tagra showed a readiness to dive straight into the deep end. An installation featuring their T-shirts, vinyl wallpapers, a video documenting the process of making the work and flavored vodka to serve at the opening at Nature Morte, New Delhi in 2005 launched their unique aesthetic and received instantaneous accolades from both the commercial and critical communities. Each subsequent exhibition or project has seen them working with the same basic transformative ethos and willingness to test their ability to apply their ideas in new and challenging ways. Rarely, if ever, are they focused on the individual art work. Instead they seek opportunities to make works that will engage with a space or an idea. While they have always hoped for the patronage of an institution or collector to maintain the unity of these installations and interventions, they have been savvy enough to ensure that its components function as individual works in their own right, whether it is a painting, a sculpture or a branded accessory.

The exhibition 'Put it On' at Bose Pacia, New York, in 2006 was geared towards raising HIV awareness and featured custom-made flip flops, underwear and bedding. 'New Improved Bosedk' at Chatterjee & Lal in Mumbai in 2008 featured a monstrous painting of battling dinosaurs flanked by vitrine sculptures containing chocolate syrup bottles branded with the images of Sikh emigres, images that were also on the wrappers of custom-made chocolates handed out at the opening of the show. In 2009, these motifs were re-configured into a giant pink dinosaur constructed from all kinds of disposal plastic bottles for a show in London. It is unfortunate that more of Thukral & Tagra's large scale installations have not been preserved, as they most surely will be in the future as more opportunities are offered to them.

The artists have shown an acute awareness of the alchemical potential of projects and commissions which promise to take their work outside of the usual art world parameters. They have enthusiastically embraced commercial commissions ranging from the decoration of the offices of Conde Nast in Mumbai and their collaboration with Swiss travel firm Kuoni to their designs for a limited edition can of Pepsi, Benetton tee shirts and a line of Puma bags. They feel no discomfort in delivering a deeply felt critique of a consumer culture that is gnawing at the fabric of society and individual expression, while at the same time admitting to an infatuation with the very same commercial world.



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The inherent paradoxical tensions that such contradictions generate inform all their work, challenging the viewer to get beneath the surface and explore rich symbolic content.

Arch manipulators of conventional perceptions, the cartoonish world which Thukral & Tagra have created takes the viewer on a trip where fragmented perceptions compiled from the past, present and future merge into a freshly assembled dream logic. Stylistically, they draw on popular Indian graphic arts, children's books and pictographic educational posters blending this with the aesthetics of Japanese science fiction and marketing media. The resulting images appear inherently sinister, bringing to mind the evil fanged smiles of the benign Hello Kitty characters, often seen in the work of Takashi Murakami, the Japanese artist for whom Thukral & Tagra have regularly expressed their admiration



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The succession of images that float through Thukral & Tagra's works are hallucinatory constructions of people, places and objects from their collaborative subconscious and, by extension, the subconscious of the sub-continent. They merge their childhood memories with contemporary observa-

tions and future projections. The psycho-geographical nexus of their lives is in fact an ancient one. The Grand Trunk Road connecting Delhi to Jalandhar, the respective birth places of Tagra and Thukral, is one of the world's great highways, connecting Bengal in the east to the Khyber Pass in the west. Their images are that of a Punjab of the mind, both their ancestral homeland and their cultural sub-community.

Images relating to childhood and adolescence are key components to Thukral & Tagra's art, as a kind of repository of both future dreams and recollections of the past. A recurring motif in their work has been the everyday detritus of the middle-class Punjabi family home, trinkets and bibelots collected to commemorate important events and achievements in foreign lands, displayed in dusty arrangements that have long ceased to impress relatives and guests. Plucked from their subconscious, these souvenirs and decorations form sentimental picture-scapes. Old radios, toasters, flocked wallpaper, artificial flowers, vacuum cleaners and other domestic artifacts are the survivals of a child's wonderment, still carrying potent auras as keepsakes and memories. The connection with childhood imagination and the ambitions of youth are themes which the artists have regularly explored, presenting a personalized association with the developing nation of India and its own coming-of-age onto the world's stage.

The material culture of the Punjabi middle-class household is one of the

more pervasive sources for Thukral & Tagra's imagery. A typical medium-sized town in the Punjab, like Jalandhar where Jiten Thukral grew up, has seen a mass exodus to Canada in particular, so much so that the influence of the emigrants is palpable and visible. The promise of a better life hangs over those who have not gone out of India, tangible in the kind of material goods that their relatives bring back, whether it is the latest gadgets or the kind of edible treats of which India has been deprived of until recently. Thukral & Tagra have created a number of installations for museum exhibitions that have examined the dreams of escape to the U.S., Canada or Europe harbored by many Punjabi adolescents. Portraits of departed family members are another common feature in most Punjabi households. Thukral & Tagra show them with their mirror shades, turbans and football shirts – the boy racers who got away. The foreign treats sent back, such as bottles of Hershey's chocolate syrup and designer clothes assume an almost mystical aura for kids brought up in India's protectionist trade years, dreaming of a cold Coke as they sip Thums Up cola.

Commenting on everyday life, we see the burgeoning satellite city in the neighboring state of Haryana, just south of New Delhi, represents the fast track to everything that was for so long unavailable in India. Its rapid growth has been emblematic of India's economic boom and has followed the emergence of a new upwardly mobile, professional middle class in



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12. "Nuovi Ricchi (Punjabi Rococo)" - Installation image at "INSIDE INDIA", @ Palazzo Saluzzo di Paesana, Torino, 2010





12. "Nuovi Ricchi (Punjabi Rococo)" - Installation image at "INSIDE INDIA", at Palazzo Saluzzo di Paesana, Torino, 2010

13. Dominus aeries-faciesII, 183x183 cm, Oil on canvas, 2010

India, empowered with disposable income and readjusted aspirations. This construction bonanza has seen the usual clusters of mirror-faced office blocks along the highways but it is in the residential districts that the novel localized style of architecture known as Punjabi Baroque has taken hold.

Houses characterised by a bizarre mélange of Indian and western motifs in the novel localized style of architecture



known as Punjabi Baroque are subject to a considerable degree of fascination from Thukral & Tagra. Once considered a vulgar aberration, these wedding cake creations represent part of the vernacular culture of the new towns of north India and their gaudy eclecticism, symbolizing the aspirations of the nouveau riche. Like giant airships supported on clouds and entwined in bouquets of flowers, these buildings float across

the sky-blue backgrounds of Thukral & Tagra paintings, such as *Dominus Aeries - fascia* (2010).

The pervasive theme of the series *Low-Tech Family Vacations* that was executed here is the fast food culture of globalization, or the 'McDonaldisation,' as Thukral & Tagra have dubbed it. In Thukral & Tagra's inimical style, the superficially happy scenes and bright colours mask an altogether more sinister underbelly. Blissfully unaware, these families are trapped behind the bars of their cages, providing a commentary on the closed culture and deceptive sense of freedom that pervades Singapore's closely controlled society, one which could not be further removed from India's chaotic social fabric. Once again, it is a paradoxical tension which animates Thukral & Tagra's works. The artists both celebrate and critique a consumer culture in which we are all inexorably trapped, guilty of both pleasure-seeking and failed responsibilities, condemned by our own desires.

art summit ad, T&T

the beautiful game