

# Rungbh

A South Asian Quarterly of Culture, Comment and Criticism

\$5

Volume 2, Number 4

## The Visual Arts Issue

### Curating Beyond Race

Diasporic Perspectives

### Bhaji on the Beach

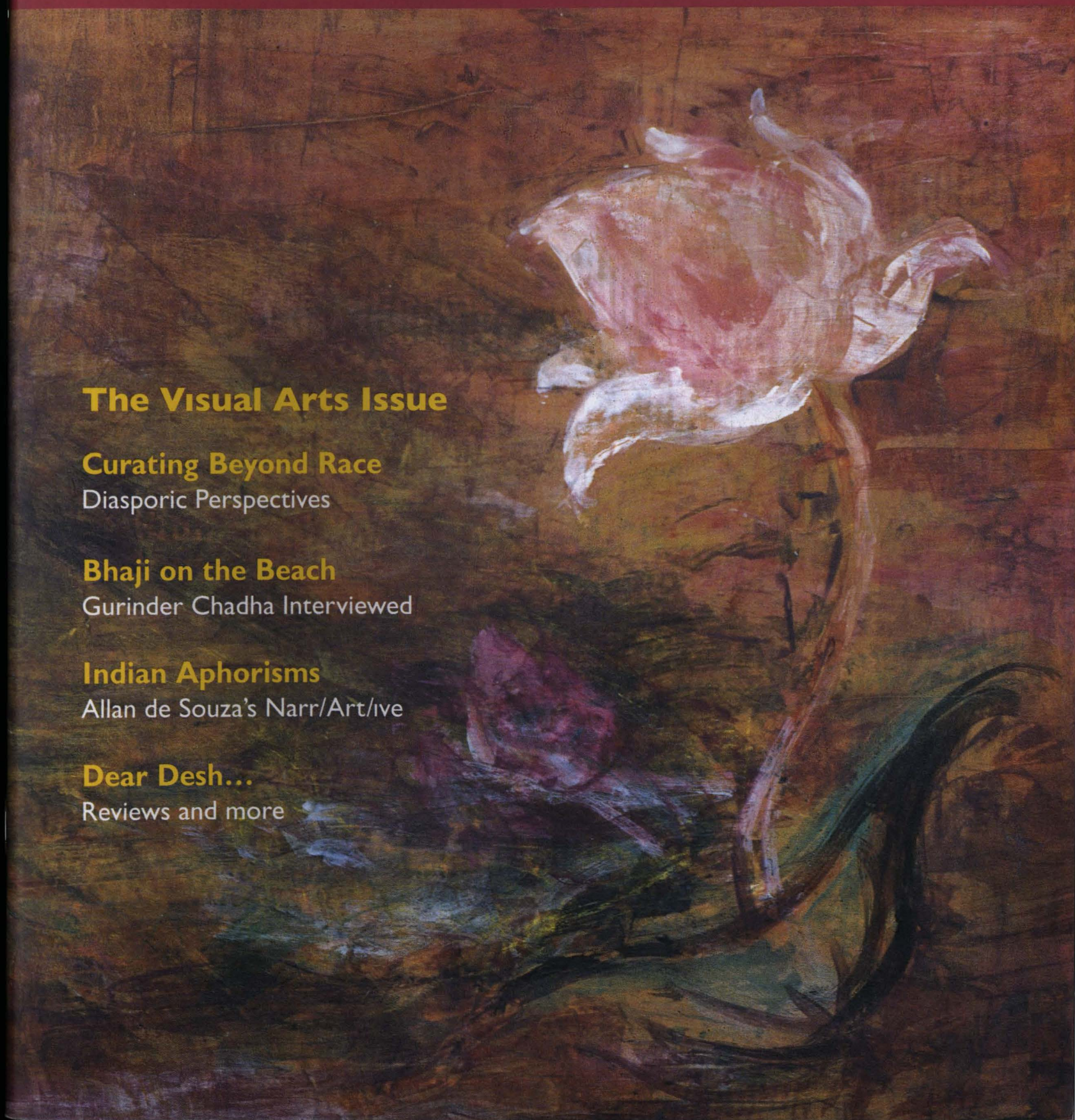
Gurinder Chadha Interviewed

### Indian Aphorisms

Allan de Souza's Narr/Art/ive

### Dear Desh...

Reviews and more







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# Rungh

Volume 2, Number 4

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# Editorial

The work in this issue deals with art production in Canada, Great Britain and the United States. I've placed an emphasis on visually representing the works of as many South Asian artists as possible, so as to expose their work to a wider audience. From Ranjan Sen's painterly images on the covers to Allan de Souza's laser prints and Sheherezade Alam's ceramic works, a diverse range of media and subject matter are presented. This issue attempts to not only present work but also stimulate a discussion about how work is represented. In Britain, Sonali Fernando describes a situation where art which is about so called identity politics is no longer the art which is fashionable to fund nor market. Instead a new Internationalism is in the cultural air and has become the focus of attention in Britain. It is a truism that acknowledging the need for change is necessary for progress, but social issues do not go away once acknowledged by the powers that be. As a practising artist who has both been included in and curated shows about race/ethnicity/identity, I believe that in Canada we're beginning to whiff the smell of the same wind that is blowing in Britain, though here the discourse is younger and still fragile. In the so called west, practising cultural producers have talked about issues of access and celebrated our heritage for some time; many of us are now asking, 'What's next?' While I recognize that there our those artists who are discovering their own histories and relationships to these histories for the first time, for the intermediate to senior artists the dialogue must move on. I agree with Fernando in her observation that the social need that gave birth to the Identity politics/visual arts team is still there; I wonder whether our only options are to continue highlighting the problems of access and continue to gain a profile for a 'different' art or to deemphasize difference and give up the access and profile that we've all worked so hard to gain.

In the end, I believe that most of us don't want to be labelled, as *exotic*, *different*, *other*, *minority*, or even *South Asian*, etcetera ad nauseum. We want to make our work honestly and with respect. We want to explore the possibilities of our different media and our roles as artists, writers, and musicians. We want to practice our art and present it to an informed and engaged audience. As artists our work comes from our own experiences and interests. Identity, through race, sexuality, and other signifiers is often the concern of many contemporary artists; it is something that holds together a lot of the work represented in this issue of Rungh. I believe that we must guard against relying on the current marketability of our ethnicity in making our work look 'South Asian'. On the other hand, many of us have to proceed through our development in stages as we unlearn and relearn history, reclaiming language, images, and traditions, before going on to develop our personal ways of communicating about issues and ideas that mean something to us. Some of us don't identify with being South Asian at all. For these issues to mean something to an audience is another matter, depending on how work is presented. The context provided by curators, catalogues, and reviewers is important in helping to create an informed audience. In my opinion, the level of discussion that currently exists, especially in Canada, has room for advancement and development. The discourse must find room to include dialogues about social issues, aesthetics, art history and criticism, semiotics, and craft. Reviews, catalogue essays and images are important ways through which we gain respect as cultural producers not only with mainstream institutions, but amongst one another. Hopefully this issue will help readers understand that contemporary art practice can be more than just entertainment and celebration; it can question, inform, comfort and provoke.

Amir Ali Alibhai, Guest Editor, is a visual artist, curator and educator.





## Preface

So 'post-modernism' has been and gone, and with it other cultural groupings and trends of the '80s and '90s. Goodbye 'identity politics', farewell 'second wave feminism' and ciao 'Black Arts Movement': in artistic and intellectual milieux these once indispensable ideologies are now considered old hat.<sup>1</sup>

If a sense of interregnum exists among Black cultural producers now, it may not be entirely because these ideas have lived themselves out. In a culture of metropolises enchained to the new, cratered with waste, functioning in that state of instant amnesia intrinsic to late Twentieth Century capitalism, there is a tendency even in emancipator politics to conform to the market's relentless braying for novelty. In the process radical ideas are rendered obsolete before they are fully stretched or nuanced; they are politically lobotomised as they themselves become market commodities. Many Black artists in Britain, who decry their continued exclusion from mainstream cultural spaces and support the ongoing critique of essentialism, are concerned about the hurried eclipsing of 'identity politics', explorations of 'ethnicity' and Black cultural alignments by a glibly conceived 'New Internationalism' which appears to have been substituted into the funding structures as though by a gentlemen's agreement to change the furniture.<sup>2</sup>

Post-modernism, as the philosophical attack on Enlightenment certainties and consequently the end of the 'grand narratives' that underwrite the political, social and economic supremacy of Western 'Man', held great emancipatory promise: as even post-modernism's stoutest critics agree: "the period after the modern is when the others of modernity talk back".<sup>3</sup> But in practice, to take the British example, the radical reversal/substitution morphology of post-modernism is most evident in the manoeuvres of the Right. Thus the political party that qualifies more than any other for the epithet 'radical' (denoting its attack at the 'roots' of British society, its destabilising of British verities such as the postwar tradition of Welfare State capitalism and the 'uprooting' of the notion of society itself), is also the party that is purveying a 'new' Britain pickled in heritage aspic: John Major's Britain of 'invincible green suburbs', 'hot bread from the local baker's', 'warm beer' and 'spinsters cycling to church'.<sup>4</sup> This Tory simulation (simulation in Debord's sense of 'a social relation among people meditated by images'), itself quoted from a text written by George Orwell in the 1940s, lives today as a concatenation of buzz-phrases from TV commercials promising an eternal Britain of teas with the Vicar on Mr Kipling's cakes, oven-warm Hovis and jaunts round Epping in a Vauxhall Nova. The preexistence of layer on layer of Little England images in the national culture ensured that John Major's speech, and others like it, were not merely a shot into the ether.

# BREAK IN



# MAKE MY DAY!

# CALL ME PAKI



# MAKE MY DAY!

Prints by Anita Kaushik

# hair of the dog?

## Contemporary South Asian Visual Artists in Britain

Coming from Britain, as I am often made to remember that I do, as a person of South Asian descent, I—and here, but for inelegance, I would peg words between inverted commas—belong to a community that is both under-represented and hyper-scrutinised. The ethnic designation of this 'I' is plucked from oblivion only in the most controlled way, of course: 'I' am produced through a cultural language that still carries Empire in it, the love-hate powerfuckover of the coloniser and the colonised, refined through four centuries of British intimacy with the Indian Subcontinent. The colonial dyad now makes a ghostly reappearance in a new idea—the impoverished, static hybrid 'British Asian'—and the colonial rationale steps out again as contemporary racism, whose first target is South Asians. So whatever one's dreams of cosmopolitan fluidity, there is always that very marginal, but very real, prior nomenclature to contend with. Scepticism becomes a habit of survival.

It was in such a mood of suspicion, though graced with sporadic joy, that many people received the phenomenal South Asian Visual Arts Festival that took place in Britain this year, an event that had been four years in the making, and involved more than sixty artists and twenty venues throughout Britain. I have chosen to write about four of these artists, all of whom produce mixed-media installations, whose work harness some of the paradoxes of representation to the task of decolonisation in the broadest sense.<sup>6</sup> The work I have selected negotiates the postmodern and the neo-colonial, offering not resolution or closure, but articulation and exposure: at their best the works are visionary biopsies of contemporary culture. They represent a desire to intervene in the proliferation of images that take no responsibility for themselves: images eviscerated from context (the first prerequisite of neo-colonial appropriation) and ideological images that conceal real power relations, referring only to each other and not to referents in the world.

Unlike the generations of South Asian artists preceding them, who came as pilgrims to the shrine of European



Modernism, these people (all aged between 26 and 25) did not come to Britain to be Artists. This generation came when it was young, or born here, and has grown up with—been intimate with—stimuli and emphases from an age dominated by information and mass communication, cheap air travel and increased cultural colonisation by the United States and Japan. It is a West that now constructs itself as futuristic by constant reference to a mythologised recent past. In this generation the notions of 'British culture' and 'South Asian culture' inevitably undergo major transformations. Underpinning 'their' concerns is a focus on the mechanisms of power that authorise mass representation. Holding that no image is innocent—for enunciation is always produced within a specific code and history that entails a process of selection and discarding—these artists' appetite is not only for 'the world itself' but for the structures, paradigms, languages and devices through which the world is produced. One of the tactics that they use is that of stealing public signifiers and redeploying them—taking the things that imprison, invade, impact and hurt from public imagery and reinforcing them, giving them even more airtime, so that eventually they seem, deliriously, to lash back against themselves. But is all the borrowing and rearranging of existing material not perhaps the ploy of the victim, of the desperado, the dependent, that of she who cannot leave it, cannot create except in relation to it? Like taking alcohol to cure a hangover, is this work the hair of the dog that bit?

In Alistair Raphael's photographic installations, the participant is assailed by tropes of invasion, scrutiny and surveillance, in a sustained exegesis of the vocabulary and imagery surrounding AIDS. Though an artist working with photographs, he actually takes very few photographs himself. Most of his images are borrowed, from medical journals, anatomy books and magazines that traffic in decontextualized pictures of the virus.

These are household images, reinforced by their presence in different media: sememes in the authorized language of the body. Raphael charges himself to be utterly passionless in his use of these images—not in denial of his humanity, but because it is in this seamless, objective style that public imagery is delivered, and, only by imitating its mode of delivery can he refigure it. In *Interrupt*, a haunting, elegiac piece on love, loss, life and death, the tensions between medical surveillance and intimacy pivot on the image of a heart; a heart that we know as such through its violent, regular hammering and its coating of blood, defined by movement and texture rather than forms so different from its caricature as the emblem of love. A life size (4m x 3m) black and white photograph of a Victorian brass bed in an empty room with white walls and bare floorboards evokes desolate stillness. The sheets and pillows of the bed are crumpled and pitted as though embossed with the memory of lovemaking: implicit memory in explicit separation. Down from the pillow, where a sleeping person's heart would be, a tiny video plays an edited video of open heart surgery in a long loop. Spurting blood in delicate jets after incision, the heart is prised out of the chest cavity by gloved hands and the hollow packed aggressively with ice to slow down its beating. This organ, presented literally at the knife-edge of life and death, cannot connote passion in any simple way, for the ineffable mystery that it represents is produced through the medical gaze, in a surgical context, already entered by both the scalpel and the artificial eye. The privacy of love suggested by the bed has been invaded: now, as throughout history, the language of

love has been informed by the language of medicine. The piece places AIDS, so often figured as an invading, 'alien' disease, within a context, within a personal history of a bed that has seen and been passed down through generations of male lovers, and the history of the mediation of male love and homosexuality by the medical establishment.

Raphael's commitment to context, echoed by other artists, means semantic as well as social context: meaning is enunciated which have their own histories of excavate those codes they also acknowledge the partiality of doing so, and tacitly, that for the children of migrants, knowledge of their parents' cultural codes is usually partial or derivative. A kind of 'doubling' of vision arises from this sense of being able to crack through, having been intimate with different semantic codes. But this is not one that entails dualism. An analogy is that of looking at an optical illusion: there is a moment when it reverses on itself and perception is suddenly radically transformed as one understands its other, perfectly logical, competing reality, which exists in *precisely the same format*; in another moment one tries to recapture the first impression. Between the two perceptions is that place where paradoxes are poised, or clenched, in equilibrium, where both views are simultaneously possible.

This perceptual doubling is evident in Said Adrus' treatment of the Canvas, that Holy of Holies of Western art. Just as Andy Warhol sent up Western art conventions, parodying what had become stereotypic while gleefully and hypocritically stealing their power, so Adrus pushes the boundaries of 'painting' while strategically preserving elements. Look, no hands! His images are high-technology computer paintings sprayed onto canvas by gargantuan computers that he has programmed. He never stretches or frames his canvases, deliberately debunking High Art orthodoxies on form and enjoying the 'practicality' of being able to roll his paintings up like scrolls to carry in his rucksack. In his early work this portability was integral to his sense of didactic urgency, that he was making messages to be delivered (for instance in his painting based on a poem about five people who were burnt to death in a racist arson attack). In *Transition of Riches* he traces the principles of canvas (its weft, strength and response to paint) back through to hessian sisal and jute (materials made in Africa and Asia), and returns these raw materials to their working form as sacks, stapled and dumped on the floor. In this form, the fabric becomes richly suggestive of histories and memories far removed from the European art world; of physical labour, agriculture, export, boxes covered in stitched calico at shipyards in India and Africa, sway gags, trade parcels, migrants' luggage. Elsewhere, hessian is used to 'frame' a canvas painting made by computer. Visually, the prints and the weave of the hessian coincide. The pixels of the computer images echo the texture of the nostalgia for the raw, a romantic desire to counterpoint

Many Black artists in Britain...are concerned about the hurried eclipsing of 'identity politics'... by a glibly conceived 'New Internationalism'.



the complexity of his new technology with the simplicity of these old materials. But it is also part of a larger ambition shared by other artists to find a place for dissident migrant histories within a restructured European art.

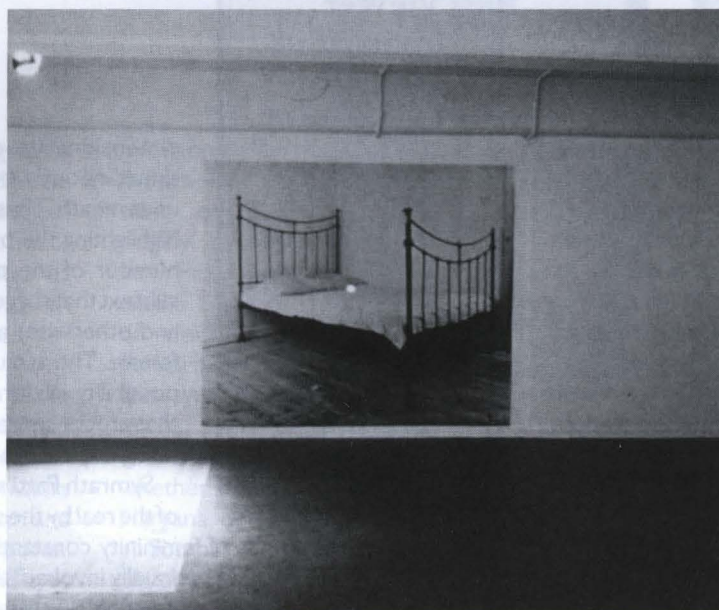
The eruption of raw human anger manifest in graffiti has long excited Adrus, leading him to experiment with its confrontational power. But now graffiti is no longer written in his work, but spoken, by voices that emerge eerily from the sacks which have been emblazoned with an image of the British crown taken from the national passport. Are these the property of the State, of transiting nationals, or have they been sequestered at Customs? A looped fragment of human voice, speaking rhythmically and slowly like a 45 rpm rap played at 33, asks insistently,

"Seeing, is it believing?" The slight twist to the cliché comes to mean both, "Can you ever safely trust what your eyes tell you?" and "Will you ever believe, even if it's staring you in the face?"

On the wall a computer generated image of a Devil TV and a skull-headed soldier has the same query, but

now the awkward relationship it posits between humanity, commerce, migration and truth is further complicated by televisual representation.

Adrus transforms cultural icon through technology. The tabla (a British metonym of 'Indianness', to the letter 'T' what Saris, Samosas, and Sitars are to the letter 'S') in his soundtracks changes from live instrument to sampled sound, digitised, communicable with other digital information: synchronic practice at an electronic level. Humorous freehand drawings of tablas produced on computers are reproduced in a variety of bright colours, their colour and lopsidedness instantly deflating the solemnity of the instrument within Classical Indian music. The contemporary, not the 'traditional' connections are what are important, Adrus contends. The tabla is relevant for many young people in Britain not through Classical music but through bhangra, players such as Talvin Singh who work with reggae, rock and jazz artists and bands like *Fun>da>Mental* that project hardhitting political lyrics, combined with traditional acoustic instruments and technologically sampled sounds. He thus regurgitates with ironic disbelief the proverbs and platitudes of Identity in his work, refusing to stabilise any identity yet creating the space in which submerged identities must be recognized. The viewer, who is also the listener, is situated between belief and mistrust, at either arrival or departure, at that place, which is also a non-place, of migration and cultural change.



Alistair Raphael's Interrupt.

fake, and arranged in the shape of a swastika. This symbol may be a Hindu token of peace, but to Asians in Europe and increasingly anti-BJP Indians, the fascistic connotations of the symbol always intervene. The reading is always double. The doll is, of course, pale-skinned and

blonde-haired, the image par excellence of ideal female beauty that dominates the world. Here she becomes a satire of the brutal pigmentocracy that exists in South Asian cultures, where brides are touted according to their colour, and women are exhorted to

apply mercuric skin lightening creams to their faces and bodies.

Kaushik leaves a small message, "Please remove your shoes," outside the room. Viewers are enjoined to enter the space clean, in a worshipful way as they would a temple or other hallowed site. The bride is there to be worshipped as a goddess. But she is also there as a sexualized object to be confined and violated. Shoeless, one experiences better the crass sensuality of the room—it becomes a hermetic zone in which everything is synthetic, a heightened, absurd simulation of the means by which misogyny is normalized. Kaushik's strategies of excess and corrosive humour, cast an unsparing eye on the day-to-dayness, the banality of sexual and racial contempt. The room takes on the aspect of a neurotic seduction chamber; lined with man-made synthesis of pubic hair ('fur'), it becomes a cavity of simulation, the exteriorisation of 'her' own sexuality as artifice and suffocation. On the walls the words 'cunt' and 'Paki' are cut in chunks of hairy graffiti, the everyday abuse with which the Indian woman, who is weirdly troped by Barbie, yet not fully present, must apparently learn to 'put up or shut up'.

Kaushik is awed by the ludicrous strength of emotion which this doll, this plastic incarnation of the Dream Teenager, can arouse in people. "Placed head to toe, the 60 million Barbie dolls sold by 1990 would circle the earth 3.5 times. A Barbie doll is sold every two seconds...in Western and Eastern Europe, Asia, South America, Africa and the Middle East."<sup>7</sup> In using Barbie as an image she both acknowledges the colossal power of

*"Raphael charges himself to be utterly passionless in his use of images...because it is in this seamless, objective style that public imagery is delivered."*



this contemporary icon (the word 'doll' derives from the Greek 'Eidolon' meaning 'idol'), and queries who has the right to authorise the meaning of something so powerful. For her, Barbie signifies not glamour but oppression, at a harmless plaything but an implement of propaganda, not a safe role model for little girls but an adult blueprint for sexualised teenagehood (yet, without genitals, simultaneously de-sexed and controlled). In her inertness, she is both a metaphor of, and a means of effecting, female impotence in the world, loss of speech and of freedom. When enlarged to human size, Barbie's resemblance to an inflatable doll is unmistakable.

Phone-booth cards of the kind used to advertise prostitutes' services, signs of the sexual trade in women, are the templates for her series of large (6'x4') Barbie paintings. The connections are many. Prostitutes' cards and paintings are both quadrants, both employ framing, both involve viewers and sale, both are in some sense advertisements to participate in a fantasy world. Kaushik hints that she is merely exposing a parallel that was already there: that of the art world's steady brokerage of women's bodies throughout the history of art in its role as grand Pimp of the Simulacral. But the cards are of course throwaway, their temporariness a product of their functionality. In translating a piece of punter's ephemeral into a painting, she destabilises precisely this valuation of Art's permanence. With a savage sense of parody, Kaushik puns in Sunday Sport mode on the word 'cheeky' and the bare plastic buttocks of Barbie, who lies across the frame while a male figure prepares to spank her. His pose makes the picture sinister, his arm stiffly raised as though in a fascist salute, an impression reinforced by the shiny leather-like texture of his body. Barbie's face inflects consternation and is more humanised and contoured than her body, which is realised as flat planes of colour. Kaushik experiments with the traditions by which volume is represented in painting, playing between two and three

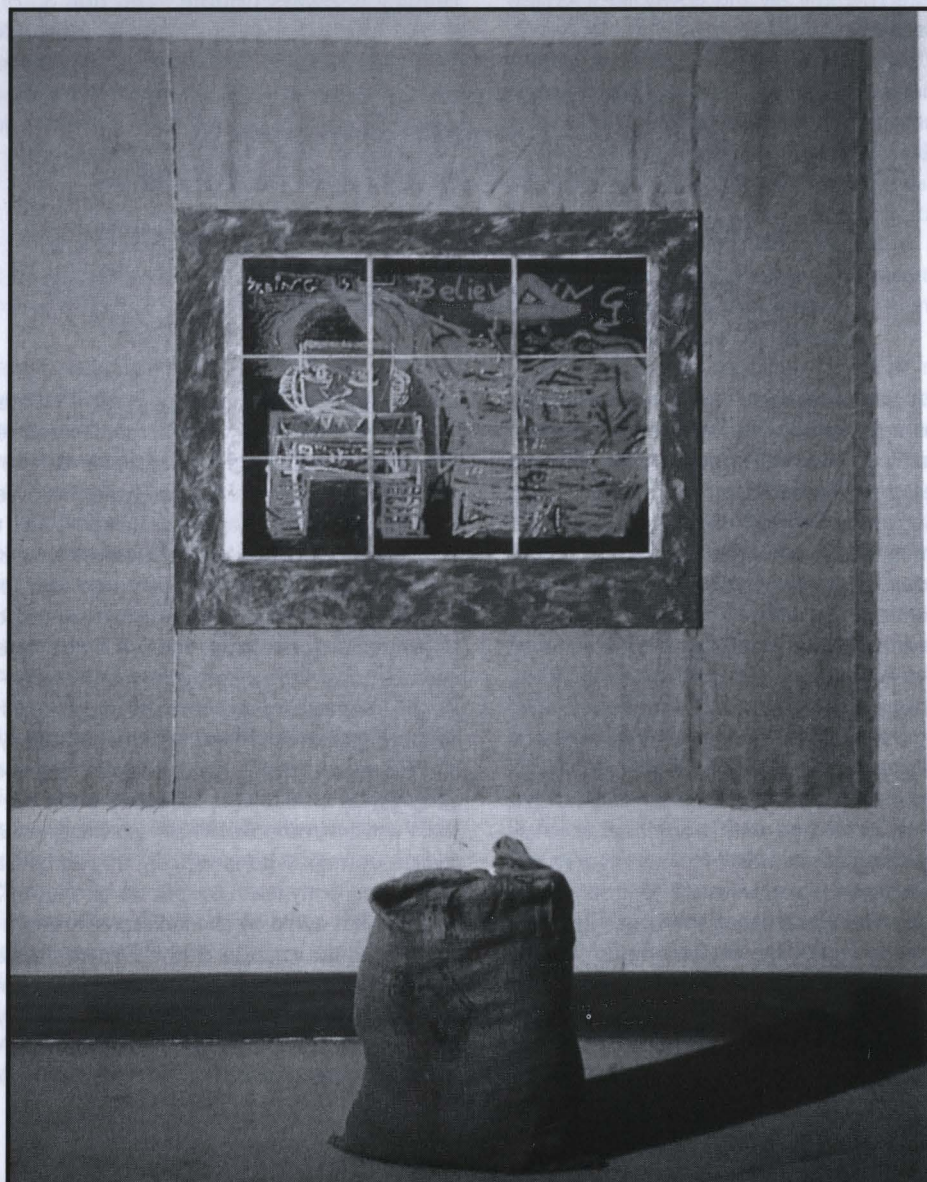
**"The viewer... is situated between belief and mistrust... at that place, which is also a non-place —of migration and cultural change."**

dimensionality, creating the illusion of volume and simultaneously belying it with the block of flat colour underneath. Thus, she courts both realism and the unreal, highlighting the painting's own status as simulation. The humour of the paintings is belied by the menace of a subtext that suggests male violence, (epistemic, domestic and otherwise) against women and degradation of the female. The assaulting of women is seen as not merely a possibility in our society but an imperative, licensed by that crucial sense of a duty being fulfilled, a moral order being imposed: a woman 'needs a firm hand'.

Symrath Patti's work depicts the pathos of the erasure of the real by the simulated. In *Cherchez la Femme*, a series of tropes of femininity constantly defer the presence of a real woman who is yet continually invoked: the participant is lured around the piece in a strange game of hide-and-seek. Designed for inclusion in an exhibition at the Victorian Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, the room is decorated like a sitting-room, complete with sofa, brash 1970s silver patterned wallpaper and a coffee table, with Indian films of TV screens. The room establishes an ironic continuity with forms of the Museum

room that houses it, reiterating the indivisibility of an discrepancies in the relationship between first and third worlds. The Museum's glass display cases—devices intended to plant the idea of an objective 'window on the world' in the minds of visitors—have become the sitting room's alcoves. Present-day 'windows on the world', in the shape of three TV monitors, flicker with Hindi film images.

We are ushered into the room by a smell of sweetness so intense that the pungency of decay is only gradually discernable. Mangoes, symbols of womanhood and femininity, rot in the room's humidity. In an alcove a sewing machine whirs intermittently, haunting the room with the sound of homework, of invisible women trading their lives in running-stitch to the rattle of a Singer, as they sew for high street shops on machines that hold them hostage to their homes. The room is an



Said Adrus, *Fragile—Handle with Care*, Installation detail.  
Photo Franklyn Rodgers



index of non-presence, bearing other signs of a woman who seems to have evaporated in the heat, or decayed in the morbidity of the atmosphere. The air, whose sickly-sour scent of mangoes represents absent, dying femininity, has become overwhelmingly present. Thus insubstantiality takes on the character of the substantial.

The work turns on this interrogation of the metaphysical and the material, the represented and the real. On the screens other phantom women en flesh codes of femininity. Film stars from old Bombay films, like Meena Kumari and Nutan Samarth, enunciate complex corporeal languages, where nuances of the hips and eyes are the body's own adverbs and verbs, a swell of the shoulders can inflect desire, a retreat in the eyes the urge to self-sacrifice. These are re-edited clips, resonant 'takes' wrenched from their original context and reassembled in a new film—a film that was anyway latent all the time in the others as a kind of subconscious—which repeats itself on the monitors in an endless loop. They are pieces of intensity, sharp epiphanies that form a dot-to-dot of femininity, a stark list of woman's available crises and choices. Always woman as daughter, sister, wife, mother, left with no social, sexual or creative option beyond the family. And should she transgress, should her desires conflict with the list of possible pleasures, there is even a form of expulsion from family duties that is sanctified: renunciation as a *sanyas*—Woman's renunciation doubling as spiritual ideal and the social valve that spares jeopardised family honour.

Therein lies the great psychosocial trick: the line between 'renunciation' and 'sacrifice' is, for women, almost always blurred. Does she jump or is she pushed? Dressed in white, colour of mourning, women in the films become ciphers of grief, striving to slough their hated bodies in a struggle to become ether, purity itself. And it is only by this remorseless drive towards insubstantiality, the cuts suggest, that 'femininity' is resubstantialised, vindicated, consummate. 'Femininity' triumphs in the death of the woman.

What is the relationship between the screen and the room? Is the sitting-room the screen's after image, scene of a poor, bungled attempt to achieve the perfection of the film universe? Or does the screen actually represent the real structures of experience, through narratives stripped bare as skeletons? On the mantelpiece rests a bumper decorated with *parandis*

(women's hair extensions) like some obscene trophy, evoking for Patti the whole tradition of decorating vehicles, industrial symbols of male power, with the trappings of socialised 'femininity'—whether stickers of Hema Malini on lorries in Haryana, or hair tied to exhaust pipes on cars in Southall. With its sinister allusions to the physical danger and degradation that women live with, it also points to the functional use of femininity as a metaphor by men. On screen, gay male characters, transvested as female film stars, pronouncedly ape the codes of femininity—codes that, for many women are not optional party wear but their only garb. Patti is critiquing homosociality, (as opposed to homosexuality) the structure of relationships between man and man that defines and controls contemporary society: As Eve Kossofsky Sedgwick has lucidly argued, this is the unacknowledged condition of social relations, whether between heads of state, fathers and husbands, opposing armies or businesses. In this male economy, women are the currency, to be bought and sold as brides, to be transferred from a father's house and name to a husband's, to be raped by soldiers in camps 'to demoralize the enemy' (i.e. in acts seen to be committed *on a man* by another man), or, as images, flogged from a movie director to a man in drag.

Patti's multivalent work enlarges a series of questions arising from observations of gender dynamics in her own family to an iconic staging of the domain of the South Asian woman; a domain in which, even in her own sitting-room, she is present only as a sign, a trace. Patti idiosyncratically combines different languages—cinematic, gestural, social—with a kind of bitter melancholy. She wants us to ask



Anita Kaushik, From the 'Barbie Paintings', 4' x 6'

where, in this dance of light, sound and electricity and the ricochet of image and meaning, where among this shabby furniture and these emblems of colonial, sexual and industrial oppression, is the real woman? We may well try and 'cherchez la femme': great indeed is her

task of producing herself, from riches so poor.

One of the hazards for Black people in the postmodern critique of the rational subject is this: that the endless dissolution of the self that it predicates denies agency, and so vitiates the counter-hegemonic project of building up the identities of oppressed peoples. The repression of the real body is catastrophic. But, paradoxically, the un-problematic assertion of the repressed body is too, for it becomes a trap. These artists tread the cusp of this paradox, refusing the paralysis it might imply by creating the conditions in which one cannot avoid speaking of repressed subjectivities without ever representing them. Thus, they create a double helix of simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction, and show that the two processes need not—and for marginal people must not—be sequential.

**"Kaushik...is merely exposing the art world's steady brokerage of women's bodies throughout its own history, and in its role as grand Pimp of the Simulacral!"**

It is for this reason that the artists referred to here avoid the negative, even nihilistic trap into which much postmodern art falls, the 'hair of the dog' scenario in which artists are doomed to perpetual reactivity and contextual meaninglessness. They are important precisely because they push against this postmodern affliction of dependency, the kind of obsessive intertextuality denoted by Baudrillard's description of the simulacral, the orchestration of 'the real' as 'not only that which can be reproduced but that which is already reproduced, the hyperreal which is entirely simulation.'

Their work is committed to context, in continuum with the emancipatory art created



by Black artists since the 1970s and before. It demands recognition of the *actual* conditions with which people live, and of the repercussions of symbols and signs of *real* people. In this sense, it is part of the ongoing, counter-hegemonic project of recovering the experience of oppressed groups from unrepresentability, and it is a living testament to the idea that the challenges of identity politics articulated by Stuart Hall *et al* in the 1990s cannot be abandoned simply because of a change in the wind (or the fatuous essentialising of 'identity' in some arenas). But what distinguishes it from earlier Black work is the refusal to represent an affirmative, essential Black self in response to mainstream negation. Their works aim to destabilize all meanings, to leave open propositions in installations that invite the viewer as *participant* to the process of reconstruction. For these artists it is an essential part of the recovery of agency to speak fluently in the registers of postmodernism and the vocabularies of contemporary mass culture: but theirs is a resistant postmodernism, one which aims to provide usable knowledge about the world, by setting in dialectical motion the formal

**Symrath Patti's work depicts the pathos of the erasure of the real by the simulated.**

and logical inconsistencies of the materials they use, and implicating the viewer in the production of both meaning and power.

The body of the participant becomes the locus of transformation, the place in which other bodies repressed by public discourse are both reincarnated and transfigured. Far from the depressive, dependent, defensive practices of much postmodern art, which trips on the 'narcissistic melancholy' of the loss of the Self, this work allows viewers to access the possibility of social and cultural transformation. The artists may use pastiche, quote and appropriate already existing images: but in a culture that wastes many things—ideas, people, products, raw materials—a culture marked by premature and compulsory redundancy—recycling, renovation and rehabilitation may be emancipatory strategies. There is certainly a need to recoup Black political and cultural coalitions in a creative and dynamic way from the premature obsolescence being wrought on them by the market forces, hungry for novelty and short on concentration, that operate in the art world as in other spheres of contemporary life. In this culture of gratuitous simulation, of irony worn too lightly and of images untenanted by meaning, the work of these young South Asian descended artists examines, with bug-eyed vigilance, the operations of power behind the aesthetic, political and commercial strategies that bring popular images into existence. In so doing, rescuing some of our most potent contemporary signifiers from the abyss of the unreal.



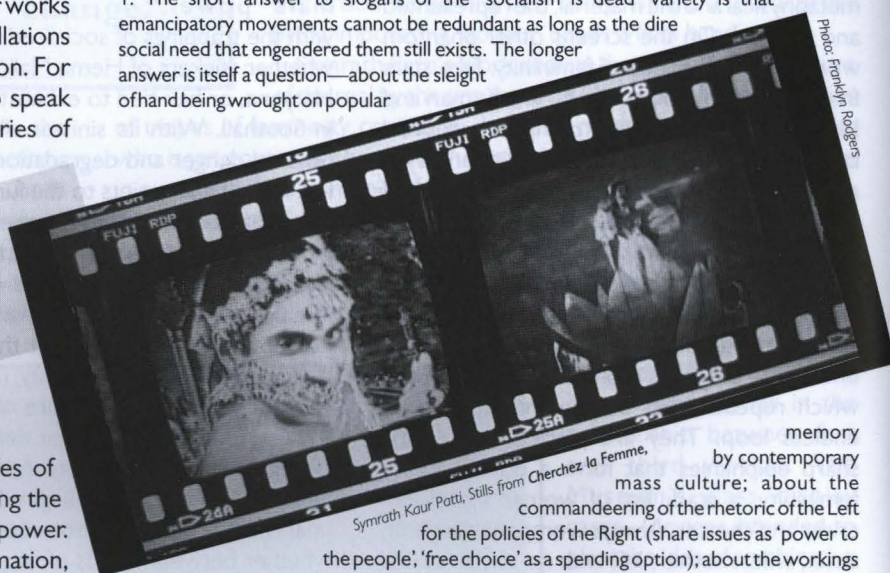
**Sonali Fernando** is a graduate in English from Oxford University. She is a writer and filmmaker currently living in London, England.

For more information about the **South Asian Contemporary Visual Arts Festival** held in Britain in 1993, contact:

Juginder Lamba, SAVAF Lionart, Unit 308,  
The Custard Factory, Gibb Street, Birmingham, UK, B9 4AA

#### Notes

1. The short answer to slogans of the 'socialism is dead' variety is that emancipatory movements cannot be redundant as long as the dire social need that engendered them still exists. The longer answer is itself a question—about the sleight of hand being wrought on popular



Symrath Kaur Patti, Stills from *Cherchez la Femme*, memory by contemporary mass culture; about the commanding of the rhetoric of the Left for the policies of the Right (share issues as 'power to the people', 'free choice' as a spending option); about the workings of postmodernism itself, not as a craze ideology, but as an ambivalent sensibility that continue to haunt contemporary life.

2. The justifications for 'New Internationalism' that have so far been offered are inadequately theorised. If the accusation of essentialism is being levelled at local Black identifications, there is no guarantee that so-called 'International' alignments will be any less essentialist: it is not hard to see that 'internationalism' courts precisely the same perils as 'multiculturalism' (in which people are required to parade discrete and immobile ethnic identities under a supervising and controlling Caucasian eye), only on a larger scale. Internationalism—except in Marx' aspiration—has always been the preserve of the elite in practice, and there is no guarantee now that it will not simply pander to artists from a global elite (whether First world of Third) and of course, in the process, throw local ideas such as 'equal opportunities' into disrepute. Unfortunately, as Alistair Raphael and others have pointed out, the powers that be have 'disenfranchised the very process of defining what New Internationalism might mean'—very few artists have been able to participate. If the arts funding bodies are genuinely interested in fostering a spirit of internationalism in the arts (though many would argue that an interesting curatorial idea should not become a principle of funding) they should surely contribute to it from the mainstream budgets, not the small pool of money that was fought for by Black artists in the '80s and was often the only guarantee that Black British work would be shown in this country.
3. Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: Identity and Postmodern Politics in Identity*.
4. John Major, speech to the house of commons, 1993.
5. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 1983.
6. The 'colonised' including women or gay people, for instance.
7. *Barbie Fun Facts*, press release issues by Mattel quoted in *Sindy-rella Complex*, unpublished thesis by Anita Kaushik



# Off colour:



not just an 'other' screening

*'Off Colour' doesn't mean 'tainted'.  
What I mean is getting off the topic of Colour.*

We have witnessed, in the last three years or so, a tremendous increase in the visibility of artists of colour, an increase that has everything to do with a concerted effort by non-white and white activists to open up access to art media technologies, to skills, to curating and being curated, to exhibition, and to funding for these artists. Just about every festival nowadays has mandatory (unspoken) of colour programming.

It is only natural that the first of colour works (in whichever discipline) in this very tender phase of access and visibility would be screaming explorations of colonization, domination, marginality, home, hybridity.

In a recent interview in *Paragraph* magazine, John Clement Ball reminds Moyez Vassanji of an essay that he had written a few years ago in which he said, "...that the post-colonial migrant writer's first serious act of writing is a reclamation of the past, after which he or she has a basis from which to write about the present." (Substitute 'writing' for whichever art form suits you and the idea still holds).

Over time however a circle of unfortunates seem to have unwittingly evolved. Film and video festivals invariable have their of colour slots which at one time might have served to highlight these works and their urgent issues. But time has passed and artists and the discourses of race and identity have grown and are taking new shape and direction. But visibility and access strategies seem to have stagnated. A good deal of curatorial choices still suggest that in order for a tape by an of colour artist to merit screening, it must deal specifically with issues of colour and race, etc. otherwise there is confusion as to how and where to shape the program. Work produced by people of colour, regardless of the subject, must fall into the People of Colour Section, leaving the rest of the programming uncomplicated and "pristine." Only tapes that foreground race are easily slottable. In order to be curated, one's work must be straightforward and uncomplicated about its colour. And so, recognizing the currency of and flirtation with works that focus on the specificities of race, artists are reluctant to explore other areas. I believe that we must take risks with techniques and styles and explore the various genres of story and topic dissemination, for ex-

ample: fiction, fantasy, mystery, etc. The medium itself stays stuck as a tool purely for activism, and goes unchallenged, undiscovered.

However well intentioned its beginnings, this strategy that we ourselves practice as curators and producers, has essentially deteriorated beyond ghettoization to its present form—a kind of benevolent and invisible segregation. It serves to keep us in 'our place', which really is someone else's place for us. I suggest that this current stagnation is actually an opportunity for quite an innovative and effective perpetuation of racism and exclusion. It's funny/bizarre how every good strategy can in time transform into the monster it was designed to destroy in the first place.

A by-product of the current climate is the paralyzing fear of critically reviewing works by people of colour—particularly if the subject is racial oppression. White people, on one hand, are justifiably afraid and cautious of the potential for criticism to become a tool for a new oppression and silencing, and also of themselves being seen to be ignorant or politically incorrect. People of colour, on the other hand, are again, justifiably nervous to criticize for fear of our words being used against us and our kind. Of course there are very private pockets of hushed pre-empted discussion. But it is the artist who suffers most in the end, with no honest public discussion of her or his work. Except that if someone likes the work, then it's okay to go public. So omission speaks loudly but not eloquently. Even if producers succeed in shouldering the burden of representing this is no longer enough. Within our communities, patting ourselves on the back takes on an air of complacency. In the end, the artist is usually left emptied, yearning for valuable critical discussion as replenishment.

I suggest that this won't happen until we stop being seen, and seeing ourselves, as programmable only when we have race.

So after access, then what? When I ask this question, I'm not suggesting that access is a *fait accompli*. It's not as if tapes about race are no longer needed. Quite the contrary—issues of race will forever sit on the surface waiting to be honestly scratched, waiting until access is genuine and most importantly, decision making is shared equitably amongst us all. Still, to date, the racial mix in the faculties of the fine arts departments of the local art college and universities do not reflect

any recognition of the urgency and importance of diversity. This makes me wonder if they have even been listening to the conversations and demands of the past ten years. Our local film institute, for all its show at outreach, still has only one staff person of a very specific colour who is expected to handle the programming for all but those without colour. More pertinently, our visibility as artists and curators is still parenthesized—we are still visible only as speciality items. I am reiterating this old news just to emphasize that race is not old and worn out—we haven't got that far along. I do wonder if such a glorious time will ever come. But simultaneously with the ever necessary vigilance of making and showing reclamation tapes, the individuality of a person of colour must be reckoned with.

To quote from Ian Rashid's catalogue essay for the South Asian Film and Video program, *Beyond Destination* at the Ikon Gallery in England (and replace the words 'South Asian' in the quoted passage below with what ever other monolithic group description you wish):

"Nayan Shah has written that as Black cultural workers we are offered the possibility not just to presume the existence and parameters of our communities and identities but, though our work, to create them. And as with any project that is concerned with articulating identity, there is always a fear that what might have been an attempt at clarification becomes an all too rigid characterisation which is narrow and prescriptive. An attempt to advocate one kind of difference serves merely, in the end, to mask other differences. In this way, the term 'South Asian' has become, for some, a rigid and alienating construct that eclipses, even disallows individualities."

So again I ask, "After access, then what?"

Access. Access to the privilege of normalcy—of being able to speak in our work of love, of death and longing, of mountains and the weather, of family relationships, of adventure and unfamiliar landscapes—to talk of our individual selves without being eclipsed by our colour, without everything that we do being interpreted as a metaphor for race. Visibility can be double edged.

We must feel free to make the kinds of tapes that we want. We must know that we will be afforded visibility with the continued diligence of recent years, coupled with new programming strategies that recognize each of us as individuals, rather than as a representative of a race.

*Thank you very much to Wendy Oberlander for editorial suggestions, to Margo Kane, Monica Gagnon and Larissa Lai for discussion.*



**Shani Mootoo** is a writer, videographer and visual artist living in Vancouver.

*Images from **Mother India**  
and **Wild Women of the Woods**.*





## 加拿大華裔現代文化探索展

# SELF NOT WHOLE

## In Search of Cultural Space with the Chinese Cultural Centre in Vancouver

Two recent arts projects organized through the Chinese Cultural Centre (CCC) in Vancouver embarked on forays into cultural space: *SELF NOT WHOLE: Cultural Identity and Chinese-Canadian Artists in Vancouver* in 1991, and *Racy Sexy* in 1993. *Self Not Whole* was an ethno-specific exhibition that explored ideas of heritage and authenticity. *Self Not Whole* was both a celebration and critique of identity politics from the *inside*; it addressed issues of displacement, otherness and racism, asking what it meant to be of Chinese descent in Canada. Out of this experience developed *Racy Sexy*, a multidisciplinary series involving coalition-building with other community and cultural centres in Greater Vancouver. Artists of diverse backgrounds from across Canada were presented within a thematic focusing on the intersection of race, culture, and sexuality. As an attempt towards intercultural collaboration, *Racy Sexy* signalled a shift in the exploration of community to the *outside*.

The mandate of the Chinese Cultural Centre is to promote Chinese language and culture. Activities range from language classes to conferences, workshops, exhibitions, Tai Chi Chuan, and Cantonese Opera. For the most part, Chinese culture there has been interpreted as *traditional* culture. What is traditional culture anyway? Is this a way of life from another land in the past, a nostalgic status quo? Does this mean Chinese art consists of ink on paper landscapes and calligraphy? What is Chinese, as opposed to Chinese Canadian, as opposed to Canadian? For that matter, what is a Chinese cultural centre? Is that where one goes to find *cultural space*, *Chinese space*?

What is cultural space? Is it the place of identity, where the promise of commonality beckons? Is it the banner around which the individual can rally in identification and solidarity with others? Or is it the site of subjectivity, the intervention of memory within official history, the refuge of the personal, the alternative? Then there is the perception of safety, of shelter, a place to shed one's vulnerability. Perhaps cultural space is home, away from the foreign outside, the alien, the different.

Cultural space is ambiguous and constantly shifting; reflecting, not representing those who define it. It is the site of social exchange and intercourse, of contest and paradox; it is the promise of democracy. Too often, cultural space is the claim of the institution; protected, controlled and so seldom shared.

It was questions such as these that originally drew me to the CCC. As a visual artist, much of my artwork has been involved with the politics of identification, particularly issues around Chinese Canadian identity; therefore, when I came across this organization, it quickly became apparent that the CCC was a very strategic site in which to investigate ideas of community and representation. This vision developed into the exhibition, *SELF NOT WHOLE: Cultural Identity and Chinese-Canadian Artists in Vancouver* in 1991.

There have been many other arts projects in recent years in Vancouver employing *difference* as a theme: *In Visible Colours*, *Yellow Peril*, *Queer City*, *to visit the tiger*, and *First Ladies*, to name a few. One of the goals similar to these projects was to stake out territory in which to speak about culturally—and/or sexually-specific experiences, without fear of homophobic, racist, sexist or self-righteous liberalist dominating reaction. They were consciously positioned in relationship to perceived centres of power, aimed at empowering those who had been historically erased or marginalized, validating voices and sensibilities dismissed by the dominant cultural gaze.

Curated by community activist Lorraine Chan and myself, *Self Not Whole* functioned as an interventionist, site-specific exhibition. In the Chinese space of the CCC, nontraditional, western art (and thus arguably non-Chinese) was presented to an audience that perhaps might not be familiar with contemporary avant-gardist art practices, but were the most likely to understand the artists' culturally-specific references.

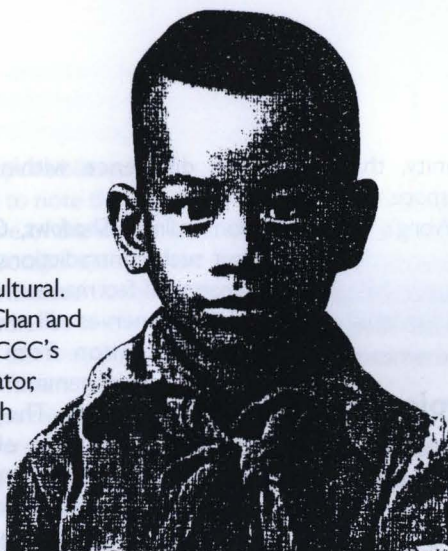
*Self Not Whole* consisted of a month-long visual art exhibition with installation, video, painting, and photo-based work, with a program of readings, performances, arts educators' workshop, and panel discussion. In all, the work of 16 artists and collectives was presented. The bilingual catalogue (in English and Chinese) contained commissioned essays discussing ideas about community, identity, and identification, as well as providing a social and historical context for cultural production by Chinese-Canadians in Vancouver.<sup>1</sup>

*Self Not Whole* as a title does not translate easily into Chinese; after much deliberation, we chose *mi*, meaning 'search,' alluding to a journey or exploration for some thing or place that was perhaps not the self, but a centre, be



that existential or cultural.

In 1990, Lorraine Chan and I approached the CCC's exhibitions coordinator, Saintfield Wong, with the idea to exhibit contemporary Chinese-Canadian artists whose work engaged questions of cultural identity. Lorraine and I were interested in presenting artists situated outside of the canons of Chinese art, artists who had not been represented in *In*



He is a fine, attractive-looking little fellow, his full hazel eyes beaming with kindness and intelligence. The almond form and oblique setting of the eye, so peculiar to the natives of the south, is well brought out in this picture.

Kiki Yee, *Southern Boy*, 1990 Etching and Chine collé, 16"x 20"

Photo: Stuart Dee

*Transitions*, a local survey show of mostly traditional Chinese art<sup>2</sup> organized by Saintfield Wong in 1989. Saintfield saw that our proposed project would take the next step beyond *In Transitions*, and agreed to host the exhibition at the CCC. As guest curators, we would conduct the research and apply for the funding.

In many ways, the CCC was the ideal site for staging *Self Not Whole*. If we were to address notions of identity and difference from a Chinese-Canadian perspective, where better to do this than in a space that by location (in the heart of Chinatown) and by name (The Chinese Cultural Centre) claimed to be the centre of Chinese culture?

First and foremost, the CCC provided a highly desirable audience for the work, that is, Chinese-Canadians. Secondly, it gave the promise of home, temporary or artificial as it may be; the artists in *Self Not Whole* were validated, their ethnicity, or difference due to ethnicity, suddenly made invisible. Exhibiting at the CCC was entry into their own community.

We were not concerned about attempting to define some sort of Chinese-Canadian aesthetic, nor to authenticate experience. It was not about where east meets west; after all, we too are the west. But if one speaks English as the language of comfort, and cooks Italian better than Chinese, are we the east as well? Would we be seen through Chinese eyes as thereby foreign? After all, it was the western historical avant-garde that the work showed the strongest links to

—it just so happened that the artists we found consciously investigating cultural identity were involved in this practice. And given that contemporary work often crosses many cultural barriers in alienating the non-art publics, we were hoping that within the apparel of these 'modern' ('western?') art forms, the ('Chinese?') viewer would find access in the matter of the subject, if the subject was speaking about topics and experiences they could share.

These strategies proved to be successful. Providing a multilingual gallery attendant as well as artists' statements near each of the works in Chinese and English also helped. On more than one occasion, I observed people reading the Chinese and English texts separately, then engage in a dialogue about the work. *Self Not Whole* attracted viewers mainly from the 'mainstream' arts community, mostly white, and the regular users of the CCC, such as those coming to see Chinese traditional dance who would encounter the exhibition, recent immigrants on their way to English as a Second Language classes, and Boy Scouts who would run around and through the installations during and after their meetings every Saturday afternoon.

For the promotional campaign, two publicists were hired, one targeting the English mainstream and alternative arts media, and the other, the Chinese. However, the linguistic bias for the project was obvious—the overwhelming majority of the artists were primarily anglophone-based, and the performances, readings and the artists' tour of the exhibition also reflected this.

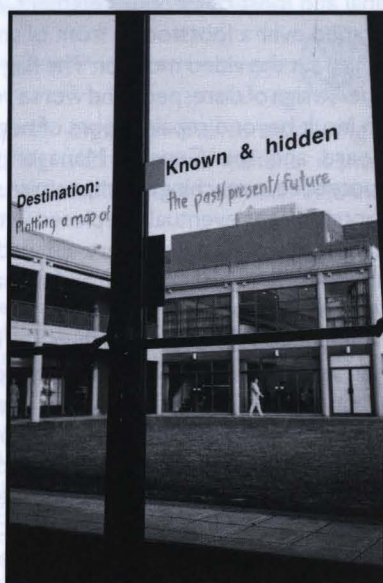
Throughout the development of the project with the CCC, Lorraine and I were confronted by conflicting ideas around art and organizational procedure. We were not familiar with their working methodology and decision-making process; at times, we could not understand their logic (and vice versa). Confrontations arose over matters such as proper procedure in order to use their stationary, and the delegation of responsibility. In turn, some of our ideas were mystifying for them, such as the consideration of artists as professionals (i.e. being entitled to fees for presenting their work), the curatorial process (i.e. research and studio visits and the encouragement of new, especially site-specific work), and exhibition/presentation standards. Grassroots organizations do not operate like art venues, and not surprisingly, personnel were not trained to facilitate contemporary artistic practices.

What we eventually realized was that there existed two main factors that created a gap between us and the CCC. One was that we were strangers; neither Lorraine nor I had had much previous contact with the CCC, and our families were not prominent members of the community with a long history of involvement with the organization. The other factor was *cultural difference*. We were westernized, Canadianized, and just because we called ourselves Chinese did not mean we were one of them. Our values, our world view was not only not the same, it was



Su-Feh-Lee, *Forth and Back*, 1991 performed at the CCC.

Photo: Ron Lee



Ana Chang, *Journey into the Centre (Beyond the Western World)*, 1991. Site-Specific Installation, detail.

Photo: Henry Tsong



sometimes perceived as alien. We were clearly outsiders, members of the even further marginalized nontraditional art community, no less.

So why were we drawn to this place where we felt, aside from occasional twinges of peripheral ethnic kinship, like foreign bodies? Was it the name, the promise of an authentic version of what is truly Chinese?

Ana Chang's site-specific installation *Journey Into the Centre (Beyond the Western World)* both overtly and discreetly addressed these concerns. Her interventionist text (in English) was applied onto the street-level glass windows of the CCC complex, enveloping the architecture as reified Chinese culture. "Dis place, this place...We are not, have not." The fractured narrative shifted from public to private, formal to personal, Chinese then Canadian then elsewhere. "On Location: Vancouver, Beijing, etc. 'Where are you from?' 'Canada.' 'No. Where are you really from...'" So successful was the installation in fusing with the existing built environment that many viewers did not perceive it to be art, or overlooked it entirely.

We received some criticism that problematics around identity did not represent everyone's experiences. The suggestion was that *Self Not Whole* comprised of a special interest group (of nontraditional artists). What this more accurately reflected was the marginalization of these artists from mainstream Chinese-Canadian cultural values. They were confronting the idea of a monolithic Chinese tradition by speaking of contradictions within Chinese-Canadian experience, that there was not and could not be a singular perspective of

community, that there was difference within difference in this cultural space.

Paul Wong's video-installation *Ordinary Shadows, Chinese Shade* spoke about such contradictions in an eloquent and matter-of-fact manner. His approach touched upon nerves still raw for many, and drew attention from individuals in the management and the Board of the

CCC. They were afraid that certain elements would be misinterpreted, and as a result, on the morning of the opening, the room in which his work was situated became locked.

Paul Wong's installation alluded to the idea of China as homeland, and exposed a sensitivity to specific local community politics, in particular, communism. Given the CCC's aims and alliances in its formative days in the early '70s, it was no longer deemed desirable to raise these nationalistic red lanterns once again.

One component of the installation consisted of flags of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Canada hanging next to each other. The CCC requested that three of the four be taken down (guess which?) for fear that offence would be taken by such juxtaposition. Near the flags were windows in front of which curtains were hung. The curtains were made up of repeating portraits of former P.R.C. leader Zhou En-Lai, a moderate during the Cultural Revolution. A bolder gesture was a large image of Mao Zedong overlooking the central courtyard from the second-floor windows of the Multipurpose Hall. For an organization that had, over time, declared itself 'apolitical', the appearance of the Great Helmsman was indeed an ironic reminder of the CCC's socialist-informed past. The final and most contentious element was a flag of the Peoples' Republic draped over a footstool in front of an ornate, kitschy dragon throne on which sat the video monitor. The flag could be construed as lying on the floor, a sign of disrespect, and worse yet, could potentially be stepped on, an insult beyond repair. Hours of negotiation with the Chairman of the Board and the General Manager prior to the opening reception succeeded in reaching a compromise. The irreverent flag of China on the footstool was eventually replaced with a red cloth. The other questionably offensive elements were allowed to remain. In this manner, with all sides, the artist, organizers, and management agreeing to changes, face was saved.

In hindsight, the risk that the CCC took in exhibiting Paul's work was minor, but the concerns raised were very real. They feared offending what they called their 'grassroots' base.<sup>3</sup> As organizers, we were either too wary or too indifferent to the CCC's possible reaction to the exhibition, and with if proper protocol had been followed, the subject matter of Paul's as well as the other artists' works could have been discussed in advance (not that the censorship issue would have been averted entirely). In our desire to urge the artists to create new work and to claim the space as best they could, to see if such *outsiders* would find comfort in such an environment, we neglected to inform our host, the CCC, what the artists were planning. Our project could be interpreted as an act of cultural imperialism, an imposition of cultural values alien to those of many of Chinese descent, or at least those of the CCC. After all, we were their guests—guest curators, guest artists, guest organizers—

**"Our project could be interpreted as an act of cultural imperialism, an imposition of cultural values alien to many of Chinese descent... After all, we were their guests...and guests have responsibilities."**

Paul Wong replaces the flag of the People's Republic of China with red cloth in his installation, *Ordinary Shadows, Chinese Shade* exhibited at the Chinese Cultural Centre, 1991. Photo: Henry Tsang





and guests have responsibilities.

It was interesting to note that Paul Wong's *Ordinary Shadows, Chinese Shade* proved to be one of the more successful and popular works in the show, for the videotape component depicts his relationship to his ancestral village, contrasted by the ever-changing mid-'80s urban China. It found its ideal audience in the CCC, in particular with old men and women who would sit through the entire 90 minutes mesmerized by an insider's journey to Toisan.

Response overall to the exhibition was extremely positive, and attendance for all events were very high, bolstered by the strong press coverage we received in English and Chinese media. Many Chinese- and other Canadians made their first visits to the CCC. *Self Not Whole* succeeded in traversing cultural, linguistic, and generational boundaries among the diverse Chinese communities.

Support from the CCC for *Racy Sexy* was garnered through a process that sharply contrasted that of *Self Not Whole*. The latter exhibition had been presented to the Board at the last minute by the CCC coordinator Saintfield Wong, resulting in confusion about who the curators and artists were, what the theme was, and overall, what to expect. The confrontation over Paul Wong's work was the result of miscommunication and fear of the unknown. The CCC Board at that time had felt no control or ownership over the show, and too late, the then-Chairman reacted to reclaim it. After weathering such an experience, we took great pains to ensure that with *Racy Sexy*, protocol was dutifully followed. Lobbying individual Board members created a safer environment when the project was formally presented, and subsequent updates kept the project alive at the Board level.

*Self Not Whole* was an intervention in the normative function of the CCC, where ideas and ideals of essential Chinese forms and languages are promoted. It brought together, without attempting to synthesize, the contemporary and the traditional through the voices of local artists, while resisting a definitive representation of Chinese-Canadian experience. It also proved threatening to CCC, for the politics of identity questioned Chineseness, homeland, and nationhood. *Self Not Whole* was an insertion of conflicting and confronting views of Chinese Canadian culture. It was an irritant, it created discomfiture; it hit home.



**Henry Tsang** is an artist, community organizer and curator living in Vancouver. Much of his work deals with issues of cultural identity, exploring the space between cultures resulting from contact, influence and dominance.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Self Not Whole* was presented from November 2 to 30, 1991. The visual artists were Ana Chang, Diana Li, Mary Sui-Yee Wong, Paul Wong, Kiki Yee, Sharyn Yuen, and the Pender Guy Radio Collective. Readings were by Jamila Ismael, Larissa Lai, Corinne Lee, Sky Lee, and Wong Wing Siu, performances by Number One Son, Lee Su-Feh, River Sui, and Sebastian Yeung, coordinated by Lance Lim, and catalogue essays written by Heesok Chang, Rosa Ho, and Karin Lee. CCC Exhibition coordinator was Saintfield Wong.

<sup>2</sup> The term "traditional Chinese art" used here is unavoidably problematic, but I use it to refer to work that is situated within the art historical traditions of Chinese formal and aesthetic strategies. Calligraphy and watercolours dominated *In Transitions*, although some oil and acrylic paintings, sculptures, and a few installation and photo-based works were included.

<sup>3</sup> I have yet to understand what this ambiguous and unidentified term means, in this and other cases.

## Art Matters

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Affecting Change*

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Visual artists and curators in all media are invited to submit exhibition proposals for the November '95 to July '96 exhibition season. Deadline for receipt of proposals is 31 October 1994 with the selection committee announcing its results by February 1995.

#### Proposals must include:

Artist statement and proposal outline

10 - 20 slides (35mm) of recent work

A slide list identifying the medium, format and date of completion

Curriculum vitae

A self-addressed stamped envelope for return of support material.

#### Video proposals should also include:

Copy of video that is being proposed /OR

Detailed description of video project, if still a work in progress.

#### Performance proposals should also include:

Detailed outline or script of proposed performance, and video if possible.

**Incomplete submissions cannot be considered.**

**Open Space pays CAR/FAC fees**

Send proposals to: Visual Arts Committee,

**OPEN SPACE**

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# Dear Desh...

edited and compiled by  
Ian Iqbal Rashid

Canada's annual festival and conference exploring South Asian cultural practices in the West has become a major presence on the Canadian cultural landscape. It began four years ago as a 'one of' festival coordinated by yours truly, Ian Rashid and run by volunteers at Toronto's Euclid cinema. It is now an established organization running activities year round with a paid, permanent staff. What has been gained and what has been lost in its growth from a small, barely funded grassroots organization to cultural institution. *Rungh* asked Gitanjali, Nayan Shah, Melina Young, Aisha Ibrahim and Atif Ghani, artists and activists with varying levels of familiarity with *Desh*, to comment on the most recent event which took place this last April, as well as their thoughts on past years and their hope for future *Deshs*. The *Desh* organizers have been asked to offer their thoughts and hopes as well. We hope to present them in a future issue.

## Cutting in on the Safety Dance

When I returned home this year, I wondered if *Desh Pardesh* had perhaps become too safe. This time there had been no passionate, wrenching debate which questioned the cultural practices and programming of the festival. Maybe I had just become addicted to the disputes and drama of years past. But as I mulled it over again and again, I realized that I had experienced my share of political clashes, intellectual discussions and traumatic moments on the peripheries of the festival. What I craved, however, was a sense of critical engagement at the festival main space. Instead, too often, I felt that what we had there was a 'safe space'.

After the 1993 *Desh*, Amir Ali Alibhai in the pages of *Rungh* (Vol 2 No 1&2, pp 67-68) asked for inclusion into the 'safety dance'. He argued that *Desh Pardesh* had failed to serve as a safe space for him—as a male, heterosexual artist. Alibhai deliberately misunderstood *Desh*'s mandate to promote the voices and expressions of those constituencies that have been 'systematically silenced' in mainstream South Asian settings, particularly 'women, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, people with disabilities,

working class people and seniors'. What he wanted was an artistic forum disengaged from a particular political commitment; he favoured a festival that was not 'overtly political' or 'predominantly gay or lesbian identified'.

There's a refusal to recognize that the *Desh* Festival has produced a progressive labour, feminist, queer coalition with a pledge to shape diaspora South Asian cultural politics. At *Desh*, the politics are crucial to the art presented. However, there are times when the substance of *Desh*'s commitment to social change gets lost in the carousel of events: as the week's momentum builds, the events and issues tend to blur. The artists' identities can appear to be a liberal litany of 'difference' rather than a reference to liberatory politics and aesthetics.

In order to bring the issues of social change to the forefront, the festival has to transform into a critical space rather than a safe space. The work presented deserves challenge, critical engagement, and the kinds of discussion and debate that can expose possibilities and potential. The addition of the question and answer period after each program was a well-intentioned effort to open the performance space to discussion. The result, though, was individually addressed questions that often heightened the discontinuity between items. Neither the programming blurbs nor the MC's introductions were able to convey to the audience why the items had been selected and grouped together. As an MC, I know this had as much to do with our lack of preparation as with the programmer's cryptic style which left programs without strong themes. Even the 'women' and 'queer' nights seemed strung together only on the basis of identity.

In the future, the *Desh* working committee could experiment with more tightly curated programming, perhaps by inviting seasoned curators to design an evening. Since most curators are often constrained by disciplinary boundaries, *Desh* could provide the training grounds for its particular brand of multimedia, interdisciplinary curation. *Desh* programmers could also draw on the expertise of critics and curators who have special experience with dance, spoken word, theatre and film to deepen the presentation of specific art forms. For instance, I have often desired the presence of a dance critic on stage after the performances of Ratna Roy (1993), Sudarshan (1993), Anurima Banerji (1993/94) and Ananya Chatterjea (1994) to contextualize how their performances appropriate and disrupt Indian dance forms

and traditional narratives. It might even be fascinating to tackle issues of appropriation head on by exploring different dance interpretations in a single program.

*Desh* should take its mandate to 'foster and develop cultural practice' to also create new practices of cultural criticism. All too often our participation in dominant structures reinforces an association between criticism and displeasure or outright hostility. *Desh* can provide a site where we can candidly exchange ideas and assessments. At a setting like *Desh*, where the audience summons feelings of solidarity and enthusiastic appreciation, it is possible to read candour as a sign of respect and concern instead of viewing every challenge as a threat. To encourage cultural criticism, the working committee could plan to hold several late afternoon seminars, guided by cultural producers and critics, to explore ideas generated by the programming or by broad changes in cultural practices. By interspersing discussion throughout the festival rather than saving it for the plenary or for the individual programs, the festival can provide more spaces of conversation. The working committee could also consider sponsoring workshops for work in progress and discussion groups for reading criticism throughout the year.

Work is not oppositional or transformational simply because it is produced by a brown person, or even a woman or working class or queer person. It is a struggle that creates critical consciousness and the energy for social change. In an age of 'visible minorities' and multi-culti fetish, cultural critique is a necessity if we are to develop cultural products that will not be simply received, accepted and applauded because of tokenism. It is imperative to turn safety into critical expression if we are to re-imagine and re-make the worlds we live in.



Nayan Shah has been involved in *Desh Pardesh* as a participant and an adviser since 1991. He writes history and creates video programs in Chicago.

## Confessions of a Homemaker

*Desh*—where is *desh*? If next year and the year after and the year after there was no *Desh Pardesh*, would there still be a *desh*?

In order to answer the burning yearning restlessness that comes with not knowing home, I sought clarity in mobility and flung my body between London and Berlin and back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean. I was looking for the line, wanting to cross it. I was looking to know in my body that I am alien, I do not belong. In the end I did find it for myself in Berlin. "Woher kommst du?" "Kanada." "Ah, Kambodia!" and he made a grab for my anatomy. I found a place



that disowned me and saw in me again and again only Far East flesh—not first world born 'n bred. I stayed and worked under the table for a bit, discovering a kinship with two women from China who had overstayed their visa. At the same time, I was painfully awakened to the fact that our fates were completely different. Alienation and bottomless gratitude were intensely juxtaposed. I found just how far my club first world membership went, and discovered not all rich western countries are alike. And anyway, back in Canada, there were dykes and dykes of colour working together to make a home away from home and a home at home. Back in Canada. So I come to *Desh* with background as a homemaker. In different places and with some overlapping experiences of London and Toronto, and this may account for, in part anyway, why *Desh Pardesh* hits close to home for me.

Making a home is a healing art: listening, remembering, inventing. The delight in drinking in the images, people and poetry is the relief in finding kindred spirits on the same voyage to desh. Knowing you are at home is first feeling comfort from your body. *Desh* lets me let my hair down (it's been flowing and growing ever since I found myself in a waving sea of shiny black a couple of *Deshs* back. A convert of another kind). There is an intimacy and sensuality that opens to me and opens me up telling me this forum is not just concepts and word games but experience and vision from deep within being expressed and appreciated. Collected at *Desh* are stories about the voyaging, told with the understanding that none of us really reach the same shore. It's a subtler and more soulful project than, say, deconstructing or reclaiming codes and modes, and so is capable of rejuvenating without getting into conceptual quagmires on contemporary South Asianness. This focus on the journeying rather than the boundaries has made for inviting space and I've found myself affirmed—I find myself a participant.

Having said that there is one more thing on my mind—I share with most *Desh*-goers the privilege of holding a passport from the North. While *Desh* explores the joys and pains of being/not being South Asian in the diaspora in a post-colonial world, there are brothers and sisters lined up who would give everything they have to trade places. The migration of people in this world is happening on an unprecedented scale. To make a long story short, I suggest that explicit inclusion of information and discussion around immigration are vital in current and future explorations around identity. We have to see ourselves as relatively privileged in the world, those of us on the 'inside' (although there are many insides within 'inside' and lots of room to be subversive). What is my relation to other people living in the world today, not

just to be a 'back-there-where-I-cannot-go-to'? I'd like to see *Desh* become as urgent as it is fun and warm and ensure that 'diaspora' keeps getting challenged and not become just another 'funky' flavoured mush. Go Girl!



**Melina Young** is a Canadian Chinese dyke discovering NATURE right now. She lives in Ottawa and has been attending *Desh* since 1992.

### Redefining the Diaspora

I was invited as a visual artist to *Desh Pardesh* this year. Since it was my first experience of the festival, I cannot compare it to previous years. I was impressed by how well it was organized and how much interest it generated in Toronto, especially outside the South Asian community. I enjoyed meeting many wonderful people and being with artists, writers, filmmakers over an intense three days. There was an impressive range of work and each day had a richly textured feel. It was a pleasure to hear the work of Shani Mootoo, Ramabai Espinet, Ian Iqbal Rashid, Shyam Selvadurai, Kaushalya Bannerji and others, and to have seen films like Alia Syed's *The Watershed*, *Acting Our Age* by Gurinder Chadha and the marathon screening of Hanif Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia*.

I was very moved by those poets, writers, filmmakers who saw their identities doubly displaced via Africa or the Caribbean. The hybridity and creolization evident in the language and in the cultural norms seemed to break away from constructions of 'pure culture'—there was a certain freedom in which this 'not-quite-here' and 'not-quite-there' was expressed (as in Shani Mootoo's excellent reading). It struck me that to be able to rid oneself of the pathological notion of 'not-quite-coming-from-the-Subcontinent' and expressing freely, and with humour those inherent contradictions, without having to revert to proving one's authenticity, is quite liberating. It opens doors to understanding the Subcontinent's fractured, divisive history and how as individuals who live in the West, our lives are inherently connected to its histories of migration, its socioeconomic realities of the past and present.

However, a festival such as *Desh* has to constantly redefine itself. Its strength is that it can bring together South Asians across

national, religious and class boundaries, and explore the premises of difference and solidarity in the issues facing the community—the politics of globalization and fundamentalism, for instance. Do ethnic/racial groups fulfil the desire of mainstream institutions of seeing identities fragmented and made into commodities? If South Asia is being inundated with images of Western Soaps, then how do we, as cultural workers with progressive views of the West and South Asia, intervene? How do we provide a cultural politic that looks critically at issues of tradition, representation and cultural interpretation? The Diaspora has to extend its definition from both ends; the dialogue in the West has to look at South Asian politics and culture as a changing, living reality, and the countries of South Asia must take the Diaspora seriously, so that a trans-national communication is possible.

It is not a bad idea to include reports on topical activities in South Asia and elsewhere as part of this celebration of identity, and extend the Diaspora to include countries that are not in the West. For instance, the Conference this year occurred right after the South African elections; discussions and films on South Asians struggling to negotiate their identities would have opened up a more complex understanding of the Diaspora.



**Ayisha Abraham** is an artist living and working in New York.

### Grappling with Privilege and Accountability

Occasionally, there is a need for people who are working in very disparate fields of cultural politics to gather together and exchange strategies. More often than not, as someone attempting to contribute to ongoing debates around conceptualizing identity politics, I find myself working very much in isolation. What often results is a sense of schizophrenia, where one loses all sense of place, importance and self worth.

The reason that *Desh Pardesh* was impor-



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tant, was that it provided a space for me, as an individual working in a very particular field of cultural politics, to make connections with individuals who are working in very different fields and forms of cultural politics. The fact that I was able to make links with people working in centres ranging from San Francisco to Montréal was important. The problem was that it required a certain privileged position to simply attend *Desh*. Maybe the larger question lies in how much this privileged position is a part of the politics of which I, and *Desh*, are part.

The other thing that struck me at *Desh* is the question of responsibility. In becoming larger and more institutionalized, political-cultural organizations can slip out of the role of being responsible to someone. For good or bad, the burden of representation has always been placed, fairly or unfairly, on the shoulders of artists of colour. This burden requires that we grapple directly with the questions of responsibility. When we free up cultural works from their contexts and particular points of reference, their ability to speak from, or to feed into, that context becomes in a way weakened. This is the first *Desh* that I have attended, but I feel from reading/hearing/asking about previous years, there seems to have been a definite shift this year. I think it is important that *Desh* continues to ask itself questions about accountability and responsibility as it grows into a bigger and better festival.



Atif Ghani is an Edmonton based cultural activist currently completing a PhD at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

### There's No Place Like *Desh* (I clicked my heels 3 times...)

A few years ago (but has it only been four years?), I was approached by Ian Rashid to show one of my early student works, and to put up some posters at my school for a festival he was putting together called *Desh Pardesh*. Many of the posters got torn down at my school. I think it was because they clearly stated that the event

was sponsored by KHUSH, South Asian Gay Men of Toronto.

Exploring South Asian cultural work being produced in the diaspora—a new concept to me. I was thrilled by the idea of an event organized by South Asian gay men for the community at large. Despite some well-founded criticisms of the event by women and despite feeling rather intimidated by the discussions at some of the sessions, the event moved me—and on many different levels. So much work I had never seen before, and so many new ideas and questions that I kept bumping up against. I agreed with some things, disagreed with others but it was all useful to me. It was one of several important events and experiences which helped me to build a foundation for my practice. More importantly, it helped me to meet people who would help me explore the directions which much of my work has taken. As I started to take my own work more seriously, I found out that many forces, both out there and within myself wanted to stop me (me!: a really nice lesbian artist of South Asian origins hailing from the streets of Edmonton) from expressing myself in a way that I felt was responsible and in right relationship to the many communities to which I belong. During those moments, I used to close my eyes and think of *Desh* and it would help me to continue. My work and I have been growing up in Toronto, alongside *Desh*, since that day many years ago, when Ian asked me to show my film. Since then, *Desh* has shown almost all of the work I've made. Since then, there have been many controversies and conflicts that have come and gone. New faces. And new directions.

This year's festival has grown even larger and is, in some ways, more ambitious than ever before. Increasingly, I feel that it has become an institution which has made for some pretty tall orders to be filled. While further establishing itself as a high profile international cultural festival which showcases theatre, film, writing, performance, music, visual arts and so on, it also attempts meaningful political and community grassroots organizing amongst a multiplicity of South Asian cultures and communities. Somewhere in the middle of all this, it seems to me that innovative political questioning and rigorous artistic practice have lost their priority within *Desh* as an organization (except in the works of individual artists and within a very few sessions). These are but two aspects of *Desh* but vitally important to the

empowerment and development of a vibrant and confident cultural community and arts practice.

Although part of me still deeply mourns the loss of what was or could have been at *Desh*, I have also reached a point where I find I do not regret these changes. *Desh* can never again be what it was. It is too big, and the structures that have been set up seem to have a different purpose and audience in mind. The event is obviously serving the needs of this audience—people are coming out in droves. So many have been donating their precious time to this gargantuan project. I still think it is one of the most, if not the most, dynamic festivals of its kind in North America. As an audience member, I can honestly say that I enjoyed myself this year, and especially felt encouraged and enlivened by seeing so much new cultural work and the excitement it generated amongst newer artists (not to mention the fashions, the food and the music).

But I was able to enjoy myself because my expectations of *Desh* as an artist and cultural activist are gone. All I can say is that I truly hope that there will be many other organizations with different names, doing different things, and with a political consciousness, and a commitment to different South Asian constituencies that emerge. I feel that having one organization that sets the agenda for how South Asian cultural communities in Canada are defined, is potentially dangerous and can only dampen the creative spirit. Having different points of reference can only strengthen the entire community and inspire new heights of creativity. (Just as the work of many artists with different sensibilities speaks louder than an individual voice, *Desh* should be able to see how fleeting and illusory star systems are). The establishing of *Desh Pardesh* has been a milestone in the Canadian cultural community; but the road before us is long and wide.

As my relationship to my own work unravels, I realize that I have just scratched the surface of what is possible. There are so many complicated questions that need to be raised, and so few examples out there. I continue, both in my own work and in cultural organizing like *Desh*, to seek out places and people that chase dreams and make them tangible. I know that the real secrets of meaningful connection and communication are not revealed in oversimplified political rhetoric nor academic jargonese. I have realized that there is really no place like *Desh*. I still want, and want more.

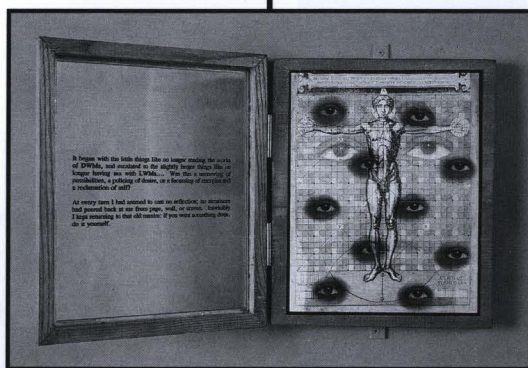


Gitanjali is a Toronto based cultural worker and is currently completing another degree in the school of life.



# Allan de Souza

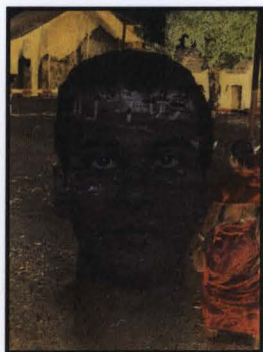
It began with the little things like DWMs, and escalated to the slightly sex with LWMs...Was this a of desire, or a focusing of energies turn I had seemed to cast no back at me from page, wall, or screen. that old maxim: if you want



no longer reading the works of larger things like no longer having narrowing of possibilities, a policing and a reclamation of self? At every reflection; no simulacra had peered Inevitably, I kept returning to something done, do it yourself.

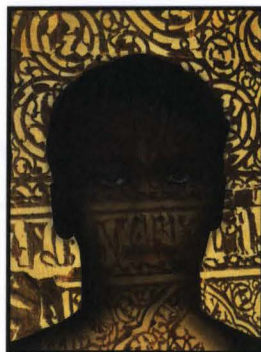
**Indian Aphorisms**





I don't know which of my memories are my own remembrance, which are tales whispered to me secretly as I lay in my bed, or which are ghostly afterimages, effigies petrified between the tissue leaves of photo albums. Which have happened, which are wild imaginings.

Which are yearnings on my part for more memories greater, more colourful than my present existence. An existence in which adventure, possibility, abandon are reined in; a quest not for experience itself, but for representation, a catalogue of experience.



These fragments, these visions played out behind my eyelids, are not just dreams, but imaginings of a place I call home. Home exists... if only within the boundaries of my body. Through these visions, home is extrapolated, given form, moulded into memory. Through

memory, I know these places exist. Who is to say this is delusion? Who will say, to my face, that I have no home, no place I can say I belong to? Just a litany of temporary shelters. Endlessly moving on. Endlessly leaving.

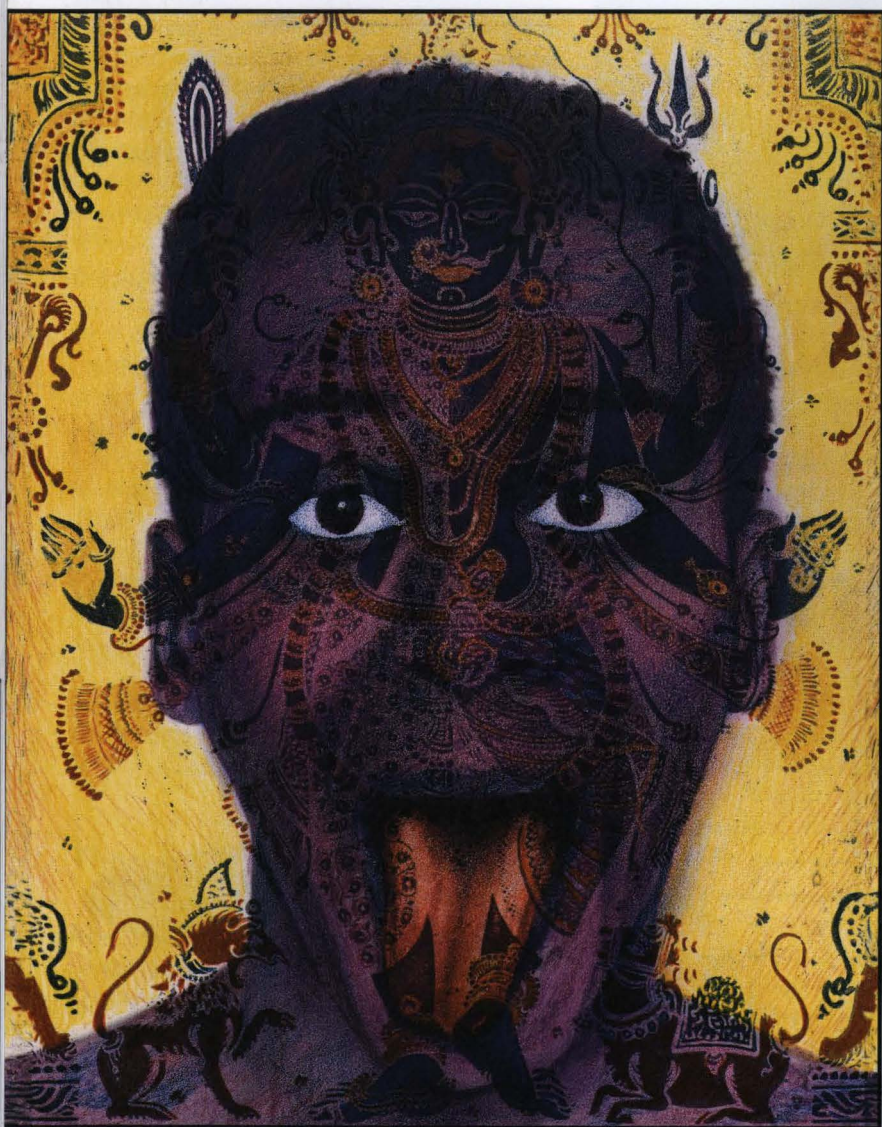


Photo: D. James Dee

We clamoured for re-ownership of the swastika, decrying its description; invoked a pantheon of heroines and heroes, Rekha to Rani ki Jhansi, Amitabh to Tipu Sultan; we became more 'desi' than thou, clinging to every last vestige of 'home'; and, alongside our 100% Kashmiri shawls, draped our Indianness brazenly over our shoulders.

Yearning for a passage to an India left behind, some sent bricks to build temples, hopelessly thinking to revive the fallen lotus.



4 What do you see when you look at me? One of a million faces on your TV screen; eyes crawling with flies, brown withered limbs protruding from a distended torso? What do you see? Smiling dark eyes, nutbrown body, promise of the East? Where am I on your sliding scale from nightmare to fantasy? Or do you see the beauty which radiates when ugliness is shared? Lover, let me share my ugliness with you, that I may see myself reflected in your eyes as beautiful.

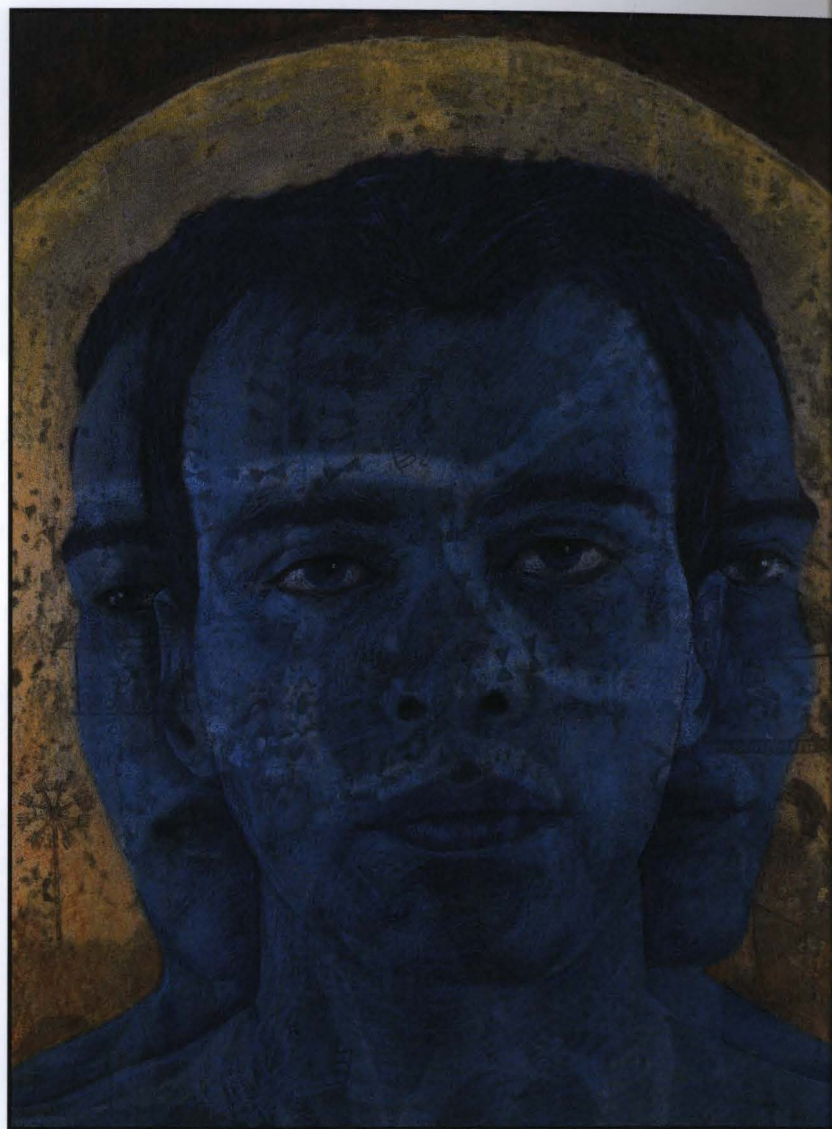


Photo: D. James Dee



6 In all my dislocations and relocations, like a latterday Columbus, I unwittingly bump into America. Bottled, canned, screened, logoed. Surrounding me, confounding me, preventing any backward glance to my mother country, leaving it to its convulsions. America the beautiful, oh, America the great. Open your arms in paternal welcome to this once pathetic little Indian, this prodigal American son, this potentially prodigious Indian American.



7 The facts of leaving and arriving remembered as physical endurance. Third world smell, noise, heat and mosquitoes of an overnight stop in Cairo. Holding in my shit for two days until a blissful evacuation in the aseptic toilets of en-route Frankfurt Airport; piss-baptizing and shit-splattering the pristine porcelain: my first rite of passage and entry into the Western Wonderland. Simultaneously my first act of its pollution.



8  
City or country, which city  
boundaries between one  
in their definition—are  
Where does one end, and  
am I? To say New York,



or which country. The  
and another—so fragile  
beginning to crumble.  
the other begin? Where  
USA, conveys little of the

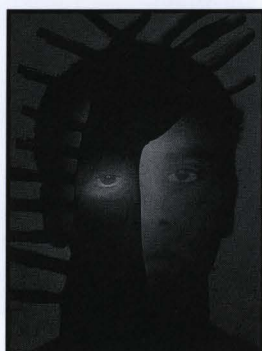
reality, and even less of my own sensing of reality. The question, 'Where  
am I?' continues to reverberate in my head, but it is becoming increasingly  
obsolete.

9  
The physical leaving of 'home' was an event so large, so traumatic  
within my imagination that it has passed into mythology. Like Rama banished into  
the wilderness, I believed that one day I would return to reclaim all that  
was 'mine.' And yet, the  
was also the place of desire.  
that it was not; loss and gain  
for living there—here—was



wilderness, the place of exile  
Simultaneously everything  
together. And the condition  
to live, think and feel this

10  
simultaneity. It has become a joke between us that I always surprise  
you. Each time you are surprised, I try to explain myself, and each time I  
feel more of a stranger. Who is this person you know? It isn't me. We make  
virtue out of honesty and shatter each other's every experience, every  
perception and mould them to our own schemes. When did truth stop  
being a virtue and become instead malicious manipulation? To assert  
my version of events  
with you, or at least  
form of warfare than the



would mean doing battle  
engaging in a different  
one we already wage.



# Four Leaf Clovers, Red Peppered Mangoes, Cousin Rafiq and Me

I read the frame above Guru Ji's head. I have read it many times before, but every time I come to Guru Ji, my eyes read it again:

1. Never give up on your Sargums.
2. One can never truly master the art of Singing without Sargums.
3. One can never truly master the art of Sargums without Practice.
4. One can never truly master the art of Practice without Discipline.
5. One can never truly master the art of Discipline without Respect.
6. One can never truly master the art of Respect without Structure.
7. One can never truly master the art of Structure without Sargums.
8. One can never truly master the art of Sargums...

—Gurcharan Singh Dhaliwal

"Urray! Hema stop reading and start singing, you want to be a professional philosopher or a singer? Hmm?" Guru Ji is not smiling. Her fingers flutter on the *tabla* skin in anger. She plays a heavy build up in *teen tal*, sixteen beats, to show me up for not coming in on the *tal* that I was supposed to.

"But I've never done *teen tal* before." I panic.  
"So?"

The incense smoke curls around the *tablas* and is quickly fanned away by Guru Ji's fluttering hands. The smoke breaks and scents the entire living room. Sandalwood. My fingers subtly tap my inner thigh in four beats of four. I can't miss. I just can't miss—thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen—"SA RE GA, RE GA MA, GA MA PA, MA PA DHA, PA DHA NI, DHA NI SA." I smile at my success.

"And down again." Guru Ji is still frowning. She doesn't even compliment me on my scale. My heart races as the beat draws near—sixteen and "SA NI DHA, NI DHA PA, DHA PA MA, PA MA GA, GA RE—"

Guru Ji stops and the room tenses. "MA GA RE, MA GA RE, MA GA RE!!" Guru Ji rests her hands on the *tablas* and fixes her eyes on me. I'm hurt.

"But...it was my first time. I've never done *teen tal* before."

"First times are the best times to get it right."

"That's not fair, Guru Ji. You know I've been practising."

"So you've practised *teen tal* before then?"

"No."

"Then you haven't been practising."

"I practised all the other *tals*."

"Of course. That's because you know them already and they're easy for you."

"So I should have practised a *tal* I don't even know?"

"Exactly."

"How?!!" I frown hard at her.

I hate these conversations. They always travel in circles. Starting at the beginning and ending exactly where they started in the first place. Guru Ji believes that "...the best journey the mind can travel is in a full circle. Minds that think in circles are always open and changing. Minds that think in lines always have a point of beginning and a definite end. This means that no thought came before the first thought, and no thought will ever come after the last thought. These minds are as dead as a flat note that can never reach the Heavens. Everything in life is a circle. We come from God to return to God. We come from a mother's womb to return to the earth's womb. We start bald and toothless and end the same way. We go in entrances only to come out of exits. We learn to work and then we find that we have to work to learn. We start from SA and end with SA." She always brings it back to *sargums*.

Without taking her disappointed eyes off of me, Guru Ji traces her necklace with her fingers until they reach the ornamented gold ball pendant that sits nestled in her cleavage. She never lets it hang outside her sari blouse. It is her secret treasure. Her *bajar*.

"Hema, humans are scared but proud by nature. This is their flaw. This is what gets them into trouble all the time." Whenever Guru Ji talks about the nature of man, it always sounds as if she is exempt from the category. As if maybe she is a stage or two above us. Closer to God somehow.

"Man will try and retry the things he already knows in order to be successful. As for the new things, he will wait until he is taught, or wait until he is alone before he attempts something he might fail at. Once he masters it, he will continue to master it instead of moving on to something new. He will master it in public places. Man loves applause and praise."

Guru Ji tunes the *tablas*. She spins the *tabla* using the rawhide bands that stretch the skin so that it can reach higher pitches. With the *hathori* she hits the wooden tuning spools without even looking to see where they are. Spin, hit, spin, hit, spin. DHA, DHIN, DHA, DHIN, DHA. "Mistakes are taboo in Canada—something to be avoided. How did the master become a master? His failures were his footsteps to success. So why erase these footsteps and pretend they never happened. It takes the path to success look so unreal, fantastical even. As if the man just arrived at success. No map, no struggle, nothing to show for it. Just arrived. What



do they call it? Hmm? A night time success?" She checks to see if I am listening. I nod.

"Yes. Well there is no such thing!" She rolls the gold ball in between her fingers. It looks like it might be the earth because of all the raised gold ornamenting on it, except that the designs are shaped like unfamiliar continents. Within the continents are fine etched paisley designs which, from a distance, look like mountain ridges. She let me hold it once, but only for a second.

Guru Ji always works herself up when she starts speaking in circles. It is an exciting and dangerous passion of hers. A time to fear and learn. She's never really given me reason to fear her really. It's more intimidation. Like the time she just left a lesson. She said, "I would have rather you cancelled the lesson and gone to wherever your mind is right now, because it would probably do more good there than it is doing here." She was right. In the middle of the lesson she just got up and left. I remember sitting there waiting for her to come back. But after about half an hour, I finally felt the draft and turned to find that she had left the basement door open for me.

"So?" The question was not meant to be answered. It was just thrown into the air like a once captured butterfly that would flutter about, regaining its senses, and make it's way to the nearest draft and out to freedom again. Guru Ji carefully cracks the ball open in her palm. The ritual begins. From the left cup of her bra she pulls out a yellow-stained hanky. She lays the hanky on her lap to protect her white sari from tobacco dust. Reaching in with her thin bony fingers, she pinches a small amount of *bajar*. With her other hand she closes the ball and tucks it back into her cleavage. She looks at me sternly. "Never ever let me catch you doing this." And with that, she pushes her thumb and finger in to her stretched nostrils, snuffs, plugs her nose to prevent any snuff from escaping, and sneezes.

Guru Ji shakes the hanky in the air causing the incense ashes to spray, and wipes her nose. "So? Are you going to do it or not?"

"No, never." I hope she never catches me with *Players* in my purse.

"Not smoke, Hema, sing."  
"Oh..."

**"Man will try and retry the things  
he already knows in order to be  
successful...Once he masters it,  
he will continue to master it instead  
of moving on to something new.  
He will master it in public places.  
Man loves applause and praise?"**

"Well?" She starts playing as if she's already heard my answer. The *tablas* thunder under her powerful fingers. She plays as well as the strong men with big hands, but hers are so fragile. Her fingers flutter in a blur and the tempo builds and matches my heartbeat. She watches me—half encouraging, half hesitating. Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen and—

"SA RE GA, RE GA MA, GA MA PA, MA PA DHA, PA DHA NI, DHA NI SA," My voice is in time with her hands. I have no time to smile; Guru Ji's playing for the down scale. My fingers tap twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen and—

"SA NI DHA, NI DHA PA, DHA PA MA, PA MA GA, MA GA RE, GA RE SAAAA!"

I hold the last note for as long as I can. Guru Ji matches me, smiling.

"Good." She closes her eyes and with her hands folded together in prayer, she starts her prayer of thanks to *Bhagwan* for the gift that He has given her and her students. She always does this at the end of a lesson.

Just 'good'? I wanted her to hug me, to be proud of me. Like my mother used to—sometimes. But I know she won't. I pack my books and wait for her to finish. I watch her while she prays. I wonder what she says, or if she sees things like Maa does. I wonder if her prayers lose some of their value because of the *bajar*.

She always looks the same. She is attractive for a fifty-two year old woman. Her black dyed hair pulled gently in a braided bun. She always wears the same white silk sari while teaching. "White is the symbol for purity and humility, the things man has forgotten since he left his origins of holiness." All her students must come in a white *shalwar-kamiz*, wear no make-up or jewellery, have their hair neatly tied, and be in the proper state of mind required for singing. There are no exceptions to these rules.

§§§

When I walked into Guru Ji's, she just beckoned me to sit. She said that it would be best if we just stayed silent for a little while. I wasn't sure what was going on, but I knew better than to question Guru Ji, especially when she said something that began with, "It would be best if..."

She sat in front of me with her eyes closed. She seemed to almost smile at times. A gradual

and almost unnoticeable smile. Her eyeballs moved frantically underneath her eyelids. I had never noticed the black circles under her eyes before. I opened my *sargum* book to study the last week's variations but Guru Ji, without opening her eyes, flicked her hands and motioned me to put it away. I wouldn't dare question her. I sat obediently, watched her face, and waited for some sign.

After about twenty minutes of this, I began to get fidgety. Guru Ji sensed this. Again her eyes remained closed. "Is there some difficulty, Hema?"

"No, sorry. No, nothing at all. Sorry." I felt the heat rise in my face.

"Then what seems to be the problem?" She persisted.

I looked at her closed eyes and wondered if she could see me. I wasn't about to take any chances. I kept my best earnest and obedient look on my face.

"Nothing, Guru Ji. I'm sorry. I just thought that maybe I should study last week's notes to prepare for this week's lesson so that..."

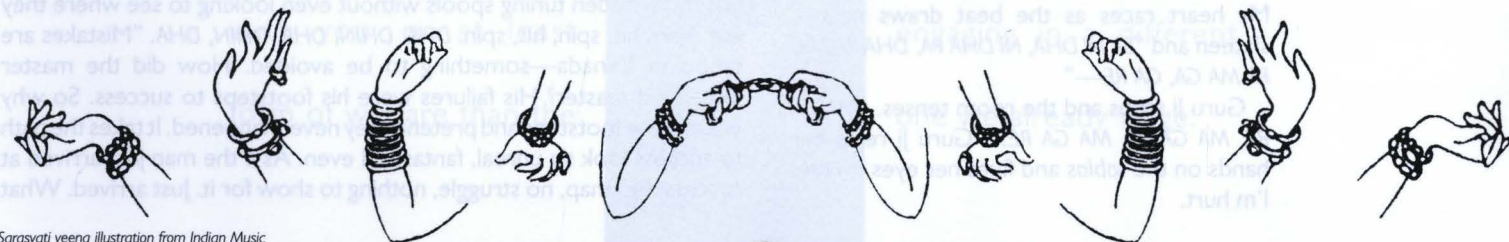
"This is this week's lesson." Guru Ji's face did not change.

"Oh."

After about another ten or fifteen minutes, I began to feel uneasy. I felt the sweat on my forehead drip down the sides of my face. I swallowed hard, hoping that Guru Ji's eyes would open and the lesson would continue as usual, but this didn't happen. Instead, she advised me to stop thinking about the lesson and focus on the presence.

The presence. What presence? The present? Presents? I looked around the room just to make sure, but there were no wrapped boxes to be found.

"Hema, you mustn't always be thinking about gifts and such. Focus on the energy in the room





and tell me what you feel. Now don't think too hard, just let it come to you."

I stared at Guru Ji, who still had her eyes closed. She could read my mind!

"Of course I can." Guru Ji raised her voice sternly. "Now stop your mind from all of these useless thoughts and focus. There is a very special presence here today. Let her come to you."

What?!? The room was too quiet for me to handle. It was that eerie silence that almost begs to be broken. I wished for anything. Leaky faucet, toilet flushing, airplane overhead, garbage truck. I tried to force my thoughts to stop so that Guru Ji couldn't read them but this, of course, proved senseless.

"Hema!" Guru Ji opened her eyes. "Stop worrying about if I can or can not think what you are thinking. If you want the answer, it is simple. I can. I know you smoke cigarettes, I know you were not pure before you got married, and I know many other things that you think you've kept hidden."

She knew everything.

"Now, breathe in deep and whatever you do, don't get scared."

Why is it that when someone tells you not to do something, it is the one and only thing you do? Like the time my dad set out to teach me to ride. The bike would wobble back and forth now and again, and my runners would trail the ground.

"Lift those feet!" Dad would yell after me. "Lift your feet and keep the bike balanced."

After what seemed like forever, I had finally managed to peddle smoothly on an open stretch of street in our neighbourhood. I heard Dad hooting from far behind me, but I wouldn't dare look back for fear of falling. On either side of the street was cobble paving. I imagined the gritty stones cutting my knees and elbows if I fell. While looking at the houses, I managed to steer the bike towards the pavement, the one place I didn't want to go.

"Don't hit the pole!" Dad yelled from what seemed like miles behind me.

The street was so wide. I could have steered anywhere. I could have let my foot drag on one side and gradually come to a halt in the middle of the abandoned road. I could have turned into Mr. Conte's driveway, it was sloped upwards, and that would have brought me to a quick stop, I could have steered left at the end of the T-junction and made my way back to

where Dad was, but no. There was only one pole and I hit it. Like hitting the bull's eye, what are the chances?

I was scared.

Now, Guru Ji's eyes opened. She looked right at me, or through me actually, to a spot directly behind me. I wouldn't dare follow her stare. Her chest heaved, ever so slowly, in long heavy breaths that I tried to copy. It was useless. My breathing was short and choppy and my heart was running for distance. I felt a surging in my chest and then a sharp bolt. My whole body shook. Guru Ji was now looking directly into my eyes.

"Good, Hema. Very good." Guru Ji gave me a smile of approval that was better than any smile she had ever given me for my *sargums*. She looked extremely impressed, though I didn't know what for. She started talking in Hindi, which made it a bit more difficult for me to understand. "You are a good catcher. The spirits will let you catch them for as long as you want to, but you must not call on them, they will come to you."

"Who will come to me?" My Hindi was rusty.

Guru Ji smiled.

"Who?" I demanded. I was getting a little bit frustrated with all of this waiting.

"Don't be impatient. The spirits are with us, and they don't stay for long. When the light runs out, they are gone until next time." Guru Ji beckoned me to hold her hands. I reached out to her.

It was then that I saw the hands. A transparent set of hands superimposed upon mine. Older hands. I tried to pull away, but Guru Ji had a firm hold of mine. I stared at our hands locked together, horrified.

"What is this?" I started to cry. "What is this? Make it go away, Guru Ji!"

"*Pagli larki!*"

By the smile on her face, I knew it couldn't have been very bad, but I knew she was swearing just the same.

"I'm not comfortable." *Comfortable?* I couldn't think of a better word in Hindi. I stared dumbly at the almost transparent trembling hands on mine.

"You're not supposed to be." Guru Ji squeezed my hands tightly. "Next time will be easier. Like the second time you were with Rafiq. It was easier, ji?"

My face went flush, but Guru Ji was not angry.

"I don't want a next time. Please let go." I was crying harder now. Just the look of the hands almost in the exact same position as mine. So close. "Please."

"Trust me, Hema, or for the rest of your life you will be *pustava*. Don't make this kind of a mistake. Other mistakes can be forgiven, but not these ones. These ones will sit like flashing bright Christmas lights on your shoulder for everyone to see when you enter the life Hereafter. Everyone will know and you will think back to this moment wishing you weren't so *pagli!*" Guru Ji began to loosen her grip on my hands. "Now breathe deeply and let her speak to you. Can you feel her body?"

Body? The question appalled me. It was the first time that I had actually thought about the body. I kept seeing the hands and not thinking about the rest of the body that would logically accompany the hands. I turned slowly to look at my feet, as if trying not to upset a jug of water balancing on my head.

"You don't have to be so careful. You take care of your body and she'll take care of hers. Just move like you would all the time." Guru Ji let go of my hands and waved her arms about. "It doesn't hurt them. See?"

Just then I saw the long dress hanging thinly in front of my jeans like a sheer curtain in front of an open window. I recognized the fabric pattern—dark brown embroidered tulips on a beige embossed background of vines and leaves. A familiar pang in my heart and then the voice in my head.

Maa.

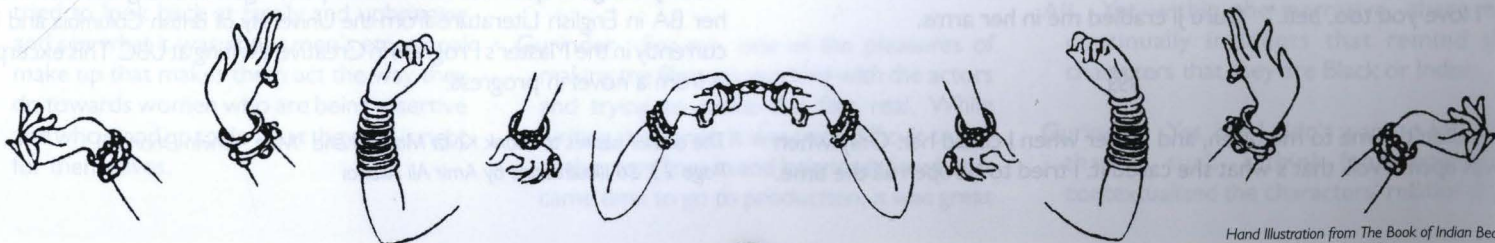
"Can you hear her?" Guru Ji's eyes lit up. "She is speaking to both of us. Can you hear it?"

Maa spoke clearly in my mind as if I was listening to a tape of her voice with stereophonic headphones. It wasn't like the sounds we pick up normally. It was as if it was playing on a special cassette player in my head. In my mind. It was loud and heavy. Heavy and clear.

I couldn't answer Guru Ji, but she knew by the look on my face. Maa thanked Guru Ji in Hindi and then addressed me in perfect English.

"Don't be scared of me, Hema. I won't hurt you. If you are scared, I cannot stay."

"I'm not scared." My voice came out shaky. A contradiction.





Guru Ji bent over and whispered, "You don't have to speak out loud when you give the reply. Just say it inside your mind as if you are talking in your head. Like if you are angry at someone and you don't say it out loud. Like the way you spoke in your head when you thought that I couldn't read your head." She winked at me.

I thought back to all the times I must have sworn at her during lessons.

"It's okay, it's okay. Don't worry, Hema. I've heard worse from some of my other students. Now, talk to your Maa. She's waiting. She has stopped talking to me anymore." Guru Ji closed her eyes and left me alone with Maa.

Suddenly, I felt a pulling on my skin. Like stretching. I felt like my skin was being ripped off me like the skin off of a chicken drumstick. It wasn't painful as much as it was awkward. It felt a flash of sensation that my body wasn't able to register. Like my mind was experiencing one thing while my body was registering another. It was like the time I was in England for my cousin's wedding. They had the sink taps backwards and on either side of the basin. The only way you could get warm was by mixing the two in the basin, otherwise it came out freezing or boiling. For me, this meant that cold was hot and hot was cold. So when I ran what I thought was the cold water, my hands were under the tap for a good five seconds before they registered that it was scorching hot. My arms were all goose-pimpled. I heard Maa in my ears telling me to breathe slowly. Then, I saw her transparent figure pulling away from me.

"No!" I yelled out loud. "Don't go! I'm not scared. I'm not scared." I hoped that if I said it enough, I would convince my voice to stop giving me away. But it was too late. She was gone.

Guru Ji kept her eyes closed. She knew that Maa had left. She felt her.

"It's okay, Hema. Keep your eyes closed and try to keep your body to stay open." She added, "She might come back."

All I could think of was the word 'Open.' I kept seeing it flash on the insides of my eyelids. 'Open' in every font and style imaginable.

Guru Ji opened her eyes and motioned me to come close. It was the first time I had ever hugged her. Her old body seemed so much stronger than mine. I cried.

"Why did she have to go?" I asked. "I tried not to be scared."

"She was not trying to go, Hema. She had enough *shakti* from your soul. Enough so she could sit in front of you instead of in you. She just wanted to sit in front of you so you can talk better. More easy, you see?" Guru Ji motioned with her hands, eye to eye.

I propped myself up again and closed my eyes. "Okay. Tell her I'm open."

Guru Ji laughed and pulled me close to her. I smelled the *bajar* from the gold ball pendant that hung around her neck. "Don't worry, *beti*. She will be back. Once you have caught her, she can come as much as she likes to. Don't worry. You did good. Very good."

I felt uneasy about entering this part of her world. Everything had changed. Nothing would ever be the same. Guru Ji and I had suddenly shared many secrets, all at once.

I love her.

"I love you too, *beti*." Guru Ji cradled me in her arms.

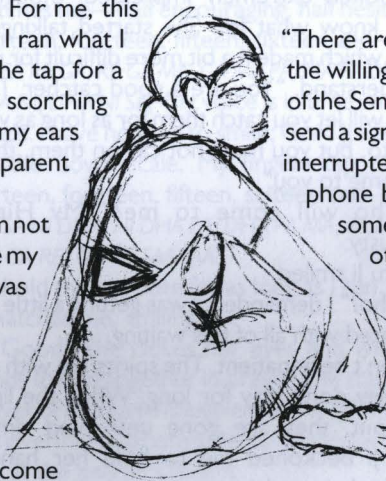
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Maa didn't come to me often, and never when I called her. Only when I was open. Well, that's what she called it. I tried to be open all the time.

I wanted to be open every moment, every second. Like the first time my fingers discovered my spot. I wanted to touch it all the time—like a horny dog. I was finding all kinds of ways to rub it in public without people noticing.

I know when I am open like I know when I have to pee. You just know. Getting there is the hard part. Guru Ji said that the more you try the less chance you have of catching them. She said that the spirits are like the balls in the *Lotto 6/49* machine. They bounce around at such a speed in the air tight container until, finally, a vent is opened. Only then can the ball break free from the cycle with such a force that it gets trapped in the metal cage; on the outside. The spirits are more comfortable in the air tight container. It is the world of Spirits. Their world. Once they are trapped on the outside they can only stay for so long. I think of it like they're scuba divers and they've got a limited supply of oxygen—or whatever the equivalent is in the Spirit world.

Sometimes Maa can stay for hours. Sometimes she only lasts a few seconds.



"There are two factors that can prevent us from connecting: one is the willingness of the Receiver, you, and the other is the willingness of the Sender, me." Maa was very good with terms. "The Sender may send a signal that gets denied by the Receiver, kind of like an operator interrupted call that gets refused. The charge is still \$1.25 on your phone bill whether you get through or not. Basically, I still lose some of my *shakti* whether I make it to you or not. Now, the other possibility is that the Receiver may send a signal to the Sender that acts as a warning. This is kind of like putting a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on your doorknob. You're warning me that it is probably best not to visit at that time."

"But," I argued, "I would never put a sign up to you."

Maa laughed and her stomach shook. She was heavier than I remembered.

"Hema, there are times that you yourself aren't even aware of. You can't help it. It is the way you have been programmed. Everyone needs a certain amount of personal time everyday. This is the law of all humans and animals. Sometimes, you may be just waiting in a Doctor's office and using this time, other times you may be cleaning the bathroom. But the most important thing is that you get this time somewhere in the day. Allah takes care of that part. You use this time naturally without even knowing that you are using it. Like breathing." Maa smiles at me. "The 'Do Not Disturb' sign goes up without you knowing it."

This was all extremely new and complicated to me, but the more meetings we had the less absurd it all became. I began to understand the laws of the Spiritual world almost as well as I knew the ones that governed my own realm.

One day I got enough courage to ask her, "But why did you make yourself known to me now?" This was the first and only question Maa didn't answer. She knew that I knew the answer better than anyone.



Farah Jehangir Tejani was born in Kampala, Uganda. She graduated with her BA in English Literature from the University of British Columbia and is currently in the Master's Program in Creative Writing at UBC. This excerpt is from a novel in progress.

The author wishes to thank Keith Maillard and "Maa" (Shirin Dhanani).

Page 23, 26 illustrations by Amir Ali Alibhai



# Bhaji on the Beach

Gurinder Chadha in conversation with Ali Kazimi

Ali What does the title of the film refer to?

Gurinder People always ask me that. *Bhaji on the Beach* generated a bit of fun because it connoted a nice day out. In England, when Fred Smith goes out to have his weekly curry, he always orders chicken *korma*, *palal* rice, *naan* bread and cucumber *raita*. But to start he always has onion *bhaji*, which is an anglicisation of *bahajia*, so we felt it was quite a good name for the film.

Ali How did the film evolve?

Gurinder It was Meera's idea [Syal, the screenwriter of *Bhaji on the Beach*] to make a film about a group of women who go to the seaside. We sat down and started thinking it through. For me, it wasn't enough to make a film like that because it would have been basically an ethnic comedy. I came up with the other two story lines, the most taboo areas in the community at the time. One was domestic violence, and the other was mixed race relationships between Blacks and Asians. We went right in at the deep end to where [the couple] have already been together and now she's pregnant. So it's a crisis situation; what's she going to do? Is the relationship going to survive? The fetus also serves as a metaphor for the Black and Asian communities. I just wanted to play around with that. Not provide any answers, just play around.

One of the biggest problems in England is women's increased independence and the associated rise in domestic violence. Although support groups exist for Black and Asian women, I wanted to explore that problem within the Asian community, and why Asian men behave the way they do. I tried to look back at family and upbringing and see what it was about men's emotional make up that makes them act the way they do towards women who are being assertive and who stand up to do what they feel is right for themselves.

Ali Where did you draw these characters from? Was it through interviews or personal experience?

Gurinder All of the characters in the film are loosely based on relatives or friends. When



Gurinder Chadha at Honest Ed's discount department store, Toronto, Canada

anybody Indian goes to see the film, they will see someone they recognize from their own social environment. The actors found the same thing. They were able to base the characters on real people that they knew and they all started to interrelate as a family. In my head, I also 'knew' who certain actors 'were'.

It was a very closely knit procedure; the improvisation the actors did worked well because they drew on very strong, recognizable character traits and they were all speaking the same language. As a director, that's fantastic. A lot of the hard work [associated with working with many actors] had been done for us because we had chosen characters who were readily recognizable.

Ali Did you encourage actors to improvise around the lines?

Gurinder For me, one of the pleasures of making the film was working with the actors and trying to make the film real. While writing the script, it was very difficult to get all the story lines in and balanced. So when it came time to go to production, it was great

to be able to pass some of the responsibility on to the actors. The actors, with one or two exceptions, had never been involved in a cinema film project before.

Their ability to suggest specific details that were so important to the film involved a lot of trust between us. Anishia Nair completely changed the character of Laddu and in the end it was much improved as far as I was concerned. It brought an honesty and a complexity to the character that I didn't feel existed before in the script and I encouraged her to explore that. Shaheen Khan, who played Simi the bus driver, based her character on me, so whenever the character became too horrible or bossy, I had to step in and correct her! It also added to the sense of intimacy and fun between the actors and myself.

Ali One of my favourite scenes was between Oliver and his father in the workshop. It was interesting to see how you dealt with a culture that wasn't yours and with a relationship between two men. How did that come about?

Gurinder What I was looking for in all the characters and scenes was the humanity, regardless of race. In the Indian scenes, I tried to remove any trace of distinct 'Indianness' and replace it with something universal. The same with the scene with Oliver and his father. It didn't have anything to do with being Black and that was why it worked so well. A lot of that is part of what makes a well written scene. Meera wrote the dialogue very well, with a lot of help from the producer Nadine [Marsh-Edwards], who is Black. We were all putting in what we knew and taking out what we didn't know, so Nadine's input was quite present in the Black and Asian story line.

We wanted to focus on the ordinariness of the characters, like in the scene where Oliver goes to visit her [Hashida's] parents. It could have turned into a scene about race versus culture, but instead it was about a young man going to meet his new parents-in-law when the parents don't know that he's married their daughter. Mo Sesay played the part very well, with a sense of honesty that came again from seeing the characters not as Black or Indian people, but just as people.

Ali Yet within the narrative, there are continually incidents that remind the characters that they are Black or Indian.

Gurinder Yes, but I didn't want to focus on that as such. I think [the incidents] contextualized the characters' relationships



within the film. The opening shot of a butcher throwing a lump of meat against his shop window [which is typically British] then of a young man spray-painting a swastika on the window, immediately followed by the sound of Indian music coming from a radio, set the context of the film in its first three seconds. It's important to show that racism is not only there, but that women deal with it assertively. Their treatment of racism turned into quite a powerful tool but we had to use it lightly.

**Ali** How was it working with Peter Sellier [the only principal white actor in the film], and how did he respond to the film?

**Gurinder** He was a great sport. He knew exactly what we wanted in the character of Ambrose and he played it fantastically. When he saw the finished product, he was very moved. He was a great person to have around because it showed the progress we were making. Here the majority of actors were Black, and only some of the supporting cast was white, while so often in feature films it's the other way around.

**Ali** Your use of sound, especially music, in the film was particularly interesting.

**Gurinder** My first film, *I'm British But...*, was about music. I made that film because during the late 1980s, great new music was coming out made for us by us. It was a particularly British Indian thing, and it moved me very much. I've taken that on to every film I've made because it's the best way to show the sort of fusion that exists between the two cultures in a celebratory way. In *Bhaji*, all the character have their own sort of sound. The film score is very intricate and tells its own story.

**Ali** Why did you choose to use the flashbacks and dream sequences?

**Gurinder** I wanted the film to look essentially English, with Indian characters. The old *Carry On* films used the dream sequence technique. I also wanted to incorporate some Indian cinematic styles. All the fantasy sequences relate to stock Indian films and represent Asha's attempts to reconcile traditionalism and her imagination with modernity and reality. I wanted to show both that we were able to exist quite happily combining aspects of two diverse cultures.

**Ali** Where do you draw your inspiration from?

**Gurinder** From everything, all the time. From magazine articles, television shows,

conversations. It's a manifestation of how I react culturally with what's going on around me in terms of race. In terms of film, I'm influenced by the new, political English film makers like Ken Loach and Mike Lee. [Films like] *Riff Raff* and *High Hopes* had something to do with the creation of *Bhaji*, as did *Tokyo Story*. In a way, I think *Bhaji* shares a resonance with that. Italian family dramas and irreverent French films also contributed something to *Bhaji*, but I think that Indian films have perhaps had more of an influence than I give them credit for. Some of the scenes that were shot, for example the one of the men under the pier, were particularly Indian.

**Ali** What is it like for you, as an Asian or Black woman film maker in Britain, in terms of working with the crew and the independent film institute? Are there certain expectations?

**Gurinder** Obviously there's some struggle involved because what I'm doing is new and it can make people uncomfortable. There are also some problems because I'm assertive. I've learned that when you are the first to do something, everything will be a struggle. Although I get some of the benefits of breaking new ground, I am assured to get most of the problems, and as long as I'm taking money away from white male film makers, the white men on the film set will question why I was able to make the jump and they weren't. I get very upset when people are surprised by how good the film is but I try not to dwell on that.

**Ali** In terms of characters and the women that you draw on, they are from India. Your own family is from East Africa. Your next project is supposed to deal more directly with your own roots. Could you tell me about that?

**Gurinder** I've been trying to write that film for three years, but it's so hard and other projects are always taking precedence. It's a project called *In the Early Hours of the Day*, and it looks back on the life of an elderly couple in London; their last thirty years in England and their first forty years in Kenya. It looks back on their parents' lives, but also at the life of their son who lives in Vancouver, so it is a sort of poetic look at movement and journey, of cultural gain and cultural loss. It's difficult to write about what exactly is being lost and what is being gained because it's not tangible. It's half written in my head, but I haven't found the proper way to express it yet. Perhaps when I am an old woman I will have found it! I like the fact that as

my environment changes over time, so does the project. It's a work in progress that influences other works I do.

**Ali** How have men will responded to a film like this?

**Gurinder** In the first screening we had in the Southampton Film Festival, we asked some of the Indian men who had attended what they thought. Some of them were able to strongly identify characters in the film with people that they knew. What I think will appeal to people who see the film is its realism and truthfulness. If there is a problem, it will be with people who say we shouldn't 'air our dirty linens in public'. Frankly, I have no patience with those people. For myself, I have to accept that some people are bound to be upset by what I do, but at the same time I have to be glad about that because at least I'm causing them to confront what's going on.

**Ali** How common is a relationship like the one between Oliver and Hashida?

**Gurinder** Very common. People just don't want to talk about what's going on. The opposite scenario—Black women with Asian men—is also common, particularly in the Midlands, but it's still hidden. This sort of denial probably won't disappear until the next generation grows up, by then the reality of mixed-race relationships will probably be accepted instead of merely tolerated. The few parents who have seen [*Bhaji*] have by and large welcomed the fact that it's being talked about. It's quite encouraging.



**Gurinder Chadha** was born in Kenya, but has lived in England for most of her life. She studied development economics and politics at the University of East Anglia. She began working for the BBC as a news reporter in 1985. In 1990, she formed her own production company, *Umbi Films*. Her first short film, the award winning *I'm British But...* was followed by *A Nice Arrangement*, a short drama which has won many awards. *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) is her first feature film.

**Ali Kazimi** is a film maker based in Toronto for the past ten years. He is a former president of the *Independent Film and Video Alliance* and is the producer and director of a film entitled, *Narmada: A Valley Rises*.

For more information about *Bhaji on the Beach*: **Film Four International**, 60 Charlotte Street, London W1P 2AX, Great Britain  
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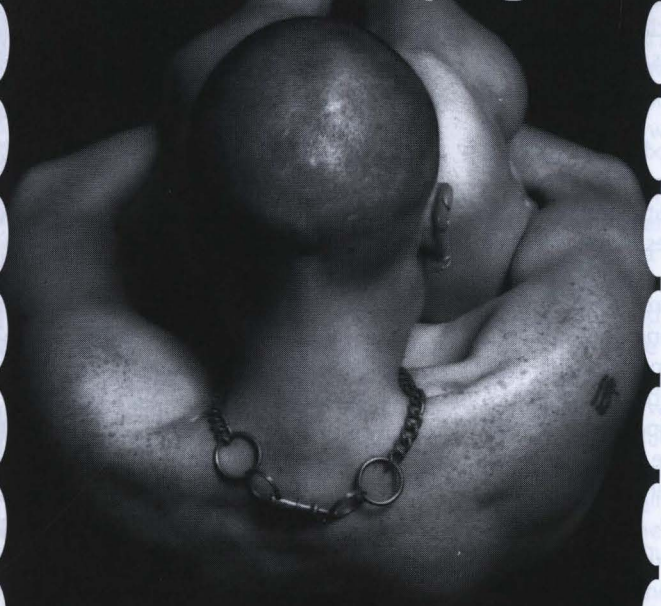
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	9:35 Pestonjee
23	7:15 Khandar
	9:15 Ankur

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Reception  
September 19  
6:30

P A C I F I C  
**CINEMATHEQUE**

1131 HOWE ST. (between Helmcken & Davie) 24-HOUR FILM INFO 688-FILM



**Shani Mootoo** has been working with colour photocopies and video for about three years. When I approached her about having an exhibition at the Contemporary Art Gallery, this work had been seen only in group shows. It was a timely moment to provide a larger representation of her work in a solo exhibition. Colour photocopying is an expensive process, so we decided to contact Xerox and inquire into the possibility of using one of their machines to produce new work for the exhibition. They generously agreed and after some initial negotiation and several frustrating days in the busy demonstration room at corporate headquarters, Xerox left Shani to work alone after hours with their latest machines.

Shani's working time on the photocopiers was compressed into about a three week period. Not a long time, but she was prepared. Having gathered images and ideas in the previous months, she arrived at corporate headquarters lugging a large box full of material—both photographic images that she had collected or taken herself, and actual objects such as plants and food. Word circulated through the office about the squid that graced the pristine glass of the new Xerox Majestic Series 5765. But the evidence was absent the next morning and although Shani was questioned about this, they smiled and let her carry on.

Many hours were spent working the machines. I joined Shani for a few evenings during production of the xerox publication which accompanied the exhibition. One night we spent ten hours running three machines. While Shani created the edition of new photocopy prints for the publication, I kept count and fed the machines for Monika Kin Gagnon's text discussing Shani's work. Watching the new flow-er photocopy emerge through many printings and colour checks

# Photocopies & Videotapes

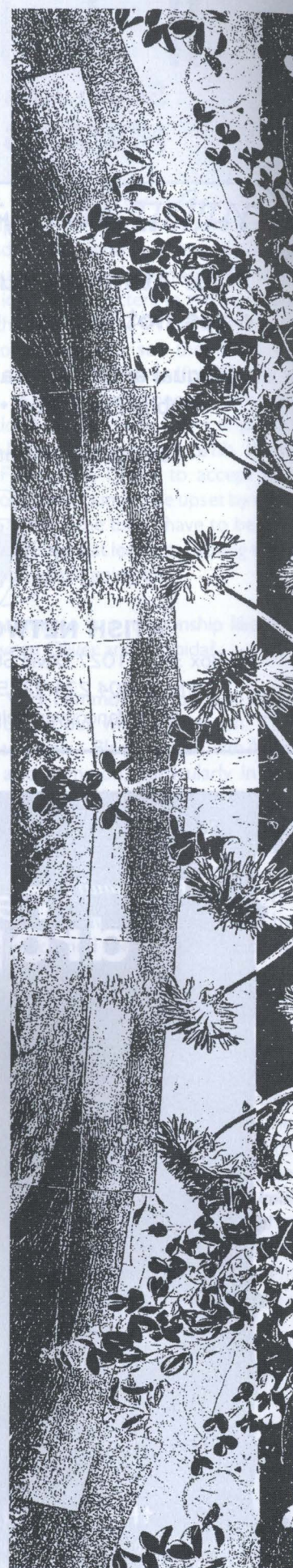
**Shani Mootoo at the CAG**

was instructive. What I had assumed was a fairly straightforward process revealed itself as one filled with complexities. Shani quietly concentrated on getting the density of the background right, creating clarity and a sense of spatial depth, synthesizing positive and negative images, pumping up the greens and reds and cropping the image to fully accentuate its suggestive possibilities.

The content in Shani's work is provocative. The exhibition did not appear cohesive except for the discreet inclusion of self portraits throughout. One wall emphasized the ambiguity of sexuality, another wall presented snapshot images of everyday street images, while another revelled in the lush sensuality of food and flowers. All were bound together, however, by a sense of identity that explores one's shifting position in a world of fragmentary signs and territories. We do not perceive the world from one point of view but from many.

Representatives from Xerox came to see the exhibition. I was in a T-shirt when they arrived and quickly changed into a striped dress shirt to try and present an image of the responsible curator. The first piece in the exhibition spoke of Shani's coming out as a lesbian to her father. I worried about what Xerox didn't realize they were getting into. They listened to my discussion of her work, watched the videos and upon leaving said, "Thank you." I believe they meant it.

**Keith Wallace** is the curator at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC.





**It comes as something** of a surprise to see a demonstration of the potential of colour xerography. The result is a full-fledged wonder, a visual feast. With the same impact as a kaleidoscope fitted with a clear lens instead of permanently affixed glass chips (to render the ever changing optical effect all the more engaging because what is reflected and distorted is the world in real time), the viewer of Shani Mootoo's current work at the Contemporary Art Gallery (Vancouver, BC) is shown a view that is nothing less than visually stunning. Colours and repetitive patterns jump out from smooth surfaces that belie the actual physical feather weight of the material.

Mootoo has been producing work for thirteen years in Vancouver. She was born in Dublin, Ireland and raised in Trinidad. After receiving a BFA from the University of Western Ontario and completing a postgraduate year at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design, she began to branch out from painting into other media. In the last three years, she has produced videos, short stories, poems and photocopy-based work.

Ranging from lushly reproduced images to pencil-crayon quality copies, the images vary from stretched street scenes, to lingeringly familiar pattern repetitions and food mandalas, to the terrain of the body. The scale is consistently human—the smallest work being approximately a foot in its longest dimension and the largest being a direct paste-up that is approximately 12' by 16'. The videos are shown in a series on one large screen TV in the west side of the gallery.

Two things come to mind when viewing this show. The first has already been mentioned above—the kaleidoscopic quality of the work. The second, which emerges upon closer examination, is a method of determining position. Prior to the development of establishing longitude through different time zones, sailors used a method called 'dead reckoning' to find their position while at sea, by recording courses sailed and distances travelled in each course. Mootoo's strategy seems to be a similar one—executed on dry land. The record of her courses and distances travelled are detectable through the use of the four cardinal points (north, south, east and west) in placing her various works. Here we have a situation of the gallery as map. The mapping structure allows the viewer to bridge the distance between the four points using composition, colour and subject guideposts.

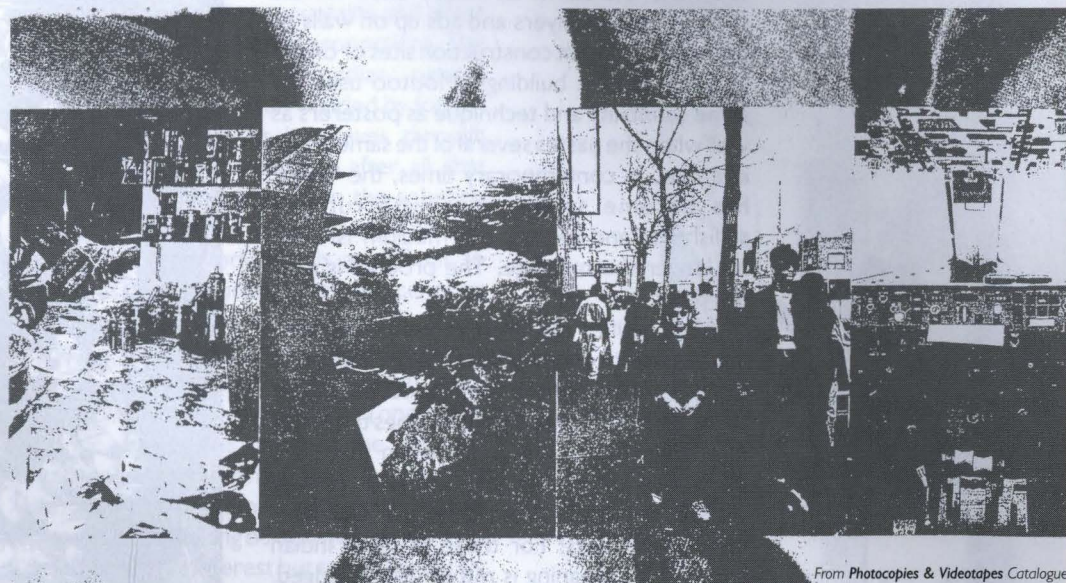
The works are, in their most deliberately humble description, photocopies and videotapes, mechanically reproduced versions of the real thing. They are replicas, reproductions, extrapolations and derivations achieved through xerography (a process of copying that utilizes light, electrical force and chemical

fusion). The concept of the invaluable, unreplacable original is not humoured here. As the idea of existence is to the experience of existence, so are Mootoo's copies to the originals: ill-fitting but malleable and ultimately something else all together—capable of achieving a distinct presence.

*Photocopies & Videotapes* is, in its most reduced terms, just that. If one were to view the exhibition solely for its aesthetic merits, the 22 wall pieces and four videos would have resonance. However, there is more here than just aesthetically arresting work.

Some of the works are distorted copies of photographs, stretched to fill a predetermined space. Others are patterns that unfold kaleidoscopically over several panels. Some show fantastic sequences of natural beauty: people canoeing on a clear azure lake, snow-covered

The octopus as subject seems a perplexing choice at first, but slyly becomes compelling upon further consideration. The octopus is found worldwide and generally in warm waters. Its skin is light- and texture-sensitive and can change quickly to blend in with its surroundings. It has a very well developed brain and nervous system and is also capable of growing back an arm in case one is damaged. The octopus is a highly intelligent and adaptable creature who hunts with stealth. The first writing ink was made from pigment found in the octopus' ink sac. Having mentioned such brief facts regarding this animal, it is interesting to note that these do not diminish the sense of mystery and even menace most people associate with the octopus' rather sinister image. Does the fact that we consume this animal change anything?



From *Photocopies & Videotapes* Catalogue

mountains, a travelogue type of desire for adventure. It is work with barely a ripple on its surface. Mootoo has never been an artist for remaining within established frames of reference. Her current work demonstrates the manipulation of images using collage, juxtaposition, reflection, distortion and mirror imaging with a style that seems, for the most part, free of convention. Here is the complexity and fragmentation of identity without the use of tired frameworks, linked thematically to each of the four cardinal points.

On the east wall hang collages of flowers, betel nut, spices, fruits and translucent octopus. Some of the five works are complexly disorienting while others flow continuously. None bear the slightest trace of spatial depth to contextualize or explain into the commonplace the choice of images. No sign of the human presence grounds the work except in the deliberateness of the arrangements. The pieces of this wall display strong composition and colour skill of considerable calibre.

And what about cultural differences and corresponding rates of consumption? It seems without question that no amount of information to the contrary will change our desire, our pleasure, in maintaining fear of the octopus even when it is quite dead on our plates. Indeed, we relish in ingesting the object of our anxiety. Perhaps it is, after all, a fitting metaphor for the 'East', or more to the point, to the East as it exists in each of us in the diaspora—a different register of understanding for each individual, varying sets of symbols, a little elusive but resilient and carried everywhere.

The north wall holds six street scenes that place the South Asian presence in the Western urban environment. Five of the six pieces consist of three rectangular copies of photographs butted up against each other to form single triadic pieces. The upper left had image is upright and stretched horizontally, the lower left image is of the same dimension but sometimes upside-down (a mirror image with differing reflection) and one vertically stretched



image on the right hand side. There are no frames, no glass.

What is strongest here is the quietness of the urban, rural and single gestural image combinations. All of these elements are combined with varying degrees of distortion to suppose, consider and explore the individual's placement. These five are the most successful of the works in the show. They display experiential and representational coherence without being unduly heavy-handed or overloaded. Just enough is here, but not too much and certainly not everything.

The west wall is the only one with xeroxes pasted directly on to its surface. A myriad of images repeat: an advertisement for Indian pizza that uses the Taj Mahal as a backdrop, people at carnival, sea-horses copulating with the line, "I'd really rather not be a theory," over top. It is the same technique used on the street—posters, flyers and ads up on walls or plywood fencing at construction sites or on the sides of derelict buildings. Mootoo uses the same sensibility and technique as posterers as well when she pastes several of the same image in a row. In contemporary times, the 'West' has become synonymous with ruthless selfishness and excess, the medium is often no longer the message. The product is now the point.

What typifies the West more exactly than marketable incongruity? Just bizarre enough to bring in a crowd or sell the product but not so strange it becomes scary. What does the image of anything mean any more when there are oceans of them that just keep on coming without any end? What does the Taj Mahal mean these days? For those of us of Indian descent it's meaning is rather double-edged. The history of its construction makes people close their eyes in horror. Oh, it started out well enough with a *shah* wanting to show a *begum* how much he loved her by building this unprecedented structure, but it gets much worse as the details of that construction process are told. Hands amputated and eyes permanently blinded so that they would never be able to reproduce it, the people who built the Taj Mahal were enslaved to its splendored completion. But what does it mean any more? It is a great feat of architectural ingenuity, despite its history. It is still an example of the power an aristocracy can wield to have its bidding done. After so long, after all the marketing and sightseeing, the Taj Mahal has become the symbol of India itself. According to the West's rule of thumb, there is no need to get into the details of history when the perfect logo, the infectious jingle, the unforgettable catch-phrase comes your way. And, if you are really lucky (or really good), history can be made irrelevant, if not altogether invisible.

The Taj Mahal may induce people to buy



From Photocopies & Videotapes Catalogue



Indian pizza. In the end it is as much a novelty as the pyramids of Egypt or the Great Wall of China, and it is used as a lure for rich tourists eager to stare mutely until the inevitable question, "How'd they do that?" strikes them. This is the context in which we view these so-called wonders of the world and Mootoo clearly shows it.

The south wall bears the place of the self, of the sexual body and gender identification. A collage of a half-female, half-male Mootoo in a pair of white underwear characterizes the artist's wit and exploration into the realm of identity. The seven works here seem incongruous though indelibly linked to one of the videos, *Lest I Burn*, in which, among other things, Mootoo tells us in a poem of the suspicion of others concerning the wholeness of lesbianism. The photocopies here are not as strong as those on the other walls. There is less cohesion and a perplexing literalness with renders these works somewhat awkward and self-conscious.

A particularly disturbing series is one in which repeating images of female genitalia form the subject. The imagery is not treated with the same sensibility as the other works. Mootoo's usual wit, cleverness and subversive strategies are nowhere apparent. Reminiscent of the 'cunt art' of the 1970s, this piece plainly displays the xeroxed genitalia for the sheer pleasure of it. Pleasure on its own, however, is not enough in a context of compelling metaphors and complex juxtapositions. Whereas some of the images may not be as strong as others, this piece fails to meet the criteria Mootoo herself seems to have set for the whole.

The videos are run in series on a TV set on eye level of the seated viewer. The screen is large enough to necessitate the reduction of tunnel vision in order for the eye to catch everything. The result is that the field of vision is dominated by the video.

*English Lesson* is the first video. It is a three minute long lesson given by a man casually dressed in a T-shirt with the words, "Native West Indian" silkscreened on the front. He stands in a kitchen in front of a stove covered with pots and pans. While holding a pair of wooden spoons, he looks into the camera and cheerfully instructs the viewer of the Canadian pronunciation of 'tomato', 'man' (not 'mon'), and 'what' (not 'Wha'). In the last few seconds he smacks out a tune on the various kitchen paraphernalia with the spoons. Raising questions about the concept of correct versus incorrect dialect and the mutability of language, this video functions audibly as the paste of the west wall does visually. The strange borderlessness of the English language functioning as a sieve through which things pass.

*Lest I Burn* appears to correspond to the with

the work on the south wall. Here are five minutes of Mootoo cruising Vancouver's Commercial Drive, an area peopled most conspicuously by lesbians. Mootoo's voiceover guides the viewer's eye as to what to look for, the gaze of a lesbian suspicious of another's 'authenticity.'

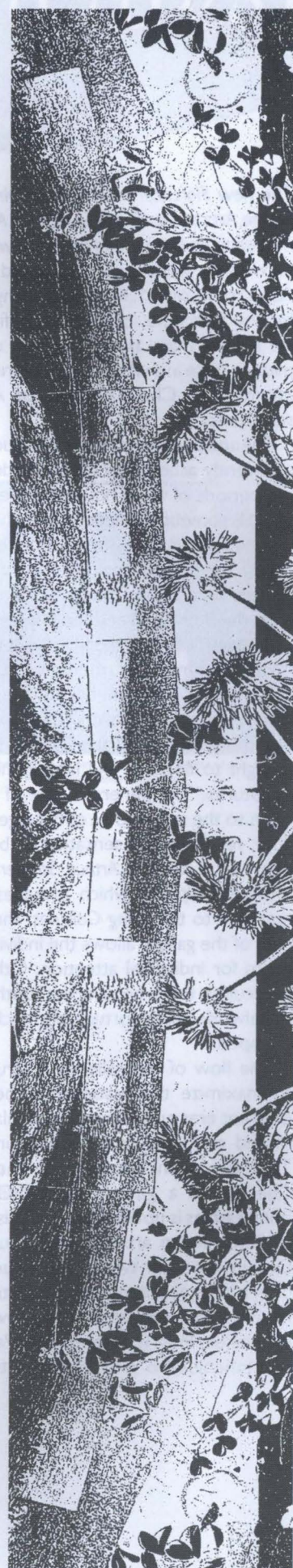
The third video is ten minutes long and is entitled *A Paddle and a Compass*. This collaboration between Mootoo and Wendy Oberlander is the most visually gratifying of the four videos and is also the one that ties all of the work together. Images of the not-altogether-tamed wilderness dominate this yearning for adventure in the great outdoors. Mootoo's monologue tells of experiences out of doors when she was a child in Trinidad not measuring up to the perfect picture of familial recreation she desired while Oberlander, in instructional tones, tells of adventurous outdoor women scaling mountains and doing other thing of similarly heroic proportions. The footage is unmistakably Canadian: people canoeing on clear lakes surrounded by forests of Ponderosa pines. As it weaves through terrain concerning ownership, after all that wishing and wanting, it ends on the sobering question of whose land this is anyway? This is an elusive, involved work that is as difficult to pinpoint as the locations of the street scenes on the north wall.

The last video, *Wild Women in the Woods*, is a narrative about a South Asian woman who, after a couple of disappointments (one of the romantic variety, the other of the personal tentativeness sort) comes upon a group of 'wild' South Asian women living in the woods replete with skis, hiking boots and saris. To read a description stirs interest but to see it is barely discordant. Strategies of subversion here really transgress.

With all of these separate works placed in the four coordinates, there emerges a map that refuses to give names, places, distances or legends. In *Photocopies & Videotapes*, Mootoo shows her characteristic skill with colour to render the effect of enjoying the map instead of simply using it as a means of guidance. This is not a voyage of fixed destination. It is a kaleidoscopic map not fixated on the cut and dried, the true and tried, the all or nothing. It is not like looking through a clear lens at a map of the world, it is like being inside of it, in the middle of all that reflection and distortion, all that possibility. And, as always, Mootoo turns the mirrors in precise ways that make quick work of established ways of looking and being viewed.



Sur Mehat is a visual artist living in Vancouver.





# Locating South Asia at the MET

The new Florence and Herbert Irving Galleries for the Arts of South and Southeast Asia are the Metropolitan Museum of Art's (New York) first permanent galleries of South and Southeast Asian art. Its over 1,300 works, many on display for the first time, quickly cover five millennia on a land mass twice the size of Europe, pausing once in a while to give more expanded attention to Chola bronzes or Angkor-era sculptures.

The architecture of the reconstructed rooms apparently accords to the aesthetic norms of the periods of work housed in them, but this effect is sometimes diminished in the jostling of different styles. The much-criticized Jain teak ceiling, for example, provides an odd entree to a gallery of Persian-influenced paintings of scenes from the *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavata Purana*. The magnificent Angkor-era sculptures, large figures from early mediæval Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam, benefit the most from their setting. The gallery that houses these works has a glass panel ceiling that allows sunlight to flood in and literally highlight the sculptures. The generous size of the room, open to the sun, and its cool beige sandstone floor, reinforce the sensation of being in the open air. Like the Arthur Sackler Gallery of Chinese Sculpture, which provides the main entrance to the Irving Galleries, the spaciousness of the gallery allows the individual works room for individual attention. Other rooms, particularly those housing the South Indian metalwork, are unfortunately much more cramped.

The flow of the galleries is structured to maximize the associations between different eras and regions, particularly the spread of Hindu and Buddhist imagery. That the main entrance to the Irving Galleries is a gallery full of Chinese bodhisattvas is not incidental, this is a view of South Asian art that looks due east. Despite a nod or two to the influence of Greek ideas about muscular definition, the rooms have been laid out to move from the ancient India (contemporary Pakistan) of Mohenjodaro and Harappa to later

Burma and Thailand on the lower level, and Tibet and Nepal on the upper level. The steady stream of Buddhas and bodhisattvas—from 3rd century Pakistani sculptures of surly mustachioed bodhisattvas to a 12th century Tibetan portrait of a bemused lama surrounded by yipping goats to more familiar images of Buddhas with enigmatic smiles, describe both the continuity and the heterogeneity of a tradition that ties South, Southeast and East Asia. At a time when some people question whether the term 'Asian-American' is anything more than a political fiction that masks the enormous differences between various Asian communities, the work in the Irving Galleries draws out historic connections.

All of the Asian unity breaks down, unfortunately and explicitly, at the border of the 'Islamic' world. Despite the fact that contemporaneous objects are set side by side in many parts of the galleries, an 11th century bodhisattva beside a 12th century Shiva, and a 19th century Keralite jasmine-bud necklace in the midst of earlier illustrations of Hindu epics,

the Met's collection of Mughal work is not to be found in the Irving Galleries—they are relegated to the Islamic galleries on the other side of the museum. This bizarre segregation promotes an entirely false dichotomy between 'Muslim' and 'Hindu', when in fact the aesthetic of the *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavata Purana* paintings are deeply influenced by Mughal art, and the Mughal paintings in the Islamic galleries are themselves not particularly religious depictions of birds and princes. It also completely belies the cross-pollination epitomized by a lovely Mohammed Ustad painting of a Radha-Krishna scene, shown recently at the *Equitable Gallery*.

The Met's *faux pas* seems particularly strange in light of its overtures towards political correctness: the Met's press packet for the Irving Galleries makes noises about the tri-state South and Southeast Asian community finally having a place to, "...bring their children here and rightly point to the heritage of which they are so vital a part...just as those of European and African descent can visualize their heritage throughout the Museum." It requires only a small stretch of the imagination to suppose that the positioning of the Irving Galleries is in the service of that noble cause, Asian-American unity (which also has a tendency to ignore West Asians). The Met has yet to emphasize the Cambodian sculptures of Shiva-Ardhanarishvara, which depict Shiva in the half-man, half-woman form that gay South Asian groups have adopted as their symbol. The fleshy early sculptures, which lack muscular definition because they are meant to exemplify the life-giving sacred breath, could be pitched to fat liberation groups. Feminists would no doubt be eager to see the dynamic 9th century Durga slaughtering the buffalo demon or the Nepalese temple relief of a woman dancing on a man's head. The possibilities are endless.



**Mina Kumar** was born in Madras and lives in Manhattan, New York. Her writing has appeared in over twenty publications.



*Yashoda and Krishna*—India, Karnataka  
Vijayanagar period, ca. 14th century. Copper.  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Lita Annenberg  
Hazen Charitable Trust Gift in honour of Cynthia Hazen  
and Leon Bernard Polsky, 1982.



# Desh Pardesh

Visual Arts Studio,

May 4-8, 1994

Toronto, Canada

## Introduction

*Desh Pardesh* is an annual conference about "exploring the politics of South Asian cultures in the West". At *Desh '94*, Rachel Kalpana James coordinated the Visual Arts Studio which featured the work of nine artists. James outlines the curatorial vision and process as follows:

"The Visual Arts Studio reflected the spirit of the mandate [of *Desh Pardesh*] through the selection of nine artists whose work and background revealed representation along these lines: gender (7 of the 9 artists were women), sexual orientation (at least two of the artists were gay or bisexual), ancestry (four of the artists were of Indian origin, the other five were Bengali, Sri Lankan, Pakistani, Irish American/Indian, Sri Lankan/Indo-Kenyan heritage), art practice (photography, textile installation, lithography, ceramics, multimedia installation, pen and ink, and mixed-media collage), experience (the artists' experience in art ranged from four to twenty years), and content (issues in the work touched on racism, colonization, identity, AIDS awareness, displacement, civil war, and sexism).

As coordinator of the Visual Arts Studio I envisioned a 'show and tell' exhibit that would invite viewers to consider visual art, to explore their relation to it, and to provoke the artists to question their own conception of art making. The selection committee, made of Toronto artists and *Desh Pardesh* working committee members (Enam Huque, Salimah Kassim-Lakha, Tamara Zeta Makhan, Steve Periera, and myself) selected the artists and their work with emphasis on the artists' proposal to interact with the viewers, engage in a work in progress, or present an interactive piece."

In these pages, *Rungh* is pleased to play a role in presenting the work of the artists in the Visual Arts Studio to a wider audience.



Sheherezade Alam demonstrates on the potters wheel for visiting Grade 4 students.



Viewer participation workshop directed by Shamina Senaratne. Viewers were invited to create their own expressions and contribute them to a wall in the studio.





Ayisha Abraham, detail

#### Ayisha Abraham (US)

Born in England, raised and educated in India, Ayisha came to New York City in 1989. She did the Whitney Program and is completing an MFA from Rutgers University. "My current work is articulated like a series of punctuation marks and it is difficult to describe. My most recent work has been a set of photographs created in the computer. They are fragments of photographs taken in South India between 1889 and 1930. They show missionaries with my family after they had been converted to Christianity. By

reframing them and changing their colour I attempt to relook at these images and not just as quaint sepia-laden images of the past. These new images reveal perspectives that look into the public and private in these highly formal images and in some instances are self-reflective."

#### Sheherezade Alam (Toronto)

was born and schooled in Lahore, Pakistan. From 1974 to the present Sheherezade has been active as an art educator and potter. She has exhibited internationally, from Karachi, Kuwait, and Islamabad to Washington, DC and Ottawa. Her prolific work ranges from affectionate and good humoured replications of classical shapes in the subcontinent tradition to more experimental forms. Sheherezade returns to the functionality of standard domestic shapes in North Indian culture... the water urn, the bread basket, the clay lamp... to reinterpret their dimensions from the perspective of an artist seeking to keep such shapes alive. Sheherezade will be demonstrating at her potters wheel at the studio and will initiate the lighting of clay *diyas* to celebrate the opening of *Desh Pardesh*.



Ceramic works by Sheherezade Alam



Detail of Neena Arora's installation, *Am I Hindu? I am Hindu?*

#### Neena Arora (Toronto)

Born in Chicago of Indian and Irish American descent, raised in Saskatchewan, she is a graduate of the Ontario College of Art. Recently, she has been working with wax dipped cheesecloth that has been left in lengths and also wrapped and formed. In the studio she will continue preparing and adding cloth in the construction of an altar installation, *Am I Hindu? I am Hindu?* [She describes her piece as] "...a place for me to connect with the universe and [with] my deepest racial memories. There are issues in my work that relate directly to being an artist of mixed heritage."



Allan de Souza, *Fetish*, Colour laser prints

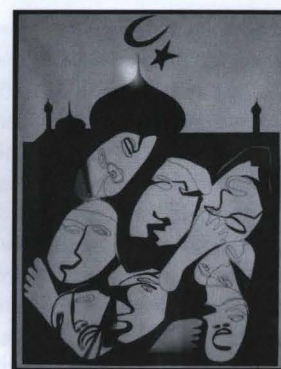
#### Allan de Souza (US)

Born in Kenya, he emigrated to England when he was seven. His work has been seen in Canada in the touring shows *Fabled Territories* (Vancouver), *Ecstatic Antibodies* (Montréal), and *Siting Resistance* (London). In England, he was coeditor of *Bazaar*, a South Asian arts magazine, and a founder of *Panchayat*, a Pan Asian artists' slide library. He now lives in New York. "My work uses the body as an arena for the enactment of social and cultural forces. Within this construct are explored issues of gender, desire, history, 'normality', infection

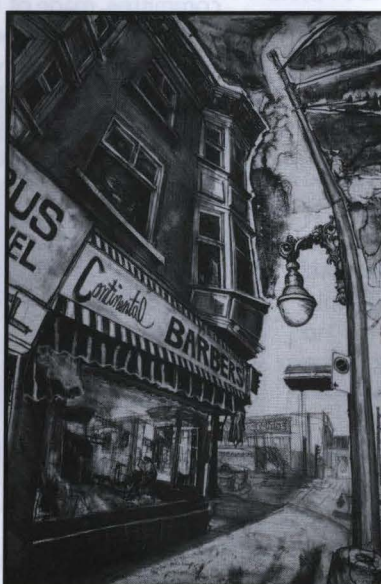
and dis/ease. I use fictional narrative in the form of autobiography to interrogate memory, 'authenticity', and nation." Allan's works are laser prints.

#### Geevan (Toronto)

Born in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, he studied at the Jaffna Hindu College and University of Moratuwa where he received a National Diploma in Technology-Civil Engineering. Living through the violent struggle for self-determination of the Tamil people and witnessing the suffering of his people he began to express his political resistance through visual arts. Toronto exhibitions include BESL Gallery, Theatre Passe Muraille, and Campaign for Democracy. Geevan's work is primarily pen and ink and collage. He is published internationally.



Geevan, Pen and ink drawing



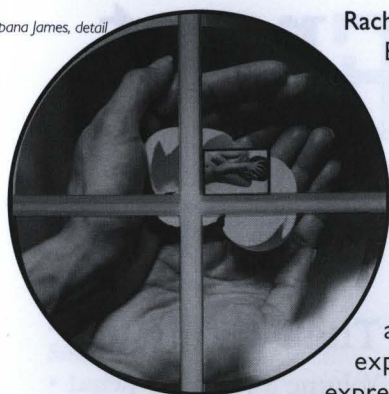
Ameen Gill, *Continental Barbers*, Lithograph, 44-1/2" x 30", March 1991.

#### Ameen Gill (Vancouver)

graduated from the Emily Carr College of Art and Design in 1989. From 1984 to the present she has exhibited in solo and group shows from China to Spain to Vancouver. She works mainly in printmaking, specifically lithography, etching, and monoprints. "My recent work explores the images that create a neighbourhood. I see myself as an outsider with no real relationship to these places. I have started incorporating elements into my work that relate to my Indian heritage by seeking out neighbourhoods that have a South Asian presence. I will be drawing in the studio what I gather from the streets of Toronto."



Rachel Kalpana James, detail

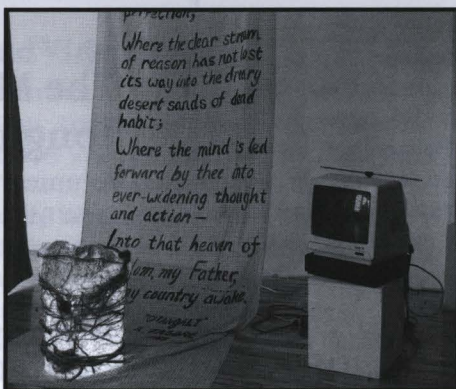


# **Rachel Kalpana James (Toronto)**

Born in England, she emigrated to Canada in 1968. She is a graduate of the Ontario College of Art. *As We Are* is a photo/collage on sexuality, AIDS prevention and family. The images in the photo/collage were a collaborative effort by the participants and myself. Many issues and experiences of sexuality are expressed from menstruation, to gender stereotyping, to same sex partners and mixed race partners, to sexual abuse, and sexual awareness, to safe sex strategies, to masturbation. The impact of family and the fact of living in the west is central. The age group of the participants is from 20 to 40 years. A magnifying glass is provided for viewers to take a closer look at sexuality within the South Asian community and to challenge the barriers that silence.

# **Debi Ray-Chaudhuri (US)**

is a lesbian artist living in New York. Her mixed media installation explores 'Indian realness.' "In the West, the inner light may be electric and the object of meditation, a moving image. For a Bengali, even growing up in Ohio, Tagore is inescapable. He echoes like thunder, the epitome of 'Indian realness'. But where is that country he called for? Not there, not here, in the heart maybe. Just a fierce desire for freedom—that I can relate to. Please walk in and put yourself in the picture." Debi has exhibited in the United States and at last year's *Desh Pardesh's In-sight: The First Canadian South Asian Woman's Art Exhibit*. Most recently she is an Artist In Residence at the Asian American Arts Centre.



Debi Ray-Chaudhuri, Installation



Shamina Senaratne, *Emerging Daily*, mixed media, 1993

# **Shamina Senaratne (Vancouver)**

is a young writer emerging from a well-rounded artistic background. About her installation/sculpture, *Emerging Daily*: "When I place my shoes in cubby holes I think of going to a mosque or a Buddhist temple...although I enter in with my mother or my father, I find myself inside a different place than the one they enter. In to this place they bring their identity: this place represents what they are about. For me it represents going to find out what we, as a family, are about. But we never quite connect because my identity seems to have been formed outside..." Shamina is of Sri Lankan and Indo-Kenyan heritage.



September 14 – October 23

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### *Artists Talks:*

**Lee Dickson:** Tuesday, September 13, 7:15 pm, followed by a reception.

**Laura Letinsky:** Wednesday, October 19, 8 pm  
*Supported by the Canada Council*

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## Call for Submissions

### Possibilities

A literary arts magazine aimed at providing a forum for the works of little known, unknown and young writers is accepting submissions. Submissions must be fiction, stories, poetry, children's fiction and other creative works written from the writer's cultural perspective. Also accepting photographs of original art work.

Submissions can be written in the writer's mother tongue accompanied by English translation. Please include SASE. Forward submissions to:

### Possibilities

#109 – 2100 Scott Street  
Ottawa, ON K1Z 1A3

## Weaving Words, Weaving Lives

A Conference for Canadian Writers of African Descent

Griots Speak will host a three day writers' conference on April 10–12, 1995. The National Library of Canada will be the main conference venue but we will also use venues such as the Multicultural Centre, Galerie SAW and the Museum of Civilization, for various events through throughout the three days.

Any writers interested in presenting written works, performance works, etc. contact P. Afua Marcus at 613 747.7886 or fax 613 233.0698 or write to:

Griots Speak  
#103 – 10 Stevens Avenue  
Ottawa, ON K1K 4M9

## Writers' Union of Canada Short Prose Competition for Developing Writers

TWUC holds an annual short prose competition to discover writers of fiction and nonfiction not previously published in book form. The prize is \$2,500 to the winner and \$1,000 to the first runner-up. Canadian citizens and landed immigrants who have not been published in book format are eligible. Submissions should be postmarked no later than November 3, 1994. Winners will be announced February, 1995. For submission requirements contact:

Competition-TWUC  
24 Ryerson Avenue  
Toronto, ON M5T 2P3  
Tel 416 868.6914 or fax 416 860.0826

## Lesbian and Gay Artists

Independent researcher is writing a review article compiling an annotated bibliography of publications by lesbian and gay artists in Canada. If you have an exhibition catalogue, periodical article, book, self-published pamphlet or other publication, please send copy and/or information to:

Caffyn Kelley c/o Gallerie Publications  
2901 Panorama Drive  
North Vancouver, BC V7G 2A4  
Tel 604 929.8706

## Upcoming Events

### Shabana Azmi in Vancouver

NRISAD will be hosting actors Shabana Azmi and Farooque Shaikh in Vancouver from September 16-25, 1994. Planned are a film retrospective in conjunction with Pacific Cinémathèque; a performance of *Tumhari Amrita*; and a fundraising dinner. For more information contact:

Non-Resident Indians for  
Secularism and Democracy  
8027 Government Street  
Burnaby, BC V6A 2E1  
Tel 604 420.2972

## What's New

### HIV/AIDS Health Educator Hired by Atish

Atish has received funding to conduct a study and educate the South Asian and Iranian communities of British Columbia about HIV/AIDS. Phindar Dulai is the newly appointed community health educator. For information, please contact:

Atish HIV/AIDS Project  
Box 345 – 1027 Davie Street  
Vancouver, BC V6E 4L2  
Tel 604 681.2122

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Rungh welcomes submissions to Samachar. Please send us your calls for submissions, announcements, upcoming events, etc. and, space permitting, we will publish them.

# Front Issues

## The Food Issue

Volume 3 Number 1

Guest Editor—Yasmin Ladha

Submissions: September 30, 1994

## The Queer Issue

Volume 3 Numbers 2 & 3

Guest Editor—Ian Iqbal Rashid

Submissions: November 4, 1994

## The Mother Tongues Issue

Volume 3 Number 4

Guest Editor—TBA

Submissions: January 26, 1995

We want your...

Desires • Dreams • Fears  
Stories • Struggles • Art  
Humour • Opinions  
Theories • Views  
Vision • Voice

We Regularly Feature...

Interviews • Reviews  
Poetry • Fiction • Profiles  
An Artist Run Centre •  
Personal Journeys,  
Personal Views •  
Samachar • Letters  
and more...

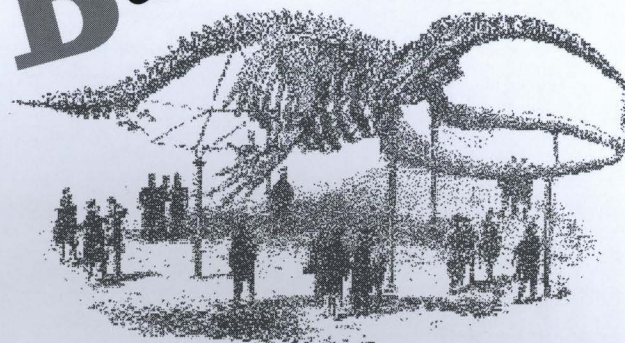
Send your Submissions to:

PO Box 66019, Station F,  
Vancouver, BC V5N 5L4  
Tel 604 254.0320  
Fax 604 662.7466

Call or fax us your ideas.  
We prefer submissions on disc—  
PC or Mac, unformatted text.



# Back Issues



## The Home Issue

### Volume 1, Numbers 1 & 2

\$8

Desh Pradesh Conference '91 • Violence Against Women • South Asian Women and Film • Indo-Caribbean Theatre • Lesbian and Gay Identities • Home—A Conversation • Cover Art and Artist Run Centre by Amir Ali Alibhai • Interview with Srinivas Krishna • Poetry by Ian Iqbal Rashid • Review of *Memory and Desire* (visual art show) • Contributors Punam Khosla, Pratibha Parmar, Chris Creighton Kelly, Moyez Vassanji, Ramabai Espinet, Sunera Thobani, Zara Suleman, Jennifer Chew, Michelle Mohabeer, Vinita Srivastava, Aruna Srivastava, Aisha Khan, Kalpesh Oza, Anthony Mohammed, Nayan Shah, Sherazad Jamal, Yasmin Ladha, Larrisa Lai.

## The Film and Video Issue

### Volume 1, Number 3

\$8

Cover Art by Geeta Saxena • Interviews with Anand Patwardhan, Om Puri and Akesh Gill • Two Takes on Srinivas Krishna's *Masala* • Gita Saxena's Identity Quest • Michelle Mohabeer, Filmmaker in Exile • Artist Run Centre by Leila Sujir • Reviews of the Vancouver Film Festival, *Of Customs and Excise* (fiction), and *Mississippi Masala* (film) • *About Face*, *About Frame* Conference • Contributors Ali Kazimi, Yasmin Jiwani, Sanjay Khanna, Seema Ahluwalia, Michelle Mohabeer, Sherazad Jamal, Kwame Dawes, Maia Chowdhury, Yasmin Ladha.

## The Body Issue

### Volume 1, Number 4

\$8

Cover Art by Kausar Nigita • Struggling to Represent Our Bodies • Interviews with Neil Bissoondath and Alistair Raphael • Referendum in Quebec • Artist Run Centre by Ashok Mathur • Short Fiction by R. Niche • Art and the Interaction of Communities • Reviews of *Eyes of Stone*, *Something Like a War*, and *Kamlabai* (films); to visit the tiger (visual arts show); Racial Minority Writers Committee of the Writers' Union of Canada (conference); and *English: Writing with an Accent* (conference); *A Sari Tale* and *Hair Scare* (video) • Contributors Raghu Krishnan, Sarita Srivastava, Ali Lakhani, Molly A. K. Shinhat, Nilambri Ghai, Sonali Fernando, Richard Pinet, Derek Simons, Ameen Merchant, Henry Tsang, Amir Ali Alibhai, Ameen Gill, Badru Jamal, Sherazad Jamal, Parminder Mann, Sur Mehat, Surjit Mehat, Kausar Nigita, Paul Pahal, Ranjan Sen, Shamina Senaratne, Waheeda Tejan-Byron, Sanjay Khanna, Ajmer Rode, Kirsten Emiko McAllister.

## The Roots Issue

### Volume 2, Numbers 1 & 2

\$11

Cover Art by Sarindar Dhaliwal • The History of South Asian Immigration to British Columbia • Remembering the Komagata Maru • Archival Project by Inderjit Kohal • Profile of Vancouver Sath • Interviews with Rohinton Mistry and Trichy Sankaran • Artist Run Centre by Shauna Beharry • Personal Journeys, Personal Views of Alia Syed (filmmaker); Ayisha Abraham (visual artist); Roger Sinha (dancer); Sur Mehat (visual artist) • Short Fiction by Shani Mootoo • Poetry by Damian Lopes and Sadhu Binning • Reviews of *A Suitable Boy* (fiction); *Chandralekha* (dance); *Telling Relations: Sexuality and the Family* (visual art); *A Balancing Act: Family and Work* (video); *Latifa & Himli's Nomadic Uncle* (film); *Desh Pardesh*, 1993 (conference); National Association of Women and the Law (conference) • Contributors Inderji Kohaly, Salvador Ferreras, Ali Lakhani, Shauna Beharry, Atif Ghani, Saloni Mathur, Roger Sinha, Sur Mehat, Shani Mootoo, Damian Lopes, Sadhu Binning, Alicia Peres, Karlyn Koh, B.K. Gosh, Ian Iqbal Rashid, Amir Ali Alibhai, Nazlin Nathu

## The Literature Issue

### Volume 2, Number 3

\$8

New writing by Bharati Mukherjee and MG Vassanji • Interview with Ven Begamudré • Artist Run Centre by Phindar Dulai • Reviews of *Culture and Imperialism* by Edward Said; *A Lotus of Many Colours* (gay and lesbian anthology); *Horse of the Sun*, Maya Memsab and *The Burning Season* (film) • Contributors Bharati Mukherjee, MG Vassanji, Phindar Dulai, Shiraz Dossa, Ameen Merchant and Yasmin Jiwani

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**Rung**

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Ranjan Sen was born in West Bengal, India in 1941. He has a BA in Honours English from Delhi University, a BFA from the University of Manitoba (1965) and an MFA from Pennsylvania State University (1967). Sen has also been a recipient of a Gold Medal Award from the University of Manitoba (1965), a Commonwealth Scholarship in Painting (1963–65), and a Cultural Scholarship from the Government of India (1960–62). Sen's paintings, prints and drawings are in several hundred private collections in Canada, India, France, England, Italy, the USA, Japan, South America and Australia.

"Attraction to nature is obvious in my recent works. I want my paintings to be subtle, subliminal reminders to the viewer of how fragile and precarious the balance in nature is. These works are a witness and a reminder, so that we don't spoil it all, but at the same time I want the viewer to enjoy and revel in the magic of movement, colour and aroma and wonder how and where one wants to fit in the scheme of things."

—From to visit the tiger catalogue

