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Contradictions and Complexities: Contemporary Art from India

[Western Project](#)

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Contradictions and Complexities: Contemporary Art from India



With the world's largest democracy awakening from its Third-World slumber, the international art world is eager to find itself reflected in India's contemporary art. As with China's art, we're finding that the production of art in India we westerners recognize as "contemporary" addresses and reveals the strains of its society's evolution, hybridizes local folk and (especially) pop sources with western late-modernism -- thus determining a homegrown Postmodernism -- and, thus, asserts a readily recognizable national identity even as it meets contemporary western standards with increasing sophistication.

This was the impression conveyed by a two-gallery survey limited to six artists; there have been comprehensive overviews, but not in these parts. It is better to think of *Contradictions and Complexities* as "focused" rather than "limited," as it chose its artists, and the work representing them, quite keenly. Notable is the fact that the show was assembled by two dealers, both ex-New Yorkers, one now based in Los Angeles and the other in New Delhi (indeed, the proprietor of India's leading contemporary gallery). More notable yet is the fact that all six artists are women -- and that much of the work takes a self-consciously feminine, not to say feminist, point of view.

Our own 1970s-era feminist essentialists would find Shobha Broota's luminous abstractions redolent with vaginal imagery, organized as are their myriad points of color into symmetrically placed orbs. These ethereal, faceless icons also reward those looking for spiritual transport; Broota's formula can be understood as the latter-day equivalent of the mandala. But Hinduism, India's dominant religion, recognizes a reality in which the transcendent and the quotidian wrestle in constant ecstasy, and the other five artists -- even Broota's fellow abstractionist Santana Gohain -- address the realities around them, if sometimes in oblique terms. Gohain eschews color altogether in favor of a rock-like range of grays. Indeed, the irregular rectangles she piles on one another and inscribes

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with a hermetic notation suggest worn tablets recycled as paving stones. The tenebrous ruminations of Broota and Gohain were segregated, reasonably enough, at Western Project from the tumultuous figuration of the other four artists at d.e.n. Here, the best-known of the half-dozen artists, Anita Dube, showed off her proficiency with a variety of media in search of a distinctly urban poetry. By far her most riveting piece in Contradictions was the video Kissa-e-Noor Mohammed (Garam Hawa), wherein Dube herself takes the identity of a Muslim shopkeeper neighbor and weaves a rambling and yet interesting monologue that speaks of and to India's ethnic tensions. More straightforwardly documentary, Sheba Chhachhi's photographs of women who have assumed the ascetic life of wandering sadhus record another layer of social friction on the subcontinent, that born of ancient religious traditions' persistence in the early twenty-first century.

Mithu Sen and Chitra Ganesh look at yet other social dissonances, which are resulting from the cultural slippages between East and West. Sen takes images lifted from (or made to seem like) magazine ads for consumer goods and adorns them with additional accessories. These glittering adornments contradict and satirize the stuff being advertised, often to the point of implied violence. Ganesh infuses romantic tropes of Indian pop culture with a healthy and knowing dose of Surrealism. Real Surrealism, right down to the florid speech balloons and dialogue boxes that accompany her equally febrile collaged images, all suggesting a South Asian take on the fantastical books of Max Ernst.

New Yorker Ganesh is the only artist here trained and living outside India, but her art is as tied to her heritage as that of her sister artists -- and their art is as critically aware of western models, and as able to absorb and reformulate them, as hers. India knows us; it's time for us to know it.

by Peter Frank

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ART LTD. September/October 2008

Indian Summer: Views from the Subcontinent

by George Melrod

Aug 2008



It's a massive nation in South Asia, with a booming economy, and a vibrant emerging art scene that is as yet barely known to Western viewers. Of course, the contemporary art coming out of India is not nearly as well-known or trendy (or expensive) as that of its Olympian neighbor to the east. But Indian art is experiencing a flowering of its own. This summer, a pair of concurrent shows at two Culver City galleries—d.e.n. contemporary art and Western Project—collectively titled "Contradictions and Complexities: Contemporary Art From India," gave a telling glimpse of what is going on in the Subcontinent. Offering six female artists working in a variety of media, the show was at once impressive and startling in its diverse range of approaches, and exploration of cultural hybridization. Spanning from surreal cartoony narratives to digital photography to painted abstraction, the show evinced a dreamlike sensation, of being at once alien and oddly familiar. One could be tempted to call it a rich marsala of flavors, except that to exoticize the work sets it apart in a way that would be distinctly opposite to the show's intent. In a globally interconnected culture of constant hybridization and cross-cultural exchange, what constitutes "the other" anyway? More immediately, what is "other" and what is implicitly understood to the artists who created the works? Although the traditions, mythologies and social issues referred to by these very different artists may be specific to India, their work invokes themes that are universal, often in a language that is highly influenced by Western practice.

For instance, the works of Chitra Ganesh employ the lexicon of a comic book or graphic novel, even using text panels and cartoon composition, yet the language and imagery they employ is deeply personal and lyrical: in *Sugar and Milk*, a girl reading a book has roses for eyes while displaced eyes gaze out from a book cover and another (multi-armed) woman's breasts. Also featured in the d.e.n. show were Mithu Sen, who creates mixed media drawings and photographic collage with elements of human hair and embroidery, often depicting women in ways that seem at once glamorous and unsettling; Anita Dube, a sculptor, photographer and video artist, whose works include a video monologue by a bearded fundamentalist businessman who is played by the artist herself in drag; and Sheba

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Chhachhi, whose photographic works include portraits of Indian female ascetics, who, while embracing tradition, live their lives outside the normal parameters of female domestic roles. The sister show at Western Project, by contrast, featured the works of two abstractionists whose work fuses Modernist forms with Indian spiritual concerns. Shobha Broota, born in 1943, before India itself achieved nationhood, is a highly regarded abstract painter and sculptor whose subtly modulated forms and deeply infused colors suggest a quest for the divine through basic pictorial language. Santana Gohain merges text and texture, using a willfully austere formal language; adorned with what appears to be inscriptions in some obscure tongue, her works resemble a Modernist reimagining of ancient stone tablets.

The show was curated by Peter Nagy and Patricia Hamilton. Hamilton is a private dealer in L.A. who used to run her own gallery in New York; Nagy is the founder of Gallery Nature Morte in New York's East Village, who moved to India in 1992 where he now runs Gallery Nature Morte in New Delhi. During a panel discussion on June 22, with Betty Seid—who recently curated “New Narratives: Contemporary Art from India” at the Chicago Cultural Center—the three discussed the growth of the Indian art scene. As Betty Seid observed, “Modernism didn’t happen the same way there.” In the wake of their country’s political emergence in 1947, artists were often forced to ask “‘Am I Indian? Or am I Modern?’ They would go to indigenous sources and then go to the west, and it kept going back and forth like that.” Noted Nagy, of India’s contemporary art scene, “I’ve seen it grow tremendously in the 16 years I’ve been there... Most of the artists I’ve worked with have studied abroad. It’s the talented and smart artists who get these grants and they go to Europe and run around like maniacs and suck it up. Then they get back to India... Not only do they want to make their own art better, they want to make the Indian art scene better.”

Which is to say, for decades Indian artists have sought out, and sought inspiration from, Western artmodes of art-making. By exposing L.A. artists, critics, curators and collectors to these artists, shows like “Contradictions and Complexities” help complete the circuit. Few Americans make it to Bombay, Delhi or Calcutta to see their burgeoning art scenes; but odds are, given the increasing globalization of the art world, their visions will be coming more frequently to us, in forms at once recognizable and foreign, and all the more provocative for both.

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Los Angeles Times

AROUND THE GALLERIES

'Contradictions and Complexities'

By Holly Myers Special to The Times
July 18, 2008

"Contradictions and Complexities: Contemporary Art From India," on view at both d.e.n. contemporary and Western Project, takes a straightforward approach to an impossibly broad subject, presenting not an argument, overview or analysis but rather a tantalizing sampler: six artists whose names you may not know but whose work deserves your attention.



Shobha Broota, *The Majestic Path*, 2007, oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 inches

The show's two abstractionists -- **Santana Gohain** and **Shobha Broota** -- prove a handsome pairing at Western Project. Gohain's large, script-covered panels, made with layers of chalk, graphite and paper in shades of slate gray and white, have an air of esoteric significance reminiscent of ancient tablets or plates from an aged printing press. Broota's canvases, comparable in scale, are airy and meditative, characterized by concentric circles and squares cast in genial shades of pink, orange and sky blue, some painted, others wrapped in strips of shaggy, garland-like fabric.

The work at d.e.n., by contrast, is primarily photo-based and conceptual. **Sheba Chhachhi's** roughly two dozen photographs document a nomadic band of female ascetics, exploring the process by which personal identity is renounced and eradicated in favor of a divine purpose.

Mithu Sen, who is a generation younger, adorns photographs of people, body parts and a variety of vaguely erotic objects (a pair of shoes, a lock of hair, a mannequin) with rhinestones and other decorative elements to draw out aspects of both the fanciful and the grotesque.

Anita Dube is one of the more established artists in the group, and the dynamic scope of her production is difficult to grasp from the handful of mixed-media pieces on view here. (The gallery's copies of her previous catalogs are well worth a perusal.) Her one video piece, however -- a 15-minute, single-channel projection in which the artist assumes the persona of a male shopkeeper to expound on such topics as love, religion, politics, art and fascism -- is among the show's highlights.

Another is the contribution of **Chitra Ganesh**, an artist in her early 30s who was actually born and raised in New York City (most of the others live in New Delhi). In a hauntingly strange and beautiful photographic triptych -- the artist appears in a wooded landscape, nude but for a pair of ruffled briefs and a crone-like mask with long black braids -- as well as in several digital collages that appear to be based on old Indian comic-book panels, Ganesh explores a sort of mythologically inflected erotic surrealism, with both political and poetic implications.

That all six of these artists are women was apparently incidental but lends a subtle sense of cohesion to the exhibition. Organized by Patricia Hamilton and Peter Nagy, both dealers (here and in New Delhi, respectively), the show reflects an infectious degree of curatorial enthusiasm but succeeds primarily -- as such shows should -- because of the distinction of its artists.

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Los Angeles Times
Arts & Culture



A PART YET APART: Sheba Chhachhi's photographs, including "Jater Ma," document a little-examined Indian population: women ascetics.

It features Sen and five other artists, all female, whose work combines references to traditional Indian culture with present-day global concerns.

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

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

The factors at work

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

The first, she agrees, is "the opening up of the Indian economy and in general the whole

Indian art: unique yet mainstream

The emergence of Indian art is further evidence of the country's influence. An L.A. exhibition takes a look.

By Sharon Mizota, Special to The Times
July 8, 2008

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

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

That concept -- the "wild woman" who defies easy description -- runs through "Contradictions and Complexities: Contemporary Art From India," an exhibition on view at two Culver City galleries: d.e.n. contemporary and Western Project.

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phenomenon of globalization that's spearheaded by the Internet." But the other is the growth of a wealthy Indian diaspora -- Indians living outside India -- who have started to collect art from the subcontinent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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"It's art first, and then it is Indian."

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

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

Novelty and necessity

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

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

Los Angeles Times

'Contradictions and Complexities: Contemporary Art from India' at d.e.n. and Western Project

Two gallery shows in Culver City spotlight contemporary female artists from India.

By Shana Ting Lipton, Special to the Los Angeles Times
June 19, 2008

LOS ANGELES art dealer and curator Patricia Hamilton points to a decadent and colorful two-frame Indian cartoon with English-language text. "It's like a surreal drama," she says of the work of the artist Chitra Ganesh. "She gets a cartoon, photographs it, draws into it and then adds all the text. She adds the drama."

It would be easy to label Ganesh the Indian Roy Lichtenstein or Max Ernst. A bit too easy. But Indian artists like her are leading their country's unique boom in the global contemporary scene.



Chitra Ganesh, 'Sugar and Milk' (2008) at d.e.n. contemporary

Through "Contradictions and Complexities: Contemporary Art From India," curators Hamilton and Peter Nagy will bring the work of Ganesh and five other female Indian artists to d.e.n. contemporary art and Western Project in Culver City starting Saturday.

Such graphic novel-esque pieces by Ganesh will be featured alongside video art by Anita Dube, whose

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high-profile video work has included a piece for which she cross-dressed as a Muslim man alleged to be her own assistant.

Photographer Sheba Chhachhi will show her series of large color portraits, "Ganga's Daughters (The Rogues Gallery)," depicting Indian ascetic women.

Mithu Sen will show drawings and mixed media photographs embellished by embroideries, beading and human hair. While the aforementioned will exhibit at d.e.n., work by the show's two abstract artists, Shobha Broota and Santana Gohain, will be seen at Western Project.

Hamilton, who owned a gallery in New York, says she has always been an advocate of celebrating the work of female artists. She and d.e.n. contemporary owner Donna Enad Napper connected on the idea for the show after Hamilton helped get her into ArtTable, a women's arts organization that she helped found.

Though the exhibit consists of the work of women only -- ranging in age from 30s to 60s -- the curators made a conscious choice to focus on a culturally defined, rather than gender-based, theme.

Hamilton had been exposed to Indian artwork for years through an old friend who collected Indian miniature painting and sculpture.

But she has become steeped in the growing contemporary niche in more recent times and through her fellow curator, Nagy, who is the director of Gallery Nature Morte in New Delhi (and formerly of Nature Morte in New York).

"It took a Westerner to promote . . . Indian art, and Peter really did it," she says.

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ART SCENE

July/August 2008

CONTEMPORARY ART FROM INDIA

(Western Project, d.e.n. contemporary, both Culver City)

-Rebecca Niederlander

In 1966 Robert Venturi's first book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* was published. In the same year India was getting to know its new Prime Minister and first female head of government, Indira Gandhi. While Venturi called for "an architecture that promotes richness and ambiguity over unity and clarity, contradiction and redundancy over harmony and simplicity" Indira Gandhi offered that "you must learn to be still in the midst of activity and to be vibrantly alive in repose."

"Contradictions and Complexities: Contemporary Art From India" will showcase paintings, photography, and mixed media wall-based works by six artists. Is it important to know that this work hails from India? Writers like Fareed Zakaria (whose latest book *The Post-American World* addresses the market rise of China and India) postulate that India is poised to become one of the three foremost world leaders. Should this happen, the perspectives of its artist will have a profound impact on the contemporary art and art-theory.

The perspectives in this show express a fervent sensibility modulated by a sort of serenity and matter-of-fact acceptance. There is also a relationship and acknowledgement of delicacy and elegance.

At Western Project are **Shobha Broota** and **Santana Gohain**. The paintings and wall sculptures of Broota are the most exquisite, and most honestly express the connection to the Divine of any of the works at either gallery. A VIP in the art scene of India, she has been exhibiting since the 1960s. These are gloriously elegant abstract paintings with a center circular pull. Each modulates a color range, a variety of hue that seems to emanate from a central hub as if to express the whole of life. Her flat sculptures are infinite patternings made by wrapping fabrics around a core square. That Broota is also an accomplished musician is evident, for there is also a lyricism that flows through all the works.

At d.e.n. contemporary are Sheeba Chhachhi, Anita Dube, Mithu Sen and Chitra Ganesh. Chhachhi's works, like Broota's, aspire to celebrate the spiritual. There are two series of photographs showing women who have left the secular world to live ascetic lives in sects of wandering mystics. "Ganga's Daughters (The Rogues Gallery)" consists of twelve large (44 x 29") portraits in deeply saturated colors. These portraits are startling and humbling. That Chhachhi admires these women passionately is clear from the largess of the photographs, the deep detail and the saturated color. That this level of

admiration contradicts with the humility and anonymity that the mystics wish to live by makes the portraits even stronger. Chhachhi's second series is "Initiations," sixteen smaller (7 x 11") black and white documentary-style images of the same female mystics in groups engaged in their daily activities. If less heroic than the "Ganga's Daughters" series, these photos, rather than being diminished, benefit from their proximity to the grand portraits.

There is always something lost in translation between cultures, thus some particulars in "Contradictions and Complexities" will not be contextualized the same way by a typical Angelino and someone from New Delhi. Chitra Ganesh's photographs are odd images of half-clothed grotesque female figures in masks and wigs taken in forested environs. Mithu Sen's photographs, collages and drawings show female body innards. Both are, from our point of view, confusing images in that they contain references and iconography which tells tales for someone else. Such a show then, rather than being about post colonial issues becomes a subtler object lesson in understanding that our perspective is what defines "margin" and "center."

Overall though, Venturi and Gandhi would probably feel validated by "Contradictions and Complexities: Contemporary Art from India," which does have richness and ambiguity, while remaining both still and vibrantly alive.