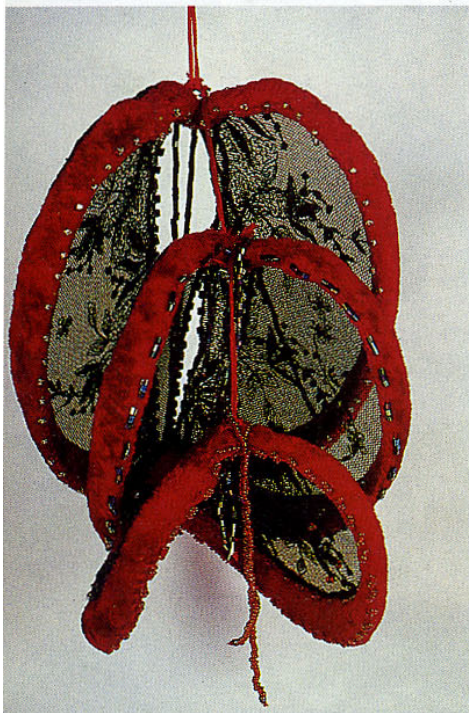


The Usual Suspects

A look at Indian representation at international exhibitions reveals that the same artists are repeatedly featured. **Girish Shahane** seeks an explanation.



Anita Dube. *Silence (Blood Wedding)*. Simulated bone, velvet, beads, thread and lace. Exhibited at Telling Times, Bath, England. 1997. Picture courtesy Sakshi art gallery.

To begin with plain facts: here is a list of some of the major international exhibitions since 1995 which have included Indian artists.

Geeta Kapur, along with Shireen Gandhi of Gallery Chemould, curated the Indian section of the Johannesburg Biennale in 1995, working around the theme of 'Dispossession', and selected Sheela Gowda, Nalini Malani, N. Pushpamala and Nilima Sheikh.

The Asia Society, New York, organised an exhibition called *Traditions/ Tensions: Contemporary Art In Asia* in 1996. Geeta Kapur was the advisor for India and the artists selected from this country were Sheela Gowda, Bhupen Khakhar, Nalini Malani, Ravinder Reddy, N.N. Rimzon and Arpita Singh.

1996 also saw Indians being represented at the second Asia-Pacific Triennial in Brisbane, Australia. Kamala Kapoor was nominated co-curator from India and chose Nalini Malani, Mrinalini Mukherjee, N.N.Rimzon, Nilima Sheikh and Vivan Sundaram.

Also in Australia in 1996, Shireen Gandhi and Chaitanya Sambrani co-curated *Fire and Life*, a collaboration between Indian and Australian artists, each representing a different city. The Indian selection included N.N.Rimzon, N.S. Harsha, Jayashree Chakravarty, N.Pushpamala and Surendran Nair.



Nalini Malani's work sent for the Johannesburg Biennale in 1995. *Medea Material*. Installation. Acrylic and charcoal on gissod plastin panels. 2,44 m x 11, 02 m. Picture courtesy Gallery Chemould.

A single artist from India, Vivan Sundaram, was invited to exhibit at the Johannesburg Biennale in 1997, which focused on the theme, 'Trade Routes: History + Geography'.

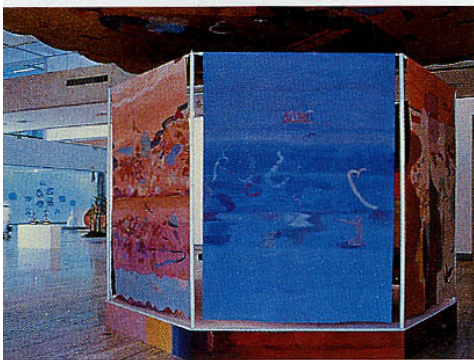
1998 saw the focus shift to Tokyo, where, in an exhibition called *Private Mythology* which was devoted exclusively to Indian art, works by Ayisha Abraham, Bhupen Khakhar, Sheela Gowda, Nalini Malani, Ravinder Reddy, Sudarshan Shetty and Vivan Sundaram were displayed.

The recently concluded Fukuoka Triennale, also in Japan, nominated Roobina Karode as the curator for the Indian section. Her selection comprised Sheba Chhachhi, Subodh Gupta, Jitish Kallat, Surendran Nair and Navjot.

The third Asia-Pacific Triennial, due to open in September 1999 in Brisbane, focuses on the theme 'Beyond the Future'. Gulammohammed Sheikh, co-curator from India has already helped make the final selection, which includes Sona Bai, N.S.Harsha, Rummana Hussain, Surendran Nair, and Ravinder Reddy.

There have been a few international collaborations devoted to the work of women artists. *Inside Out: Contemporary Women Artists*, a Middlesborough Art Gallery touring exhibition in 1995, featured works by Arpana Caur, Rummana Hussain, Nalini Malani, Navjot, Gogi Saroj Pal, Madhvi Parekh, Mona Rai, Rekha Rodwittiya and Nilima Sheikh.

Rekha Rodwittiya co-curated *Cross Currents*, Norway. 1997, choosing the work of Arpana Caur, Anita Dube, Rummana Hussain, Navjot, Manisha Parekh and Shantamani.



Nilima Sheikh. *Shamiana*. Installation at the Second Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. 1996. Picture courtesy Gallery Chemould.

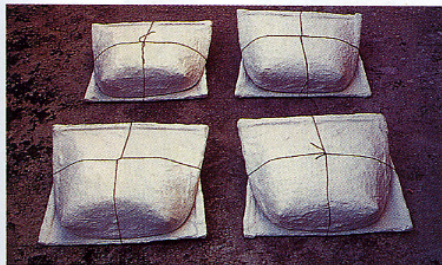
In the same year the Bath Festival Trust and The British Council put together *Telling Times*, featuring Ayisha Abraham, Anita Dube, Sheela Gowda, Rummana Hussain and N.Pushpamala.

Finally, India was represented at the World-Wide Video Festival, Amsterdam 1998 by Rummana Hussain, Nalini Malani and Vivan Sundaram.

This is not a comprehensive list, but it gives an indication of the variety of venues at which Indian contemporary art has been seen in the recent past. It also clearly shows that the lists of participants feature the same names repeatedly. There are only two conclusions that could possibly be drawn from this fact. It may be that only a handful of artists in India are producing work which is exciting and original enough to merit international attention. Alternatively, one could conclude that the persons selecting artists for these exhibitions have too narrow a focus.

Let us grant that biennials and triennials are not instituted as sites where the entire extent of a country's artistic achievement is on display. These events focus on the avant-garde, or what could be construed as an avant-garde in art. There is, therefore, an in-built bias in favour of relatively new forms of art (installation, video, performance) or the use of non-traditional materials. Equally, there is a bias against forms which might have been revolutionary at the beginning of the century but have since been absorbed into the mainstream of art across the globe and are deemed to have largely exhausted their avant-garde potential (abstract painting is the most obvious example).

Even granting this premise, one would be hard put to explain why, for instance, the extraordinary work of Valsan Kolleri has not featured in international exhibitions, while the creations of Ravinder Reddy (admittedly equally

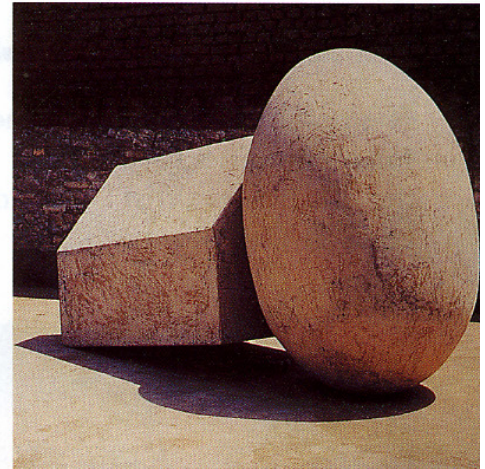


Johannesburg 1995. N. Pushpamala. Hidden Narratives. Cane, plaster, string. 1994. 122 cm x 122 cm. Courtesy Gallery Chemould.

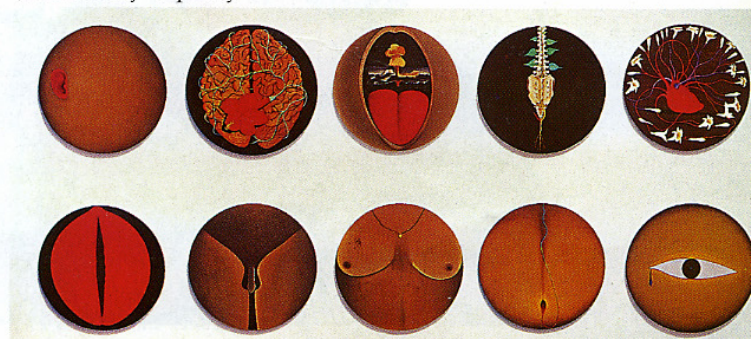
extraordinary, if tending to the formulaic) have been selected repeatedly, while the languid paintings of Nilima Sheikh have been presented in numerous fora of experimental art and, most curiously, no international exhibition of Indian art seems complete without Nalini Malani.

Arguments for the inclusion of particular artists, though, can be seen as mere quibbling. I would rather return to my statement that international exhibitions tend to focus on work which is avant-garde or *can be construed* as avant-garde. The qualification was added because art does not, unfortunately, speak for itself across national borders. People with little knowledge of the tradition out of which Indian art emerges cannot be expected to place the work and are likely to miss its significance entirely. Art, therefore, has to be construed and the persons doing the construing are writers/ curators. The crux of the problem, then, is not a lack of exciting new art in India, but the lack of writers/ curators who can interpret it and place it within an internationalist framework.

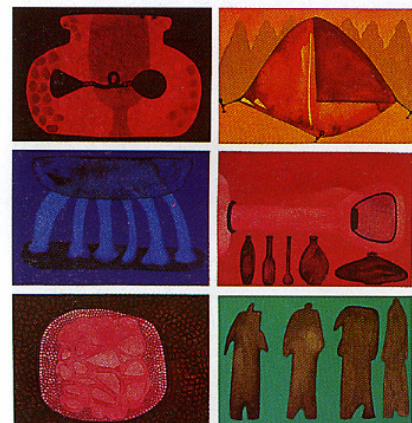
There is, in fact, only one person who has dedicatedly interpreted Indian contemporary art in this fashion for decades: Geeta Kapur. Other original thinkers about Indian art have usually been artists themselves, J.Swaminathan, K.G.Subramanyan and Gulammohammed Sheikh prominent among them. Since foreign curators have only one narrative of Indian art to guide them, they invariably choose the artists who are central to that narrative. And, with a few exceptions, Indian curators in the shadow of the grand narrative, often appear not to have the courage, the conviction or the knowledge to produce an alternative vision.



At the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art held in Brisbane, Australia in 1996. N.N. Rimzon. House of Heavens. Resin, fibreglass, aluminium and marble dust. 1995. 229 cm x 150 cm x 90 cm. Picture courtesy Gallery Chemould.



Surendran Nair. Corollary Mythologies; Wounds. Acrylic and oil on canvas. 1998. 45.5 cm x 45.5 cm. The First Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale 1999. Courtesy Sakshi art gallery.



Manisha Parekh. From 108 Worlds. At Crosscurrents, 1997. Curated by Jennifer Lloyd and Rekha Rodwittiya. Picture courtesy Sakshi art gallery.