

Outsource This: The Cutting Edge of Indian Art

By Reena Jana

TO NEATLY SUM UP TODAY'S TRENDS IN ART FROM ALL OF INDIA IS NO EASY TASK, given the wide spectrum of styles, media, art historical references and themes that are utilized by artists throughout the subcontinent. It's a sprawling challenge that presents logistical and philosophical hurdles: the variety of internal cultures, languages, dialects and regional art-historical references, not to mention possibly polemical views on how to define Indian art; for example, are diasporic artists who reference, say, Mughal painting, to be considered *Indian*? And should today's art from India be considered "Indian" or simply "contemporary" art, set upon a global rather than regional (and, arguably, "ghettoized") stage?

Making generalizations is tricky and sure to spark debate. An internationally touring exhibition titled "Edge of Desire: Recent Art from India"—which opened last September at the Art Gallery of Western Australia in Perth and is currently on view at the dual venues of New York's Asia Society and the Queens Museum of Art through June 5—makes an impressively bold attempt to present a broad look at contemporary art from the country. And, as the range of works on view attests, the ambitious show offers succinct, aesthetically and conceptually gratifying contexts in which to tackle the daunting task of accessibly presenting Indian art of the past decade to a global audience.

Featuring thirty-eight artists and artist groups who practice and live in their native India, the exhibition presents over eighty works in a variety of media, all created within the past decade, when India experienced economic liberalization. In New York, "Edge of Desire" is divided into five sections which reflect thematic threads among the works on view: Location/Longing, centered around the quest for a sense of belonging; Unruly Visions, concerned with the cacophonous, colorful spectrum of Indian pop culture; Transient Self, focused on migratory identities; Contested Terrain, featuring the tensions of Hindu and Muslim fundamentalism as well as the threat and promise of Western-style globalization; and Recycled Futures, which looks at the parallel concepts of the renewal of resources and the resurgence of centuries-old traditional culture. The five themes, although not presented so distinctly in Perth, emerged naturally while the curator, Chaitanya Sambrani, a highly respected scholar who teaches at the Australian National University in Canberra, spent three years researching and assembling the exhibition. "I wanted to convey the sense of dazzling faceting, of diversity and clamor, rather than a single voice," says Sambrani about the show. "I was also concerned not to present this plurality merely as spectacle, but to anchor it historically around transformations, economic, political, technological and so on, that have been so important for us in India during our recent history."

Indeed, the works selected reflect broad trends favored by Indian artists today, ranging from work that references regional painting traditions that suggest a more "indigenous," pre-Mughal mode of representation (characterized by a preference for a palette of primary colors, flattened



■ Surendran Nair — TAURUS from PRECISION THEATRE OF THE HEAVENLY SHEPHERDS (2002-2003) Watercolor on paper, 50 x 65 cm (framed). Courtesy Nitin Bhayana.
 ■ Pushpanimala N. — From the "BOMBAY PHOTO STUDIO" series (2003) Sepia toned photograph, 20 x 26 inches. Courtesy Bose Pacia.



picture planes and figures portrayed with elongated, black-rimmed eyes), to the *lingua franca* of installation art. Other practices currently popular throughout the subcontinent include sculptures that echo ancient temple motifs; photography (think of Dayanita Singh or Pushpamala N., both of whom are in the show), which has a presence in the canon of Indian art history dating back to the late nineteenth century when practitioners developed a distinctively Indian style of colorfully painted photographs; and, given the influence that Indian engineers have had in the global marketplace of information technology, imaginative experiments in new-media art (Raqs Media Collective, for instance, who are also included).

Somewhat mysterious and romantic, “Edge of

It’s a sprawling challenge that presents logistical and philosophical hurdles...should today’s art from India be considered “Indian” or simply “contemporary” art, set upon a global rather than regional and, arguably, “ghettoized” stage?

Desire” is more than a catchy title. It is certainly clear that many of the artists in the exhibition are on the threshold of international recognition—hence a sense of the “edge.” Simultaneously, edge also implies a sense of location, as in geographical location, or national boundaries. And to many art historians who specialize in South Asia, the show’s title can be seen as a smart, yet unpretentious

reference to the idea that Western scholarship of Indian sculptures and paintings has long been, as Calcutta-based scholar Tapati Guha-Thakurta points out in her recent book, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Post-Colonial India*, unfairly focused on the subcontinent’s sensual and sexual imagery.

Ultimately, “Edge of Desire” is a thought provoking

■ N.N. Rimzon — SPEAKING STONES (1998) Photographs (laminated), stones, resin fiberglass, marble dust (on figure), 90 x 500 cm (diameter). Courtesy the artist.



title, especially given the international media's current focus on India's shifting political, economic and cultural landscapes. As India slips more deeply into the consciousness of non-Asian nations around the globe, "Edge of Desire" ostensibly parallels an earlier, region-specific blockbuster exhibition of contemporary Asian art, also co-organized by Asia Society and a partnering institution: 1998's "Inside Out: New Art from China." This landmark show introduced not only American, but also international audiences, to art from China (mainland, Taiwan and Hong Kong) by artists who are now globally recognized during a similar period in which China liberalized its economy, making the nation a "player" in world trade. While "Inside Out" might seem a clear antecedent for "Edge of Desire," neither can be neatly or simplistically compared to the other. Though there are distinctions, as the Asia Society's gallery director, Melissa

Chiu, points out: "A clear contrast between 'Inside Out' and 'Edge of Desire' that immediately comes to mind is the presence of much more painting and figurative work in 'Edge of Desire.'"

A sampling of imagery found in "Edge of Desire" illustrates that what Chiu suggests might be a major trend that perhaps distinguishes Indian art from that of other regions of Asia—at least at present. While some included artists do use forms that are the rage among globally recognized, transnational artists—for example, *Made in England* (2001/2002) by LN Tallur, reminiscent of British architectural firm Archigram's utopian inflatable structures or even the cheeky, YBA sexual puns of Sarah Lucas, yet really refers to the Shiva *lingam* (the symbolic male sexual organ) as its antecedent—there is a remarkable proliferation of figurative painting practiced throughout India today.

One explanation for this popularity might be the

millennia-old traditions of Indian painting, namely, figurative Indian painting—from Gupta-period cave-paintings at Ajanta and sixteenth-century Mughal manuscripts, to the twentieth-century canvases of M. F. Husain. "Edge of Desire"—displays a fresh take on the tradition. *Tomb's Day* (2001), for example, by Atul Dodiya, features smiling former president Bill Clinton alongside his jubilant daughter, Chelsea, as they visit the Taj Mahal—a clear reference to Clinton's groundbreaking visit to India in the 1990s. They appear as confident American tourists—he wears cowboy boots and a trench coat, she grins from ear to ear, her young lips hued with crimson lipstick. They appear larger than life, superimposed on a postcard-perfect view of the Taj Mahal, rendered in Western perspective, with a lone Indian figure leaning over the glassy pool in front of the tomb. Also superimposed is a deck of playing cards, portrayed as if scattered across the

■ Pushapamala N. — From the "BOMBAY PHOTO STUDIO" series (2003) Sepia toned photograph, 20 x 26 inches. Courtesy Bose Pacia.

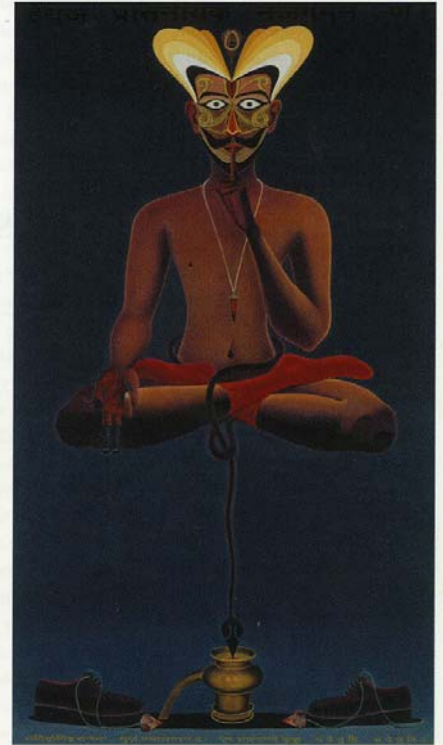
landscape by a croupier who has dropped them—perhaps to suggest the gamble that India might be taking by entering into more involved economic partnerships with certain American companies.

Somewhat of a surprise to some viewers might be the inclusion of “craft” or “folk” art in the show. Yet, simultaneously, this aspect actually reflects an ongoing trend in the exhibition of Indian contemporary art abroad. Mumbai’s Gallery Chemould, which was active in the organization of “Edge of Desire” and whose programming is favored by leading critics such as Geeta Kapur, has been exhibiting “folk” art from India for decades. Originally founded in 1963 as a framing business by co-owners Kekoo and Khorshed Gandhi, Chemould always supported “serious,” aesthetically and intellectually substantial art, rather than work that is obviously commercial or decorative. Many of the major, international exhibitions of modern and contemporary Indian art curated since the country gained independence from colonial rule in 1947 have been influenced in some way by the Gandhys. Their 1987 London exhibition at the Horizon Gallery of Warli, masters of the folk genre, is clearly an antecedent to “Edge of Desire.” In terms of global exposure of India’s artists, Chemould also played a pioneering role when it established, in 1984, Chemould Publications and Trust, an arm of the gallery dedicated to creating and distributing art-historical documentation of current developments in Indian art. The books published by Chemould have received international attention: in 1998 a monograph on Bhupen Khakar’s work made its debut at London’s Tate Gallery.

Summing up “Edge of Desire” is as difficult as attempting to encapsulate Indian contemporary art in one swift attempt. It will be interesting to look back at the exhibition’s reception around the globe—after New York, the show’s next venues are the Tamayo Museum in Mexico City and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Monterrey, Mexico, before traveling to its final venue in India (still to be announced). Clearly, Indian contemporary art has been gaining momentum internationally, thanks in part to a number of Indian-art-centric contemporary art galleries outside of the subcontinent. These include Bose Pacia in New York, which is also a partner in New Delhi’s Nature Morte and Sepia International, a unique gallery with locations in New York, Delhi and London that shows photography from Asia and the subcontinent, and houses the Alkazi Collection, the world’s largest holdings of photography from South Asia.

In addition, *The New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter has announced that he is at work on a book on contemporary Indian art, suggesting a more mainstream interest in South Asian forms, aesthetics and themes. The time couldn’t have been more appropriate for “Edge of Desire” to make its debut—and its impact on not only Indian, but international, art history.

REENA JANA is a contributing editor at AAP.



■ Nataraj Sharma — **FREEDOM BUS OR A VIEW FROM THE 6TH STANDARD** (2001-2004) Iron, wood, electrical motor, oil and enamel paint on paper, ink jet prints, rubber tires, electroplating, 103 x 237 x 76 cm. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Asia Society. ■ Surendran Nair — **MEPHISTOPHELES... OTHERWISE, THE QUAQUAVERSAL PROLIX (CUCKOONEBULOPOLIS)** (2003) Oil on canvas, 210 x 120 cm. Collection of Usha Mirchandani, The Fine Art Resource, Bombay. Courtesy Asia Society. ■ Subodh Gupta — **DOOT** (2003) Cast aluminum Ambassador car with toy cars. Courtesy Bose Pacia.