

Study for **KHALIL CHISHTEE's** *History Is a Nightmare from Which I Am Trying to Awake II* (detail), 2017, wood, 101.6 x 254 cm. Courtesy the artist.



INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

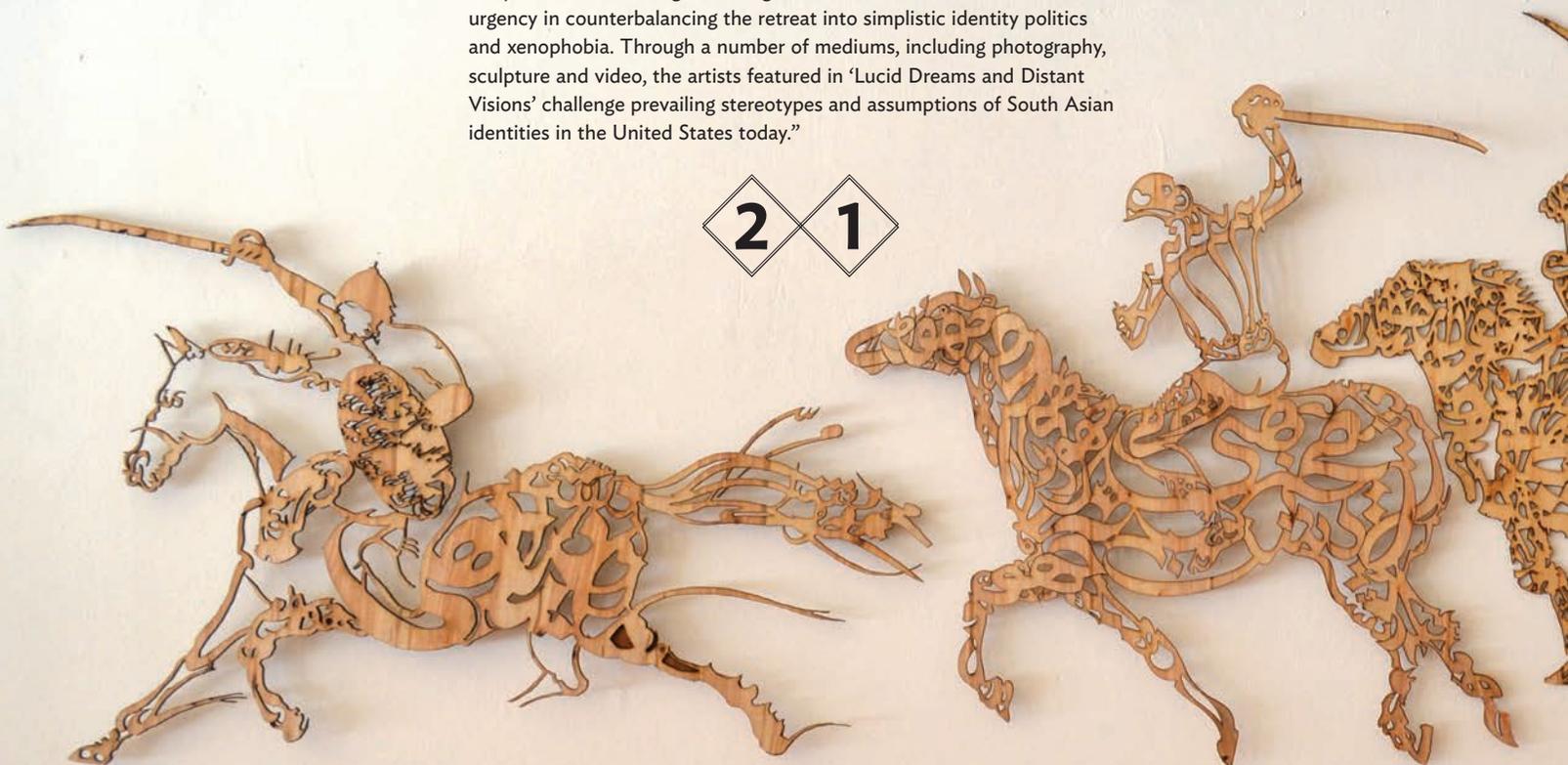
ART IN THE ERA OF IDENTITY POLITICS

By Bharti Lalwani

This year, pressing issues of our time—migration, gender, sexuality, race and religion—were tackled head-on at two events in New York: the exhibition “Lucid Dreams and Distant Visions: South Asian Art in the Diaspora” at Asia Society Museum, and the two-day conference “Fatal Love: Where Are We Now?” at the Asia Society Museum and Queens Museum.

Nineteen South-Asian-American artists explored the narratives of recent immigrants, second-generation Americans and transnational artists working in and around South Asia and America in “Lucid Dreams and Distant Visions.” The exhibition was a microcosm of what defines the American experience. Here, numerous artworks examined the notion of home through intertwined personal and political histories within the framework of systemically biased and oppressive structures of authority.

Artist-activist Jaishri Abichandani, who conceived of “Lucid Dreams and Distant Visions,” co-curated this exhibition with Tan Boon Hui (vice president for Global Arts and Cultural Programs and director of Asia Society Museum) and Lawrence-Minh Davis (curator at Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center [APAC]). Tan, who has been planning and broadening the scope of Asia Society’s exhibition programming, acknowledged the timely significance of the show: “Seen in the context of the turbulent state of affairs for immigrant populations, the work of diasporic artists working and living between worlds has taken on a new urgency in counterbalancing the retreat into simplistic identity politics and xenophobia. Through a number of mediums, including photography, sculpture and video, the artists featured in ‘Lucid Dreams and Distant Visions’ challenge prevailing stereotypes and assumptions of South Asian identities in the United States today.”



Many of the artists featured explored the contentious experience of being visibly brown in a post-9/11 America. The increasing disregard for facts or reason coupled with inflammatory rhetoric by right-wing politicians has led to an immediate escalation of hate-crimes against ethnic and religious minorities. Such tensions were obliquely addressed in the works of Naeem Mohaiemen and Mariam Ghani, while other artists such as Khalil Chishtee and Anila Quayyum Agha, preferring coded visual metaphors, took a more formal approach.

The notion of home and dislocation has been a question long examined by Zarina Hashmi, Allan DeSouza, Jaret Vadera and Tenzing Rigdol. In contrast, artists such as Shahzia Sikander, Chitra Ganesh, Mequitta Ahuja and Ruby Chishti deploy animal and human bodies as vehicles for interrogating sites of conflict. Simultaneously unraveling in this interrogation is a distant association to being Asian-American in the region. The complications that arise from a diaspora's will to self-determination and identity associations in a world before and after 9/11 are intriguing to observe. For instance, Sikander's pioneering contemporary miniature paintings from the early '90s open a window to the cacophony of voices attempting to define Islam and who confusingly speak for Muslims worldwide. Underpinning the solidarity or lack thereof among South Asian countries themselves, Sikander also wittily emphasized the animosity and distrust with which South Asian leaders in the field of politics and literature view one another, while centering on American hegemony.

Adding to the conversation were questions around invisibility or institutional lack of will, which were boldly addressed at "Fatal Love: Where Are We Now?" which opened with writers and artists of color asserting that "we are the change we have been waiting for." The event brought together more than 50 South-Asian-American artists, academics and curators to focus on a much-required face-to-face dialog among various generations of practitioners and theorists who have been working as peers, often on an international level, but with no organized national platform. Panelists Vadera, Mohaiemen, DeSouza, Swati Khurana and Asha Ganpat conveyed highly personal and emotive narratives that explained their resistance to identity politics and set the stage for engagement. Mohaiemen, for example, did not shy away from reminding the public that European modernism could not have been achieved had it not been for the violent exploitation of the colonies. One member of the audience challenged the panel for not tapping into the statistically wealthy South-Asian-American "uncles and aunties," to which Vadera reminded her of how classist, caste-ist, sexist and indeed homophobic those in the South Asian diaspora can be. Over the following days, I reflected on this reality and the lack of queer representation in South Asia itself, as I sat through playful yet tense performances by LaWhore Vagistan and Faluda Islam. In South Asia, I do not believe such interventions would be possible in public institutions or private galleries without the risk of a lynch-mob assembling.

Judging by the enthusiasm of both the speakers and the public over the nearly three-day gathering, there was clearly an urgency and appetite for such open discussions. As I wondered what such an exhibition and convening meant for the South-Asian-American community, Diya Vij, Special Projects manager for the Commissioner's Unit at the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs, offered her perspective: "I can't tell



(This page, top)
RUBY CHISHTI, *The Present Is a Ruin Without the People*, 2016, recycled textiles, wire mesh, thread, wood, embellishments, metal scraps, archival glue, sound, 207.6 x 324.8 x 29.8 cm. Courtesy the artist.

(This page, bottom)
VANDANA JAIN, *Sugar Mandala*, 2010, cast sugar, 106.7 x 106.7 cm. Courtesy the artist.

(Opposite page)
MEQUITTA AHUJA, *Performing Painting: A Real Allegory of Her Studio*, 2015, oil on canvas, 203.2 x 243.8 cm. Courtesy the artist.





(This page)
ALLAN DESOUZA, *Rumpty-Tumpty Series*
 #5-7, 1997/2017, digital prints from film, 50.8 x
 76.2 cm each. Courtesy of the artist and Talwar
 Gallery, New York and New Delhi.

(Opposite page, top)
JARET VADERA, *Emperor of No Country*, 2016,
 print on fabric, 147.32 x 71.1 x 15.2 cm. Courtesy
 the artist.

(Opposite page, bottom)
PALDEN WEINREB, *Untitled (Reliquary)*, 2012,
 encaustic wax, polyurethane resin, LED lighting,
 142.2 x 61 x 61 cm. Courtesy the artist.

you how much it meant to me to see this concentration of South Asian artists and art workers of the diaspora. There really haven't been many opportunities for me to see this concentration of progressive South Asians in general, and specifically of artists. It's so significant, even validating, to be able to see the complexities, multiplicities, creativity and breadth of our community—one that young me in Connecticut never thought possible, let alone be part of. It's so easy to feel like you're floating alone in this white art world—but there was something so grounding and important about being included in this space.”

Vij's quote is telling. While many of the artists at the Asia Society Museum and the symposium are recognized today, and their works feature in numerous international shows, there has not been an institutional exhibition in over a decade that focuses on their collective experiences as South-Asian-Americans. It is pertinent to explore this history and the contexts within which this show has come about.

The first time that any prominent public museum in the American capital of the art world turned the spotlight on practices of Asian-American artists was in 1997, when the Queens Museum of Art, as it was known then, mounted “Out of India: Contemporary Art of the South Asian Diaspora.” The same institution followed that with “Fatal Love: South Asian American Art Now,” curated by Jaishri Abichandani in 2005.

That same year, the Asia Society Museum hosted an exhibition titled “Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India.” The exhibition extended beyond the premises of Asia Society, with some works being displayed at the Queens Museum.

According to Abichandani, “In 2004, the Asia Society approached the Queens Museum to host ‘Edge of Desire’ on the ground floor. At the time, I served as the director of public events at the Queens Museum and saw the opportunity to present the work of my peers, which manifested in the show ‘Fatal Love: South Asian American Art Now.’ This allowed us to take the pulse of the community post-9/11 and brought several artists to visibility.”

The narrow focus of “Edge of Desire” on India-based folk and contemporary art springboarded discussions within the Asian diaspora community that moved away from representation of any singular country of origin. Free from national boundaries, the discursive atmosphere of “Fatal Love” launched the career of artists such as Naeem Mohaiemen, who premiered at the show. “Lucid Dreams and Distant Visions” includes at least six such artists who had featured in “Fatal Love” over a decade ago, a choice that charts the progressive contemporary practices of artists, academics and curators in the South-Asian-American diaspora.

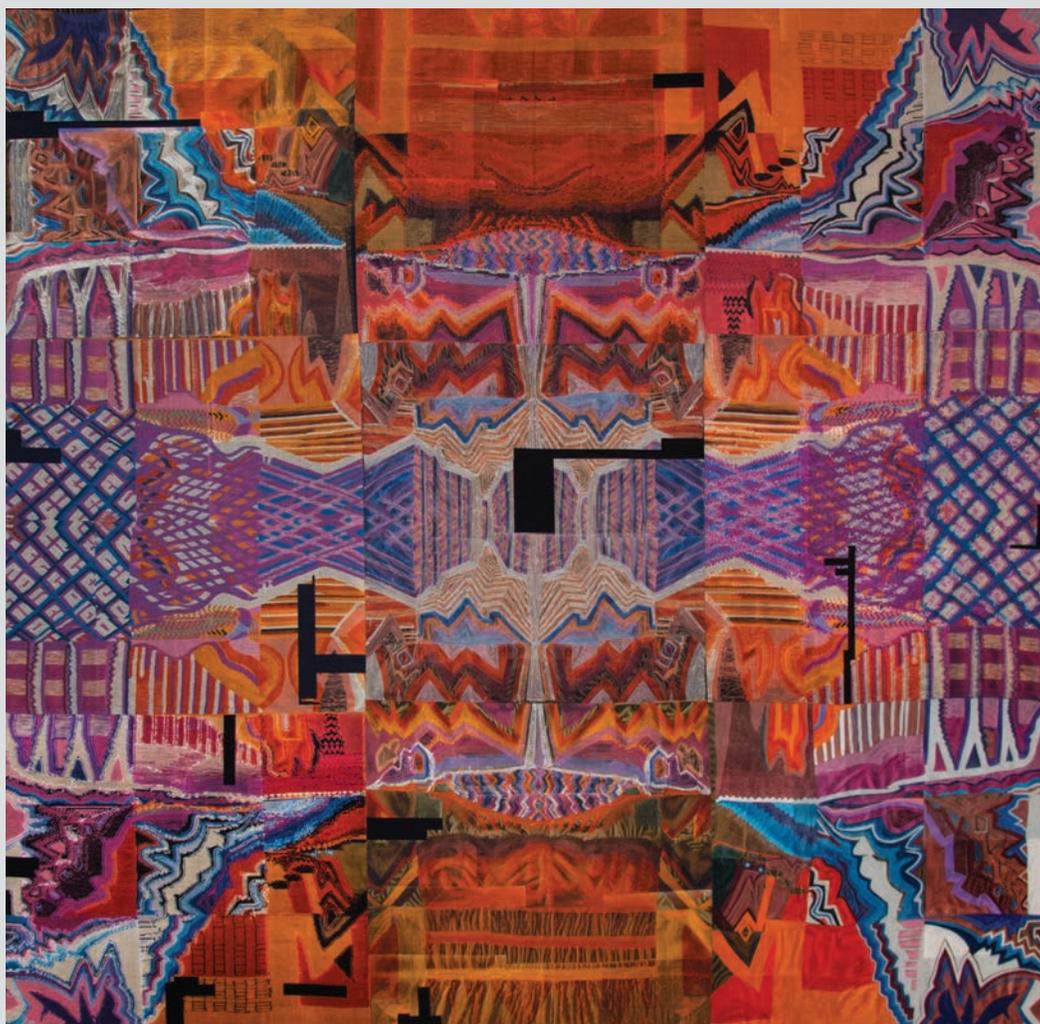
While “Fatal Love” made visible the artist community that had been developing in New York since Abichandani founded the South Asian Women's Creative Collective (SAWCC) in 1997, “Lucid Dreams and Distant Visions” was groundbreaking in its response to widespread Islamophobia. Curatorial efforts responded, through the platform of a public institution, to an atmosphere of fear, panic and hostility. In a reflection on the 16-year period after 2001, Mohaiemen, whose work is included in both exhibitions, said: “Historian Vijay Prashad argued, in *The Karma of Brown Folk*, that by embracing a model minority myth in the 1990s, Asian-Americans were pitted against African-Americans. South Asians in America have now gone through realignments as a result of hyper-profiling. But triumphalist presentations of ‘South Asian’ identity can delink us from global south struggles. The equations of institutional ‘visibility’ always subtly demand that we leave something, or someone, behind.”

Today, it is apparent how only a few organizations and commercial galleries in the US are actively supporting the work of South-Asian-American artists, especially since the political climate has become more charged. Pointing out the challenging shifts in the art world since 2005, Abichandani elaborates, “On one hand, we have fewer and fewer creative spaces that lend visibility to diaspora artists, on the other, along with newer migrants, a much larger and diverse pool of artists have come of age. The lack of funding, institutional support and scarcity of full-time South-Asian curators for contemporary art employed in any local museum have prevented generations of artists from forming networks that go beyond the local to the national. When Lawrence-Minh Bui Davis was hired at the Smithsonian APAC, he was able to secure funding for the projects I designed: ‘Lucid Dreams and Distant Visions’ and ‘Fatal Love: Where Are We Now?’”



Since the Smithsonian APAC does not occupy a physical gallery space, Abichandani had secured institutional partnerships for the show. She said, “Prerana Reddy, co-curator of ‘Fatal Love: South Asian American Art Now’ has provided space at the Queens Museum for the convening, while Tan Boon Hui at the Asia Society was kind enough to open the doors to the exhibition. This three-way organizational collaboration between Smithsonian APAC, Asia Society and Queens Museum brings us full circle.” Adding to that, co-curator Lawrence-Minh Davis emphasized the Smithsonian center’s vision to enrich and empower Asian-Pacific-American communities in their sense of inclusion within the national culture. “At the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, we’re acutely interested in art-making in the face of critical invisibility—and hyper-visibility. We’re very proud to support this new exhibition that demands a fuller reckoning with diaspora and the crafting of history in a post-9/11 imaginary.”

KANISHKA RAJA, *I and I (Others Hide)*; SW1, 2016-17, fiber reactive dyes on kona cotton, 189.2 x 195.6 x 3.8 cm. Courtesy the artist.



The exhibition “Lucid Dreams and Distant Visions: South Asian Art in the Diaspora” and the convention “Fatal Love: Where Are We Now?” were supported by institutional partnership with additional funding from collectors Max and Monique Burger, Burger Collection.