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Weekend

FINE ARTS
LEISURE

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Neal Cassady, left, with Jack Kerouac in 1952, was immortalized as Dean Moriarty in Kerouac's "On the Road" (1957).

Carolyn Cass

City Where the Beats Were Moved to Howl

By ANN DOUGLAS

Growing up in New Jersey, I plotted getaways. At 17, in June 1959, just after I was expelled from high school, I dyed my hair black, caught a New York-bound train and checked into a Y.W.C.A. near Times Square under an assumed name. To my eyes, Times Square looked like a party, a party for all the people not invited to the other parties — this was the place where anonymity turned into excitement. When the detectives my stepfather had hired found me in my room at the Y a few days later, I was armed with "On the Road," "Howl" and a Gideon Bible, verging on what I hoped was existentialist psychosis and planning my career as a Beat outcast.

After I returned home, my life took a different direction. In the fall of 1960, I went to Harvard, a place without "beatniks," as authorities had recently informed





Queens Museum of Art

Shahzia Sikander's "Uprooted Order Series 3, No. 1," from "Out of India: Contemporary Art of the South Asian Diaspora."

ART REVIEW

Many Shows and Many Indias

By HOLLAND COTTER

In Queens, an ambitious view of the South Asian diaspora.

If you like New York City, chances are you'll like India. Midtown Manhattan at lunchtime and an Indian village on market day are surprisingly alike. Cars and bikes charge by; personal space is at a premium; the noise level is high, the sheer variety of people exhausting. There are days when it's just too much, and you'd rather be anywhere else. But when you leave, if you leave, you can't wait to return.

The comparison has seemed particularly apt over the last year. The 50th anniversary of the independence of India and Pakistan from British rule arrived in August, and celebration surrounding the occasion has brought a steady flow of cultural riches to New York, including an unprecedented concentration of Indian art, old and new.

Two of the year's most spectacular exhibitions are on view, side by side, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. One, "King of the World: A Mogul Manuscript From the Royal Library, Windsor Castle," is a traveling show of the

painted page from a single renowned 17th-century book. The other, "Flowers Underfoot: Indian Carpets of the Mogul Era," organized by the Met, is a gathering of some of the most beautiful rugs imaginable and, given the fragility of the work, a once-in-a-lifetime event.

To this list one must add "Mandala: The Architecture of Enlightenment," at the Asia Society, a much-anticipated show that, top-heavy with Tibetan material, ends up being a disappointingly incomplete study of its subject. Still, it offers some gorgeous objects, a few Indian in origin, all of them ultimately Indian in inspiration.

Perhaps the real news of the season, though, lies in the local appearance of contemporary art either from or about India in three recent-

ly opened exhibitions: "Out of India: Contemporary Art of the South Asian Diaspora" at the Queens Museum of Art, "Women Artists of India: A Celebration of Independence" at A Gallery in Chelsea, and "Francesco Clemente: Indian Watercolors" at the Met.

Widely varied in scale, content and polish, the shows together define the very different meanings that "Indian" can have. And they give at least a hint of the groundswell of creative activity not only on the subcontinent but also within its vast and widening sphere of influence abroad.

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ART REVIEW

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Much has happened since -- sectarian violence, economic upheaval, the extended medical emergency of AIDS -- to eat away at that initial tragedy-shadowed optimism. And the heightened, even exultant mood that runs through Ms. Vyarawalla's pictures is nowhere to be found in the work of her younger colleagues.

For example, in the photographs by Satish Sharma (born 1951), which hang across the gallery from hers, political figures appear not in person but as spectral public icons. A sculptured bust of Nehru crumbles from neglect; the face of Rajiv Gandhi peers out from a torn poster under a commercial sign reading "dynasty."

The work of Ayisha Abraham moves further back in time: her enlarged details of colonial-era photographs catch the uneasy social disparities of the English-Indian world of the Raj. Dayanita Singh, by contrast, turns her lens to the present to capture India's rapidly growing urban middle class, in whose lives Western and non-Western styles merge with a kind of surreal aplomb.

The Delhi-based journalist Pablo Bartholomew takes a similarly documentary approach in his pictures of Indians in the United States, from a Jain holy man enjoying tacos in upstate New York to hundreds of South Asian Muslims praying in the park that surrounds the Queens Museum. But other artists more clearly assume a critical, outsider stance.

Allan deSouza -- born in Kenya, now living in Los Angeles -- shoots the chilly, empty interiors of the arrival areas in American and European airports, which are often an immigrant's first glimpse of a new home. Sunil Gupta's grainy photomontages suggest the subjugated but vivifying Indian presence in England today.

And then there is work that invites ambivalent readings. Such is the case with Zarina Bhimji's illuminated transparency of what might be taken as the forbidding interior of a power station. It is actually a shot of the stacks of the British Library, where both Gandhi and Karl Marx formulated their ideas. Mohini Chandra's framed photographs may appear to be blank, and they are, in fact, the backs of snapshots, creating a hidden family portrait.

Portraiture, of the self or others, is a repeated theme in the show. Shani Mootoo, for example, creates a composite image of herself as a kind of nature spirit, half man and half woman, framed by panoramic views of wilderness in Canada, where she lives. And Chila Kumari Burman contributes a terrific collage of dozens of pictures of her own face in a Pop-flavored, kaleidoscopic play of identities.

(Ms. Burman, incidentally, along with Mr. deSouza, Mr. Gupta and several other British artists of Indian descent, is also included in "Transforming the Crown: African, Asian and Caribbean Artists in Britain, 1966-96," a three-part exhibition at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, the Franklin H. Williams Caribbean Cultural Center/African Diaspora Institute in Manhattan and the Studio Museum in Harlem, where the installation, by Jorge Daniel Veneciano, is especially good.)

Role-playing is also the essence of Poulomi Desai's series of portraits of Indian transvestites, which she titles "Shakti Queens." Shakti is a Sanskrit term for feminine spiritual energy. One senses this subversive energy, too, in the immense sculpture of a female head by Ravinder G. Reddy, in which the face has the features of a low-caste village woman but the golden skin of a goddess.

Apart from Mr. Reddy's work, sculpture in the show takes the form of installation. Rina Banerjee comes through with a packed, dangerous-looking environment of found materials and sari cloth; Vivan Sundaram with a walk-in paper house with a video image of a cooking fire; N. N. Rimzon with a snaking line of earthenware pots and brooms, an allusion to the status of the so-called untouchables, who were required to sweep the ground they walked on, and Shaheen Merali with an atmospheric video piece accompanied by his own music.

And some print work is included: chalky gray etchings by the New York-based artist Zarina showing the floor plans of homes she has lived in in Asia, Europe and the United States, Vijay Kumar's silhouetted crowds of figures set against newspaper reports of religious violence. But it is in the medium of painting that one finds some of the best entries.

This is certainly true of the three small pieces by Shahzia Sikander, the young artist (born in 1969 in Pakistan) now living in Houston, who was a standout at the recent Whitney Biennial and whose strong solo show closed last week at Deitch Projects in SoHo.

In Pakistan, Ms. Sikander studied the traditional art of miniature painting, a convention-bound art form requiring the use of hand-ground pigment and burnished paper and now often geared to the tourist market. She has revamped it in extremely imaginative ways by taking its signature image, the figure of the endlessly available woman awaiting the arrival of a lover, and setting it on a collision course with the psychic chaos of the contemporary world.

A piece like "Uprooted Order Series 3, No. 1," which is only inches high, interweaves Hindu, Islamic and personal emblems. The central woman grasping the branch of a tree is an ancient Indian symbol of fertility, but the cordlike roots dangling below her body seem to cripple rather than sustain her. The

slightly raw, disjunctive, unfinished quality of the some of the work becomes part of its power.

Interestingly, "Out of India" introduces a second Pakistani artist, Miriam Ishaque, also in her 20's and a recent graduate of the Whitney Independent Study Program. Using egg tempera on panel, she adapts the precisely limned female figure of the miniature tradition but isolates it against a bare or lightly gridded flesh-pink ground. The effect is subdued, almost hesitant, but Ms. Ishaque is an artist to watch.

The show's selection of paintings is rounded out by two artists who live and work in India. The stainlike, calligraphic watercolors of Nalini Malani, 51, offer deliberately generalized scenes of coercion and violence within a patriarchal society. Atul Dodiya's semi-realistic oil-on-canvas paintings depict a polluted Bombay and the many-armed goddess Durga, who is usually shown holding a weapon in every hand, in the form of an airport metal detector.

Modernism Preserved

Ms. Malani's work also appears in the show at A Gallery, an exhibition originally organized by Mary-Ann Milford-Lutzker for Mills College Art Gallery in Oakland, Calif., last fall. It arrives in New York in radically truncated form and in an overcrowded installation. It is worth seeing, however, not only for its fine and influential artists but also because it touches on stylistic aspects of Indian art only glancingly addressed in the Queens show.

In the decades after independence, many vanguard painters, breaking away from both British academic models and traditional Indian styles, adopted Western modernism as the appropriately progressive style for a new nation. And in the form of a versatile, readily personalized, often semi-abstract figuration, it maintains its currency in India today, though its cachet has faded in the West.

It is the style practiced by several of the artists in the A Gallery show, among them Arpana Caur, Jayashree Chakravarty, Suruchi Chand, Kanchan Chander, Anupam Sud, Vasundhara Tewari, Gogi Saroj Pal and Rekha Rodwittiya. The results, inflected with specific Indian content, require a carefully judged presentation to look persuasive in trend-conscious New York. Unfortunately, they don't get that here.

Even under the circumstances, though, some things shine through. They include Ms. Malani's touching figure of a child dressing, Nilima Sheikh's lightly touched depictions of childbirth in tempera on handmade paper, and aquatints by Naina Dalal, two of which address the vulnerable status of unwanted female infants in India. Also worth seeking out are early abstract paintings by Arpita Singh, whose first New York solo show has been extended into January at Bose Pacia Modern Gallery in SoHo.

Inspiring an Italian Artist

If modernism was an import to the subcontinent, Indian art has, in its turn, been an inspiration for several Western artists. One is the Italian-born painter Francesco Clemente, represented in a small show of 19 watercolors organized by Holliday T. Day for the Indianapolis Museum of Art and now installed at the Metropolitan.

Since 1973, Mr. Clemente has spent part of every year in the southern city of Madras, and the big, grid-divided paintings in this show incorporate many Indian images: the elephant-headed Hindu god Ganesh, Buddhist lotuses and wheels, tantric configurations. In characteristic fashion, Mr. Clemente abstracts them slightly, smoothing and sweetening them in the process, as if to insure their viability as universal emblems.

Whether the results look too smooth, particularly when placed beside the densely textured, emotionally urgent paintings of Ms. Sikander (or those of Bhupen Khakhar, born in 1934, for whom a New York solo is long overdue) is a question. Mr. Clemente's work at the Met looks too easygoing for its own good, but he has produced far more provocative things, particularly when giving visual embodiment to the intensely erotic implications of Hindu devotional poetry.

In any case, the internationalist, crossover example he has consistently set is important, particularly in New York, where the most "advanced" art too often carries the whiff of a hermetic art-school parochialism. He has helped establish the climate for the reception of Indian work here and has undoubtedly given certain younger artists in India itself reason to believe they would find an audience abroad.

That audience is still, it is true, relatively small, but it will grow. At the moment Ms. Sikander must bear the unenviable burden of being a breakthrough figure, with work dynamic enough to capture the attention of viewers who have little direct knowledge of her sources. But there are other artists waiting in the wings to join her in an art world that is now global.

That's the basic message of "Out of India," and it is summed up in the work of the conceptual artist Navin Rawanchaikul, the show's youngest participant. Born of Indian parents in Thailand in 1971, he lives in Japan. In the conceptual piece created for the show, he has asked members of the Indian temple in his home city in Thailand to send postcard greetings to the show (many of the responses are on view) and invites visitors to the Queens Museum to send cards back in reply. (Just fill them out; the museum does the mailing.)

It's a simple gesture of reciprocity but a liberatingly expansive one, in which everyone is an artist and far-flung corners of the world become a common ground.

Where They Are

Here are the exhibitions discussed in the art review.

"Out of India: Contemporary Art of the South Asian Diaspora" remains at the Queens Museum of Art, New York City Building, Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, Queens, (718) 592-9700, through March 22. The exhibition is sponsored by Bell Atlantic.

"Women Artists of India: A Celebration of Independence" remains at A Gallery, second floor, 521 West 23d Street, Chelsea, (212) 206-8350, through Jan. 5.

The following shows are at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fifth Avenue at 82d Street, (212) 535-7710: "Francesco Clemente: Indian Watercolors" (through Feb. 8); "Flowers Underfoot: Indian Carpets of the Mogul Era" (through March 1); "King of the World: A Mogul Manuscript from the Royal Library, Windsor Castle" (through Feb. 8, after which it travels to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Feb. 26-May 17), the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth (May 31-Aug. 23) and the Indianapolis Museum of Art (Sept. 6-Nov. 29).

"Transforming the Crown: African, Asian and Caribbean Artists in Britain, 1966-96" remains on view at three locations through March 15: the Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1040 Grand Concourse at 165th Street, (718) 681-6000; the Franklin H. Williams Caribbean Cultural Center/African Diaspora Institute, 408 West 58th Street, Manhattan, (212) 307-7420, and the Studio Museum in Harlem, 144 West 125th Street, (212) 864-4500.

Arpita Singh remains on view at Bose Pacia Modern Gallery, 580 Broadway, near Houston Street, SoHo, (212) 966-3224, through Jan. 17. The gallery is open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 12 to 6 P.M.

Photos: Shahzia Sikander's "Uprooted Order Series 3, No. 1," from "Out of India: Contemporary Art of the South Asian Diaspora." (Queens Museum of Art)(pg. E43); Two Jains eating tacos in upstate New York, as photographed by Pablo Bartholomew. (Queens Museum of Art); One of 19 watercolors by Francesco Clemente with the collective title "Early Morning Raga." (Metropolitan Museum of Art)(pg. E45)