



Subhash Chandra Bose offering his head to Bharat Mata (Mother India) in the presence of Krishna. Artists unknown, c. 1940s, collage created by a frame-maker, 70x50 cm. Background painted by a Nathdwara artist. All the figures except Krishna are cut out of a print titled Subhash Balidan; the image of Krishna is from a print. Private collection, Delhi. Bose strived for the independence of India but his movement did not have a religious connotation. Here, by adding the figure of Krishna in the collage, his movement is appropriated to Hindu nationalism.



Gripe water calendar, depicting Krishna in a pastoral landscape. Artist unknown, c. 1920s, print, 50x35 cm. Private collection, Delhi. Gripe water has been a popular medicine to ease stomach-ache among babies in India for over a century. Religious imagery on commercial calendars lent the medicine a divine touch.

Examining the Urban Body in South Asia

Asian Art >
South Asia

Independent curator and artist Peter Nagy explores five concurrent exhibitions and their diverse presentations of South Asian artists, whose work poses questions about the role of the urban environment in the development of international, local, and personal images of Indian postmodernity.

By Peter Nagy

An explosion of creativity from India is taking place in Berlin from mid-September to the end of November. 'body.city' is the umbrella title given to a four-part compendium of projects, hosted by the House of World Cultures. The institute itself focuses on contemporary cultural developments from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Though nationalistic theme packages of any kind can be problematic, the House of World Cultures has carefully negotiated its representation of India by inviting four esteemed scholars in the various disciplines to present substantial offerings on the subjects of contemporary visual arts, popular culture, film

and cinema, and the performing arts. This inclusive programme provides the Berlin audience with ample opportunity to properly evaluate the cultural achievements that have taken place in India in the last 25 years, framed as they are within the historical, political, and critical parameters that are necessary to avoid the token exoticism or fetishism which is often the pitfall of such presentations.

Identity and its relation to politics, economics, and the production of culture can then be encapsulated with the title 'body.city.' For much of the twentieth century, India's identity was still defined by the rural and agricultural norm, a paradigm that Gandhi and the independence movement successfully exploited. But since the 1960s, the economic and cultural initiatives of India have increasingly come from its cities and, with the burgeoning of a globalized service- and information-based economy, the cities of India have come to define its identity both to itself and the outside world. The demographics alone are startling: while the three megalopolis of Bombay, New Delhi, and Calcutta each encompass some 15 million people, relatively obscure (to the rest of the world) secondary and tertiary cities such as Patna, Pune, Ahmedabad, or Madurai now have populations of 2 to 3 million each. The individual body and its relationship to both a larger body politic and the living organism that is the city can be a useful set of parameters from which to explore the cultural production of India today.

Two very different exhibitions of visual arts take up centre stage at the House of World Cultures. Geeta Kapur, who has written extensively on contemporary art in India and curated the 'Bombay/Mumbai' section of the 'Century City' exhibition at the Tate Modern in 2001, presents 'subTerrain: artworks in the cityfold,' a survey of 41 works by 16 artists. Kapur's premise is to present works that articulate aspects of the interface between body, city, and polity. Her taste favours works that express self-consciousness about their relationship to both international vanguard art practice and the contemporary urban visual cultures of India. The majority of works on exhibit take the form of multi-media installations often encompassing video or projection devices (such as those by Nalini Malani, Vivan Sundaram, Navjot Altaf, Sheeba Chhachhi, Shilpa Gupta, Atul Dodiya, and Anant Joshi), yet, pure painting is still represented by the works of Bhupen Khakhar, Jitish Kallat, and Vasudha Thozhur, and unmanipulated photography by those of Raghu Rai. The works chosen by Kapur combine a strong, sometimes even aggressive, presence with a clear meaning, often taking inspiration directly from contemporary political and social situations in India.

Paired with 'subTerrain' is 'The Conquest of the World as Picture,' an encyclopaedic exhibition of popular culture and consumer ephemera from the last 150 years curated by Jyotindra Jain, former director of New Delhi's Crafts Museum and current Dean of the School of Art and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University. A kaleidoscopic variety of material – from calendar art and religious iconographies to commercial and portrait photography, functional crafts, miniature paintings, film posters and stills, theatrical backdrops, tourist postcards, packaging labels, ceramic statuary, and 'folk art' from the



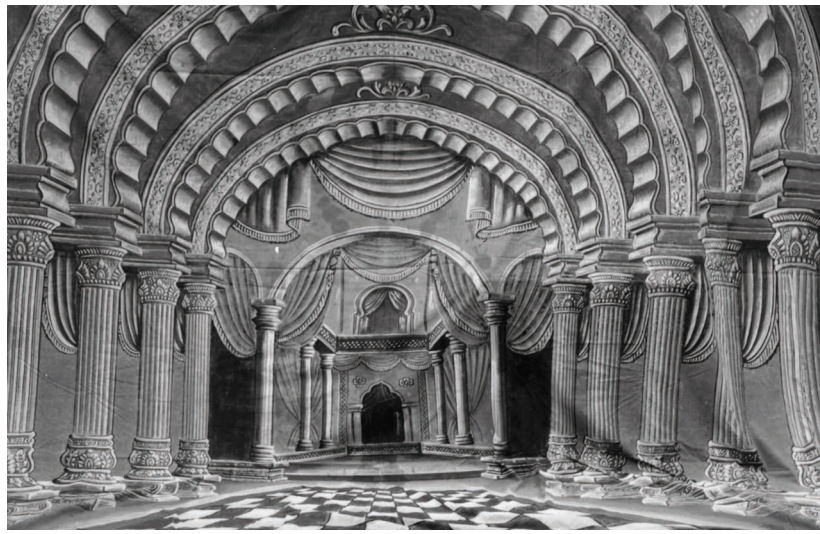
Baby Ganesha with his mother. Artist unknown, ceramic (probably made in Germany), 12x20 cm. Collection: J. and J. Jain, Delhi. The figure is modelled on painted clay figures commonly sold around the Kalighat temple in Calcutta.



Vasantasena. Ravi Varma, early twentieth century, print, 50x35 cm. Printed at Ravi Varma F.A.L. Press, Bombay. Private collection, Delhi. Vasantasena is the heroine of Shudrakha's fourth-century Sanskrit play, *Mrichchhakatikam*. She is depicted here in the style of a photo-studio portrait.

Photos on this page Exhibition: "Indian Popular Culture: The Conquest of the World as Picture". Curated by Jyotindra Jain.

Exhibition: 'Indian Popular Culture: The Conquest of the World as Picture' Curated by Jyotindra Jain.



Theatre backdrop. Dhipthy Arts, Guntur, painting on cloth, 600x330 cm. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was customary to use painted cloth backdrops for theatrical performances. Converging rows of trees, colonnaded halls, and corridors with colonial architecture, which reflected the interest in geometric perspective, were popular devices in such backdrops. The backdrop here comes from Surubhi, a 'traditional' theatre company based in Andhra Pradesh.



'Nehru's Coat', Anand Bhavan, Allahabad 2000

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Fried Jam,' performance artist Maya Rao teams up with musician Ashim Ghosh to present both political and autobiographical meditations in an informal, comedic, cabaret style. Most of the works in 'Actors at Work' display the same uninhibited experimentation with technology and formal hybridization operative in the visual arts presentations.

Finally, film historian and theorist Ravi Vasudevan takes on the multi-headed monster that is film in India, with his programme entitled 'Selves made Strange: violent and performative bodies in the cities of Indian cinema, 1974-2003.' Vasudevan's tastes are all-embracing, giving equal attention to the commercial Hindi-language cinema generated out of Bombay (Bollywood), regional cinemas in Bengali and Tamil, documentary film-making for social and political purpose, as well as diasporic storytelling. Directors included in the programme are Satyajit Ray, Yash Chopra, Kumar Shahani, Mani Rathnam, Mahesh Bhatt, Anand Patwardhan, and Ram Gopal Varma, amongst others. 'Selves made Strange' celebrates a certain dissipation of coherence that has taken place in Indian cinema since the 1970s, asserting the 'mutability of personality' as a possible emergent critical vocabulary. With Vasudevan's programme, 'body.city' achieves its cathartic melting point, identifying Indian culture as inherently and necessarily complex and contradictory.

Contemporaneous with 'body.city' but not officially allied to it is a comprehensive survey of work by the New Delhi based photographer Dayanita Singh at the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum. Having begun her career in photojournalism, Singh has pursued a variety of subjects of her own volition over the past ten years. This exhibition, entitled 'Privacy' and

comprised of 130 photographs, is drawn primarily from two bodies of her work, 'Family Portraits' and 'Empty Spaces,' each of which focuses on the domestic scenario within contemporary India, both with its inhabitants and without. Singh's portrait of India is intimate, patient, privileged, and refined, light years away from the garishly coloured visage of touristic India and the disaster-driven images that feed the international media. Her realistic portraiture provides the Berlin audience with an in-depth look at a single artist's accomplishment, which unfortunately, is not possible with the collective format of Kapur's show (and isn't this perhaps the strategic foil to nationalistic exhibition paradigms?). Parallel to 'Privacy' is 'Myself Mona Ahmed', Singh's body of work documenting the life of and her friendship with a transgender inhabitant of Delhi's old city. Exhibited separately at the Museum of Indian Art, 'Myself...' provides a poignant rendering of the life of an individual who is both marginalized by mainstream society and her own milieu, a portrait of the tremendous tolls taken in the creation of an independent identity. As the vast majority of Singh's images in both shows in Berlin have been shot in New Delhi, Calcutta, and Bombay, her corpus should make an appropriate addition to 'body.city' and its multiple arguments. ◀

Peter Nagy is an American artist and curator, frequently writing on the subject of contemporary art. Since 1992 he has been based in New Delhi where he runs Nature Morte, a gallery promoting a wide variety of art forms by both Indian artists and those coming to India to work.

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