

## ARTS INDIA OPENS NEW GALLERY IN LONDON

What was once Gagosian's West End vehicle is to become Arts India Contemporary - the first gallery in Britain dedicated to showing art from India. I snatched an hour of new director Farah Rahim Ismail's time this week, in her frenetic rush to open the gallery on 16 March. Formerly exhibitions manager at London's Hauser and Wirth, she is now taking on the role of Arts India Contemporary's overall London director.

Arts India, under the name Gallery ArtsIndia, has long been the definitive outlet for Indian art in the United States with a gallery in the Flatiron district of New York and another in Palo Alto. Its new London location will be devoted to contemporary artists only and will extend the reach of its artists into Europe. Arts India, whose mission is to "build bridges through art", was founded in 2002 by Prajit Dutta, a professor of economics, and his brother Projjal, an architect, after testing it out for two years as an online gallery. The physical locations came about in 2002 (New York) and 2004 (Palo Alto) and such was their success that they were able to set up two private equity funds mandated to invest in contemporary Indian art.

In June 2002, they acquired a substantial part of the comprehensive Herwitz Collection - a body of work collected over 35 years by the eponymous Chester and Davida Herwitz. From this, several substantial shows were curated that showcased modern masters such as M.F. Husain, F.N. Souza and Laxma Goud. In addition, the East Coast and West Coast galleries have exhibited works by modern masters such as S.H. Raza, Anjolie Ela Menon, Ganesh Haloi, Sakti Burman, T. Vaikuntam, Shyamal Dutta Ray and Rameshwar Broota. Arts India has also loaned works to Tate Britain, the San Francisco Asian Art Museum, and to the city of Lille in France. Contemporary artists including Chittrovanu Mazumdar, Shibu Natesan, Baiju Parthan, TV Santosh, Bose Krishnamachari, Anandajit Ray, Riyas Komu, Anant Joshi, GR Iranna, Harsha Vardhana and Rathin Kanji have also exhibited.

Many of these artists fall into a self-named group of artists called the Bombay Boys - all Keralites of roughly the same age who now live and work in Bombay. They are by and large 'realist' painters who share the same social circles and curate very popular exhibitions in India under the Bombay Boys banner. They'll all be flying in for the opening of the gallery in London, as will Indian Ocean, a "very hot" fusion band who will be playing at the VIP party at Momo across the street.

As part of its building bridges mission Arts India has taken exhibitions to cities across North America, including Dallas, Houston, Chicago, San Francisco, Seattle, Washington DC, Orlando and Boston. And if all that wasn't enough, they've hosted Artists' Retreats in America for the past three years at which Indian artists have come together to create dialogues and exchange ideas. In 'Confluence 2006', contemporary American artists joined the artists from India. This spirit of interaction is reflected in AICON's first show in London - one of the artists is Indian, the other from Long Island.

Peter Drake and Riyas Komu are old friends who really wanted to work together for this new chapter in the world of Indian art. "It's going to be a very political show," Farah Rahim Ismail told me. Drake's works show us the "American as the ironical Other" and are scathing indictments of the war that emanated from the paranoia following 9/11. 'M/oral Pathology' is a set of perversely beautiful paintings of lip-glossed, glamour-puss mouths that are "infected" by Arabic and English inscriptions of phrases from the Bush administration that have, say Drake, "helped precipitate violence around the world". We've got "weapons of mass destruction," "mission accomplished," "Al Queda in Iraq," "will withdraw if asked," "stay the course," "imminent threat," and of course "axis of evil."



Peter Drake, 'M/oral Pathology I, Mission Accomplished', 2007, Acrylic on canvas, 29 x 31 inches

"The M/oral Pathology paintings link the pathological lying of the Bush administration with traumatic diseases of the mouth. In this way the corruption of the body is equated with corruption of the body politic. We open and close our mouths all day long calmly exposing our most vulnerable interiors. For the average person the interior of one's mouth remains oddly neutral. Race, religion and gender are all unknowable. In our mouths we are all the same."

'Katrinastan' is a collage of multiple images taken from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Drake believes that "the failure of the levies and the indifferent response to the victims of the hurricane can all be attributed to the administration's habit of viewing marginal communities as "others" and undeserving of their concern." A major American city has been reduced to third world status, because of this disquieting lack of interest, believes Drake.

Peter Drake, 'Siege of the Syosset' 2007  
Acrylic on canvas, 65 x 69 inches



'The Siege of Syosset' places war tanks and gunships in suburban America's back garden. "Americans have not seen a battle fought on their own soil since the civil war. For most of us the horrors of war are filtered through the deadening prescription of mass media. Wars happen to other cultures in other lands," said Drake. "These suburban battle scenes come across as surreal precisely because the thought of violence on our own shores is as unlikely as melting pocket watches."

If Peter Drake's paintings show us the American as the ironical Other, then Riyas Komu's paintings show us the Indian Other as, ironically, the Same - as unadventurously modern, and as deracinated as any modernised European or American. His work is all about conflicted identity. His 'Systematic Citizens' have been "internationalized into anonymity", they've been made insipid and mass-produced, losing their Indian identity while maintaining their Indian 'features'. Komu's portraits suggest that the Other, once modernity has imbibed it, loses its essence.

Riyas Komu, 'Untitled' 2007



But the pre-modern is enchanting and very much alive in Komu's sculptures - well, he is the son of a carpenter and a craftsman extraordinaire. 'Magic Landscape' is an intricately carved wooden temple that contrasts sharply with the shallowness of the figures that populate 'Systematic Citizens'.

There is angst and dark premonition in the work too, made explicit in 'Tragedy of the Carpenter's Son III', an 18 foot wooden plane that will be the darling piece of the opening, I imagine. Komu has carved the Islamic prayer said prior to journeys on the plane's side. The missile seems to be acknowledging the war in Iraq but then, it could also be an Arabic weapon. Whatever Komu's meanings, they are definitely double-edged and unreconciled.

Arts India seem genuinely dedicated to opening up new audiences for progressive Indian art - a welcome breath of fresh air in a market top-heavy with European and American art. And Heddon Street feels like a miniature village in the middle of a metropolis. Bars, restaurants, galleries, heated outdoor seating - you could be down a side-street in Paris; you can't even hear the growl of Regent Street, twenty metres away. An ideal place, perhaps, for such a contemporary, internationalist new mover.

'Other' opens on 16 March and runs until 15 April 2007.

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