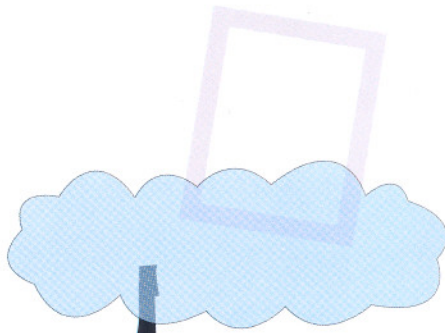


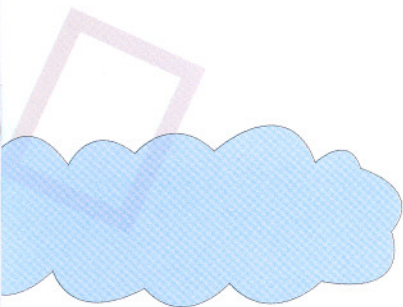
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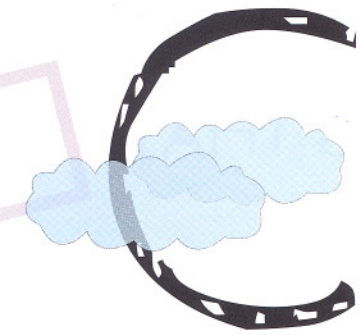
AS ARTISTS, THEY ASK QUESTIONS THAT  
COUNTER POPULAR SOCIAL BELIEFS  
ABOUT CULTURE AND IDENTITY.

COLLECTIVELY, THEIR WORK REVEALS  
THE SPIRIT OF INQUIRY THAT DEFINES  
THE NEW GENERATION OF SOUTH  
ASIAN ARTISTS LIVING ABROAD.

HERE ARE 10 SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA  
ARTISTS TO WATCH FOR.....



By Sharmistha Ray



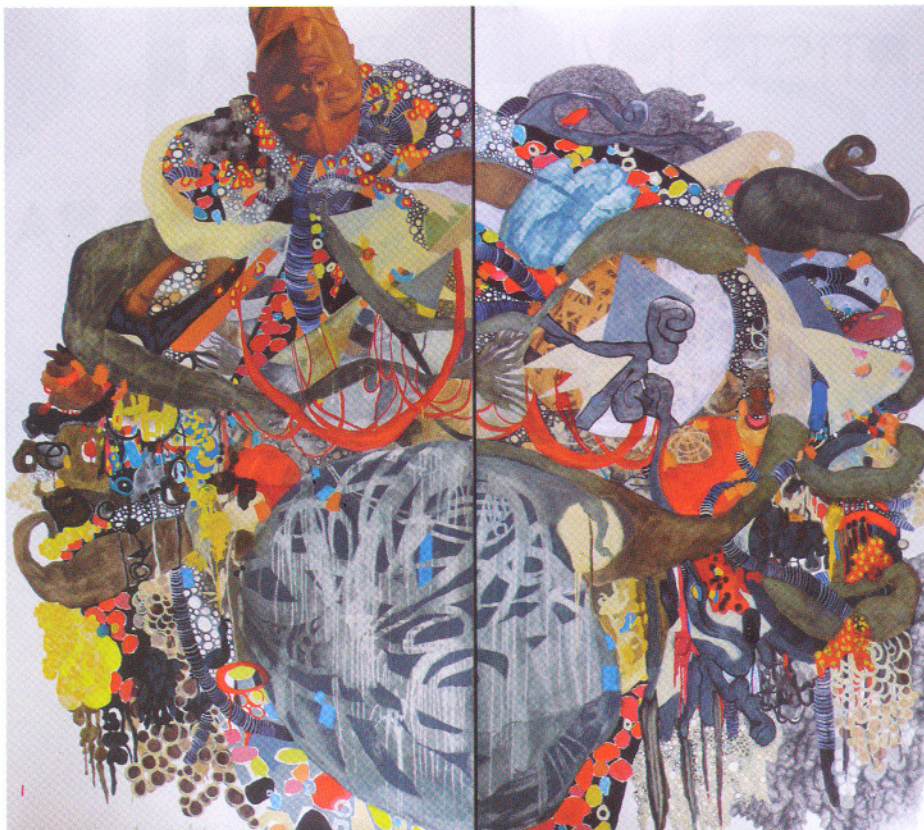
Contemporary artists from the South Asian Diaspora in the United States and England have been steadily working away over the past decade. These artists – either first-, second- or third-generation immigrants – have carved out a niche for themselves that distinguishes them from their counterparts residing in India. The principal themes in Diaspora art relate to migratory patterns and the straddling of cultures. While Indian Contemporary Art has become an international brand comprising India's foremost artist practitioners like Atul Dodiya, Subodh Gupta, Jitish Kallat and Bharti Kher, for example, South Asian Diaspora artists are quietly stepping out of the shadows. Mid-career artists like London-based photographer and video artist Zarina Bhimji and film and video installation artist Runa Islam have both been nominated for the prestigious Turner Prize in 2007 and 2008, respectively. Similarly, their counterparts in the United States, among

them Los Angeles-based painter Bari Kumar and New York's curator-cum-artist Jaishri Abichandani and sculptor Rina Banerjee have only recently established themselves in the international arena though their careers are a decade – or more – old. Before them, only Pakistani-American miniaturist painter Shahzia Sikander was successful in crossing over into the American and international mainstream in the early '90s, not long after she graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design. Meanwhile, the younger lot of Diaspora artists is showing promise for the future. As artists, they ask questions that counter popular social beliefs about culture and identity. Collectively, their work reveals the spirit of inquiry that defines the new generation of South Asian artists living abroad. Even though these artists may have differing views on what 'Diaspora art' actually is – and indeed, some of them openly resist classification – there's no doubt the Diaspora artists are slowly, but surely, coming into their own. ✨



[MEQUITTA AHUJA]

**Mequitta Ahuja, who was born in Michigan in 1976 and lives in Houston, Texas, plays with racial stereotypes and forefronts social issues related to ethnic representations. Ahuja quotes the African-American author, feminist and social-activist Bell Hooks: she says "the diasporic is an act of will and memory." Born of Indian and African-American parentage, Ahuja believed she was a social misfit from early on. Her parents didn't indulge their two daughters in the kind of cultural activities like singing and dancing that would have helped them blend in. Instead of coaxing them to socially integrate into either Indian or African-American communities, they let their next of kin find their own way. Confused and alienated by the dual ethnicities she had inherited, Ahuja found her way through painting. She went on to receive an MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Ahuja is her own muse. Employing self-portraiture with both humor and satire, she challenges the viewer's perceptions about race and ethnicity. For her most recent solo exhibition at BravinLee Programs, Ahuja looked to the legendary African-American poet, essayist and novelist Audre Lorde for guidance. The exhibition was named 'Automythography' after Lorde's 1982 publication *Biomythography*. Like her famous predecessor, Ahuja coalesces ideas culled from history, myth and personal narratives to reinvent her own visual fictions about the multi-racial superwoman entangled in a web of complications.**



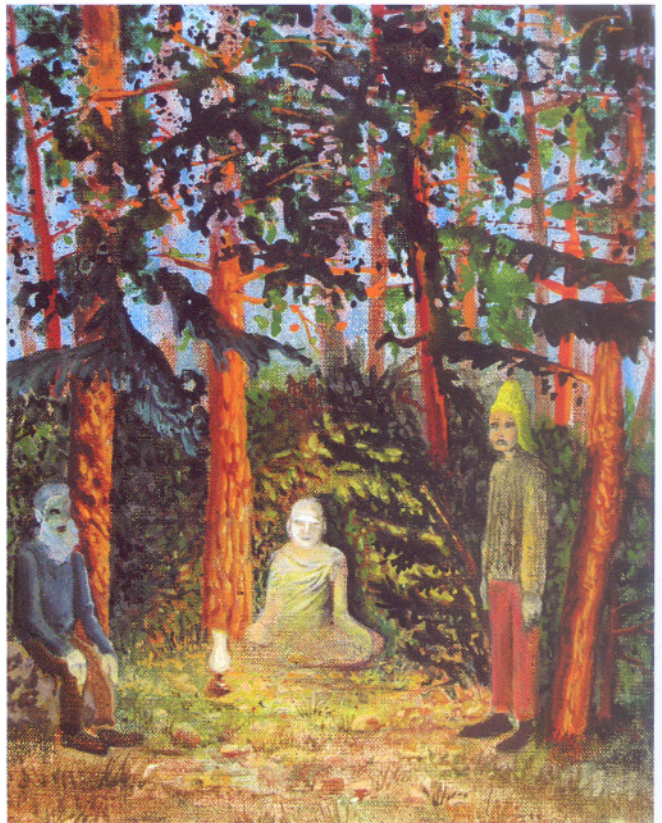
[*Dream Region*, 2009, oil, enamel, acrylic and waxy chalk on paper]

**Mala Iqbal's luminous landscape paintings** are as subtle and dazzling as they are foreboding and desolate. Completely absent are references to South Asian culture; there needn't be any. Iqbal's paintings are utterly uncanny, confounding the viewer with strange occurrences while seducing the senses. An internal dysfunction is apparent; human beings make appearances, but they seem hopelessly out of place, lost and abandoned as they engage in ambiguous activities. The disjuncture between person and place creates a profound dystopia. Of Pakistani and German origins, Iqbal was born in New York in 1973. She studied at Columbia University and then the Rhode Island School of Design and she continues to live in Brooklyn. Iqbal had her first New York solo exhibition with Bellwether Gallery in 2003. Since then she has participated in numerous group shows around the world and had one more solo exhibition, 'Washed Away', at PPOW Gallery in New York in 2007. With the exception of one group exhibition at Nature Morte in New Delhi in 2007, she has rarely exhibited in Asia, so we have yet to get a glimpse of her work in India. Iqbal's paintings are in prestigious collections such as Altoids Curiously Strong Collection, New Museum of Contemporary Art and Queens Museum of Art. ([www.malaiqbal.com](http://www.malaiqbal.com))

[MALA IQBAL]



[Meeting, acrylic on linen, 2009]



[CHITRA GANESH]

[Untitled 2, 2007]



[Untitled 4, 2007]



[Broken Spell, 2004, Mixed media]

**Inspired by South Asian history, mythology and queer politics**, Chitra Ganesh's work is at once critical and subversive, didactic and playful. Ganesh started to appropriate Amar Chitra Katha comic books in 2001 in order to subvert traditional representations of sexuality and gender. By digitally manipulating the images and text of the original comic books, Ganesh renders mutated bodies, sexual hybrids and discombobulated narratives and creates digital collage prints out of them. Commonly, a pig-tailed, female warrior is the leading protagonist. Is she also Ganesh's alter ego? While the colourful, eroticised prints have become her signature style, Ganesh is multi-faceted and experiments with alternate media. For her first solo exhibition in Mumbai this year at Chatterjee & Lal, she showed a diverse body of work that included digital prints, animation, film and drawing. Ganesh is the consummate New Yorker. The daughter of immigrant parents, she was born in New York in 1975, raised in the city boroughs and continues to live in Brooklyn. She received her MFA in Visual Arts from Columbia University and graduated from Brown University before that. A social activist as well, she also co-founded the South Asian Women's Creative Collective in 1997 that provided a much-needed platform for Diaspora women artists to show their work. Ganesh is also known for her large-scale fantasy wall drawings made of eclectic, everyday objects bought at the dollar store. ([www.chitraganesh.com](http://www.chitraganesh.com))



[Untitled 2, 2007, Mixed media on paper]

# [KANISHKA RAJA]



**Kanishka Raja** paints large vacant interior spaces that are post-apocalyptic. Hotel lobbies and airport lounges figure commonly. As spaces of transit and transience they hold psychological import for Raja. These environments feel abandoned. There are never any people, just stuff strewn about or carefully planted objects with ominous undertones. Current political events and the prevalence of media play a large role in Raja's work. New York, like other large metropolises London and Mumbai, suffered a gross terrorist attack that left the city vulnerable and its denizens uncertain and afraid. Raja's canvases reveal these fractured realities created by the de-stabilisation of society. Once inhabited spaces are emptied out, bereft of life; or worse yet, they have been occupied by the enemy. Mumbaikars recently had a chance to view Raja's works at Mirchandani + Steinruecke with his solo debut in India 'I Have Seen the Enemy and It is Eye'. Raja is originally from Calcutta where he was born in 1969. He left India to study in the US and attended a small, experimental school called Hampshire College in Massachusetts. Eventually he settled in New York after a short stint in Boston. The painter has also exhibited at institutions like Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. ([www.kanishkaraja.com](http://www.kanishkaraja.com))

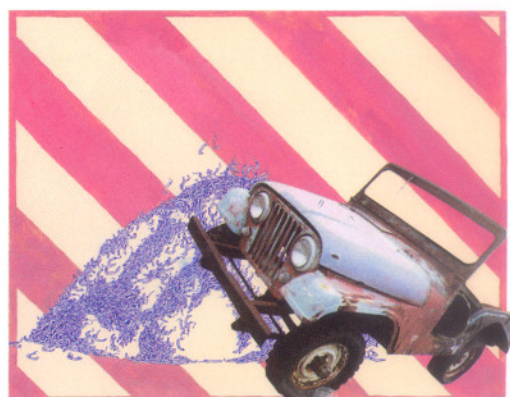


[Cruise (Green Stripes), 2008, oil on canvas]

**Pakistani-American artist Fawad Khan** was born in Tripoli, Libya, on a military base – his father was a major in the Pakistani Army Medical Corps – in 1978. His family moved to the United States from Pakistan when he was just eight years old and Khan now lives and works in New York City. A graduate of the School of Visual Arts in New York and the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, Khan has been drawn to the oppressive military cultures he grew up with. His works depict brilliant explosions of vintage and foreign-model automotive vehicles. We are left to view violent displays, but not as bloody events but as elegiac transformations that seem almost choreographed. Khan's work comments upon the media-saturated images of war and violence that spills out of TV screens, video games and movies in contemporary culture and our subsequent de-sensitisation to them. The automobiles Khan renders have special mnemonic attachments: a Citroën he used to see on Greene Street in New York, a Peugeot 504 from his father's military days in Libya in the 1970s, a commuter bus he photographed on the busy streets of Karachi. Frozen in time, these vehicles represent the disparate threads of the artist's life experience. Khan has shown solo, 'Fast Moving Passenger at 33 Bond Gallery', New York and has shown in a number of group exhibitions including 'Wonder What the Others Are Upto' at Gallery OED, Kochi. ([www.fawadkhan.net](http://www.fawadkhan.net))



# [FAWAD KHAN]



[Taxi sculpture, 2008 (above) and other selected works]



[GAUTAM KANSARA]

**London-born, New York-based** Gautam Kansara employs video, photography and digital printmaking to create narrative works about family life. Both of Kansara's parents were born in India, but moved to London at a fairly young age, and met at Cambridge. Kansara moved to New York with his family in 1984 when he was just five years old. After finishing college at University of California at Santa Cruz, Kansara followed on with an MA in New Media from New York University. Even though Kansara's work is intimately familiar with an Indian subject, his experience of India has largely been

filtered through his grandparents who lived in London (they both passed away within months of each other last year). His close relationship with them has provided a well-spring of investigations into the eccentric habits of the Indian family, their generational experiences and the impact of migration. In 2008 Kansara presented his solo exhibition 'us between us' at Real Art Ways in Hartford, Connecticut. This poignant video installation focused on the intimacies of family life with its subtle dynamic shifts and the impact of ageing on his grandparents. ([gautamkansara.wordpress.com](http://gautamkansara.wordpress.com))

[Video still from /I'm Leaving]



[HETAIN PATEL]



**England-born, second-generation** British-Indian Hetain Patel is a performance artist who uses sound and physical interaction to explore notions of cultural identity. His parents were both born in Kenya and subsequently spent their childhoods in Gujarat before immigrating to England in 1967. In *Sixteen Classical Beats* (2008) Patel borrows a 16-beat rhythm cycle from Indian classical music and dance to structure the video-based performance. In the spirit of collaboration – which is essential to Patel's practice – Patel and Louise Clements investigate cultural displacement through movement. Using the movement associated with traditional Kathak dance to shape the visual rhythm of this silent work, the performers play with the conversational relationship between a tabla player and a Kathak dancer. As the performers fall in and out of sync with one another, Patel uses red Kanku pigment both to provide structure for and to trace movements from Louise's dance. Patel has had several solo shows and the titles of his shows further reflect his cultural underpinnings and his exploration: 'Sacred Bodies', 'Coded Gestures', 'Sine Language', 'Copy/Paste' and 'Learning to be Indian', among others. ([www.hetaipatel.com](http://www.hetaipatel.com))

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[Video still from Kanku Raga]

[Quiet Execution, Loud Bombs, 2007]



[YAMINI NAYAR]



**Brooklyn-based visual artist Yamini Nayar** creates photographs of constructed interior and exterior environments. Each of Nayar's environments start with a three-dimensional model in the form of an architectural structure made out of cardboard in which the artist places both handcrafted and found objects as well as images sourced from photographic archives and mass-media. The items are disposable and made from tin foil, wire, plaster and wood. Once Nayar photographs the set-up – which she does with a large format camera – she discards the box and its contents. The photograph image becomes a stand-in for reality and is the only evidence left of the original. Nayar's preoccupation with identity and place can be located in her own personal history. Of Indian parentage, Nayar was born in Rochester, New York, in 1976. She moved with her parents to Detroit when she was five years old and she spent most of her adolescent and teenage years there. Her family retained their ties to India and so Nayar travelled frequently to Kerala and New Delhi to visit relatives. This early exposure to culturally conflicting worlds informed Nayar's viewpoint about cultural idioms as well as her own ambivalence in the face of them. Nayar, who holds a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design and followed this with an MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York, now lives and works in Brooklyn. Her work has recently been exhibited at Chatterjee & Lal in Mumbai and will be included in the upcoming exhibition, 'Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today', at Saatchi Gallery, London. ([www.yamininayar.com](http://www.yamininayar.com))

[Speaking Room, 2007]

(SRESTHA RIT PREMNATH)



[Duty Free  
[diptych], 2008]

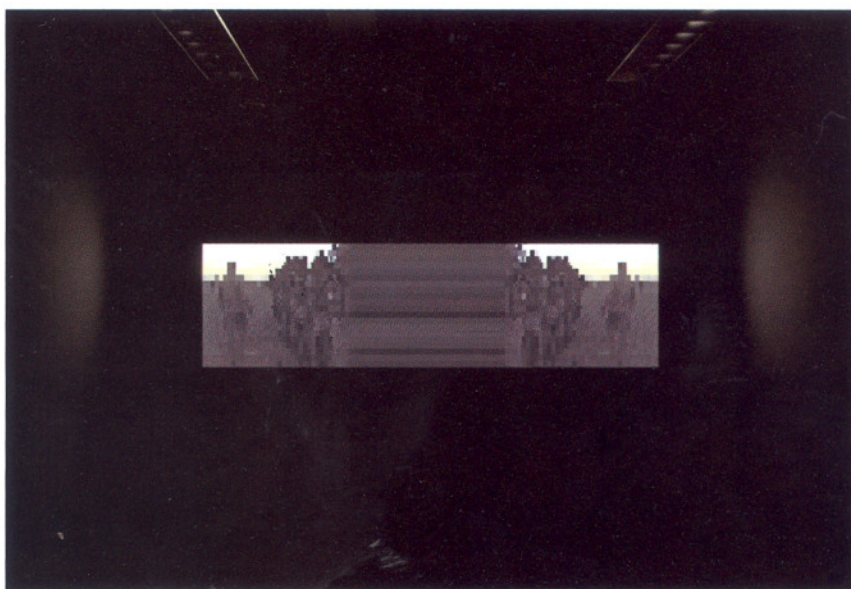
**Srestha Rit Premnath, born in Bangalore in 1979, now lives in the United States.** Although he had little exposure to contemporary art in his early days, he was raised in an environment where critical thinking was encouraged. During his middle school years his mother was finishing her PhD in Animal Behaviour and often had colleagues at home discussing their research. After schooling in Bangalore Premnath moved to Cleveland to attend the Cleveland Institute of Art. There, and afterwards at Bard College, he

absorbed as much as he could about contemporary art. Premnath's work is engaged with forms of interrogation and representation. Using strategies of negation, erasure and fracture, his work explores the space between history and our memories of it. Installations, writings and a topical magazine, *Shifter*, have emerged from this practice. Most recently, Premnath curated an exhibition *On Certainty* at Bose Pacia gallery in New York with artists from India and abroad like Abhishek Hazra and Kiran Sub-

biah, revealing yet another of his many creative facets. Reflecting on the word 'diaspora', Premnath writes: "Often in the rhetoric that surrounds the metaphor of diaspora, history is seen as dislocated and nostalgic. However, I find that history is more an accretion, or accumulation of events, and as I have lived in different parts of the world I have become a part of them. We must extend the metaphor and imagine a plant that has roots in many places—some real and some imaginary."



(JARET  
VADHERA)



**Jaret Vadera's work is engaged with cognitive feedback loops and the process by which information is filtered, mutated and manipulated.** Working with video installation, Vadera creates a sensory situation that attempts to bridge the gap between a high art experience and common daily occurrences. Vadera, who is half-Punjabi and half-Filipino, is a nomad between New York and Toronto, where he was born. His parents met and married in Toronto. Of his early years, he says: "My family moved around the city every few years. And with family spread out across the globe that were regularly traveling back and forth across national borders, I never really felt defined by just one place or by one worldview." Keeping that in mind, Vadera works across media, primarily in the spaces where painting, photography, video installation, and new media intersect. Vadera is a recent graduate of the prestigious Yale University School of Art in New Haven. *Carol* is a series of digital prints from Skype conversations with friends and family at the moment when a glitch occurs. Through this work, Vadera explores the distortion of perception in cross-cultural communication in an age of video conferencing. In another work 'I tell the truth, even when I tell a lie', a video installation is found footage of the US marines in Afghanistan which has been cut, fragmented, filtered, slowed down and reversed in different ways during the video in an exploration of systems of violence, power and invisibility.

[I tell the truth even when I lie,  
video installation shot, 2009]