

## **Artists of the South Asian diaspora in Britain** **By Leon Wainwright**

Artists of the South Asian diaspora in Britain have shaped a rich, engaging artistic legacy, which continues to surface in challenging and surprising ways. Many of these artists have been exhibited publicly and achieved glowing critical acclaim, although their life stories, and the historical record of their making and displaying art have yet to be fully documented and recognised historically.

### **Why should art and diaspora be thought about together?**

Given the obvious diversity amongst them, it is probably inaccurate to say that South Asian artists can be considered as a coherent group under the diaspora heading, and this is equally true of the body of their art works, which diverges very widely indeed. It has not always been the case that these artists have chosen to communicate something of their South Asian identities through their art practises, or to agree that “Indian”, “Pakistani”, “Bengali” or “Ugandan-Asian” labels, for example, should be associated with their art. But the idea of diaspora is still an important one since the written history of these individuals has often circles around this theme and other issues to do with diaspora identities; it helps us to understand something about their artistic choices, inspirations, beliefs, politics and so on. At certain points in their impressive record of exhibitions, direct considerations about cultural difference and “Asianness” have often played a role. But even if these artists themselves have not directly used art to encourage us to think about their unique histories of migration and cultural continuity, the conditions in which they have been received, criticised, and responded to in modern Britain still place diaspora and cultural difference quite centrally in our view of this recent art history.

### **How did this history of art begin?**

The forerunners to today’s practising artists mostly arrived in Britain in the late 1950s and 1960s, and came into a social and artistic climate much different from that of today. Although in all cases they didn’t want to stay in Britain for more than a few years, these earlier artists were intent on becoming an integral part of the exciting, exploding art “scene” centred around London, hoping to feature amongst white artists in the frequent international exhibitions that has come to make Britain a global centre for modern art. But this ambition would only be partly realised, for reasons historians and some of the artists would come to attribute to institutional racism, and due to attitudes that artists themselves later set out explicitly to confront.

Those early individuals were mostly painters and in many cases sojourners to this country, such as Francis Newton Souza (1923-2001) who arrived in 1949, Ivan Peries, Avinash Chandra (1931-1991), and Anwar Shemza. On the face of them, their paintings and sculpture looked much like those the art world was praising; in style and subject matter they were influenced by widely admired artists whose art historical importance was firmly accepted. Souza’s expressionistic style and borrowings from Roman Catholic and Byzantine imaginary were shown frequently in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and widely talked about. Avinash Chandra, a participant in the important impasto layers of pain on canvas, not entirely unlike those of Willem de Kooning, popular in mainstream art circles in the United States. Ivan Peries’ paintings featuring women bathers were not greatly dissimilar from those by the massively acclaimed Gauguin, whose paintings made on location in Tahiti were considered to be foundational in the development of modern art.

But the people who wrote about these artists at that time were keen to emphasise their South Asian background, or as the critic and artist Rasheed Araeen has put it, to invent an ethnicity for their art works, such as a “quality of Indianness”. For example, critics jumped to the conclusion that Chandra was trying to capture the same kind of celebration of sexuality found in temple sculpture at Khajuraho. It has been suggested that this has the effect of circumscribing their contribution to the history of modern art, to create a perception of them as less worthwhile, as secondary and derivative, and to place them at its margins.

### **Why and when did being a specifically South Asian artist in Britain become a hot topic?**

By the time of the 1980s, artists found ways of contesting and confronting attitudes of racism, encouraging art historians, critics and the gallery - going public to find alternative ways to approach and understand their art works. In many cases this meant they placed references to their South Asian connections very boldly at the centre of their works. Certain artists has had enough of trying to skirt around the very visible fact of their difference in culture and colour from Britain’s white majority, and wanted the public to accept them and their art in ways they could choose for themselves. Interacting with those of other diasporas (namely of Caribbean and African descent) became significant at this time, and a string of exhibitions took place in which black and Asian artists displayed together – the most widely publicising and debated being “The Other Story” (Hayward Gallery, 1989) – claiming that social conditions has given rise to them experiencing their situation in the arts in roughly similar ways. Looking at this kind of sharing of artistic ideas, experiences and resources amongst people of various diasporas gives a strong background to knowing how certain artists chose to represent themselves as simultaneously British *and* South Asian.

For this reason, there were many similarities amongst what black and Asian people intended their art to mean. Asian artists pursued what became known as a “politics of identity” that mirrored what those artists of other diasporas has chosen to adopt. But alongside this, there are still important details linked with heritage and ethnicity which set Asian works aside generally from those by their black contemporaries.

Balraj Khanna’s paintings and drawings are typical in this regard, and the narrative, graphic works of Manjeet Lamba, and murals by Shanti Panchal. These restate their artists’ ostensibly “Asian” origins, identities and influences by using the human figure as a focus for personal, collective and historical narratives. They have also used their art to make interesting, often quite critical and scathing comments on the ways Asian people have been unfairly represented in the European history of Art. An array of explicit visual references to ritual, performance and religious art form South Asia has been used to make this both explicit and deeply interesting visually.

Gurminder Sikand has recalled the gods and goddesses of Hindu mythology in her multi-headed, multi-limbed figures, as well as borrowing and reusing the decorative border designs made by the women of the Mithila region of Southern India. Much in the same way as the metallic, kinetic sculpture of Sokari Douglas-Camp has invoked Nigerian masquerade, the play of Hindu-derived signs, as well as Egyptian ones, in the sculpture of Dhruva Mistry, and of the Hindu deity, Kali in the painting and collage of Suptapa Biswas are characteristic of this ongoing visual “conversation” with forms and meaning which are distinct from those of “Western” art. These and other art works, such as the cut-out collage and painted silhouettes by Salim Arif, offer instances of deep familiarity with historically, geographically and culturally distinctive visual material and meanings.

It is also worth remembering that most of these artists have been *playing* with audiences, to confuse and confound the expectation that their work would somehow “speak” the fact of their maker being of the Asian diaspora. This might be less so with Dhurva Mistry say, who became the youngest ever member of the Royal Academy and has since resettled in India, than Chila Kumari Burman or Sutapa Biswas, who presented herself as a “black” artist from 1985 in the group exhibition “The Thin Black Line” – although like many of her immediate peers, Biswas developed a wide repertoire in the 1990s moving away from anti-racist “art activism” as Eddie Chambers has termed it, to a more detailed questioning of identity, obvious in her photographic series “Synapse” (The Photographer’s Gallery, 1992). One artist who is still ambiguous in this regard is the sculptor Anish Kapoor, whose early organic and geological forms dusted in bright, primary pigment, emerged at the same time as overtly political artists, before his limestone, fibreglass and polished steel sculptures became progressively larger, yet more elusive, both physically and conceptually. After winning the Turner Prize in 1991, Kapoor has successfully negotiated public perceptions about the “Indianness” of his interests to form a huge international reputation.

An artist who perhaps treads more stealthily between anti-colonial politics, public demands for exotic or “primitive” art, and his own poetic and modernist concerns with the monumental, sculptural and textural qualities of wood carving, is Juginder Lamba. Although Lamba was partly responsible for the first work of documentation in which the grouping of artists of several diasporas was named as a “black arts movement”, in his later career he has become less directly concerned with a separatist politics, and more taken with a sophisticated exploration of Asian artistic heritage. Like Lamba, painter and graphic artist, Amal Ghosh, has explored the plural, non-prescriptive ways in which he describes as “the universal story...of the mysterious depths of the human psyche” is taken to shape the narrative of his densely worked drawings and figurative schemes based on fields of deep colour, to contemplate subtle ways in which memories and myths of migration can become relevant for contemporary art practise.

### **How did this art shape the British scene?**

In so many of these examples, a kind of visual “language” that can be traced to South Asia is interwoven with concepts of art practice and display which seem more at home on the British art scene. Being mixed in this stimulating, evocative way, these works have come to change the routes along which the history of art in Britain has developed. In the another sense, a full, critical understanding of these art works demands an acute sensitivity on the part of exhibition visitors and art audiences of how to approach contemporary art with greater social and political awareness. In both these respects that are interesting political dimensions to such changes in that they offer further instances in which diaspora people have extended what is possible in British cultural life, and what we should expect of it.

Artists like Perminder Kaur, for example, have innovated the use of site-specific art, installation, and sculpture, with her 3D billboards, and pieces such as “Innocence” (1995), approaching notions of fragility childhood and memory, whilst exploring how artists can form collectives to voice strongly historical and political ideas, as she did with Juginder Lamba, Jagjit Chuhan and others for the “Independant Thoughts” exhibition, held to commemorate fifty years since the Partition. Inventive uses of portrait and documentary photography such as that of Sunil Gupta and Zarina Bhimji, in her work around the human body and medicine have brought photography into the purview of gallery-based art practice, and her use of mood and metaphor in a videopiece “Out of the Blue”, commissioned for Documenta 11 and shown at Tate Britain, London, March, 2003, depicting a turbulent Uganda in 1972, draws the medium of video into new territories of atmospheric narrative.

In terms of the structures or organisation and making and displaying art, there have been several notable individuals whose influence has made changes, great and small, in patterns of public patronage, publicity and support. Under the Arts Council of Great Britain and other official funding, in 1987 Rasheed Araeen established the journal *Third Text: Third World Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture*, which would go on to have an international academic reputation, reprinting profiles and interviews with artists, reviews, and polemical and opinion pieces. In the 1990s publisher Satjit Rizvi has produced a commendable series of titles devoted to South Asian artists, whilst editing a related journal, *Eastern Art Report*. Artist and curator, Samena Rana (1955-1992) tirelessly yet successfully campaigned for shifts in policy at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, whilst defying prevalent attitudes towards disability in a personal work of visual documentation, "The Flow of Waters". Another artist, Shaheen Merali, known for his complex photographic and installation works connoting the themes of travelling cultures and migration, and his collaboration with US-based Allan de Souza on "Crossing Black Waters", a touring exhibition that originated at the City Gallery, Leicester, has been particularly active in compiling documentation on South Asian cultural practice in its diaspora. Together with Allan de Souza, Shanti Thomas, Bhajan Hanjan, Symrath Pathi, in 1988 Merali founded the arts organisation Panchayat, which takes its name from the basic foundation of Indian democracy – the council of village elders. Panchayat focuses its efforts on initiating an archive of documentation on art and culture related to a wide set of post-colonial and international issues, and is now housed at the University of Westminster.

## Conclusions

The few examples mentioned here offer but a small sample of the diverse technical and thematic interests held by artists of this kind, representing at best an indication of a wider mass of others, in which social, political, historical and intellectual concerns are allowed to overlap in the process of making visual art. It will always be inadequate to introduce a set of artists and art works as characteristic of an entire history of art that spans half a century, and mistaken to assume a definite, common, underlying point of formal similarity amongst them. This is no less true in the case of artists of the South Asian diaspora in Britain, since they present a range of innovative and dynamic concerns. With this in mind, our fuller understanding of these artists should be based on an awareness of the very diversity of their both shared and individual histories, amongst which the complexities of living in the South Asian diaspora contribute but a single strand.

## Useful background reading

Araeen, Rasheed ed., *The other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-war Britain*, London, Hayward Gallery, 1989

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Design, 1996

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Arnolfini Gallery, *four x 4: Installations by Sixteen Artists in Four Gallery Spaces*, Bristol: Arnolfini Gallery, 1991

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Chakrabarty, Dipesh, *Postcoloniality and the artifice of history* in Salah Hassan and Iftikhar Dadi eds., *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Reading*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam: NAI publishers, 2001

Chambers, Eddie, *The Emergence and Development of Black Visual Arts Activity in England between 1981 and 1986: Press and Public Responses*, Goldsmiths College, University of London PhD thesis, 1998

Chambers, Eddie, *Let the Canvas Come to Life With Dark Faces*, Coventry: Herbert Art Gallery, 1990

Horizon Gallery, *Avinash Chandra*, London: Horizon Gallery, Exhibition catalogue, 1987

Kettle's Yard Gallery, *Dhruva Mistry: Sculptures and Drawings*, Cambridge: Kettle's Yard Gallery, 1985

Mullins, Edwin, *F.N.Souza*, London: Blond, 1962

Rizvi, Sajit, *Here and Now II: Juginder Lamba in conversation in Amal Ghosh and Sajit Rizvi eds. Beyond Frontiers: Contemporary British Art by Artists of South Asian Descent*, London: Saffron Books, 2001

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The Photographer's Gallery *Synapse: Sutapa Biswas*, London: The Photographer's Gallery, 1989

Warner, Marina, *Zarina Bhimji*, Cambridge, Kettle's Yard Gallery, 1995