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ART REVIEW

For a Fresh Gallery Space, Contemporary Indian Art

By [BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO](#)

Home to the [Yale University Art Gallery](#), the [Yale Center for British Art](#) and the Architecture Gallery in [Paul Rudolph](#) Hall, Yale would hardly seem to need another art space. But the School of Art Gallery on Edgewood Avenue, adjacent to a new building dedicated to the school's sculpture program, will complement rather than compete with its sister institutions.

The gallery building is a versatile but somewhat barnlike space with glass walls on two sides designed by Kieran Timberlake Associates. There is also an outdoor courtyard that will host site-specific sculpture. Taking me through the complex, Robert Storr, dean of the School of Art, laid out his vision for the space as a hub for the latest contemporary art from around the world.

"The art world is no longer centered in New York or, for that matter, anywhere in particular," he said. The School of Art's new gallery, he explained, will break out of the North American/East Coast-centered view of the art world, bringing to students, staff and the public "breaking news from a diversity of international artists" with approximately four shows of international art a year.

Mr. Storr knows a thing or two about contemporary art. A former curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1990-2002), he has also organized several art biennales, including the 2007 [Venice Biennale](#), the world's largest and most prestigious showcase for contemporary art. He is the author of many books and continues to travel and lecture widely on contemporary art.

The inaugural show in the gallery, "Shifting Shapes — Unstable Signs," brings to New Haven works by 13 artists and one artists' collective from India and the Indian diaspora. It was organized by Mr. Storr and Jaret Vadera, a student in the School of Art, and focuses on works that manipulate signs and symbols of cultural, national and gender identity. All told it is a handsome, thoughtful exhibition that feels both relevant and timely.

Several of these artists are extremely well known on the international art circuit, including Nalini Malani, Vivan Sundaram, Bharti Kher, the Raqs Media Collective and Bhupen Khakhar, who died in 2003. Still, few of them have ever exhibited in New Haven, which suggests to me that this exhibition should be essential viewing for anyone interested in contemporary Indian art.

Ms. Malani's two paintings of Medea (a Greek mythological figure who seeks revenge on her husband by killing their two children) are painted in an expressive, fluid style. In one, "Medea 1" (2006), she is depicted as a sad and traumatized figure, possibly even skinless, with her two dead children dangling from her hands.

Mental pain and suffering is also the unstated theme of "With the Walls III" (2008), an impressive super-realistic painting by Abir Karmakar. It is a self-portrait, painted in a London hotel room, depicting the artist crouched down in a corner with his face right up against the wall. Is he frightened of something, or is he ashamed? We don't know. But the amber glow of the lights adds to the overall mysteriousness. Whatever the explanation here, this man is in purgatory.

Photographs by Ram Rahman document poignant and amusing moments of everyday life in India, while Chitra Ganesh, using a computer, creates alluring digital collages mixing and matching imagery drawn from various sources that she transforms into something altogether different and new. Her collages are about the possibilities of shifting, multiple and hybrid identities in a global world.

Three of Mr. Khakhar's delicate, atmospheric watercolors from the final years of his life are among the most beautiful pieces in this show. I am grateful for their presence, not only for their beauty but because it has been years since I have seen his work in a United States museum. He is inarguably among the greatest Indian painters of the 20th century and a full retrospective of his work is long overdue.

Jaishri Abichandani is among the lesser-known artists included in the show. But her video "Happily Never After" (2005) is one of the more compelling inclusions, presenting documentary-style imagery of an electric, female fortune-telling robot found at street fairs in India intoning women to follow the example of stoic Hindu women saints. It is a commentary on the pervasive influence of religion in Indian society, especially among women and the poor.

It is not possible here to mention all of the terrific works in this show, but suffice it to say that viewers will constantly be surprised and delighted with what they find. No doubt future exhibitions in the gallery will have catalogs and more interpretive material like wall labels and introductory text panels that will help viewers unfamiliar with international art understand what they are looking at.

But for now this is an impressive debut for a worthy new space.

"Shifting Shapes — Unstable Signs," the School of Art Gallery, Yale University School of Art, 32 Edgewood Avenue, New Haven, through Feb. 27. Information: (203) 432-2605 .

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