



Abir Karmakar. *Within the Walls III*. Oil on canvas, 72" x 108". 2008.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SANDRA CLARK BURNS.

## BEYOND PERFORMING IDENTITY

DESPITE THEIR OBVIOUS MERITS, EXHIBITIONS THAT SHOWCASE art from India and its diaspora in the West risk being accused of indulging in 'ethnic marketing,' raising complex issues related to Otherness, exoticism and cultural authenticity. By stressing formal and semiotic instability over national identity in both its title and curatorial premise, *Shifting Shapes - Unstable Signs* at the Yale School of Art's new gallery, from January 26th to February 27th, side-stepped these concerns, nudging its frame of reference away from a reductive presentation of India's cultural specificities. Instead, the show co-curated by MFA student Jaret Vadera and Dean Robert Storr, focused on conceptual strategies that assert culture as dynamic not static, as a set of floating signifiers that can be re-contextualized and re-combined to introduce ambiguities and produce new meanings.

Clearly visible from outside, Brendan Fernandes' *Poser* (2006), the word spelled out in cursive pink neon, advertised the performative - pose, artifice, semiotic play - as the exhibition's conceptual terrain, while Gauri Gill's *Bhangra Competition* (2002), a photograph of dance crews hanging backstage, highlighted how elements of authentic 'Indian' culture are appropriated and performed in the diasporic realm. Arguably, artists in the diaspora, who regularly negotiate two cultures, are acutely aware of the performative as integral to cultural expression - both in mundane everyday acts and in conscious cultural production such as art. However, as contemporary Indian art has expanded globally, and the concept of the nation state, and the identities it prescribes, have been challenged by transnational flows of capital, people, information and culture, artists based in India have become increasingly attentive to identity as a performed construct. This realisation also allows artists to use locally specific subject matter while simultaneously resisting the exoticizing Western gaze. Through an excess of affect, paintings by Bhupen Khakhar, Abir Karmakar and Nalini Malani, Chitra Ganesh's *Amar Chitra Katha*-like digital prints and Tejal Shah's photographs of hijra fantasies, foregrounded their artifice, while simultaneously profaning the sacred and challenging gender norms. By focusing on such work, which rejects any essentialist notion of culture and identity, this exhibition might just have avoided the pitfalls that have befallen other comparable exhibitions of Indian art in the West.

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