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MOCHTAR APIN

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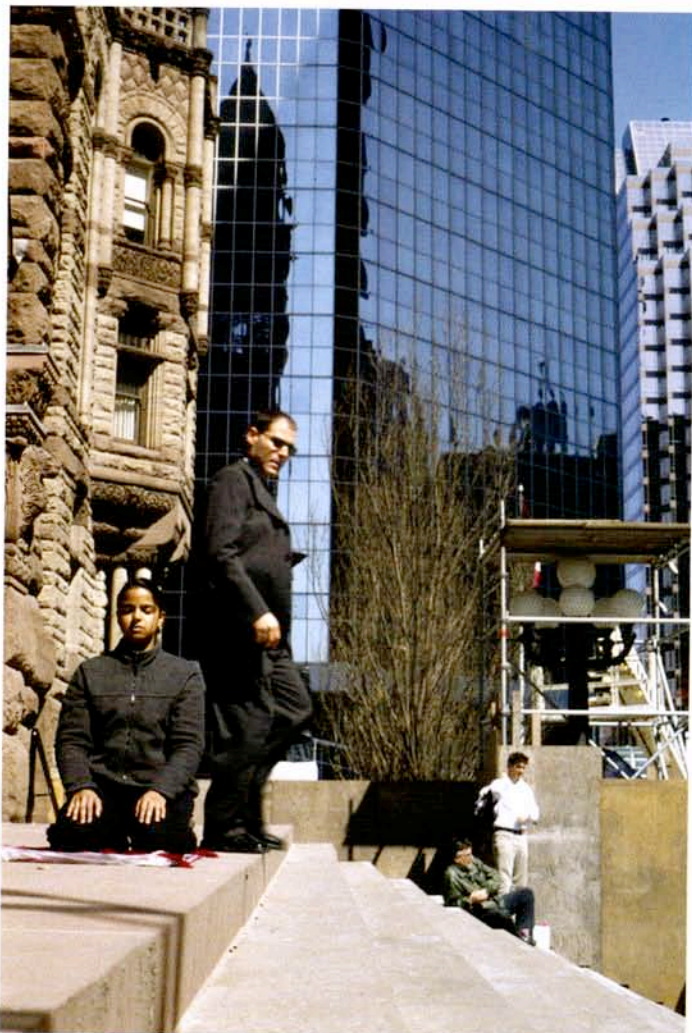


N.N. Rimzon, **Speaking Stones**, 1998, photographs (laminated), stones, resin fiberglass, marble dust (on figure), 90 x 500 cm (diameter). Collection of the Artist.

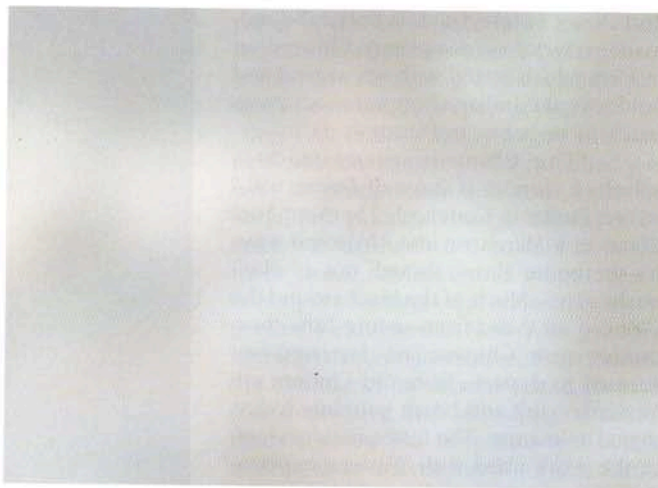
A Multitude Of Voices

The task of conveying a sense of a country's reality through contemporary art exhibitions is a difficult one indeed. The work of a handful of artists barely scratches the surface of that reality. Still, two recent large, wide-ranging shows in New York City went some way to providing access to some of the complexity of life for artists working in India and those of the South Asian descent living in North America.

By Priya Malhotra



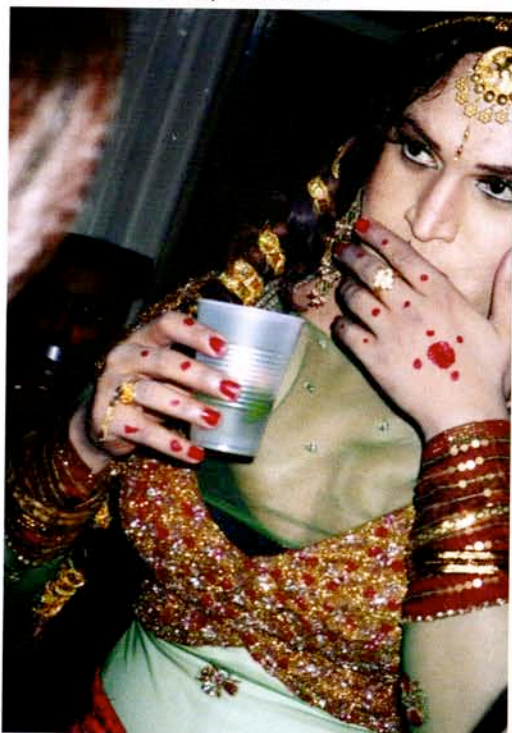
Farheen HaQ, **Retreat**, 2004, installation of 15 photo lightboxes, 6 x 5 inches to 20 x 15 inches. Courtesy of the Artist.



Jaret Vadera, **Untitled** (selection from the *Light* series), 2003, acrylic paint and mylar on digital C-print, 7 1/2 x 10 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the Artist.



Yamini Nayar, **From the Airplane Window, She Looked Like Me**, 2005, digital C-print, 30 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the Artist.



Saeed Rahman, **Khushboo**, 2002, color photograph, 30 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the Artist.



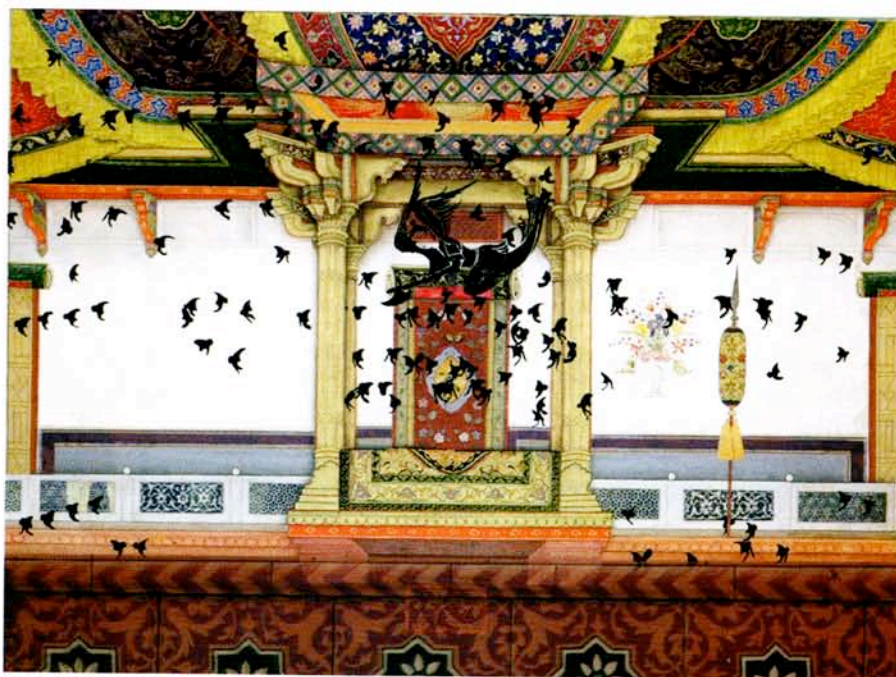
Mareena Waheeda Daredia, **Afternoon Prayers 1**, 2004, color photograph, 30 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the Artist.

Pakistan-born Sikander playfully put together a panoply of images from Muslim, Hindu, and Christian cultures (including the Western female figure of Justice sitting on a throne) to create a fantastical and trance-like experience in *SpiNN*. The highlight of the six-and-a-half minute video was when the hairdos of the gopis, the Hindu deity Krishna's female attendants, fly off their heads and swarm like bats in entrancing and disturbing moments.

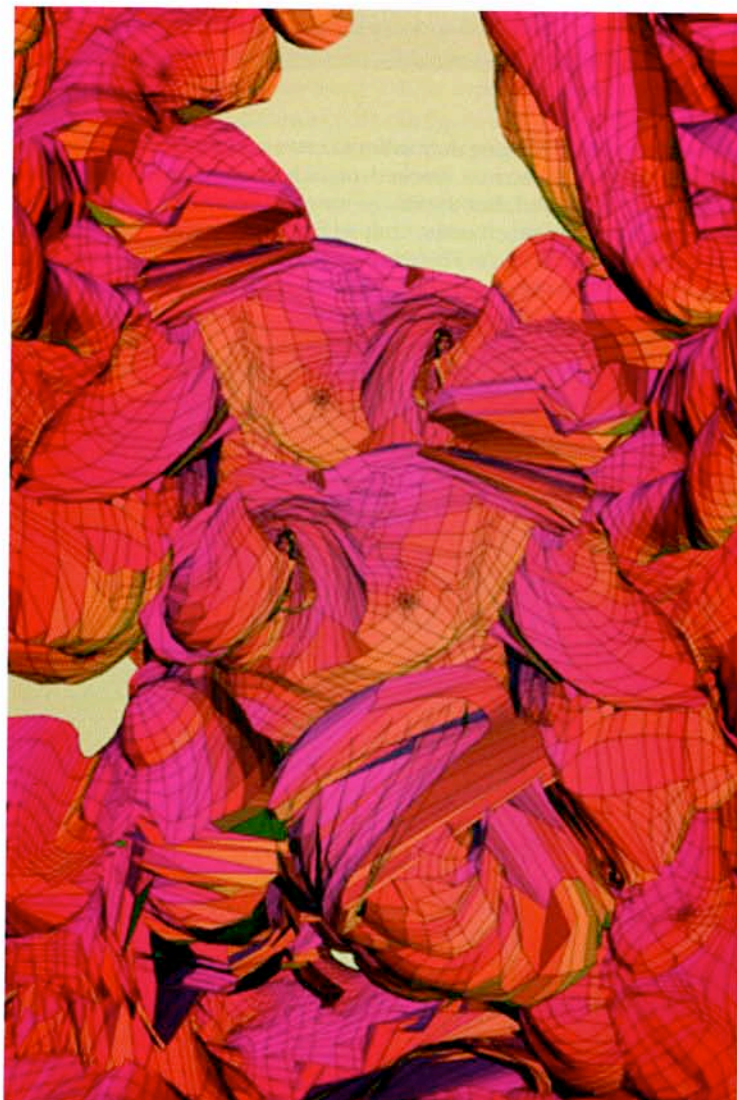
One of the most promising artists and the only one who did not feel a need to deal with South Asian issues was Jaret Vadera, a Canada-born artist of Indian and Filipino heritage. Instead, Vadera's cerebral work dealt with the ephemeral nature of memory and how the mind erodes pieces of past information and fills the gaps with layers of subjective information. *Light*, his series of photographic prints, went through a complex process to mirror what happens in the human mind. First, he covered the digitally manipulated photographs in plexiglas and then layered paint and mylar over it, subtly blurring and dissipating the images. The absence of any discernible forms compelled the viewer to investigate further, which appears to be Vadera's goal.

Yamini Nayar, whose surreal photographic explorations of migration and alienation were hauntingly memorable, was another promising artist. So was Saeed Rahman whose dramatic and eccentric photographs of Pakistani drag queens in New York City cleverly played with the boundaries between the beautiful and the grotesque.

In a few of the pieces, the politics were so didactic and blatant that it was easy to forget you were looking at art. *Disappeared in America*, an installation of large silk-screened photographs of Muslims detained after 9/11 along with illuminated excerpts from the Patriot Act, was a prime example. Even though the piece by Bangladesh-born Naeem Mohaimen and Pakistan-born Ibrahim Quaraishi was well-intentioned and politically hard-hitting, it looked like it belonged in



Shahzia Sikander, *SpiNN*, 2003, digital animation. Courtesy of Brent Sikkema Gallery, New York.



Prema Murthy, *QNS#020605-2*, 2005, diptych of prints, pigmented ink on fine art paper, 50 x 38 inches. Courtesy of the Artist.

a seminar to increase awareness about Islam rather than an art exhibition. Even works like Haq's photographs of herself praying or Daredia's depiction of the lives of her Muslim family and friends felt preachy and overly simplistic. Like a good number of works in the show, they had a catchy youthful energy, but not enough maturity.

Finally, despite their shortcomings, the two shows were landmark events in themselves. They were a testament to the growing power of India in the international community on the business, technology, fashion, and culture fronts. But, most important, they were, by far, the most comprehensive introduction to Indian and South Asian American art in the United States. Hopefully, those who associated South Asian culture just with filmmaker Mira Nair and fiction writer Jhumpa Lahiri also added the names Vivan Sundaram, Rummana Hussain, Shahzia Sikander and Prema Murthy to their list. Δ

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