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LUCID DREAMS AND DISTANT VISIONS: SOUTH ASIAN ART IN THE DIASPORA

Coinciding with the 70th anniversary of the Indian Subcontinent's independence from the British Empire, "Lucid Dreams and Distant Visions: South Asian Art in the Diaspora" at the Asia Society Museum in New York provided a rigorous yet nuanced survey of contemporary artists of South Asian descent. By showing only artists currently working in the United States, the exhibition succeeded not only in introducing viewers to the artists' native lands—Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Tibet—but also to the outsider experience of living between worlds. Themes of home, identity, race and migration were explored in a range of mediums.

The exhibition layout was strongly guided by the formal and stylistic elements of the artworks in the museum's largest hall, where 17 of the 19 artists' works were located. Beginning with Ruby Chishti's *The Present Is a Ruin Without the People* and Jaret Vadera's *Emperor of No Country* (both 2016), the first encounter in the exhibition was highly textural and tactile. Chishti's work is a wall sculpture resembling a miniature urban environment created from recycled textiles, wire mesh, thread and metal scraps. By peering through windows in the structures, viewers see spaces with no trace of people. The installation is a visceral expression of absence sparked by the artist's loss of many family members. Vadera's piece, on the other hand, presents the result of information after it is actively removed. The work resembles an emperor's vestment with a redacted world map printed on its fabric. By using black bars to blot out all textual references to geographical locations, the artist challenges the use of language in imperialism and colonization.

Mequitta Ahuja's canvas *Performing Painting: A Real Allegory of Her Studio* (2015) offered a welcome lull in the exhibition after the conceptually weighty textile works. By showing herself studying art-historical texts and images in the nude, with the artist's back to the viewer, Ahuja creates a powerful self-portrait, skirting passive depiction and inserting a woman of color into the canon of idealized female forms.

Particularly noteworthy was the exhibition's inclusion of strong video works. Mariam Ghani's three-channel video *Kabul 2, 3, 4* (2002–07) depicts the artist's tour through Afghanistan's capital in December 2002, December 2003 and October 2004. Each time, she follows the same route and documents the city as she rides in a moving vehicle. The artist did not time her journeys so that the same locations were always shown on all three screens, but the viewer cannot help but try to match up these places shown months apart, even as the footage flits past swiftly. In this hopeless chase, Ghani poignantly

portrays the city's changes as it undergoes post-conflict reconstruction.

Gautam Kansara's *Don't Hurry, Don't Worry* (2010) explores the divide between our memory and the documents of our experiences. The single-channel video represents a compilation of footage that the artist gathered over five years in his grandparents' London home. The viewer sees two layers, as the work shows footage recorded in the abode projected onto walls in the same space. Most of the scenes are lively or moving: we see Kansara's family playing Scrabble, the artist's grandmother telling anecdotes or singing while cooking in the kitchen, and his grandparents sleeping in their bed. But the feeling of loss and displacement is pronounced, as the vacillating images projected in an empty home are unstable and fleeting.

Located in its own room was Anila Quayyum Agha's *Crossing Boundaries* (2015), a stunning chandelier-like fixture of a light bulb encased within a cube of laser-cut steel. It casts shadows of the intricately incised pattern in all directions, evoking the geometric arrangements found in mosques, which the artist said she was not allowed to enter in Pakistan. The work is celebratory in nature—rather than Agha protesting conservative religious practices, the installation invites all people to take part in a spiritual experience regardless of their background or gender.

While much of the exhibition focused on the tragic stories of political and religious strife leading to migration and immigration, it also suggested a hopeful message of strength in fragility, and the assertion of one's vision within narratives of loss.

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