

RIVER BLOOM

BY RANJIT HOSKOTE



Three views of Atul Dodiya's *26/11*, 2012, exterior, enamel paint on motorized metal roll-down shop shutter, 9 by 6 feet, and interior, oil, acrylic, marble dust and oil stick on canvas, 7¼ by 5 feet. In "India: Art Now" at ARKEN, Ishøj, Denmark.

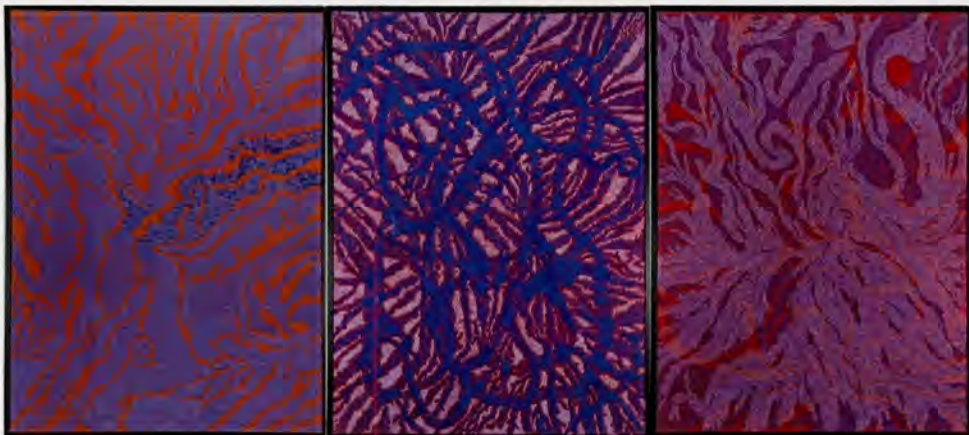
THE GREENEST THINGS happen when you're not looking. And where you're not looking. If you think of South Asian art today, you likely focus on the subcontinent's metropolitan centers: on the gallery scenes in Bombay, New Delhi and Bangalore in India, and on artists' circles in Karachi and Lahore in Pakistan. Not surprisingly, it's the artists who work in these populous, kaleidoscopic hubs of activity, transiting between there and West Europe and North America, who are most often selected by curators to embody the specificity of their place and time.

No argument at all with that, of course. The work of artists like Subodh Gupta, Dayanita Singh, Atul Dodiya, Jitish Kallat, Shilpa Gupta, Imran Qureshi and Bani Abidi thrums with a lively response to the challenges of shaping a sophisticated

contemporary practice from diverse cultural resources—including a colonial past, indigenous visions, and all the transcultural perspectives and opportunities that globalization has to offer. Many of the artists on this list are seen to advantage in the touring show "Indian Highway," which was presented in its latest avatar at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA), Beijing, this summer. Curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist, Julia Peyton-Jones and Gunnar B. Kvaran, "Indian Highway" opened at the Serpentine Gallery, London, in 2008, and has already traveled to Oslo's Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art; HEART Herning Museum of Contemporary Art, Denmark; and MAXXI, Rome. Meanwhile, this August, the ARKEN Museum of Modern Art, near Copenhagen, opened another exhibition of con-

temporary Indian art, "India: Art Now," with a not dissimilar dramatis personae. Abidi, who works between India, Pakistan and Europe, was featured in Documenta 13 this year, while the Lahore-based Qureshi's bloodied courtyard, with its terrifying combination of violence and beauty, became one of the defining images of the 10th Sharjah Biennial last year.

But where, I suspect, many curators are not yet looking is several thousand miles away from South Asia's metropolitan centers, in the northeast of India and in Bangladesh, at the geographical edge where the South Asian subcontinent shades away into the Himalayan foothills of Tibet to the north and the tropical lushness of Burma and Thailand to the south. New forms of artistic community have emerged here, as art scenes begin to unfold in grimly



ON BOTH SIDES OF THE BORDER OF NORTHEAST INDIA AND BANGLADESH, ARTISTS HAVE BEEN RE-EXAMINING WHAT IT MEANS TO BE CULTURAL ACTORS AND CITIZENS.

Above, Bharti Kher: *The internal workings of my mind when the body is sleeping*, 2012, bindis on 3 painted boards, 74 by 98 inches overall. In "Indian Highways" at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing.

Right, view of Desire Machine Collective's installation *Nishan I*, 2007-12, 4-channel video, 30-minute loop. In "Being Singular Plural" at the Guggenheim, New York. Photo David Heald.



unpromising conditions. The great natural beauty of these riverine zones is held in counterpoint by the great uncertainty and terror that long-playing dramas of insurgency and militarization have conspired to produce. Both northeast India, defined by the valley of the Brahmaputra, and Bangladesh, set at the mouth of the Ganga, the world's most extensive delta, have suffered decades of conflict between authoritarianism and various forms of emancipatory efforts ranging from peaceful protest to armed struggle.

These have historically been palimpsest societies, taking their evolutionary cue from the shuttling of people, with their goods and ideas, across cultures, climates and religious systems. Nailed down by colonial cartography in the 19th century, they were constrained, in the

20th century, within the concertina-wire outlines of rival nation-states. The protocols of electoral democracy continue in northeast India alongside the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which places the entire region under the shadow of military control. Bangladesh has been bitterly contested by supporters of liberal democracy and those who prefer conservative military rule; democracy and dictatorship have alternated with one another since the country was born from the ashes of the former East Pakistan in 1971. Artists in these two situations, adjacent but divided, confront very similar questions of identity, belonging and choice.

In both cases, buried histories await exhumation and contending versions of the future clamor for articulation. On both sides of the border, too, groups of artists have been working,

over the last decade, to generate and sustain an environment of debate in which they can re-examine what it means to be cultural actors and citizens. For the most part, they work independently of institutional support structures, since none exist that might support contemporary forms of artistic exploration. Artists in these regions must contend with senescent academies on the one hand, and, on the other, a mass culture poisoned equally by mindless television programming and a rampant ethno-populism. So they must self-organize, to respond to the urgencies pressing in upon them, and do so in the most imaginative ways.

Sonal Jain and Mriganka Madhukailya of the Desire Machine Collective (DMC), based in Guwahati, Assam, have developed film works, sound pieces and social projects since 2004;



Left, Promotesh Das Pulak: *Echoed Moments in Time* (detail), 2011, 10 appropriated and digitally altered photos of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. In the Bangladesh Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.



Above, preparations for a public art program at Periferry, organized by Desire Machine Collective and the Lalit Kala Akademi, Guwahati, India, March 2010.



Left, Tayeba Begum Lipi: *Bizarre and the Beautiful II*, 2011, hangers, razor blades and stainless steel. At Britto Space, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Photo Mahbubur Rahman.

they have also set up an experimental platform called Periferry, staged on a barge anchored on the banks of the Brahmaputra. Periferry dramatizes the condition of living on a distant border yet retaining the right to mobility: it is used as a laboratory for interactions among new-media artists, communication theorists, scientists, writers and ecological activists. DMC's initiatives are guided by its mission of transcultural exchange, in its insistence that physical and conceptual nomadism is

more vital than the fixities of nation-states and disciplines.

Across the border in Dhaka, Bangladesh, the Drik organization acts as an umbrella for an impressive array of initiatives ranging from the archival to the activist. Among these is the Drik Picture Agency, an archive and visual information distribution system that does not simply preserve a nation's traumatic memories but actively asserts their value against private amnesia and official suppression. Other projects include Chobi Mela, an annual international photography festival; Pathshala, one of South Asia's leading academies for photojournalists; the Drik Gallery, which presents the work of young photographers; and, crucially, the Bangladesh Human Rights Network, which documents and investigates violations of civil and cultural freedoms. The Drik Gallery was founded

in 1989 by Shahidul Alam, a photographer, writer and activist, who was sensitized to the political and cultural problems menacing his country as a student in the UK in the 1970s. He returned and dedicated himself to confronting them, and to nurturing the fragile public sphere in Bangladesh.

A similar vision inspires the Britto Arts Trust, also based in Dhaka. Part of the transnational Triangle Network, Britto is a not-for-profit, artist-led initiative that has emerged as a significant outlet for artists who depart from the norms of the academy and the market. While encouraging dialogue among artists in Bangladesh who pursue various experimental tendencies, including those who touch on subjects regarded as sacrosanct by the country's Muslim orthodoxy, Britto fosters periodic conclaves that catalyze



Above, Desire Machine Collective: *Residue*, 2011, 35mm film, 39-minute loop.

Right, view of Kabir Ahmed Masum Chisty's installation *Quandray*, 2011, 99 drawings, 12½ by 9½ inches each, and 1-minute video animation. In the Bangladesh pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Photo Mahbubur Rahman.

interactions between Bangladeshi artists and their colleagues in various other parts of the world.

Recognition of these initiatives has dawned gradually. In 2010, London's Whitechapel Gallery and the Fotomuseum Winterthur, in Switzerland, jointly organized a landmark exhibition, "Where Three Dreams Cross: 150 Years of Photography from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh," for which Alam of Drik was one of the curators. In 2011, both India and Bangladesh presented their first-ever national pavilions at the Venice Biennale. DMC's 35mm film poem, *Residue* (2011), was shown at the Indian pavilion, in the exhibition "Everyone Agrees: It's About To Explode" (for the record: I was the curator), while Britto members co-commissioned and participated in the Bangladesh pavilion's offering, "Parables," displaying the works of Promotesh Das Pulak, Kabir Ahmed Masum Chisty, Imran Hossain Piplu, Mahbubur Rahman and Tayeba Begum Lipi. Earlier this year, DMC included a



meditative four-channel video installation, *Nishan I* (2007-12), as part of its participation in the exhibition "Being Singular Plural," at the Guggenheim Museum, New York.

DMC/Periferry, Drik and Britto are protean, tactically flexible and versatile: they can act variously as collaborative programs, information agencies,

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archives, curatorial missions, production stages, schools or pressure groups. In each case, the project was born from the desire of artists from a marginalized and disenfranchised region to participate in a sphere beyond their birth country or the region to which their citizenship assigns them. Importantly, though, these are not vehicles of careerist aspiration. They are heroic and pio-

neering efforts to create cultural infrastructure where none exists, to resurrect the technical and intellectual capacities for citizenship where

these have been aborted through the abuse of power, and to bear testimony to a predicament in which the gesture of autonomy is threatened constantly by eclipse and erasure. ○

Atlas is a rotating series of columns filed from different cities around the world.

RANJIT HOSKOTE is a Bombay-based poet, cultural theorist and curator. See Contributors page.

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