

Unsettling the National in South Asia

My East is Your West, Venice Biennale, and *After Midnight*, Queens Museum, New York

My East is Your West and *After Midnight: Indian Modernism to Contemporary India 1947/1997*, two recent exhibitions of modern and contemporary South Asian art, could not be more different in scope or curatorial praxis. Mounted by the Gujral Foundation for this year's Venice Biennale (2015), and co-curated by Natasha Ginwala and Martina Mazzotta, *My East is Your West* presents the one-time collaboration between Pakistani artist Rashid Rana and Indian artist Shilpa Gupta. It is the smaller of the two exhibitions, housed on the first floor of the Palazzo Benzon just off the Grand Canal, but this says nothing of the show's sizable ambitions. A powerful compilation of work that takes its name from Gupta's light installation (2014), featured on the Palazzo's exterior, the exhibition can be seen broadly as an interrogation of lines and borders, one that mobilizes a collaborative and visceral viewing experience to underscore the capacity of art and the artistic imagination to transcend such barriers in the twenty-first century.

After Midnight, by contrast, is the more expansive of the two shows, both chronologically and physically. Curated by Dr. Arshiya Lokhandwala for the Queens Museum in New York, it traces the development of the Indian avant-garde across two distinct historical periods, interweaving India's present social, political, and economic climate with that of its founding moments in the 1940s. To this effect, the exhibition features the work of approximately thirty Indian artists and recalls the encyclopedic range of a grand survey.

In spite of these differences in design and content, *My East is Your West* and *After Midnight* together present an important opportunity to reflect on the changing relationship between museological spaces, curatorial practices, and the production of nationalist

historiographies in South Asia. As will be argued in the course of this review, both exhibitions suggest a shift in alignment away from prevailing national frameworks for collecting and display in South Asia—those prominently canonized by national museums in India and Pakistan—and that historically have inscribed museological spaces in South Asia as an extension of the nation-state and its ideologies. *My East is Your West* and *After Midnight* build, more specifically, on a growing body of exhibitions of modern and contemporary South Asian art whose curatorial interventions rely on a new and rigorous engagement with partition history, which has seen the subcontinent violently divided along religious and communal lines multiple times throughout the twentieth century.¹

My East is Your West

The museum's close-knit relationship to the nation-state has long been central to its history in South Asia. Though introduced to the subcontinent in the nineteenth century as an instrument of colonial rule designed to reduce India, its vast geography, and diverse peoples to an “objectness” that could be collected and controlled (Mitchell 2004), museums in India and Pakistan were quickly refashioned in the 1940s as a crucial vehicle for national politics and identity. Following independence and partition in 1947, they served as important symbols of power and civilization in India and Pakistan, their implicit ties to enlightened, rational thought, and Western conceptions of progress invaluable to both nations as they began to negotiate their standing on the world stage. Museums also became key players in the production of nationalist art historiographies, tasked with forging a “pre-history of the present” worthy of national pride and respect (Singh 2015). National institutions erected anew at Delhi and Karachi, in particular, were responsible for collecting and disseminating India and Pakistan's national heritage. A complex

task, this entailed in many instances the sequencing of art works and galleries in such a way as to affirm the cultural differences underwriting India and Pakistan's separate claims to sovereignty by the twentieth century. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these narratives of art gave rise to contending interpretations of the subcontinent's archaeological heritage, and often suppressed the connections that otherwise tied the history of India and Pakistan's art worlds together in intimate ways.

My East is Your West turns these historic ties between the museum and the nation-state in South Asia completely upside-down. To start with, the exhibition marks an unprecedented collaboration for the Venice Biennale. It interweaves Rashid Rana's *Transpositions* (2013–2015), a series of five immersive works, with Shilpa Gupta's incisive series *Untitled* (2014–2015), bringing together artists from rival states, India and Pakistan, across a labyrinth of interconnected rooms at the Palazzo Benzon, a seventeenth-century Venetian home. In so doing, the exhibition also powerfully proposes a new cultural cartography for the Indian subcontinent, one that not only eschews the national pavilion, the historic and structuring premise of the Venice Biennale, but also problematizes the history of partition in South Asia by foregrounding the fragility of national divisions within the region. Born of the artists' mutual desire to interrogate the limits of the nation-state as a geopolitical formation and the forms of belonging it imposes in the twenty-first century, the exhibition re-envision the present complexity of the Indian subcontinent through an alternate lens, opening up the historiography of modern and contemporary South Asian art to directions beyond the confines of nationalist frames. It emphasizes themes of human mobility, location, dislocation, and the fragility of human perception in its re-imagination of the region and its cultural contours.

The exhibition begins with Rashid Rana's *War Within II* (2013–2014), a digital rendering of Jacques-Louis David's seminal masterpiece, *The Oath of the Horatii* (1784). Rana's re-interpretation of the work is a fragmented version of the original, at once recognizable as David's neoclassical painting, and yet notably reshuffled. Arms and legs of the painting's central figures, along with other defining elements of the original composition are pixelated into moveable squares, and then rearranged and scattered by Rana across his digitized canvas in unexpected, and sometimes uncomfortable, ways. Gone, for instance, are the brothers' faces, once wrought with tension and resolve as they prepared for war, vowing to defend their family's honor unto death. Instead, the Horatii stand as dismantled heroic figures in Rana's work, shadows of their former selves, and unleash the deconstructive impulse driving the remainder of the exhibition. This impulse certainly takes on new life in Rana's subsequent installation, *My Sight Stands in the Way of your Memory* (2013–2015), a work that in part renders Carravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (1598–1599), a violent and terrifying scene, from running video comprised of film clips, scenes of daily life, news reels, and CCTV footage, among other sources. A trompe l'oeil that employs real-life scenes of action and terror to construct a fictional one, it is a work that, on one level, challenges its viewer to acknowledge the "paradoxical lives of images"—that is, the way images have come to simultaneously make and inhabit the world, blurring fiction with reality.² However, it is also a work that unapologetically plays with human perception much like Rana's *War Within II*, foregrounding above all its fragility and mutability. Both of these ideas lay the foundation for what follows in the course of the exhibition, namely Rana and Gupta's broader critique of the nation-state, itself an imagined community made real through human perception.

Rana's critique comes to fruition in *Asl-e-Shuhuud-o-shaahid-mashhhuud* (The viewer, the viewing, and the viewed in unison, 2015), arguably the climax of his *Transpositions* series, and the exhibition at large. In its most basic form, *Asl-e-Shuhuud-o-shaahid-mashhhuud* relies on video-call technology to facilitate a cross-border dialogue between viewers of the work in Venice and viewers in Lahore, Pakistan, where a small outpost of *My East is Your West* has temporarily been installed for the duration of the Venice Biennale. Visitors of both sites are encouraged, moreover, to interact across a mirrored space, which has been made to look as if they are inhabiting the same room in Venice, rather than conversing across national lines. To relegate the work as simply a cross-border conversation, however, would be to overlook the larger stakes of Rana's intervention.

The exhibition sites at Venice and Lahore differ significantly from one another, and it is within these differences that a critical upheaval of place and self also unfolds. While viewers of the work in Venice look on from the quiet, decadent interiors of the Palazzo Benzon, viewers in Lahore access the installation through a temporary, cubic structure, situated at the heart of Liberty Market, one of Lahore's busiest commercial sectors. From the exterior, this makeshift building looks almost unfinished, taking its white coloring from the scaffolding that keeps it propped up and stable, a far cry from the historic frescos and garden terrace that cradle the exhibition and its viewers in Venice. On the inside of this temporary structure, however, Rana digitally reproduces the walls, ceilings, moldings, doors and general décor of the Palazzo Benzon, giving life to a familiar version of Venice in Lahore, or one familiar enough. Though hardly detectable to viewers of the work in Venice, Rana's digitalized renderings of the Palazzo Benzon in Lahore are two dimensional, and highly pixelated. In other words, Rana simulates the Palazzo's interiors in Lahore with an eye to how they will appear across the video feed. He does

not actually recreate, or transplant the extravagance of the Palazzo for viewers in Lahore, for whom the fiction of the room is left duly exposed.

Overall, the result is a disjointed sense of place for viewers at both sites, where national divisions are uprooted by the fictions of a mirrored reality, and common ground ultimately comes in the form of dispossession, a shared sense of displacement, unease, and uncertainty. This interplay of fiction and reality, more specifically, produces a dislocated space in which East and West, self and other converge upon one another, and viewers, unable to locate their reflection in the projected image before them, a false mirror on multiple counts, must then find themselves instead in the image of the viewed. While this in the end does much to confront, if not collapse, the cultural stereotypes separating the work's two sites and respective occupants, Rana's *Asl-e-Shuhuud-o-shaahid-mashhhuud* is much more than a gesture of East-West diplomacy. Taken together, within the context of the exhibition, it also becomes a crucial exercise in redefinition, where linear notions of place and self are destabilized, and in the process borders are exposed as images themselves, in the sense that they are both real and fictionalized, and importantly permeable.

This notion of permeability unfolds further as a key thread in the latter half of the exhibition as well, which is comprised of Shilpa Gupta's *Untitled* (2014–2015), a series of interconnected works born from her recent and ongoing research at the Indo-Bangladeshi border and its surrounding communities. From the outset, Gupta's series interrogates the fluidity of national borders and national belonging by highlighting the constant stream of bodies and goods, and the economic activity that daily brings the borderlands between India and Bangladesh alive. For instance, a wooden walking stick wrapped thick with strands of Dhakai Jamdani Saree purchased in Kolkata brings into focus the long and laborious journey across the Indo-

Bangladeshi border that allows such goods to be available in Indian markets. The stick's corresponding label, a kind of textual performance, as much a part of the work as the fabric wrapped tight, contextualizes the materiality of the work against a three-hour train ride from village to city, miles of fenced border, and bribery at customs. By comparison, a subsequent installation of shattered bone china ceramic, white with flecks of red, reminiscent of blood, compares the demand for cattle in Bangladesh to the demand in India, where cows are considered sacred, and thus have a significantly higher market value for merchants in Bangladesh willing to cross over. A visceral work that also recalls the violence of slaughter in its fractured state, the ceramic formation, made in part from the bones of cattle, brings to life the array of differences erected by national lines, as well as their potential for arbitrariness. That cattle in India would fetch ten times the price in Bangladesh because of an imagined line in the soil, which makes real certain cultural differences by virtue of its relation to the national, reads as incongruous, even irrational. The permeability of borders in these pieces thus helps to cast the geo-politics of the nation-state in an absurd light, and unearths it as a fragmenting and fragmented formation, rather than affirm it as a natural or organic entity.

The nation-state often emerges as an unnatural, geo-political phenomenon in Gupta's *Untitled* (2014–2015). In one room of the exhibition, for example, viewers encounter a blinding spotlight. The assaulting work, which showers viewers in an orange tint from the moment they step into its view, forces them to reflect on the disorienting machinery used to secure the Indo-Bangladeshi border at night, as well as the underlying anxiety around the fragility of borders within the region that seems to permeate it innately. Also striking in this regard is one of Gupta's final installations in the series, a work consisting of a variegated table piled high with envelopes randomly dispersed across the table's surface. They come in various shapes and sizes and appear

stuffed with mysterious content. The puzzling work, like most of the pieces in Gupta's series, is accompanied by a panel of text that foregrounds its interactive nature. In reference to the envelopes, for instance, it asks the viewer to "take one away" and "open after crossing 150 yards—the distance between the zero line and fence where no defensive structure is permitted."³ The text, in this instance, has an unsettling effect upon the installation in that, once consumed, it fundamentally changes the relationship of the viewer to the work. On the one hand, and perhaps most superficially, the text destabilizes traditional barriers between viewer and viewed that might otherwise prohibit the touching of an artwork, let alone the taking of an artwork throughout an exhibition.

This, however, is not its only effect on the experience of the work. Prompted in part by the text, the viewer is then made to reflect on these traditional barriers between viewer and viewed as borders themselves, where the infrastructure of the exhibition comes to stand in for the infrastructure of the nation-state. The act of taking an envelope and then walking away becomes a performance of the border itself, one filled with uncertainty, tension, anxiety, perhaps even excitement incited by the anticipation of discovering the envelope's contents. The envelopes, much like the preceding spotlight, raise important questions around what borders are made of; what makes them real—time, distance, anticipation, a system of national defense located no less than 150 yards from the zero line? What enforces them? Who or what has the capacity to cross them? The installation unfolds, moreover, as a critical reflection on the extraordinary relationship between violence and nation-building in South Asia, capping off a visceral exhibition in which national lines, and the forms of belonging and knowledge they demarcate and produce, are made to come crashing down.

After Midnight

Where *My East is Your West* is very overt in its criticism of the nation-state, *After Midnight* functions in more subtle ways. It materializes a host of contending narratives within its written and spatial framework that together speak to a shift in exhibitionary culture as it relates to the nation-state in South Asia. As previously mentioned, *After Midnight* is an expansive curatorial undertaking. In contrast to *My East is Your West*, it is focused geographically on India, and chronologically on two disparate historical periods in the development of modern and contemporary Indian art. It features modern artwork produced from 1947 through the 1970s, the crucial years following Indian independence and partition during which Indian artists struggled to redefine themselves in relation to a colonial legacy, and a new Islamic neighbor. Throughout the course of the exhibition, these modern works are juxtaposed with more contemporary artistic production from 1997 to the present, a period of equally critical social, economic, and political change within Indian society, precipitated in part by the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991 and the rise in communal tension and violence following the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in 1992.

Physically, the exhibition takes over almost the entirety of the museum's ground floor, featuring the works of approximately thirty Indian artists. The exhibition's "Modern Section" is contained to roughly one room at the show's entrance, and presents the work of the Progressive Artists' Group. This contrasts with the exhibition's contemporary contributions, which are scattered about the remainder of the museum's floor plan, occupying the museum's larger exhibition spaces as well as a few unexpected nooks and crannies. While monumental works by Anita Dube, Sheela Gowda, Subodh Gupta, Jitish Kallat, and Asim Waqif, to name a few, line the museum's central foyer, a series of performance-based works presented by Nikhil Chopra

stand notably apart from the rest of the show. Represented through textiles, drawings, photographs, and video footage, Chopra's work, much of which explores the instability of identity in urban environments like New York and Mumbai, can be found tucked away along the circular walkways of the Panorama room, where the museum's eminent and monumental model of New York City also resides.

In spite of this expanse, both chronological and physical, *After Midnight* is not a survey of modern and contemporary Indian art, according to its curatorial statement (Lokhandwala 2015). Instead, the exhibition positions itself as a critical exercise in juxtaposition that seeks to both locate and compare the avant-garde impulses driving artistic production in India at two pivotal moments in Indian history. By bringing a critical selection of artists and artworks from 1947 and 1997 together for the first time using this comparative framework, the exhibition investigates the long-standing and complex relationship between art and nation-building in India, illuminating how artistic practices in India have over time both negotiated and contested a geopolitical consciousness.

The exhibition begins with a selection of modern artworks that celebrates the accomplishments of the Progressive Artists' Group, an artist collective founded in Mumbai in 1947. Early painted works from the group's core members, including M.F. Husain, S.H. Raza, and F.N. Souza, methodically line the room's walls, documenting the group's innovative turn away from the academicism of the Bombay school, and the revivalism of the Bengal school in the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, works like Raza's *Untitled (Temple Scene)*, c. 1950s, and Souza's *Reclining Nude* (1954), when juxtaposed together, speak to the group's founding struggle to articulate and assert a new artistic vision for India in the 1940s and 1950s. Raza's abstracted meditation on the Indian landscape, and Souza's re-imagination of India's erotic

sculpture, respectively, chronicle the Progressives' intervention into the abstract vocabulary of European internationalism to better address the aesthetic concerns of Indian society, then in the process of solidifying its identity as a modern and secular nation-state.

Importantly, however, this understanding of the Progressives as pioneering and solidifying the Indian nation-state in its moment of infancy, is not left unchecked, but rather is productively complicated in the course of the exhibition by a selection of later pieces by members of the group. These later works, produced by M.F. Husain, Krishen Khanna, Tyeb Mehta, Akbar Padamsee, and F.N. Souza in the 1960s and 1970s, notably after the group's disbandment in 1956, are placed at the center of the gallery, and made to look out upon what came before. They range in media from chemical painting to photography to video, and in turn broaden conventional understandings of the Progressives and their legacy for the contemporary Indian art world beyond the group's early accomplishments in painting. This new experimentalism is further linked to the artists' travels to New York, which productively connects the exhibition to its surroundings at the Queens Museum and challenges the Progressives' earlier ties to the Indian nation-state, repositioning the group and its artistic project on a more globalized frontier. It is in this first room then that the exhibition really begins to distance and differentiate itself from more nationalist readings of this history through its methods of display.

This more nuanced picture of the Progressives and their legacy lays a critical foundation for the argument that follows in the rest of the exhibition, which challenges a triumphant image of the Indian nation-state post independence by probing the various issues at the core of Indian society today. Jitish Kallat's *Public Notice* (2003), for example, ruminates on the rise of religious fundamentalism within Indian society and politics. The work consists of five large panels of

acrylic mirror that are burned black with the words of Jawaharlal Nehru's infamous "Tryst with Destiny" speech, given on the occasion of India's independence in 1947. The "cremated letters" lend a dismal air to a speech once charged with hope and conviction, and point to the growing crisis of Nehruvian secularism within Indian society today, signaled by the violence at Ayodhya in 1992, and the Gujarat riots of 2002, to which the work is a direct response.⁴

By comparison, Atul Dodiya's installation, *Three Brothers* (2012–2013), engages with communal violence in India on a more global scale, building on Kallat's work in interesting ways. Apart from conjuring an air of curiosity in the vein of seventeenth-century wonder rooms, Dodiya's set of painted wooden cabinets, filled with a strategic array of photographs, place the 2002 Gujarat riots in conversation with other global events, namely the Nazi Holocaust of World War II and the violence of 9/11. Communal violence, however, is not the only subject touched upon throughout the exhibition's contemporary corridors. Asim Waqif and Sheela Gowda, for instance, expand these discussions around the Indian nation-state to questions of environmental and economic concern. Where Waqif's haphazard installation *by production* (2015) examines waste and consumption in the twenty-first century and is accordingly made entirely from recycled materials found in the Queens Museum, Gowda's *Blanket in the Sky* (2004) raises questions around urbanization and poverty in India. A large, rectangular structure, made from flattened tar drums and machinery used to pave roads in India, the sculpture considers the temporariness of shelter for India's impoverished, against the country's race to urbanize and build anew. That the sculpture also recalls the shape and stature of the Kaaba, Islam's holiest site located in Mecca, should not be overlooked. It is an aspect of the work and its display that productively overlays religion into Gowda's discussion of economic disparity in India, as well.

The exhibition's climax arguably occurs in its backmost room, where Shilpa Gupta's *1,278 unmarked slabs, 28 hours by foot via National Highway No 1, East of Line of Control Medium* (2013) is juxtaposed with Dayanita Singh's *Fileroom* (2012). It is a quiet space, an atmosphere engendered if not demanded by the nature of the works themselves, both of which contemplate the darker consequences of national formations. Gupta's *1,278 unmarked slabs* ... transforms the gallery into a cemetery, a place of deep mourning and ritual where the viewer is invited to meditate on the violence unseen. Specifically, Gupta puts forth a series of white marble slabs that recall the austerity of gravestones. These slabs are further etched with a series of nonconsecutive numbers that commemorate the thousands of unidentified lives lost within the region due to unlawful activity on or near the Line of Control, the temporary border separating India and Pakistan, which incises the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Where Gupta's work documents the nation-state's potential for inhumanity then, Singh's *Fileroom* documents its potential for chaos, specifically the administrative chaos that goes hand and hand with systems of government, control, and knowledge. The work, a series of book prints hung against the wall in symmetric formations, overwhelms the viewer with images of archives, libraries, shelves of documents piled high, spaces of order and regularity that unfold unexpectedly as disarray, disorder, and madness. The importance of this juxtaposition for the exhibition, thus, becomes its aura of lamentation. Both works, in their own way, lament the nation-state as a settling force. By foregrounding its capacity for violence, disorder, and madness, they inscribe it, instead, as a great unsettling force, one that should not, especially in our contemporary political climate, go unquestioned or unchallenged (Chatterjee 1986; Mufti 2007).

Conclusion

My East is Your West and *After Midnight* are by no means the first exhibitions of modern and contemporary South Asian art to attest to this extraordinary shift in exhibitionary culture in South Asia. In fact, they bracket a substantial line of exhibitions that have in the last decade taken nationalist historiography to task, transforming museological spaces and curatorial practices in India and Pakistan from nationalist armature into powerful forums for social, political, and economic resistance.⁵ Unique to these exhibitions, however, is the extent to which their engagement with partition history enables their curatorial interventions. Their varied embrace of partition history links them, more specifically, to recent exhibitions like *Lines of Control* (2013), which was among the first to directly take on the partition of India in 1947 as its subject, and in the process transform the concept of “partition” into a “productive space” with which to think about collective trauma, commemoration, memory, and their impact on the writing of history in South Asia and beyond (Dadi and Nasar 2012).

There are, of course, several important distinctions that can be made to further differentiate *My East is Your West* and *After Midnight* on this front as well. Most critically, where *My East is Your West* utilizes the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 and 1971 as a point of departure, proposing an altogether new cartography for the analysis of South Asian art, *After Midnight* thinks around partition history. As its title suggests, an allusion to Salman Rushdie’s partition novel *Midnight’s Children*, the exhibition begins its narrative of modern and contemporary Indian art after independence, after 1947, in some ways displacing the very history of violence and dispossession that might otherwise strengthen its intervention into the forms of knowledge and display that the infrastructure of the nation-state has generated in South Asia. This is not to say that partition history does not find its footing in the course of the Queens show. On the contrary, partition becomes an important and looming specter in the background of its

analytical efforts, that is, when it is not addressed frankly in key labels throughout the exhibition, including those relating to the work of Jitish Kallat, Krishen Khanna, and Tyeb Mehta. Rather, this is to suggest that *After Midnight* did not go as far as it could have. Therefore, while it can be argued that *After Midnight* raises an important question regarding the ambiguous place of partition in the historiography of modern and contemporary South Asian art, itself a productive and necessary exercise, *My East is Your West* begins to pursue ways to answer this question, opening up the historiography of modern and contemporary South Asian art to interconnections previously lost to the borderlands between the subcontinent's art histories.

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Notes

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1. In 1947, British India was partitioned into India and Pakistan, where Pakistan consisted of two separate territories: East Pakistan in Bengal and West Pakistan in Punjab. Following the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971, a period of intense violence and civil strife, Pakistan's territories were further divided. Today, they comprise modern-day Bangladesh and Pakistan, respectively.
 2. Quotations taken from wall text for *My East is Your West*, written by co-curator Natasha Ginwala, recorded by author, 11–12 July 2015.

3. Quotations taken from Shilpa Gupta's *Untitled* (2014–2015) presented for *My East is Your West*, recorded by author, 11–12 July 2015.

4. Quotations taken from wall text for *After Midnight: Indian Modernism to Contemporary India, 1947/1997*, written by curator Dr. Arshiya Lokhandwala, recorded by author, 25 July 2015.

5. See, for example, *Edge of Desire: Recent Art from India* (2005), *Karkhana: A Contemporary Collaboration* (2005), *Hanging Fire* (2009), *Zarina: Paper Like Skin* (2012), and *Sahmat Collective: Art and Activism in India Since 1989* (2013).