

Being, Becoming, Belonging

Pia Singh checks out the opening show at the National Indo-American Museum in Chicago.



Sreshtha Rit Premnath. *Lean/Hold.* Chain link fence, metal frame, foam, plaster. 2021.

Dedicating the last seven years to art writing, curatorial research and exhibitions, I am one in four million (and counting) Indian immigrants living and working in America, striving to create a connective tissue between the two countries. It is in conversation with other immigrants that the deep desire to be 'seen' or reflected in the worlds of art, politics and culture, comes alive. One sees the urgency to archive, document and present lost histories. But is it possible to belong to two places at once?

With the impetus of sharing and preserving first person immigrant narratives, the National Indo-American Museum (NIAM) has opened its doors in Chicago with *E/Merge: Art of the Indian Diaspora* curated by Shaurya

Kumar, artist and faculty at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, in December 2021.

Formerly known as the Indo-American Heritage Museum (IAHM), NIAM is a result of Chicago's Indian-American community's desire for a self-determined museum collection. Presenting oral history projects, public programs and exhibitions for over a decade, NIAM established itself as a not-for-profit in 2008, building an online museum that worked in collaboration with the city's schools, cultural and philanthropic organizations. Announcing its national presence in 2018, NIAM has now found a physical home at the Umang and Paragi Patel Center, in Chicago's northwestern suburb of Lombard.

Finding itself comfortably placed between the ‘art world’ centres of the East and West coasts, NIAM felt the necessity to build a museum where the country’s Indian-Americans can find a shared sense of belonging. With the aim to build a community-led archive, NIAM’s idea of the Indian-American experience is rooted in the process of identity formation.

Since the Enlightenment, at least in the European world, anyone outside a totalizing narrative was considered to be ‘the other’. Diasporic communities which did not ‘originate’ or ‘belong’ had a peculiar relationship with their adopted nation. Over the past several years, the geopolitics of diasporic identity has grown racially charged. With tightened border security and the tyranny of right-wing nationalism, the pandemic’s final blow brought the endless cycles of migration between countries to a sudden halt, severing immigrant populations from their families back home. As the West begins to rethink ‘labour-supply’ models, diaspora communities have to renegotiate their ways of belonging. The pandemic has also been a global political catastrophe, dividing us on the basis of nationality and citizenship – living between worlds, flying across oceans and transferring earnings ‘back home’ has come under a cloud.

In *E/Merge: Art of the Indian Diaspora*, curator Kumar presents an assembly of emerging and mid-career artists whose distance from their places of origin affords them the opportunity to present a complex take on belonging as well as the condition of being elsewhere. Kumar’s curatorial framework attempts to draw from a set of definitions, positing the diasporic experience as one “based on a shared set of fundamental assumptions that diasporic people retain a sense of ethnic identity, distinct from their host societies, and that they preserve an emotional allegiance to their homeland”.

The experience of artists, as seen through sculptures, installations, paintings, photographs and videos on display, resists this *very* codification. Allusions to biographical, mythic, ethnic and religious themes evoke a common thread by which one can indeed identify a shared community. But it is in the chimeric desire to search for the roots of an ‘Indian American’ identity that the exhibition raises these questions – for whom are museums built? And, where, at this historical juncture, do the accomplishments of Indian-Americans stand shoulder-to-shoulder with those of the South Asian community at large?

Tactfully, Kumar avoids reducing the Indian-American experience to a singular narrative, bringing themes that speak vigorously to social, political and cultural formations over constructivist identity politics. While the past and the present are forever intertwined, it is through the deliberate practices of select artists that new pathways of meaning and interpretation grow, drawing us to appreciate diasporic experience as a *continuous* phenomenon.

Avantika Bawa’s *dot dot dot* (2021) comprises circles painted in the ‘pinkest pink’ on the exterior facade of the Center and inside the building. Working as a navigational indicator in the new museum, the human-scale dots open up space to address the incompleteness of identity formation, grammatically implied in the reading of the work as ‘...’. Bawa’s interest in abstraction and her Anish Kapoor-esque exploration of *pure* pigment speak to the duality of inclusion and exclusion within the art world. The work seems to ask why deserving diasporic artists are excluded from large museum collections.

Sreshta Rit Premnath’s *Lean/Hold* (2021) is a site-specific sculpture, presented in a long and narrow space. Cast foam ‘bodies’ slump away from one another and are connected by a stretched coil wire. One can walk around them but never in between. The hyphenated relationships that Indian-Americans have, complicate the act of belonging to both native and foreign places. *Lean/Hold* solicits acceptance, refusal, alienation and exclusion, disrupting the notion of community as a unified, conflict-free entity. The concrete-like cast foam ‘bodies’ represent the cities we inhabit. Each form leans into a fence, pushing its weight against a cold rectangular metal frame, most commonly used at heavily policed sites of protest. Provoking images of uprisings and the profound shifts experienced by labouring immigrant bodies during the pandemic, *Lean/Hold* represents the imposition of order from seemingly strong yet fallible structures.

Nandita Raman’s *Body Is a Situation* (2017-2021) takes us to the artist’s hometown of Varanasi. A large photograph of a map of India shows the handiwork of locals who have signed their names and that of their lovers to ‘claim space’. Footprints in red pigment sit near a photograph of the artist capturing her feet besides a carved cubist fresco of ‘lotus feet’ at the threshold of a Buddhist or Hindu temple. A large photograph features a hand maneuvering the saree as part of the ‘shringer’ of Goddess Durga to reveal smooth, polished stone feet. Split into a series of frames,



Kuldeep Singh. *Still Here.* 4K high-definition video with sound. 10:40 minutes. 2021.

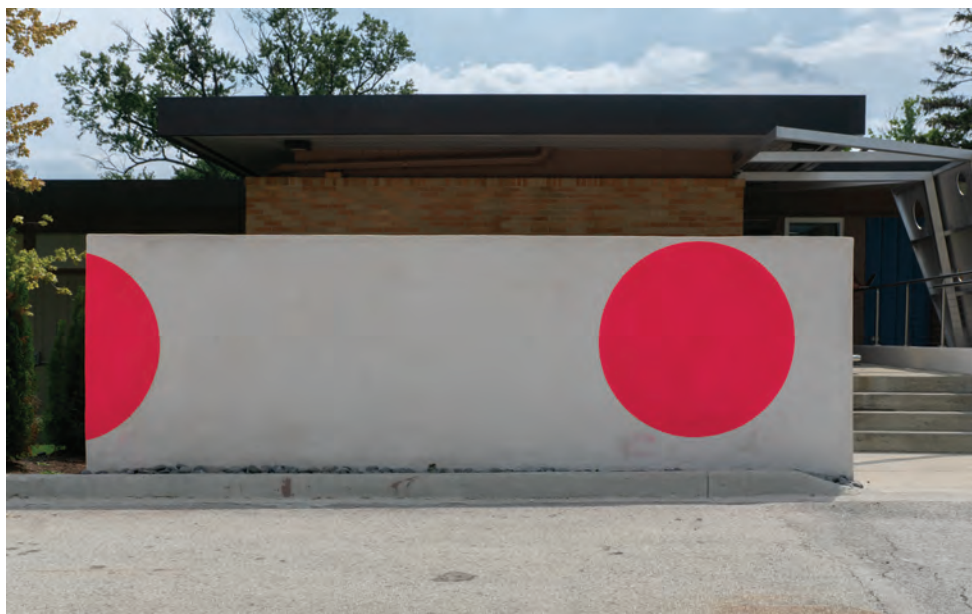
the photo is desaturated and coloured in bands, focusing on the sea green of organza and the flaming red of the hibiscus at the feet of the deity. The constant collision between the traditional and the abstract representation of the body is explored in Raman's work. The 'situation' she puts us in demands ways to reimagine and reclaim one's body vis-a-vis the attitudes and assumptions dictated by the West. The colonial legacy of representation permeates the installation, closing with a wood-mounted photograph of a young female Indian student sculpting a male torso to European standards.

Kaveri Raina's paintings, composed of acrylic, graphite and oil pastel on burlap, resist classification but are reminiscent of some of Tyeb Mehta's compact figures. Raina's interplay between the figurative and the non-figurative creates what can best be described as non-stereotypical forms. Her choice of burlap leads to reverse paintings. Pushing and pulling paint through the

jute, Raina creates an ambiguous depth of field between geometric and anamorphic forms. Memories of a place, an encounter or the ambiguity of home, are suggested in Raina's works where floating colour strands and uncanny gestures disorient and displace the viewer.

In Sarika Goulatia's *Sometimes forgotten, sometimes remembered; the tribulations and afflictions never erased* (2019), one enters a life-sized bedroom with moth-eaten, drilled wooden furniture and pin-textured interiors that delicately compose an image of domesticity that is rife with discomfort. In an evocation of the forced self-isolation generated by the pandemic, an environment of comfort and safety (a bed, pillows, desk, chair, replete with wall-mounted shelves) is suggested. Within this space lurks the terror of dying alone. Neha Vedpathak's fibre paintings are juxtaposed with Goulatia's and Raina's. Vedpathak separates fibres of Japanese handmade paper with the use of a sharp pushpin, stitching together compositions

Avantika Bawa. *dot dot dot.*
 Latex wall paint and Pinkest Pink acrylic
 paint. Dimensions variable.
 At the National Indo-American Museum
 (NIAM), Lombard, Chicago, Illinois. 2021.
 Photograph by Manos Dimitrakis.
 All images courtesy of NIAM.



of turmeric yellow, indigo blue, kohl black and verdant green. Exploring identity and history through abstract symbolism, the artist's use of colour is decisive. Kushala Vora's site-specific installation comprises *The Unearthed* (2017) and *Bodies made by Habit, Tools by Hand* (2018). Porcelain and terracotta 'fossilized' notebooks question our colonial conditioning. Do we exist in a permanent state of colonial nostalgia or can we shake off the calcification of time, history and language? Vora's space is an intriguing interaction between material and process, where the artist's location, history and the geographical interface between Panchgani and Chicago is explored. In *Bodies made by Habit, Tools by Hand*, a series of lost wax sculptures mounted on a hand-painted earthen wall draws the viewer in to examine brass assemblages of indeterminate shapes. The calcified notebooks begin to appear to be sacramental objects, gaining in resonance alongside the brass totems.

Surabhi Saraf's acclaimed video *Fold* (2010) shares stage with Kuldeep Singh's *Still Here* (2021) in NIAM's lower level screening room. In *Still Here*, the camera traces the contours of a youthful, male dancer dressed in a muslin *langot* (loin cloth) standing atop a vessel filled with earth or soil. He positions his hand on the hip, posing as a figure model for an artist's study. The inversion of the exotic gaze is disquieting, as here the white-skinned 'other' is seen as the fetish object. A guitar drone score lends an atmospheric ambiguity to a slow-moving camera. Is it a video, a performance or a durational encounter one

is witness to? The video serves as a record of love and loss; it is also a sonnet of devotion.

Saraf's *Fold* resonates with the collective experience of being 'alone together' during the pandemic. Repetitive actions of the artist folding different coloured dupattas while doing laundry move like clockwork across a grid of smaller screens on a large-scale projection. Opening and folding brightly coloured fabrics, the screens expand and engulf one another, serving more as a colour field painting than a video. Saraf gently hums a song as she tries to recall memories of home as a student. The bold colours appear to move rhythmically, creating a stream of consciousness between domestic and spiritual realms.

While the immersive nature of the works on display could be attributed to the intimate scale of NIAM's galleries, the real challenge will truly lie in representing art and culture that reflects the *changing* needs, desires and concerns of contemporary individuals who are part of the Indian diaspora. It is not in preserving Indian-American history but rather, in resisting a monolithic definition of Indian-American-ness, that the museum will be able to truly imagine new perspectives while addressing identity and belonging. With the presence of the newly founded South Asia Institute, which also opened its doors in downtown Chicago, it will be intriguing to see how these institutions challenge the oversimplification of Indian and South Asian culture and identity for Western and Indian audiences. /