

HOME ?

Crosscurrents in Contemporary South Asian/American Art

Siona Benjamin

Ambreen Butt

Sabina Zeba Haque

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew

Sejal Patel

Ram Rahman

Sukanya Rahman

Kanishka Raja

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A documentary video of *Lowell's Asian Indian Community* by international photojournalist **David Wells** accompanies the exhibition.

Exhibition curated by E. Linda Poras

February 18 to April 15, 2001
The Brush Art Gallery and Studios
256 Market Street
Lowell, Massachusetts 01852

UMass Lowell Building Community Through Culture Program

The Building Community Through Culture program (BCC) is a collaborative effort of the University of Massachusetts Lowell and Lowell cultural organizations. BCC has sponsored a multi-year series that focuses on the rich cultural expression of Lowell's peoples. Over the last two years BCC has supported performances of poetry, art, film, music and dance from the city's Southeast Asian and Latino communities.

BCC hopes to establish and continue to expand a "core audience" of community members interested in promoting understanding and tolerance in our diverse community. Together, we seek to share and foster exchanges of ideas to further increase cross-cultural understanding through sharing cultural and artistic expression.

This is the third year in a row that BCC and the Brush Art Gallery have worked together to open up doors to understanding among the diverse cultural groups living in and around the Lowell area through art exhibitions and educational programs. Linda Poras has provided us with a number of thought provoking exhibitions which celebrate the rich cultural tapestry of Lowell. This year's exhibition *Home? Crosscurrents in Contemporary South Asian/American Art* explores a relatively unknown segment of the Lowell cultural community, South Asians. We expect the collaboration between BCC and the Brush Art Gallery to continue in the future.

Dr. Jeffrey Gerson, Professor Political Science Department, UMass Lowell

Dr. Charles Nikitopoulos, Professor Psychology Department, UMass Lowell

LEF



Acknowledgements

This exhibition has been a collaborative venture, made possible by the support and cooperation of a number of people. First, I would like to thank the artists who were of great assistance in providing insights and information, and Nicholas Capasso, curator at the DeCordova Museum, in Lincoln, for his excellent suggestions.

Special thanks go to my colleagues and collaborators in the Building Community Through Culture Program: Dr. Jeffrey Gerson, Dr. Charles Nikitopoulos, and Chath perSath. I very much enjoy working with them and deeply appreciate their continued support and encouragement. I am also grateful to Dr. Susan Bean, Curator of Asian, Oceanic, and African Art at the Peabody Essex Museum for agreeing to moderate the panel discussion *Contemporary South Asian Artists from the Diaspora: A Multicultural Mosaic* being held in conjunction with this exhibition.

Anjali Kothari has been incredibly generous in taking the time to introduce David Wells to Lowell's Asian Indian community; Anjali helped in numerous other ways, and for all of those I am appreciative. Betty Sanigati, Chair of the Art Department at Lowell High School and Sean Driscoll, the President of the Board at the Brush, initiated a Brush Gallery/Lowell High School partnership which has made it possible for student interns like Erica Vitori, a student docent from Lowell High School, to experience giving gallery tours to student groups.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my South Asian Advisory Committee: Dr. Mitra Das, Indu Anand, Sucharita Hegde, Gayathri Ganapathy, Alok De, Anjali Kothari, and Rajini Srikanth who helped to educate, direct, and assist me in this project. Thanks also to Francine Koslow Miller and Jason Poras, who provided invaluable editing support, and to Bombay Mahal, one of the best Indian restaurants in New England, for providing us with refreshments.

This exhibition has been funded by the LEF Foundation. Additional support has been provided by the Lowell Cultural Council, The Massachusetts Cultural Council, UMass Lowell's Center for Diversity and Pluralism, and Bombay Mahal restaurant, Lowell.

E.L.P.

HOME ? Crosscurrents in Contemporary South Asian/American Art

Home? Crosscurrents in Contemporary South Asian/American Art is the third in a series of exhibitions which the Brush Art Gallery and Studios has organized in conjunction with UMass Lowell's Building Community Through Culture Program. Similar to past exhibitions, which focused on Southeast Asian and Latin American art and culture, this exhibition provides an opportunity for the greater Lowell community to deepen their understanding and appreciation of the many different cultural groups who make their home in Lowell. In this show South Asian culture is explored through the rich and diverse art being produced by South Asian artists living in America. We have also taken this opportunity to celebrate our own South Asian community with a documentary video by David Wells, an international photojournalist, who spent time visiting with and photographing Asian Indian families in the greater Lowell area.

South Asian artists living in America are confronted with the challenge of maintaining their cultural heritage while adapting to the conventions of contemporary art, and somehow managing to define themselves in the process. Their works illuminate the cross-pollination which is an inevitable result of bridging cultures, while at the same time reflecting their immersion in the cultural pluralism which has been present in South Asia for centuries. The Indian art critic Geeta Kapur has pointed out that eclecticism is inevitable in cultures which have been invaded by foreign influences: "We cannot understand modern art in India today unless we take account of acculturation processes involving the integration and synthesis of Euroamerican influences with native conceptions."¹

The provocative works by Siona Benjamin, Ambreen Butt, Sabina Zena Haque, Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, Sejal Patel, Ram Rahman, Sukanya Rahman, and Kanishka Raja are infused with personal and universal issues relating to stereotypes, tolerance, women, spirituality, religion, and identity. Stylistically the artists come from different vantage points. However, what they have in common is an intense passion for conveying messages in work that challenges the current definitions of art, as well as the foundations of ethnocentric culture.

The momentum to exhibit the work of prominent South Asian artists in galleries and museums around the world has been greatly impacted by the forces of globalization and electronic technology which have loosened the tether of Western hegemony over contemporary art production. Western art history can no longer be the standard measuring stick by which we evaluate and look at world art. As is evidenced in this exhibition, South Asian/American artists challenge us with unique and refreshing ways of looking at art. Their works reflect the intersection of East and West—their two worlds informed by different aesthetic values yet bound by a sense of "home" in multicultural America.

E. Linda Poras
Executive Director/Curator

1. Geeta Kapur as quoted by Suzi Gablik, "Report from India" *Art in America*, September 1979, 34.

Select Exhibitions: Gallery at 678, New York, N.Y.; Tarble Arts Center, Eastern Illinois Univ.; Bockrath Gallery, Cleveland, Ohio; Wood Street Gallery, Chicago, Illinois; MacLennan Gallery of Asian Art, St. Louis University, MO; Institute of Fine Arts, Jewish Community Center, Fairfax, VA; Maison des Dimes, Gondreville/Nancy, France; Stage Art, I-Space, Chicago, Illinois; Galerie Ovidia, Nancy, France; New Harmony Gallery of Contemporary Art, New Harmony, IN; Palais Thurm und Taxis, Bregenz, Austria; Dhoomimal Art Center, New Delhi, India; and Jehengir Art Gallery, Bombay, India.

Honors: Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture Grant, New York; Women's studies and Professional Advancement Juried Competition Award, Southern Illinois Univ., Carbondale; Missouri Arts Council Arts-in-Education Residency Program Grant; Illinois Arts Council Arts-in-Education Residency Program Grant; and Illinois Art Council Special Assistance Grant.

SIONA BENJAMIN

Lives in Carbondale, Illinois
MFA, Univ. of Illinois, Urbana, Champaign
MFA Southern Illinois Univ., Carbondale
Diploma in Metals, J.J. School of Art, Bombay, India
Diploma in Fine Arts, J.J. School of Art, Bombay, India
Teaches at the School of Art and Design,
Southern Illinois Univ., Carbondale



Detail of *Finding Home Series #35 (Khamoshi)*, 2000
gouache on paper

I am currently working on a series of paintings entitled "Finding Home." In this work, I raise questions about what and where is "home," while evoking issues such as identity, immigration, motherhood, and the role of art in social change. I am a Sephardic Jew from India. My family has gradually dispersed mostly to Israel and America, but my parents remain in India. I am now also an American, living and working in Carbondale, Illinois. With such a background, the desire to "find home," spiritually and literally, has always preoccupied me—a concern that I feel many Americans can relate to. The feeling I have of never being able to set deep roots no matter where I am is unnerving, but on the other hand, there is something seductive about the spiritual borderland in which I seem to find myself.

My paintings explore female energy and power, as I am inspired by tantric art of ancient India. The work is informed, as well, by Indian miniature paintings, Byzantine icons, and Jewish religious art from my childhood. While the forms in my work may appear unconventional and exotic to some, I would like to see viewers transcend this apparent exoticness and absorb the core message—tolerance of diversity.

Siona Benjamin

AMBREEN BUTT

Lives in Boston, MA

MFA Mass College of Art, Boston, MA

BA National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan

Teaches at Mass College of Art



Cognition Series #2, 1993
watercolor and gouache
on handmade paper

Select Exhibitions: Bernard Toale Gallery, Boston, MA; DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA; Mills Gallery, Boston Center for the Arts, Boston, MA; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA; Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art, Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Staten Island, N.Y.; and Columbia University, New York, N.Y.

Honors: Artist Award for Excellence in Art, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA; and Artist-in-Residence, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, MA.

I am trained in two seemingly exclusive painting traditions: one, Indian and Persian miniature painting and the other, contemporary Western tradition. My work draws from both.

My day to day experiences in America resonate in my efforts to give form to many complex issues: risks involved in reflecting conventional social roles; ways of achieving independence and yet guarding the spirit of time-honored traditions; modes of challenging stereotypes this culture associates with women in Islam. In engaging all these issues in my work, my primary concern remains form. I have worked hard to develop a personal aesthetic that can accommodate the complexity of my experience as a Southeast Asian Muslim woman in America.

Ambreen Butt

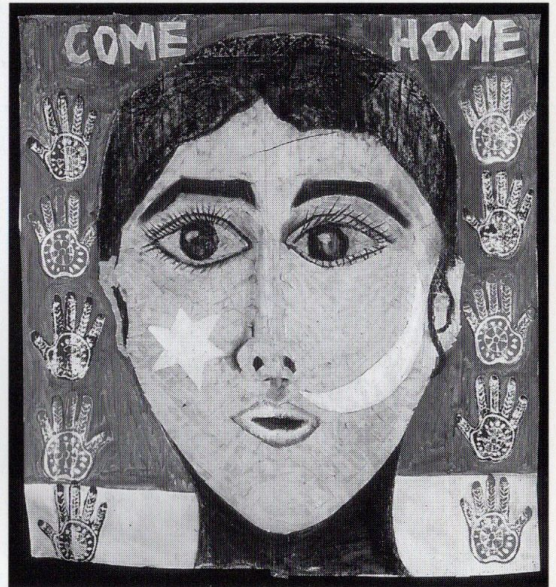
SABINA ZEBA HAQUE

Lives in Boston, MA

MFA, Boston University, Boston, MA

BA, Smith College, Northampton, MA

Teaches at Boston Renaissance
Charter School



Detail of installation:
Come Home, 2000
mixed media on paper

Select Exhibitions: American
Consulate, Karachi, Pakistan;
American Library of Congress,
Karachi, Pakistan; Bowery
Gallery, New York, N.Y.; Green
Street Gallery, Boston, MA;
Mount Holyoke College
Gallery, South Hadley, MA;
Hampshire College Gallery,
Amherst, MA; and Smith
College, Northampton, MA.

Honors: Chautauqua School of
Art, Chautauqua, N.Y.; Painting
Fellowship, Vermont Studio
Center, Johnson, Vermont;
Painting Fellowship, Glasgow
School of Art, Scotland, United
Kingdom; and Visiting Artist
Fellowship, Mass College of Art.

I am an artist of South Asian decent born in America but raised in Pakistan. My father was born in India and my mother was born and raised in America. For the last eight years, I have been living and working in the United States drawing from both cultures and creating my own unique identity both as an individual and a painter.

In the 1950s my Norwegian grandmother learned to forget her native tongue and lost touch with her native country, assimilating into the melting pot of America. Two generations later, here I am retaining parts of my Pakistani culture, language, and nationalism. My work examines and reacts to the meaning of this ever changing buzz word "multiculturalism" and what it stands for in American culture today. My paintings question which parts of my Eastern and Western visual aesthetic and culture I retain, and what I must abandon or transform to better fit my needs.

As Nehru writes in his autobiography: "I am a quaint blend of the East and the West. At ease everywhere, at home nowhere." Yet unlike him, I feel comfortably at home gliding in and out of both worlds, adopting for myself the best aspects of my collective traditions, customs, and way of life.

Sabina Zeba Haque

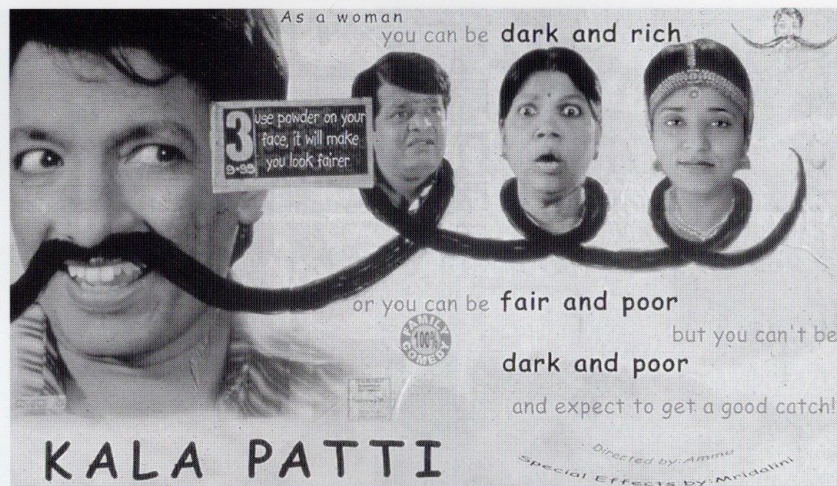
ANNU PALAKUNNATHU MATTHEW

Lives in Providence, RI

MFA University of Delaware, Newark, DE

B.Sc. Women's Christian College, India

Teaches at the University of Rhode Island



Bollywood Satirized, Kala Patti, 2000
Luminage digital print

Select Exhibitions Houston
Center for Photography,
Houston, TX; DRIK Gallery,
Dhaka, Bangladesh; Southern
Illinois University, Carbondale;
University of Notre Dame, IN;
Soho Photo Gallery, New York,
N.Y.; Center for Photography,
Bombay, India; University of
Central Arkansas, Conway, AR;
El Museo del Barrio, New York,
N.Y.; The Bronx Museum of the
Arts, Bronx, N.Y.; and the Balch
Institute of Ethnic Studies,
Philadelphia, PA.

Honors Aaron Siskind
Fellowship in Photography;
Residency Fellowship, Vermont
Studio Center; New Media
Residency Grant, Visual Studies
Workshop and New York State
Council for the Arts; University
of Rhode Island Foundation
Grant; the Joseph and Rose
Artist-of-Color Fellowship,
Anderson Ranch Arts Center,
Snowmass, CO, and New Works
Award, En Focco; and Heathcote
Art Foundation for minority
artists, New York, N.Y.

The Bollywood Satirized portfolio is a critical commentary (parody and satire) on the societal expectations that I experienced as a woman growing up in India. To create this work, I started with Indian movie posters, a reflection of the popular culture and the melodrama of Indian life. The visual and aural presence of cinema in India is the result of the largest commercial film industry in the world. It produces close to one thousand movies a year. Using digital technology to alter the posters, I re-interpret the images of Indian movie posters to make satirical social commentary based on my experiences. The final images include myself, my former lover in India, other imagery and text. The work explores issues such as the position of women in Indian society, the dowry system, arranged marriages, discrimination based on skin color, and inter-racial relationships.

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew

SEJAL PATEL

Lives in Dracut, MA

BFA Mass College of Art, Boston, MA



If I were back in India, who would I be ?

Smelling Yogurt, 1998

silver gelatin print

Select Exhibitions Mass

College of Art, Boston, MA; and

Brush Art Gallery and Studios,

Lowell, MA.

Honors Mass College of Art

Travel Grant to India; First Prize

Photography Exhibition, Brush

Art Gallery and Studios, Lowell,

MA; Rachel Whittier Memorial

Fund Award; Excellence in Art

Education Award/Scholarship;

and TJX Companies Scholarship.

I left India when I was six years old. My family moved here to give me a life beyond what was possible for a woman in India. I have now grown up in two distinct cultures, both playing an equal role in my life, yet I constantly wonder about what I left behind. The question is the recurring theme in my work: I create photographs that are expressions of the life that might have been. The deeper I thought the more I questioned the role of an Indian woman.

The role of a woman in the Indian culture has become a big question in my mind as I reflect back on my grandmother's stories of her youth. They have led me to question and wonder about my own lifestyle as an Indian/American woman: "Who I would be if I were back in India at this age?" Such visualization became the subject of this series of photographs. I used clothing, jewelry, facial expressions, and gesture in order to explore one day in the life of a woman in India.

Sejal Patel

RAM RAHMAN

Lives in New York, N.Y. and New Delhi, India
MFA Yale University, New Haven, CT
BS Massachusetts Institute of Technology,
Cambridge, MA



New York, 1999
silver gelatin print

Select Exhibitions Gallery 678, New York, N.Y.; Gallery Chemould, Bombay, India; Shridharani Gallery, New Delhi, India; Japan Foundation, Tokyo; MIT, Cambridge, MA; Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham, England; Impressions Gallery, New York, N.Y.; Admit One Gallery, New York, N.Y.; Panopticon Gallery, Boston, MA; University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland; Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield, England; and the Photographers' Gallery, London, England.

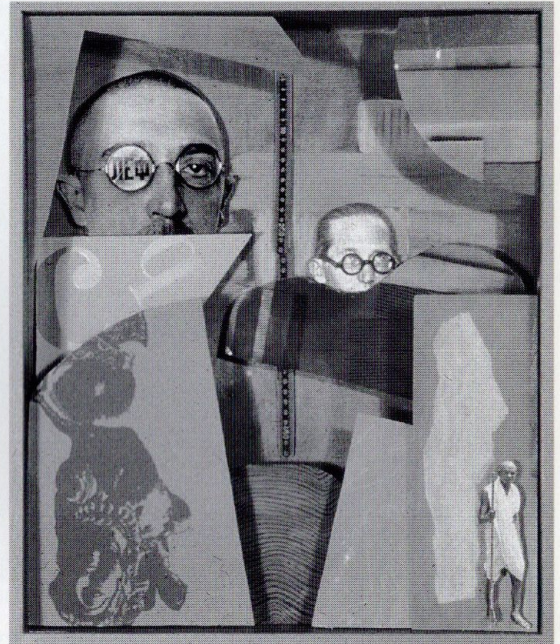
Honors Rahman is a lecturer in institutions and universities around the world, both on his work and on the work of the Sadfar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT), which was formed in 1989, in the name of the theater activist Sadfar Hashmi after his brutal, politically motivated, murder. As a leading member of this political artists collective in New Delhi, Rahman helped conceive, design and curate several landmark exhibitions.

Working in a documentary style, I juxtapose images into complex grids, creating elusive visual narratives. Many stories are woven into my photographic assemblages. The settings are multi-dimensional, involving politics, economics, religion, and culture. Dividing my time between New Delhi and New York, I am distanced enough from India to be impelled towards a rediscovery of it, and close enough to know what is real and mere exotica.

Ram Rahman

SUKANYA RAHMAN

Lives in Orr's Island, ME
Ecole National Des Beaux Arts,
Paris, France
College of Art, New Delhi, India
Dance Studies with
Martha Graham School, New York, N.Y.



Detail of installation:
Homespun, 2001
mixed-media

Select Exhibitions Art in General, New York, N.Y.; Hunter College, New York, N.Y.; Gallery 678, New York, N.Y.; Theater Project Gallery, Brunswick, ME; Nancy Margolis, New York, N.Y.; Macey Gallery, Columbia University, New York, N.Y.; and Centre Culturel de Neuilly, Paris, France.

Honors John Anson Kitteredge Educational Trust Grant; NEA, Maine Humanities Council; French Government Scholarship; and NEA Dance Fellowships.

In view of the city of Lowell's ties to the textile industry and the setting of the Brush Gallery in an old mill, I thought I might, as a jumping off point, draw on Mahatma Gandhi's use of textile as a weapon to bring down an empire. Much in the spirit of the Boston Tea Party, his movement to boycott British cotton in favor of home-spun Khadi cloth was inspired by Henry David Thoreau, whose writings confirmed and reinforced Gandhi's own concept of civil disobedience.

Sukanya Rahman

KANISHKA RAJA

Lives in Jamaica Plain, MA

MFA Southern Methodist University,
Dallas, TX

BA Hampshire College, Amherst, MA



Detail of *Pearl*, 2000
oil on canvas

Select Exhibitions Brandeis University, Waltham, MA; Green Street Gallery, Boston, MA; Laguna Gloria Museum, Austin, TX; University of Dallas, Irving, TX; Galerie 21, Calcutta, India; SARD, New York, N.Y.; Center for Contemporary Arts, Calcutta, India; and GTE International Headquarters, Las Colinas, TX.

Honors Skowhegan Fellowship; Meadows Fellowship, SMU, Dallas, TX; International Scholarship, Hampshire College, Amherst, MA.

The images arrive from various sources: memory, photographs, chance remarks, street graphics, comic books, rock n'roll. Some of these elements have lived alongside each other before, inadvertently or otherwise. Many have not.

The dense layering of images allude to spaces that are psychological and physical, public and private, in ways that acknowledge their polyglot cultural ancestry. I am interested in exploring the notions of place that inform the formation of a personal and communal identity.

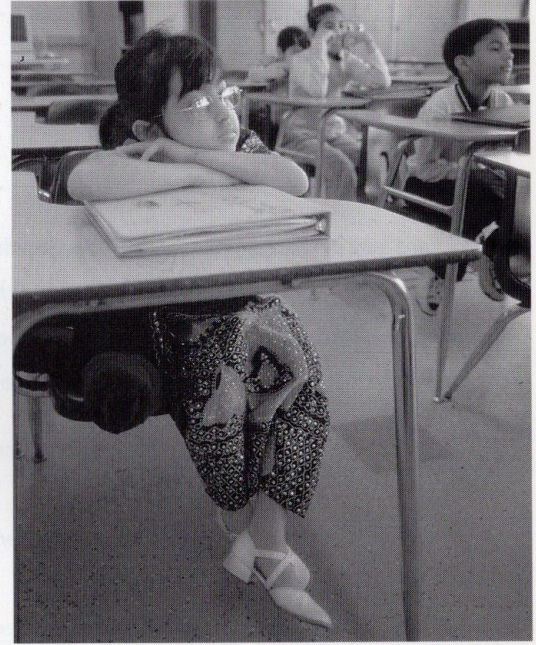
There are times when the images have to be cut up or broken down for them to make sense. Other times, leaving them alone works better. Either way there is rarely a linear narrative informing them. Nothing like a dumb story to ruin a perfectly good picture.

The success or failure of these juxtapositions can be fleeting. It is an odd sort of privilege to be living in many places at once.

Kanishka Raja

DAVID WELLS

Lives in Providence, RI
BA Pitzer College, Claremont, CA
Freelance editorial photographer
affiliated with Matrix International,
New York, N.Y.



Detail of Lowell's *Asian Indian
Community*, 2000
video

Select Exhibitions Balch
Institute for Ethnic Studies,
Philadelphia, PA; Lowenherez
Gallery, New York, N.Y.; Brown
University, Providence, RI;
Museum of Anthropology and
Archeology, Philadelphia, PA;
University of California at
Berkeley; Carpenter Center,
Harvard University, Cambridge,
MA; University of Pennsylvania;
National Center for Photography,
Bombay, India; NAFOTO, Sao
Paulo, Brazil; Museum of the
Jewish Diaspora, Tel Aviv, Israel;
and Blue Sky: Oregon Center
for the Photographic Arts,
Portland, OR.

Honors Fulbright Fellowship to
India; MacArthur Foundation
Fellowship; Visual Arts
Fellowship, Pennsylvania Arts
Council; and Nikon/National
Press Photographers'
Association Documentary
Sabbatical Grant.

I have a special relationship with this community because of my marriage to a South Asian woman, which signals my acceptance of them. One in every five humans is South Asian. By national identity they are Indians, Pakistanis, Sri-Lankans, and Bangladeshis. By religion they are Hindus, Moslems, Sikhs, Christians, and Buddhists. And, by choice, they are one of the fastest growing immigrant groups in America. According to demographers, by the middle of this century non-Hispanic whites, currently the majority in America, will become the minority. In order for us to better appreciate multicultural America, we need to understand the struggles and accomplishments of the Newest Americans. My work gives faces to these anonymous statistics, telling the story of the new immigrants as a metaphor for the experience of all the immigrants who helped build America.

David Wells

Checklist of the Exhibition

All works are lent by
the artist unless
Otherwise indicated.
Dimensions are in
inches; height precedes
width precedes depth.

Siona Benjamin

All works gouache and
gold leaf on paper
unless otherwise noted

Finding Home Series #29, 1998

16 x 22

Finding Home Series #30, 1998

18 x 24

Finding Home Series # 27, 1998

18 x 24

Finding Home Series # 35

(Khamashi), 2000

20.5 x 14.5

Finding Home Series # 28, 1998

18 x 24

gouache on paper

Ambreen Butt

All works watercolor and gouache
on handmade paper; 18 x 14; 1993

Lent by the artist;

Courtesy Bernard Toale Gallery,
Boston, MA

Cognition Series # 1

Cognition Series # 2

Cognition Series # 3

Cognition Series # 4

Sabina Zena Haque

Come Home, 2001

installation: mixed media

50 x 60

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew

All works from the *Bollywood*
Satirized Series

Dowry Violence, 2000

Luminage digital print

60 x 36

What Will People Think ?, 1999

HP digital print

60 x 36

Kala Patti, 2000

Luminage digital print

36 x 80

His Fate!, 1998

HP digital print

36 x 60

Sejal Patel

All works silver gelatin prints from

If I were back in India, who would I be ?

Series; 1998

16 x 20 unless otherwise indicated

Hand Sewing

Getting Water

Cleaning Rice

Smelling Yogurt

Preparing Roties

20 x 16

Ram Rahman

All works silver gelatin prints;
15 x 19 unless otherwise indicated
Lent by the artist;
Courtesy Admit One Gallery,
New York, N.Y.

Calcutta, 2000

New York, 1999

Jaipur, 1997

Bhutan, 1983

Jodhpur, 1992

Priti Paul, Delhi, 1997

9 x 13

Madhuker, Ayodhya, 1993

Ayodhya, 1993

Calcutta, 2000

New Delhi, 1988

18 x 17

New Delhi, 1989

Lucknow, 2000

Cochin, 1987

Delhi, 1993

32 x 40

Delhi, 1994

32 x 40

Sukanya Rahman

Homespun, 2001
installation: mixed media
90 x 88 x 12

Kanishka Raja

Pearl, 2000

oil on canvas

80 x 56

Teenage Dreams English Adult, 2001

oil on canvas

76 x 39

David Wells

Asian Indian Life in Lowell, 2000

video

