

Home  
&  
the World

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## Foreword

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Rajiv J Chaudhri  
Chairman

**T**he India Center of Art & Culture (ICAC) is proud to host its inaugural exhibition, *Home and the World*.

The meaning of home, the nature of an individual's relationship to his or her homeland, and the future of culture in an age when it can no longer be identified as the essential expression of nationhood — these are issues of lively debate among South Asians today. This is because South Asia is home to old civilizations and young nations. These old civilizations are not only defined by religion, but also by language and regional affiliation. Thus a clash is inevitable between the narrow identity offered by old ethnic cultures on the one hand, and the requirements of modern nation building on the other.

To this have been added the powerful forces of technology, globalization, and mass media. These developments have offered South Asia opportunities for economic growth, but they have also exposed its peoples to the seductions of American consumer culture and the irresistible tendency towards conformity unleashed by it. Non-resident South Asians have compounded the challenging impact of these forces. Starting in the 1950s, and gathering steam in the 1970s, significant numbers of South Asians have migrated to Europe and the United States. These people carry back to their communities new ideas about life, work, family, social relationships, and civil society. As a result, personal, national, and cultural identity have become issues for reflection, debate, political contest, and even violent conflict.

The works of the six artists featured in *Home and the World* examine the complex interaction between western and eastern cultures, as well as the conflicts that arise as ancient societies seek to modernize and find their own identity in an age of mass communication and globalization.

Karin Miller-Lewis has conceived and organized this exhibition. A writer, teacher, and independent curator of contemporary Indian art, Ms. Miller-Lewis brings a range of experiences to ICAC that mirror the multiple goals of the institution itself. She began to develop *Home and the World* in 1998 while working in India on an exhibition for the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. But her interest in the modern and contemporary art of the Indian sub-continent took root twelve years earlier when she was teaching in New Delhi. In addition to being wonderful to work with, I have been impressed by, and have gained immensely in my own understanding from the sensitive manner in which she weaves her knowledge and experience of the sub-continent into her analysis of art.

The opening of ICAC would not have been possible without the support and commitment of many others as well. Thomas Keehn, a member of ICAC's Board of Directors with many

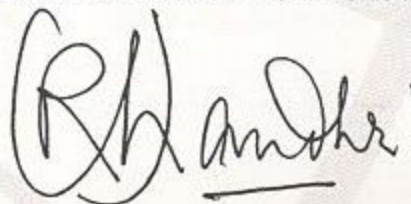
years of experience leading World Education, Boston, has offered invaluable guidance as we establish the Center. His love for and knowledge of modern Indian culture, so evident in his book of memoirs, *India Ink*, is infectious. Arun Vadehra of the Vadehra Art Gallery, Delhi, Virendra Kumar of the Kumar Gallery, Delhi, and Sangita Jindal, publisher of *Art India*, all Directors, have offered their experience as central participants in India's art community. Mukesh Parekh, Managing Director at Goldman, Sachs & Co., has recently joined the Board. He has already taken a central role in broadening the funding of ICAC. Sage Wimer Coombe Architects, helped convert our vision into reality. Heidi Breiland, our administrator, has risen magnificently to every challenge of organization building, and has positioned us extremely well for our future growth. The law firm of Cleary, Gottlieb, Steen and Hamilton has graciously offered to work pro bono for ICAC. Nutan Shrivastava has coordinated our activities in India and has been essential in building ICAC's profile there.

Ms. Miller-Lewis and I would also like to express our gratitude for the support and cooperation we have received to make this exhibition possible. Above all, we are indebted to the artists for the intellectual rigor, aesthetic accomplishments, and emotional power of their projects. Their dealers and collectors have been remarkably generous as well. Bernard Toale and Julien Tomaselli of the Bernard Toale Gallery in Boston conducted with aplomb the delicate diplomacy of convincing Ms. Butt's devoted collectors to lend her work. In addition to Geetha Mehra of the Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai, we would like to offer our profound thanks to Shireen Gandhi, Director of the Gallery Chemould, Mumbai. Aided by Ram Rahman, Kamala Kapoor, and the Hussain family, her quick and adroit efforts made it possible to reassemble Rumanna Hussain's installation. With his considerable technical know-how and enthusiasm for contemporary South Asian art, Rahul Bhushan has provided an ongoing forum for discussion among the exhibition's participating artists on his website [Kaliyug.com](http://Kaliyug.com). We want to thank Mohammed Henry, our multi-talented foreman, for the construction of vital elements of the exhibition and the Center itself. Peter Perez, the highly skilled framer, has made a valuable contribution to our presentation. Arani and Mita Bose, and Steve and Shari Pacia, of Bose-Pacia Modern, the first gallery in New York to focus on South Asian art, and Sundaram Tagore of Dialectica Gallery, New York, have gone out of their way to be helpful. Paris Wald, producer for CNN, volunteered countless hours late into the night to provide us exceptional editorial guidance. Finally, for this publication we want to acknowledge the creative efforts and enthusiasm of its designer, Kimberly Breiland, Director of 22Graphics, New York.

Above all, I would like to thank my mother and late father for their inspiration and love.

Encouraging critical reflection and mutual understanding among South Asians and the broader American public have been of fundamental importance to me in the founding of the **India Center of Art & Culture**. If, with this first exhibition, we complete our first steps towards fostering such dialogue, it will be largely due to you, our new audience. For that involvement and interest we are profoundly grateful.

**L**et the dialogue begin!



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## Home and the World

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Karin Miller-Lewis  
Curator

In his 1917 novel, The Home and the World, the Bengali Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore offered a prescient analysis of the crisis India faced in the early days of its struggle for independence. He challenged the position, held by Indian nationalists and British imperial administrators alike, that East and West represented binary realms of thought and experience. After colonialism, he countered, home and the world were intertwined.

Tagore identified what remains a formative challenge for the peoples of South Asia. Today, the rise of technology, the global economy, and mass movement of populations from the subcontinent have brought South Asians in ever closer, and more varied contact with the world beyond its borders. This interaction has presented opportunities for social, economic, and intellectual growth, but it has also put pressure on the region's nations and has caused significant loss. Increased traffic across cultural and political borders has transformed and eroded traditions; mobility has begotten a sense of displacement.

This inaugural exhibition of the India Center of Art & Culture presents recent work by six artists who examine the impact of globalization and migration on personal,

national and cultural identity. Three of the artists — Kabir Mohanty, born in Peshawar, Pakistan, Rummana Hussain, born in Bangalore, Karnataka, and Surendran Nair, from Onakkoor, Kerala — have spent their professional lives in India. Three — Ambreen Butt, from Lahore, Pakistan, Allan deSouza, born in Nairobi, Kenya, and Bari Kumar of Vakadu, Andhra Pradesh — now reside in the United States. Their works of painting, photography, installation, and video commonly embody and address the difficult legacies of colonialism, even as they imagine what might be the productive results of intercultural encounters. But they also present an array of distinct perspectives on these issues, shaped by the different challenges the artists confront at home and in the world.

### Identity at the Crossroads

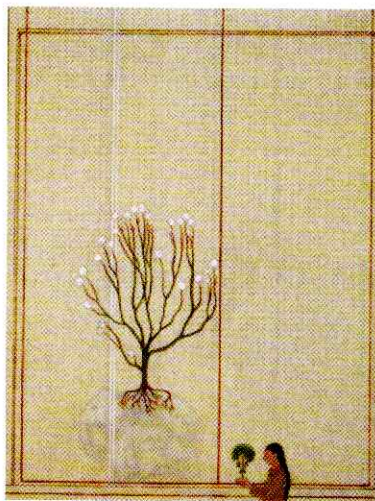
Ambreen Butt & Kabir Mohanty

Home. The word signifies both a place of origin and a place of return, the starting point and final resting place of an object in motion. Both Ambreen Butt and Kabir Mohanty invoke the word's divergent connotations in their explorations of identity.

Ambreen Butt earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts at Lahore's National College of Art, but

left Pakistan for Boston, Massachusetts, in 1994 to pursue further professional training. She examines the divided self that develops with bicultural experience. Kabir Mohanty, in contrast, returned to India after studying film and video at the University of Iowa. His roots in the dynamic and fragmented colonial city of Calcutta inform his portrait of home and self as a composite of multiple images, sounds, and artistic traditions.

Ambreen Butt's 1999 series of paintings, *Bed of My Own Making*, evokes the delicate work of a diplomat urging two contestant cultures to confront differences and build upon common ground. On layered sheets of transparent mylar, she merges the floral arabesques of the Indo-Persian miniature tradition with a linear abstraction reminiscent of the work of Agnes Martin. Iconic forms loosed from their original and determinative contexts wander this gorgeous no man's land. Self-portraits as stock female figures and a ceremonial elephant carry trees with tender shoots made from torn bits of the artist's Urdu-language diary. A transplant not yet taken bares its roots. These images convey a sense of yearning for new horizons.



Ambreen Butt

*Untitled*, 1999, watercolor, gouache, thread on mylar and paper, 18" x 15"

From the series

*Bed of My Own Making*

At the same time, the compositions express the artist's doubts. In her own words, her aim is not liberation from, but a full comprehension of the "risks involved" in both "rejecting conventional social roles and challenging stereotypes [American] culture associates with women in Islam; achieving independence and yet guarding the spirit of time-honored traditions." One particularly poignant and wry image cautions that her negotiations might prove self-defeating. She presents herself standing on the back of a luminous fish, its bleeding mouth ensnared in a loop of her hair. The figure also poses a quiet and firm challenge to American culture's faith in self-determination. Refusing to abandon the constraints of Mughal art's conventions, she maintains her search for selfhood among traditions that supersede the individual.

In his 28-minute video of 1996, *Home*, Kabir Mohanty never leaves the two rooms of a house he shares with his wife in Calcutta. The self that takes shape within it suggests that the world is always with him. Transfiguring images and a carefully tuned score of ambient sounds portray home as a permeable and receptive place, a place of

intimacies and surprises. It is open to the violet light of a changing evening sky, the bark of a river fish-vendor on the street. A lingering close-up of the crevices and grains of pigment on his wife's face conveys deep tenderness and uncovers the transcendent beauty of a mundane sight.

Mohanty says his video aims to "open up what is unknown to me through images and sounds." His improvisational taping methods (related to principles of Hindustani music) make the perception of his home a process of discovering it. As its visual and audio sequences elaborate on each other, and the video reveals the artist's developing perspective, *Home* explores how a self takes shape in relation to a place, in the creative process of perceiving.

Viewers familiar with video art will recognize Mohanty's debt to Bill Viola's pioneering explorations of relational consciousness. The American video artist was himself interested in, and influenced by



Kabir Mohanty

*Home*, 1996, video, 28 minutes

Image captured from

*Home*

classical Indian philosophy and music. But Mohanty also modifies Viola's project. Viola's meditation on the interrelationship of all things in his 1986 video *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* has a haunting, spiritual quality. Mohanty, in contrast, focuses on the social and ethical dimensions of connectedness. He emphasizes his pleasure and his purpose in integrating contemporary Western art, ancient Indian artistic practices, and modern technology. "I am against aloneness," he has said, "[I am] talking to [my] colleagues, talking to [my] soil." Towards the beginning and at the very end of the video, a quavering female voice underscores this effort to build community with her narration of two stories in which strangers establish a human connection in the otherwise alienating spaces of two distant cities, Mumbai and Atlanta. Embedded almost nonchalantly in *Home's* variegated visual and aural texture, these episodes welcome the world into, and extend the boundaries of home and the self.

Mohanty has said that he titled the work (only after making it) bearing in mind the meaning of "home" found in geometry: where the vertical and horizontal axes meet. In the video, home and the self are portrayed as such points of intersection, where divergent traditions may be brought together, and a capacity to extend oneself comes into being.

## Belonging & Nationalism

Allan deSouza & Rummana Hussain

National identity is a complex issue for Allan deSouza, a second generation immigrant born in Kenya to Goan parents, raised in Great Britain, and now residing in Los Angeles. No single country claims him. In addition, the uses and vulnerabilities of "Indianness" have made him wary of the theme. As a participant in the British Black Arts Movement, deSouza realized that championing a fixed ethnic or national identity in opposition to mainstream culture failed to empower minority individuals and communities because the strategy left old colonialist ways of thinking and acting intact.

The resurgence of communal violence and Hindu nationalism's successful bid for power in India over the last two decades has made national identity equally conflicted terrain for Rummana Hussain. Hussain was born shortly after independence. Living and working in India's cosmopolitan city of Mumbai until her death in 1999, she witnessed the collapse of Jawarhalal Nehru's Congress party and the violent challenge that Hindu nationalism mounted to his vision of a secular and pluralist society. When, in 1992, an organized Hindu mob destroyed the 16th Century Babri Mosque (said to have been built on the Hindu god Ram's birthplace in Ayodhya), and subsequent riots killed

1000 Muslims, Hussain was one of many Indians who felt her society and her place in it fundamentally threatened.

Allan deSouza and Rummana Hussain have come, paradoxically, to embrace their given status as outsiders. In their explorations of the dangers of nationalism, they redefine the marginalized position as one from which to critique and reform their worlds.

At first glance, Allan deSouza's 1999 series of C-prints, *Terrain*, seem to depict eerie versions of the much-mythologized heartlands of Ireland and the United States. Barren, sepia-toned hills giving on to the sea, and pink hillocks dotted with stones and defiant tufts of grass invoke the 19th Century pictorial landscape traditions that sought a glimpse of a nation's soul in its soil.

But deSouza turns a critical eye on these modes of representation. Like the photographers James Casabere and Gregory Crewdson, he creates one falsehood in order to expose another. On close inspection, the landscapes reveal themselves to be models. Made from his own earwax, eyelashes and finger nail clippings, as well as common household debris, the photographs only mimic nationalism's romance of the land. His little human offerings spoof ideology's encouragement of self-sacrifice in the name of self-love.

Ultimately, deSouza's visual jokes are more anguished and more foreboding than

satiric. Even as the artist invokes his own longing for homeland in the precarious, obsessive work of cutting and assembling his tiny hairs, he advises himself and his viewers against nostalgia. Our readiness to see romantic landscapes in these pictures proves that we cannot wholly liberate our imaginations and emotions from the societal forces, including technology and ideology, that precede and shape us. DeSouza's evacuated fantasies, as if haunted by the abuses of nationalism that mark our era, urge us to be alert, to protect the visceral and vulnerable desire for homeland from manipulation.

There is a fascinating and perhaps logical relationship between deSouza's experience of being twice removed from his homeland, the abstraction of his longing, and the aims of his work. He has described *Terrain* as an effort to "externalize those emotions of longing to undo their hold [and] view them from a distance." The distinct, or



Allan deSouza  
*Terrain #8*, 1995, c-print, 12" x 18"  
From the series  
*Terrain*

perhaps complementary, goals of Rummana Hussain's *Home/Nation* demonstrate an equally firm basis in her own circumstances. Fiercely devoted to a fractured society that threatens to deny her membership, Hussain's installation explores ways to restore a shattered hope for — if not a lost reality of — wholeness.

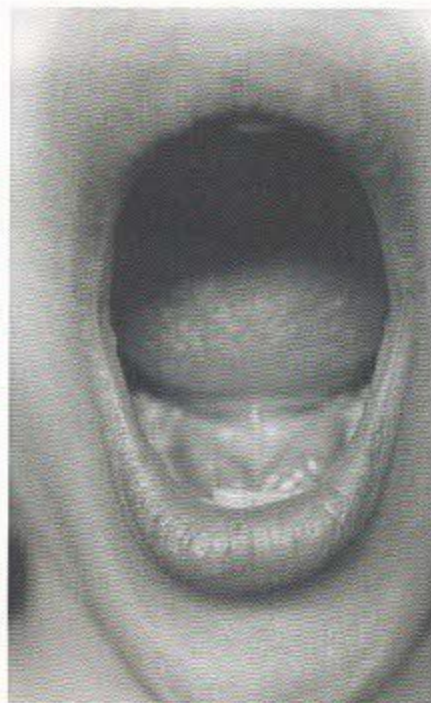
*Home/Nation* presents an archive of fragments. Photographs, textual and physical evidence document the state of decay of India's heterogeneous cultural traditions as well as the precariousness of its modern democratic and egalitarian ideals. A large photo mounted on rough board presents the decrepit but proud 17th Century mosques, temples, and homes that stand together along the Saryu River in Ayodhya. A picture of a local mosque's archway decorated with scenes from the Hindu myth of Krishna's play among the cowherdesses relate to a sequence of photos including gaping mouths and halved papayas. They make a frieze of sensuousness and violation that joins the lack of social cohesion along ethnic and religious lines to the stratification of society by gender documented elsewhere in the installation. On one wall, multiple contact sheets underscore the monotonous rhythms of thin hands preparing Indian flat breads or washing pots. They accompany a harrowing and unadorned report on the death by AIDS of a female servant from the artist's household.



Hussain's *Home/Nation* borrows the interventionist strategies of installations by Hans Haacke, Christian Boltanski, and Michael Schmidt. She, too, upsets expectations that the artwork remain a contained aesthetic object in order to protest a situation too threatening and too unresolved to be merely commemorated.

But Hussain also draws on models closer to home that reach beyond analysis and resistance to a logic of love and restoration. The mournful tone of the historical ruins, the disparate but hardly arbitrary collection of memorial elements recalls a shrine. (A photograph of a Sufi tomb is, in fact, the centerpiece in the row of hands at work mentioned above). Just as the holy remains of a saint, gathered together with those of his followers, give the individual a place in a spiritual order, personal effects dispersed within the installation explore the way the private realm is always intersected and subsumed by the public sphere. Grimy, prosaic relics of home life sit on a shelf for all to see. Happy photos of the artist and her daughter are sealed in plastic files along with documentation of the oppression of women. These items express the artist's identification with history's victims — as a woman, as a Muslim, and as an Indian tenaciously holding on to a faith in secular society. They also acknowledge her own privileged place in an inequitable system.

If *Home/Nation* exposes Indian society's threatening fissures, the installation never collapses into chaos or despair. Allusive formal relationships and emotional associations link its many parts. It may have been Hussain's hope that the viewer's act of making connections among them would comprise the first, tenuous steps toward repairing the fragmented culture.



Rummana Hussain  
*Home/Nation*, 1996, 15" x 10"  
Photo from installation

## Culture's Mixed Signals

Bari Kumar & Surendran Nair

In an optimistic mood, buffeted by economic expansion over the last decade, many have welcomed the cultural fusion that has accompanied globalization. Its enthusiasts, echoing a modern urban tradition, hail the meeting of different cultures as a catalyst for creativity.

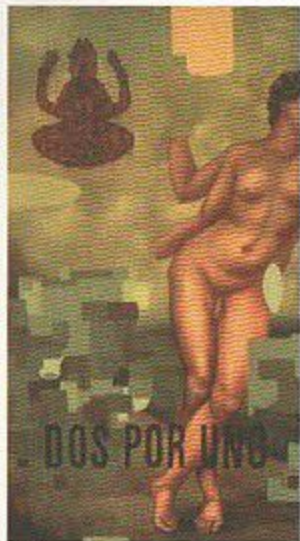
Left and right have also criticized it; both are wary that the global market values cultural diversity only as a means to grease new mechanisms of domination and co-option. Hindu nationalism's drive to define national culture more exclusively can be seen as one defensive response to this analysis. From within a partisan camp, reasserting firm parameters of cultural identity is an act of resistance.

The uncertain prognosis for culture in this rich and conflicted historical moment is the concern of two painters of South Indian origin, Los Angeles-based Bari Kumar, originally from the village of Vakadu in Andhra Pradesh, and the Kerala-born artist Surendran Nair, who now lives and works in Vadodara (formerly Baroda), Gujarat. Their paintings present alter-

natives to trumpeting or rejecting cultural fusion.

At his most pessimistic, Bari Kumar warns that the effort to erase cultural boundaries threatens cultural coherence and puts communication at risk. In his 1998 canvas, *Useless*, the painter creates symbols that merge references from Eastern and Western cultures. The conjunction only threatens to nullify each original meaning. A pair of crossed cleavers suggests a mutilated *swastika*, symbol of well-being. A dark, maimed, and multi-armed man is suspended indefinitely between the idealized human form of Indian art and the mortified flesh of Christian art.

*Useless* may embody Kumar's experiences as an immigrant in an American culture quick to take from, and slow to empower its newcomers. (A self-portrait of 2000, *NowHere*, is a darker version of Ambreen Butt's exploration of living betwixt and between cultures. Seen from behind, his skull bifurcated by a knife, the artist faces an empty space that mocks the painting's symmetrical order and careful one-point perspective.) But the canvas also reminds us that the contemporary, personal experience of inefficacy and helplessness is a product of history. Kumar uses classical European painting techniques and the awkward figure types of colonial Christian art. They associate the current rush to transcend cultural dif-



Bari Kumar

*Dos Por Uno*, 2000,  
oil on linen, 86" x 50"

ferences to the age of European expansion. *Useless* may thereby hint that what offers itself today as cultural exchange may be colonialism in disguise.

By contrast, the painter adopts his host culture's habits of appropriation to exuberant effect in *Dos Por Uno*. The painting's vision of cultural syncretism poses an alternative to exclusion and assimilation. The canvas takes its title from a sign for a swap meet the artist saw in a Mexican immigrant neighborhood of Los Angeles. It combines a muscular Northern Renaissance beauty with Shiva Ardhanarishvara, the god as simultaneously male and female, and a figure for the divine's all-encompassing and ambivalent essence.

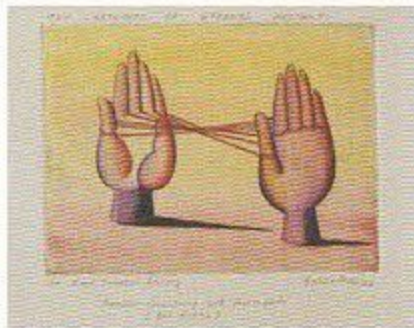
Kumar's montage harks back to Surrealism's efforts to shatter Europe's rationalist delusions; its startling and illogical images draw on the exotic, the unconscious and the accidental. While Kumar also aims to disrupt social norms, a shared aesthetic of androgyny, not shocking incongruity is the basis of his mutant in *Dos Por Uno*. As a result, he replaces Surrealism's fantasies of estrangement with a figure of belonging. According to the artist, the comically baroque form may herald a new heaven, if not a new earth: "People will no longer need to communicate if we all evolve into hermaphrodites," he has joked.

Surendran Nair created *The Labyrinth of*

*Eternal Delight* in the aftermath of the Hindu right's frighteningly effective use of cultural icons to incite violence. The work appeals to the mutability and ambivalence of a symbol's meaning to oppose nationalist and orientalist efforts to identify — and thus petrify — an essential Indian culture.

Summoning the legends of Ariadne and Shehrazade (pictured in one image weaving a cat's cradle), *Labyrinth* lays a trap that is also a means of escape. The 35 hand-colored etchings seem to be a reassembled encyclopedia of mystical signs, a contemporary version of Humanist labors to cull a unity from different mythological systems. The compositional clarity, rich tones, and allegorical implications of the images seduce viewers with the familiar properties of icons.

But these images function as anti-icons whose complexities resist any attempt to assign them a singular meaning. Nair reclaims the cosmogonic figures of the Hindu pantheon to emphasize their paradoxical



Surendran Nair  
*Ariadne Conversing with Shehrazade (For Rekha)*,  
1997, hand-colored etching  
From the series  
*The Labyrinth of Eternal Delight*

natures. Prajapati generates the world through his dismemberment; Brahma and Vishnu perform the intentional act of creation in their sleep. Weird couplings of Greek and Indian figures satirize the totalities they seem to promote. "Centaur Play", for example, conjoins a man in a *lungi* and a horse. With a surrealist's pleasure in subversion, Nair turns the modern West's fascination for the Other into a sexual innuendo. A picture of an elephant in a balloon invokes the Kerala proverb that sensibly advises "even if an elephant loses its weight, you can't get it into a bladder." Proving the saying false with the provocative powers of imagination, the artist gently mocks the desire for a system with the answers.

Nair has said that *The Labyrinth of Eternal Delight* aims "to pursue possibilities of associations." His forms revive the dynamic interplay of connotations within and between symbols that produces new meanings and maintains cultural vitality. Their ambiguities demonstrate his commitment to rescuing the image from both propagandist misuse, and the simplifications of some Grand Unifying Theory. Moreover, Nair's modification of the biblical reference in his title indicates that his goal is not liberation from historical conflicts. He invites us to engage the contradictions — the pleasures and the difficulties — inherent in the mythical labyrinth rather than seek the release of the pre-historical paradise.

It is this kind of challenging work that has brought South Asian artists to the attention of the international art world during the 1990's. To understand and appreciate their contributions is to acknowledge the ways they redefine the fundamental challenges of our moment: being rooted in multiple and contradictory arenas; finding home already occupied, its contents rearranged; confronting persistent, and in the subcontinent, violent attempts to make an essential and exclusive unity out of a multifarious culture. To address these challenges, this group of artists have embraced the encounter between East and West. They take up the West's perennial invitation to greater individual liberty and progressive change, and borrow critical strategies to address local problems. In the process, they re-orient those practices and their goals. Refusing exclusion and polarization, they offer visions of reclamation and reunion.