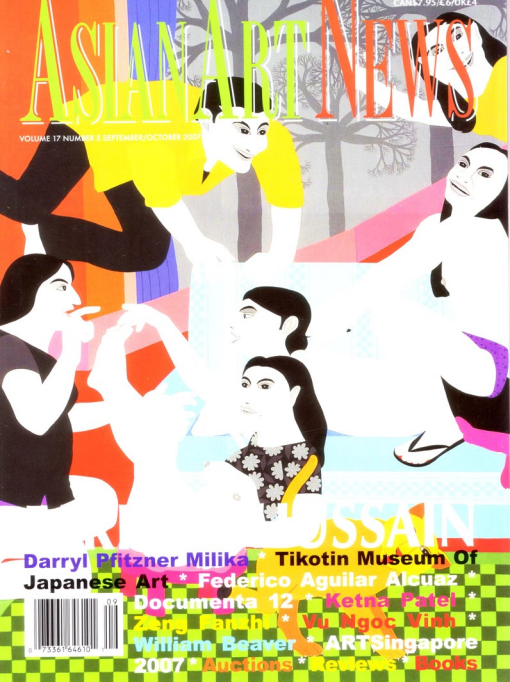


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ASSAIN

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The Indian diaspora over the past 50 years has added greatly to the intellectual and artistic wealth of the world. One has only to look at the accomplishments of people such as conductor Zubin Mehta, novelist V.S. Naipaul, film director M. Night Shyamalan, New York gallery director Sundaram Tagore, and artists such as Solhan Qadri and Anish Kapoor to understand the depth of their contributions and the influence that they have had in their respective fields.

The inexorable rise to prominence of Indian artists on the international stage is no accident and is on par with Chinese artists whose influence has startled the world during the past decade. In the past, most Indian artists who wanted to work or study abroad went primarily to the United States, Britain, or continental Europe. With the dramatic developments in the Indian economy and education, during the past few years, however, many Indian artists have remained at home. At the same time, as the Asia-Pacific region has developed on all fronts, many Indian artists have settled to work in other parts of the region, adding significantly to the influence of the Indian diaspora's influence, as well as drawing artistic inspiration from their new 'homes.'

This is the reality for the British-Indian artist Ketra Jitendra Patel. Patel, who was born in Uganda in 1968, has lived and worked in Singapore for 15 years, a period of important transitions for her, moving as she has from architecture in London and Baltimore to Singapore and painting, printmaking, and gloriously colored three-dimensional functional objects that culminated recently in her dramatic *Asia Pop* series, which contains strong social messages.

The *Asia Pop* series features some 80 prints and paintings, was, as she says, "conceived as a versatile visual vocabulary that can be configured for a variety of applications. Our world and its communication processes



Ketra Patel, *Pranayama*, 1997, oil on canvas, 145 x 105 cm. Private Collection.

have changed in so many fundamental ways. Advertising and mass media, lifestyle and fashion have interrupted people's perceptions of themselves. People seem to crave to be someone that they are told to be. I feel that people are increasingly



Ketra Patel, *Erosion*, 1997, oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm. Private Collection.

disconnected from their immediate environments as well as being alienated from themselves. The result is not only individual insecurity but also a very insecure society. So I wanted to find a way in which the above aspects could overlap to produce a range of artworks or applications that would be a utilitarian extension of identity.

"But the objective of the *Asian Pop* series is also to celebrate popular Asian street culture. We are in danger of erasing our folk stories, wisdom, crafts, architecture, working methodologies, and so on in favor of breeze-block, instant gratification, bubble-gum lifestyles that are relentlessly pushed down our throats one way or other. I want to give a voice to those who are becoming increasingly voiceless, who are marginalized and almost invisible."

In the mid-1990s, Patel felt she "was more of a voyeur than a participant," and she was "ill-equipped to explore myself with my limited experiences." She became disillusioned with the corporate environment where she felt invisible. "I felt compelled to find out who I really was and what my opinions were outside my educated conditioning. But I did not have the confidence to articulate my way out of it," says Patel. "I needed to see more and to question more. On a very personal level I wanted to move my thinking from the left side of my brain to the more creative and emotional right side."

Patel's art, which has always contained a consistently strong narrative of time and place, from Singapore to India, from the countryside to the city, by the late 1990s, had taken on a new complexity. Her early narrative moved from deeply personal responses to the world as in works such as *The Honey Seller* (1997), an exploration of the seedy side of Indian streets in Rajasthan (the honey seller is really a pimp); *Skeleton Woman* (1997) is "really a self portrait that shows how temporary and fragile life is," and *Pranayama* (1997) "was more of a metaphysical explo-

ration into a space where gender and time cease to exist."

As Patel moved from one narrative within her art to another, a brighter, bolder, and more complex view of the world began to appear and it was one that was in tune with exploring quotidian life. "I feel that to understand where society is one has to scrutinize what one takes for granted," says Patel. "The streets people live in the shops they visit, their traditions, their songs, the novels they read, their relatives, and so on. I think that my work is a heightened awareness of popular culture; the culture of the ordinary. To understand our society, and its social, political, and emotional underbelly, street culture is one of the most compelling landscapes to examine."

Patel's art has been informed by wide range of influences, from architecture like abode housing in Mali to the Arab *abwa* and Arabic calligraphy; from Indonesian batik to Bollywood movies and old Indian music and songs; from Indian folk art and African woodcuts to Punjabi truck art and the art of Arpana Kaur (b.1954), Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), and Frida Kahlo (1910–1954), an influence that is discernible in some of Patel's figurative art. But there is also a hint of the surreal in some of her art, an early example of which is *Erosion* (1997), where the world appears to be melting, and in the dynamic line and color of *Years of Milk* (2002) where cultures collide. Yet, what is immediately striking about Patel's art is the boldness of her colors, drawn as she says from a "palette that is evident in nature, food, spices, antique jewelry, the Masai with their strong red and earth colors. Colors that have a lot of life force." But color for Patel is not something that should remain consistent but should change depending on the specific "story" that she is telling. "When I did a series on Cuba, the palette reflected the military khakis, communist red, and South American motifs. My gaudy colors pay homage to everything from karaoke bars to pink Thai tissue boxes and yellow Mumbai taxis, from lime green Peranakan shop-houses to powder blue Malay house shutters and Buddhist monks' orange robes. The Western world calls it kitsch."

Whatever one might



Ketna Patel, *Tears of Milk*, 2002, mixed media on canvas, 200 x 200 cm.

think about kitsch, it has played an important role in changing attitudes towards art since the days of Marcel Duchamp (wasn't Pop art just such a thing once, before it gained respectability among critics and a

new generation of collectors?) Patel, like many of the early Pop artists, begins her work on the street, "walking around, talking to people, and taking pictures. There is a continuous participation in 'live' street cultures, and the information that I am consciously and unconsciously absorbing, from colors to textures, and from patterns to how utensils are used. I always have sketchbooks and take lots of notes, draw, collect bits from newspapers, menus, train tickets, and so on. All these go back to the studio, waiting for the time when I will assemble them, which, with resurrected memories and the perspective of time, help lend my narrative an objective 'voice.' In this way I am speaking of a social condition larger than the sum of its parts."

Patel constructs her work carefully, which is perhaps a holdover from her time as an architect. One has only to look at such works as *Samskara* (2004), and the recent *Rajasthan Doores*, *Asian Faces*, and *Signs of*



Ketna Patel, *Honey Seller*, 1997, oil on canvas, 130 x 130 cm.

Asia (all 2007) to see her practice at its most immediate. She selects from thousands of photographs taken over many years, both in digital and hard copy format. Depending on the narrative Patel wishes to create, the photographs are chosen and juxtaposed against others or text. "I want to use anything that lends me an alternative way of viewing our rather strange world." The results often surprise her for there is something serendipitous in the way that she works, discovering arresting compositions in which myriad narratives, experiences, and subtle observations are laid before viewers to interpret as they will. But she notes, "If I am not in the right mood or try to force it, the process suffers."



Ketan Patel, *Forgotten Flowers*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 123 x 123 cm.

Through careful scanning and reworking, however, on the computer, where she can experiment with coloring and arrangement, a decision can be made to paint or print. Regardless of the medium that Patel decides upon finally, computer technology is something from which she can no longer escape. It is now an integral part of the creative process. "Technology is something

most of us take for granted. For me, the usage of digital idioms is very liberating. Technology is only a tool. Most of my recording is done through cameras, but these and computers cannot compensate for observations, insight, and the spontaneous, emotive communication that sketching or painting uncovers."

For Patel, painting, printmaking, and the three-dimensional provide different

platforms through which to express her ideas on "ordinary culture" and her philosophies on both the role of art and the part it plays in her life. The dramatic three-dimensional *Samskara* is a good example of this. With its allusions to the mystical and the mundane, expressed through painting and an intricate collage of Chinese, Indian, and Southeast Asian photographs, texts, and symbol drawn from a broad range of sources, *Samskara* speaks to the everyday. The Western viewer, even without knowledge of the content's sources, can readily relate it to their own quotidian visual culture dominated as it is by popular magazines, well-known personalities, advertising, and symbols of abundance. The narrative is clear in *Samskara*, but it

is more oblique in *Tears of Milk*, where cultures collide within the framework of the representational and elements of the surreal. The refreshing liveliness of *Samskara* gives way in *Tears of Milk* to subtle angst encapsulated in such images as the blindfolded girl, the footprint across the pages of an open book, dollar signs, fish that are disoriented within an unnatural environment, the lonely woman framed



Ketan Patel, *Private Rojak Korner*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 140 x 140 cm.



Ketan Patel, *Indochine*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 4 x 3'.

in a window, and the dominating face that hints at sublimated unhappiness that can only be relieved through tears. The silence of tears adds to the anguish of the roar that lives within the minds and hearts of so many men and women alienated by contemporary society's demands and the consumerist manipulation of big business that controls through the illusion of choice. We are slowly being controlled by horrors of political correctness that stifle genuine communication. While there have been significant changes in Patel's overall narrative, the emotional and psychological content of early works such as *The Honey Seller*, *Skeleton Woman*, and *Pranayama* is to be found as details in the overall narratives that exist within *Samskara* and *Tears of Milk*, as is her attention to the importance of color and texture.

The best of Patel's work raises myriad questions about society, culture, and the role people play in their own deception, as well as demanding questions on aesthetics. We have sold our freedom and individuality for a life in which almost all decision-making is quietly being consumed by the illusion rather than reality, by games rather than face-to-face communication. Patel has no answers, nor should she try to offer any for to do so inhibits the viewer from seeking their own answers to her many questions.

"I have noticed, over the past two decades, how much of the so called 'civilized' world takes refuge in all things manufactured, compared to all things hand-made," she says. "The latter often has 'third world,' 'cheap labor' connotations, and is sadly perceived of as inferior. Advertising sells face creams made by scientists in white jackets that seem to be more reassuring than ground paste from an organic shop. Clothes from large chain stores are more accepted than those made by individual persons. Has anyone noticed how 'corporate men' wear similar clothes on weekends? My belief is

that our collective visual conditioning is getting flatter and more homogeneous. Are we witnessing the demise of the individual? I really want to experiment with these thoughts by producing the same narrative using different techniques. How much of the world we occupy is virtual and fabricated, and how much is real? Do we act in certain ways after watching dozens of Hollywood movies that influence our behavior and responses? Or is it the other way round?"

People are important to Patel. One can see this clearly in such works as her

the juxtapositions of textures and geometry add to the viewers' fascination with the people and structures they see before them. Patel's own fascination with figuration is continued in these works but it is given a fuller examination in the *Asia Pop* series. Works such as *Private Rojak Korner* (2006), *Indochine* (2005), and *Forgotten Flores* (2006) amply reflect Patel's concern with ordinary culture and the people and places that make it alive for us. Here we have the quiet of the café and something of the clichés about the "submissive and sexy"

Asian woman, but is juxtaposed with two aging figures, suggesting the present and the future, and the notion "beauty is only skin deep."

Patel is challenging our prejudices and our pretensions about art, much in the same way that early Western Pop artists did. Some people will see only Singapore in these works, but for those who have traveled widely within Asia the images are to be found wherever a broad range of ethnic diversity exists. I juxtapose different cultures and historical events on the same canvas. A Bollywood actress and a communist Red Guard come together in the same composition. This is a romance between the old and the new, yet once prohibited by stringent cultural, political, and class boundaries that have hemmed in most of us. Singular stories have become increasingly plural.

But it is not only the figures and architectural elements of Patel's art that are striking, her use of texts, both book and newspapers texts and signage—Chinese, Indian, and English—is also important as these. Patel covers a wide range of texts as in *Signs of Asia* (2007). Many of which we are rarely aware of but still form part of society's intricate visual culture. "Text is revealing. Often, it is not conscious of itself. Like words etched on the back of public toilet doors, 'street text' can show us sides of ourselves that we prefer to keep hidden," says Patel. "Shop signs, misspelled menus, road names, supermarket notice boards,



Ketna Patel, *Signs of Asia*, 2007, mixed media on canvas, 4 x 3'.

large mixed-media works *Asian Faces*, *Rajasthani Doorways*, and her *Asia Pop* series that gives voice to everyday cross-cultural experience of much of Southeast Asia where traditions are held to vigorously by various ethnic groups while new ones are being created by emerging generations whose dreams are littered by global imagery and actions. *Asian Faces* and *Rajasthani Doorways* are informed by Patel's architectural past. Here we see snippets of life through an agglomeration of doors and windows, some of which remind one of the work of the late Filipina-American artist Pacita Abad. The bright colors and

leaflets, billboards, broken neon signs, construction hoardings, and advertising—all these are an integral part of contemporary street culture. To look at an Asian street and not look at the words is like trying to understand an Asian woman by only seeing her, not listening to her. Popular culture is dominated by somebody selling us something, from a bar of soap to clothes to a political agenda to warnings. Such things let us know of what we can do and what we cannot. Words—slogans, mottos, or 'mission statements'—seem to be replacing visual narrative in many ways. Words are the glue that holds up the pictures.

“One day I came across leaflets advertising Vietnamese brides that had been placed on car windcreens. They were complete with spelling mistakes and nubile women, but they were compelling. I took at least a dozen home. The piece of paper was like a mobile art installation, which spoke of a sociology that we are not always aware of. It was a human need disguised as commerce. Is this not what Art does? To understand where our society is at, take a good look at the junk mail culture. This informs us as much, if not more than the official news.”

It would be easy enough to label Ketna Patel a political artist for whom



Ketna Patel, *Samskara*, 2004, mixed media on 3D board, 140 x 140 x 30 cm.



Ketna Patel, *Rajasthani Doorways*, 2007, original photos and mixed media, 200 x 200 cm.

all art is a statement. This is far from the truth; indeed if one were to label her so it would be a disservice to her as an artist for whom personal identity and the liveliness of everyday culture are integral to a healthy, changing society. For Patel “latent prejudices” are to be attacked and for this she must “observe, assimilate, digest, regurgitate, and then make art and move on. I understand how intricately connected everything is.”

Her art helps not only Patel to make sense of the world, it also helps her audiences, for we are all in transition. Over the past decade, Patel has “changed as a person. My relationship with the world I occupy has also changed as a result. Many times, I only understand aspects of myself once I catch myself reacting to situations. I think this has been reflected in my work and methodology. Increasingly, my objective is for the artwork to have the ability to tap into a larger, collective memory bank so that art might help to become an extension of an individual’s identity honoring their memory of habitat and space. If I can do this, then some sort of communication is taking place.” **A**

Note:

1. All quotations are from correspondence and interviews with the artist during 2006 and 2007.