

ART

■ Tara Sabharwal's Tree Path. As a student, she sold her work to London's Victoria and Albert Museum



For Roopa Singh, political poet, adjunct professor of international political science at Pace University and theater instructor with South Asian Youth Action (both in New York), *Erasing Borders 2008* — which is currently showing in New York — is a deeply diverse exhibit. “An extremely affirming taste of how creative our Diaspora is,” she says. “From eerie florescent gas masks on Bharat Natyam dancers, to blood-hued mangoes for breakfast, to sari and sex pistol clad Desi women ‘stenciled’ on wallpaper, to a playful piece on the New York City sewer caps inscribed in bold: Made In India. This is us bearing witness to ourselves, a South Asian Diaspora, spread and alive.”

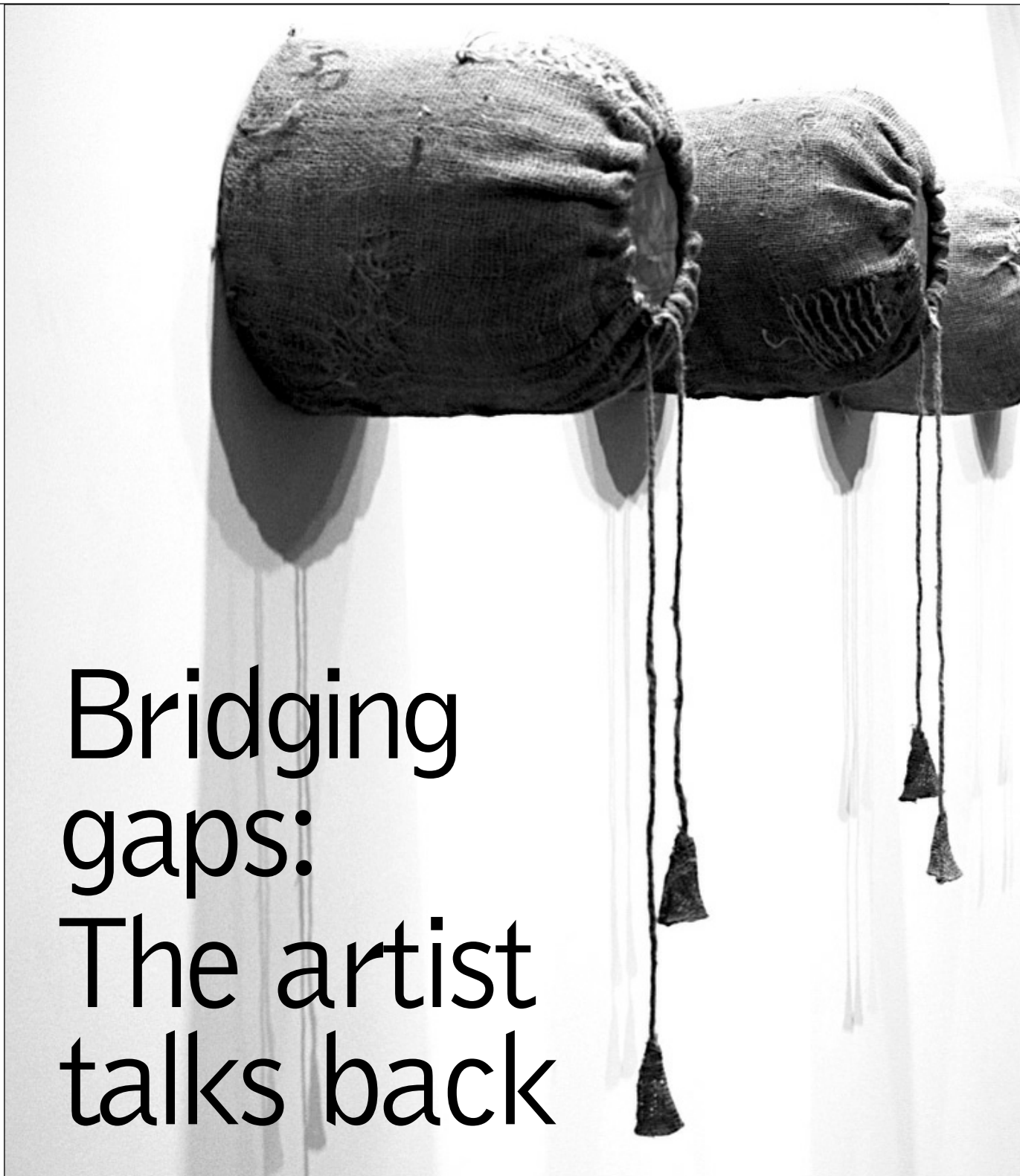
Vijay Kumar, curator for the fifth edition of the *Erasing Borders* traveling exhibition, has been watching the changing Indian art scene in New York for several decades.

“There are many new ‘Indian’ galleries in New York and other cities now, fueled by the new wealth in India and the booming art market there,” he says. “These galleries mostly show work by artists still living in India; occasionally, they do exhibit work by Diaspora artists.”

With *Erasing Borders*, he says, “we are pleased to be able to give these Diaspora artists another venue.” It offers a glimpse into the work of 40 Indian Diaspora artists who, Kumar says, have “come together to express their Indian identity in the US.” From traditional Indian fingernail art to photo installations — the show captures diverse artistic techniques and expressions. Many of the artists have advanced art degrees from prominent British and American universities; some also teach part-time at major art institutes in America. They range in age from 20 to 60; some have had a few paintings shown earlier. But with *Erasing Borders* — organized by the Indo-American Arts Council led by Aroon Shivdasani — they are getting the attention and backing big time Indian art galleries do not provide.

Of the 270 submissions, Kumar selected 40 artists whose work he feels accurately reflects the diversity — the religious, ethnic and intellectual predilections — of the Indian Diaspora in the US. Each distinctive piece in the exhibition shares this unifying characteristic. The exhibition, currently being shown at the Guild Gallery in New York, will travel to Purchase and North Salem in New York State before coming back to New York's Queens later in the year.

Kumar says, “In this show, there are not just mangoes, but mangoes ‘in the morning;’ colors remembered from



Bridging gaps: The artist talks back

Forty Diaspora artists express their South Asian identity in the US with the traveling exhibition, *Erasing Borders*, reports **Arthur J Pais**



■ Siona Benjamin's *Ishq (Fereshteh)*. Benjamin says she combines the imagery of her past with the role she plays in America today

childhood; images from pop culture including Bollywood films, advertising and fashion; strong social commentary; traditional miniature painting transformed and used for new purposes; calligraphy and script; startling juxtapositions; work trying to ‘find a home’ within the psyche.”

By the time India and Pakistan celebrated 50 years of Independence, the words Desi and Diaspora had become commonplace, he continues. “For many in the earlier generation, the struggle was how to incorporate the concepts of ‘modern’ Western art or new materials into their own work. Sometimes, it seemed traditional Indian symbols or motifs were just plunked into their compositions, and Sanskrit words put into the titles they chose (*whether anyone understood their meaning or not*.)” With the new generation there were new questions, or somewhat different versions of the old ones — about their identity, their relationship with both India and the West which seemed more fluid. “This group kept a little distance from the sentimental attachment — the nostalgia — their parents had with their homeland. They began to call themselves South Asians. The first real success came to the writers within this community.”



For the younger visual artists, while modern art and the huge variety of possible art forms were a given, their relationship to the Indian

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■ Anindita Dutta's *Deep Frieze*. Her collection represents the complications arising out of willing and unwilling 'consumption of sex'

exhibit whatever they want — and seem less concerned with financial success.”

While many of the artists showing their work at the *Erasing Borders* exhibition grew up in America, others made America their home in recent years. Kumar, who learned printmaking (etching) first at Pennsylvania State University and then at the Pratt Graphics Center in New York City, studied art in India. He is a founding member of the Manhattan Graphics Center, where he teaches etching. His work has been exhibited in the US and abroad, and has won awards. It is included in the permanent collections of The New York Public Library, The Museum of Modern Art, the New York Historical Society, the Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York City and the US Library of Congress in Washington DC.

Like Kumar, Tara Sabharwal was also raised in India. After studying painting in Baroda, she completed her Master's at the Royal College of Art in London on a British Council scholarship. As a student, she sold her work to the Victoria and Albert Museum. She continued to pursue her passion when she came to America, even as she taught art at the Guggenheim Museum, Cooper Union, City University of New York and the Rubin Museum all in New York.

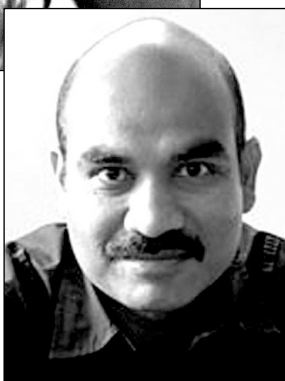
Siona Benjamin, who was raised in Mumbai, says her work reflects her background — she was brought up as a Jew in a predominantly Hindu India. In her paintings, she “combines the imagery of her past with the role she plays in America today, making a mosaic inspired by both Indian miniature paintings and Sephardic icons.” Benjamin has an MFA in painting from Southern Illinois University and a second MFA in theater set design from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, with an undergraduate degree from the J J School of Art in Mumbai.

Anindita Dutta earned a BA in history from Ranchi University but, by 1995, decided art was her calling. She came to America after earning a degree in sculpture and art history from the Visva Bharati University in West Bengal. Five years ago, she received her master's in sculpture and ceramics from Purdue University, followed by a master's in sculpture from the University of Iowa. She is showing work from her *Bed and Breakfast* series. “*B&B* evolves a space of complications arising out of willing and unwilling 'consumption of sex,’” she says. “The installation introduces the metaphor of a bed with a 'feminine' identity wherein the bolsters, with their enhanced presence, create a nightmarish disturbance. The materials, which are sourced from an organic base specifying an 'unrefined' quality, are responses that emerge from our multivalent experiences of seeking shelter in nature.”



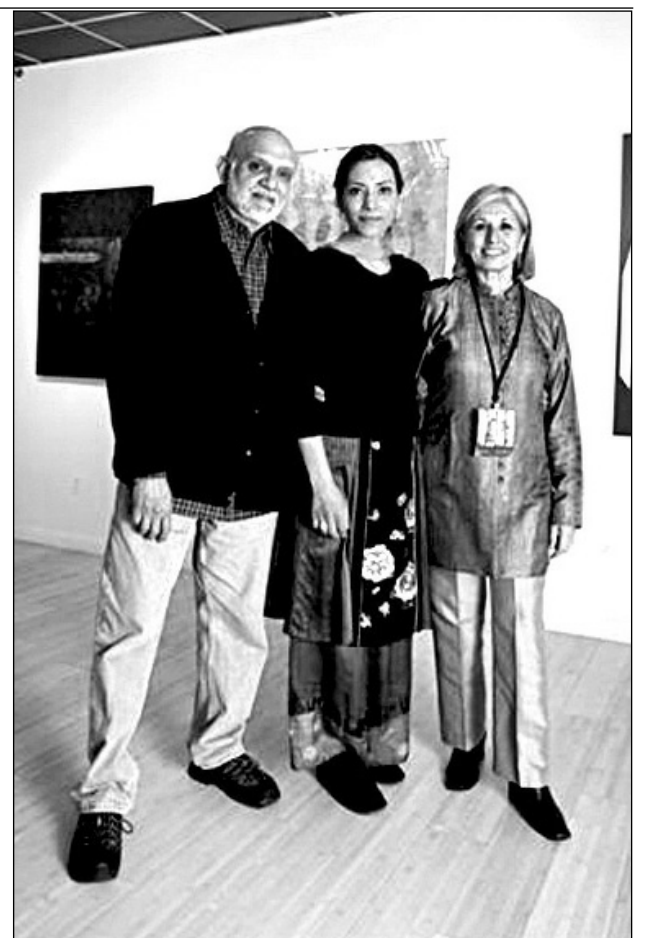
■ Chirag Rana's exhibit is titled *Sculptures*

subcontinent remained a subject. “In their art, they were exploring and reflecting on what was happening around them, the way society was changing, how society saw them and they saw society in terms of religion and race (especially post-9/11) — but also in terms of gender, pop culture and societal roles and expectations. There is often humor and satire in their work, but sometimes defiance too (they have their own activist groups). They show their creativity with a heightened independence — free to create and



Anujan Ezhikode, who is showcasing *Inside Out*, studied at the Kerala Kalamandalam. He trained in make-up and costume-making for Kutiyattam, the world's oldest continuous theater form dating the 10th century and Kathakali, a 17th century dance drama form. After moving to America, he studied painting and printmaking at the Art Student's League of New York. Working on canvas and paper, with mixed media installations, he says he “explores personal narratives and authorship.” Influenced by his early classical theater experiences, he uses color and the contrast of object and background to create visual drama in his work.

The exhibition includes the acclaimed poet and writer, Amir Parsa, a Queens's artist who emigrated from Iran at the age of 10 and who has always questioned what generation he belonged to. Amina Begum Ahmed, exhibition director at the IAAC, says, “The surprise comes where three different voices are heard reading in English, French and Farsi. Weaving

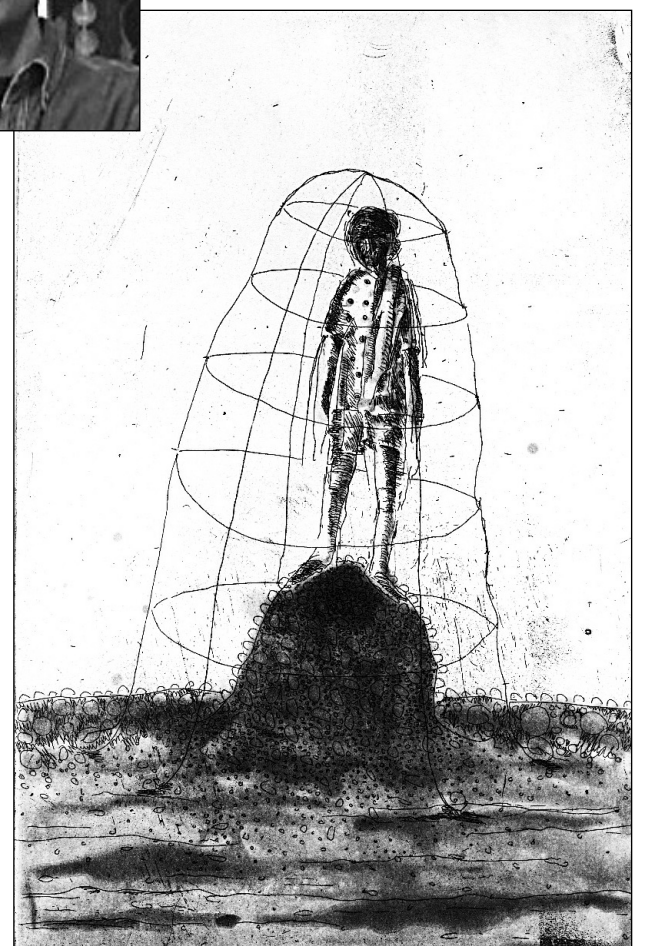


■ Vijay Kumar, Amina Begum Ahmed and Aroon Shivdasani

through the crowd, they illustrate through their movements the dynamics of being heard and not being heard, of being alone among the multitudes, of being understood and not, all along illustrating the essence of being foreign to a place, a language, a world. The overall performance provokes the audience intellectually, while simultaneously affecting them on an emotional, psychological and physical level.”

Ahmed, who was raised in London, moved to New York in 2000 and graduated with an MFA from the Royal College of Art in London, focusing on visual Islamic and traditional art. She is thrilled that many South Asian artists are now recognizing they have a venue of their own. “The experience that everyone has lived through at one time or another spills out among the work hanging on the wall (*at the exhibition*).” ■

For more information on the exhibition and other artists who are featured in it, visit www.iaac.us



■ Anujan Ezhikode's *Inside Out* uses the contrast of object and background to create visual drama in his work