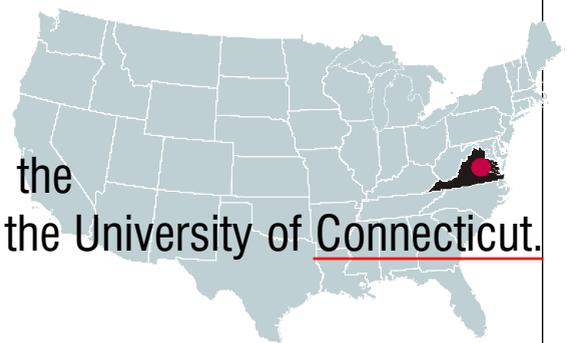


# Contemporary Indian Art

## in Rural America



The “Proximities” exhibition served to celebrate the inauguration of a new India Studies Program at the University of Connecticut.



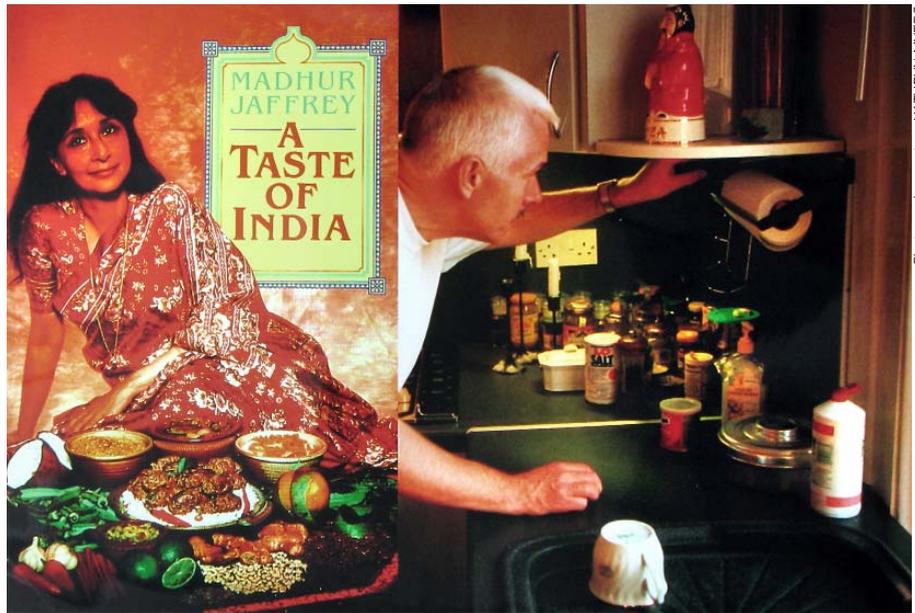
By KATHRYN MYERS

Over the past few years The William Benton Museum of Art at the University of Connecticut has acquired for its permanent collection works by contemporary Indian artists and artists of Indian heritage, as well as works by western artists influenced by the art and culture of India. In the fall of 2006 these works were featured in an exhibition titled “India: Proximities of Distance.” Some were first seen, however, in the 2004 “Masala: Diversity and Democracy in South Asian Art” exhibition at the Benton, which featured more than 200 works of contemporary, folk and popular art. It was a privilege as guest curator from the Department of Art and Art History to have had the opportunity to organize both exhibitions. The collection continues to grow as these exhibitions have served as a catalyst to subsequent acquisitions.

The “Proximities” exhibition further served to celebrate the inauguration of a new India Studies Program at the University of Connecticut. India Studies sponsors a lecture series that brings a range of scholars and artists from India

**Vijay Kumar**  
 Untitled #16,  
 from The India Portfolio  
*Intaglio print on newsprint*

**Indrapramit Roy**  
 Euripides’ The Bacchae  
*Offset lithographed illustration, 2004*  
 lent by the Getty Institute in Los Angeles



Sunil Gupta Untitled #2 from the series Trespass 2 Ink-jet print, 1993



Photographs courtesy KATHRYN MYERS

ART



Anupum Sud *Rear Window Etching, 2001*

and the United States to our rural campus. The Indian Studies “minor”—a new curricular option—consolidates course listings from a variety of disciplines, and sponsors the creation of new courses, including one that I have developed on the subject of contemporary Indian art.

The premise of the “Proximities” exhibition was to consider how India has served as a source of inquiry and investigation for contemporary artists with diverse histories and localities; art that raises questions about geographical and emotional boundaries. For the artists in this exhibition and many more around the world, these encounters and crossings between cultures and borders continue to result in gratifying investigations and remarkable works of art.

Artists represented in the Benton Museum collection who live and work in India include Hanuman Kambli, Madhvi Parekh, Indrapramit Roy and Anupum

Sud. Through diverse artistic methods and styles, they respond to varied global and local issues while mining a multiplicity of art historical sources, east and west.

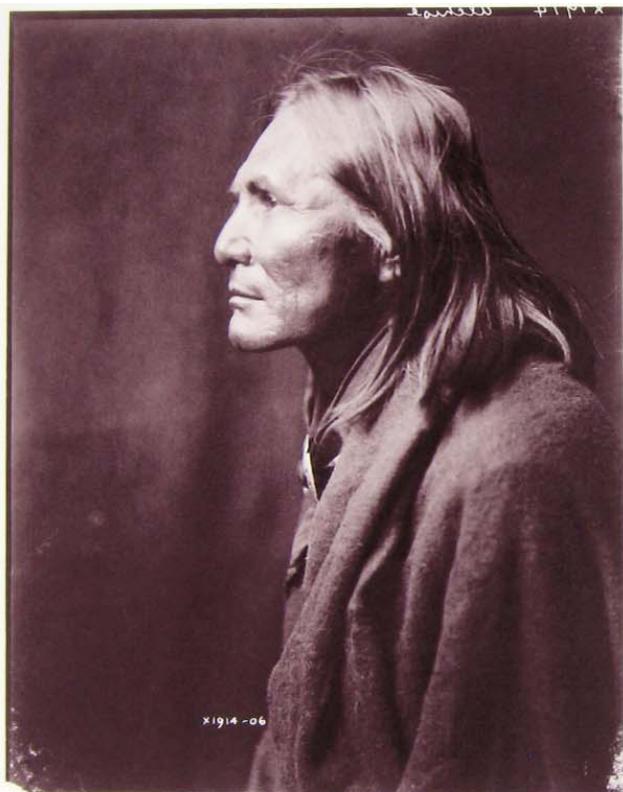
Goa native Kambli finds his work to be a suitable vehicle for expressing the turmoil and contradictions that define human relationships. In paintings such as “Dialogue III” he reflects on actions and words that pervade different facets of human behavior in intimate relationships and in the larger global arena. Through depicting the changing faces of people, their moods, conduct, and deeds, he grapples with duality and contradictions that are found in the collision of words and actions. Kambli is head of printmaking at the Goa College of Art and a recipient of a Fulbright fellowship to the United States in 1999.

Also layering the personal and political is printmaker and painter Anupum Sud. Her intaglio “Rear Window” is one of a

series regarding the “human condition” that are deeply personal but also make subtle political commentary. She has an empathetic response to people who live physically and metaphorically “at the edge” of society, in the decay of the city, particularly New Delhi, where she lives and works. Although it is an Indian city, it could easily be any urban area in the world, based on her art. Her figures are often depicted with bald heads that create a further sense of anonymity and isolation, alienated from themselves as well as those around them. With the recent rapid expansion of the Indian economy the gaps between rich and poor grow wider daily. Sud’s concerns voice an enduring dilemma. She is a retired head of printmaking at the Delhi College of Art.

Although Madhvi Parekh has lived in New Delhi for many years, the major inspiration and formal influences for her work are a result of her childhood in a rural area where her father was the principal of a local school. Her images, such as a large watercolor painting titled “Morning Light,” are drawn from fantasy and invention as well specific stories from

<http://www.fulbright-india.org>



Photograph by E.S. Curtis

RED INDIAN



Photograph by A.P. Matthew

BROWN INDIAN

**Annu Palakunnathu Matthew** An Indian from India-red *Luminape digital print*

her personal life, her friends, neighbors and travels. Much of her work employs formal motifs reminiscent of folk art, including patterns, borders and iconic figures and forms. Recently she has added sculpture to her repertoire, furthering the iconic presence of her mysterious pictographic language.

Indrapramit Roy is a painter and book illustrator and senior lecturer in painting at the M.S. University of Baroda in Gujarat. Four of his illustrated books were acquired by The University of Connecticut Thomas J. Dodd Research Center Special Collections Library. "Euripides' the Bacchae" published by the Getty Institute in Los Angeles, was loaned to the Benton Museum for the "Proximities" exhibition. Illustrating books allows Roy to discard his "painter's skin" and explore things that he is not able to in his paintings, particularly the challenges of the silk-screen process. The illustrated book on exhibit provided a vehicle for Roy to investigate Greek symbols and imagery, particularly pottery that he has always admired. Roy was a Fulbright scholar to the United States in 2004.

Immersion in the multicultural fabric of

American life provides abundant opportunity for artists of the Indian diaspora to investigate and interrogate American as well as Indian culture and identity through myriad ways and means. Some artists discover parallel histories and fruitful meeting points, while others may experience painful clashes of culture.

As an immigrant in the United States, Annu Palakunnathu Matthew has been questioned about where she is really from, often having to clarify that she is an Indian from India. In prints from her "Indian from India" portfolio, she presents photographs of Native Americans from the 19th century that she feels perpetuate stereotypes and highlight attempts at forcible assimilation. She pairs these images with self-portraits in clothes, poses and environments that mimic these historic images, effectively challenging the viewers' assumptions of exotic and local.

Also in the Benton collection is her monumental digital collage, "Bomb," from the "Bollywood Satirized" series. Starting with actual film posters, she uses digital technology to add images of herself as well as humorous and satirical

commentary that questions traditional Indian gender roles and behavior. Matthew is an associate professor of photography at Rhode Island College and was a co-curator for the Benton Museum "Masala" exhibition.

Siona Benjamin's multi-ethnic heritage—as a Sephardic Jew from Mumbai, educated at Christian schools, attending graduate school in the United States and now living in Montclair, New Jersey—provides a dizzying array of often contradictory artistic influences. Benjamin utilizes miniature painting techniques along with symbolic imagery from Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Hindu traditions. Compassion as well as humor, satire and allegory serve as multiple avenues to investigate, interpret and interrogate the complex strands that make up her ever shifting sense of self. Her compelling gouache painting in the Benton collection titled "Hagar" depicts a personal interpretation of the traditional Hebrew story. In Benjamin's haunting image, however, Hagar, the Egyptian handmaiden who flees her jealous mistress and is ready to die in the desert, is surrounded by water



**Madhvi Parekh** *Morning Light* Watercolor on paper, 2001



**Hanuman Kambli** *Dialogue III* Acrylic on paper, 2001

that does not offer spiritual renewal. Instead, it is undrinkable, and in fact, contains fragmented bodies from a suicide bomber. Siona Benjamin was a curator for the Benton Museum “Masala” exhibition.

Communal violence between Muslims and Hindus, particularly the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, is the focus of Brooklyn, New York artist Vijay Kumar’s powerful “India Portfolio.” Using newspaper clippings and roughly drawn figurative images reminiscent of graffiti, Kumar attempts to describe the pain of witnessing such continued conflict

in his beloved land of birth. He visits regularly but has been living away from India for more than 30 years. Kumar is a printmaker, an instructor of printmaking and one of the founding members of the Manhattan Graphics Center.

Sukanya Rahman is an accomplished dancer as well as artist, residing in Orr’s Island, Maine with her playwright husband. Her shadow-box collages layer diverse sources that reference both western and Indian iconography. Drawing from modern and vintage popular culture—including calendar art, Bollywood and Hollywood film magazines—her cut-outs of figures and

stage set-like scenes mix east and west as well as high and low. Her works dramatize the confusion and collision of contemporary society, particularly in urban areas in India and the United States, where the sacred and secular, ancient and contemporary exist side by side.

The much celebrated paintings of Andhra Pradesh native Bari Kumar layer sources from eastern and western with the vibrant street culture of the Asian and Latino communities in Los Angeles, California, where he lives. Trained as a designer at Parsons School of Design in New York and Los Angeles, Kumar discourages those who wish to read the symbolism in his work in a one-dimensional manner. For Kumar, signs are fluid, and bear the potential to function as metaphors for a multiplicity of meanings as boundaries become increasingly permeable. His paintings are filled with images of religious, social and cultural significance that invite multiple readings. Kumar states that what often begins for him as a personal expression sometimes ends as sociopolitical commentary. For instance, his painting in the Benton collection titled “Good Luck” is informed by witnessing the expectations brought to bear upon women in his family, but extends to the plight of women everywhere.

The William Benton Museum of Art at the University of Connecticut is committed to presenting art from diverse cultures in a variety of media. As such, the museum responds to the significance of Indian art and the ever-growing importance of India on the global stage by acquiring new works of art with a focus on contemporary India. I am pleased to have had the opportunity to share my own research and love of India with my students, colleagues and community and thank the William Benton Museum of art directors, former director Salvatore Scalora and current Director Steven Kern for their continued support and continuing interest in this endeavor.



*Kathryn Myers is a painter and professor of art at the University of Connecticut in Storrs and held a Fulbright fellowship to India in 2002. She had recent exhibitions of her work at the M.S. University of Baroda, Gujarat, and Fundação Oriente, Goa.*



**Siona Benjamin** Finding Home #64. Hagar Gouache and gold leaf, 2001