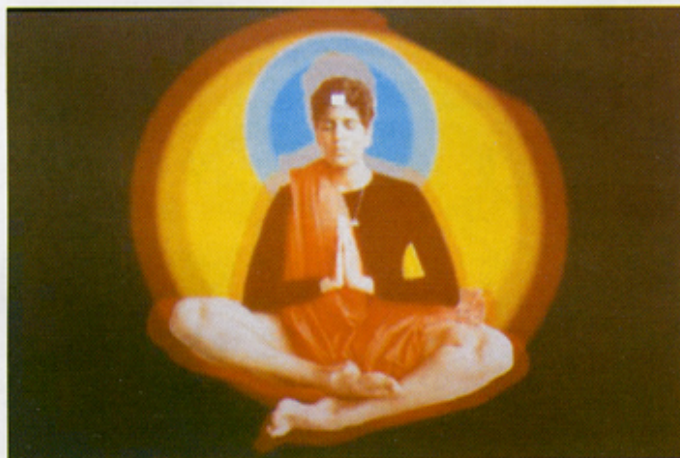


From Foreign Shores

Rachel Kalpana James writes about her involvement with SAVAC, an art collective in Toronto, that is committed to exploring South Asian diasporic identity.



Karma Clarke-Davis (Toronto). Corner Buddha – Karma Om...The Walk of the Nomad. Detail from video and slide projection installation. 1998. (From the Tourists in Our Own Land exhibition, at the Gallery 44, Toronto, 1998.)

Cultural theorist Gayatri Spivak suggested through her writings, a strategy for those involved in a practical engagement with identity politics – “We should act as if an identity were uniform only to achieve interim political goals, without implying any deeper authenticity”.



Chitra Ganesh (New York). Bandit Queen with Hookah. Acrylic on canvas. 48" x 36". 1998. (From the alieNATION show at the York Quay Gallery II, Toronto, 2001.)

The early '90s saw the celebration of South Asian culture in Toronto, Canada in the form of the annual Desh Pardesh Festival. It offered a ‘home away from home’, a place where diasporic South Asians like me could begin to recognize the commonality of our experiences and transform our sense of self and community. For a five-day multidisciplinary arts festival, hundreds of artists, activists, academics, and interested people came to Canada from the UK, the US, the subcontinent and beyond, to ‘explore the politics of South Asian cultures in the west’. In 1994, I was the Co-Director of the Festival with Steve Pereira. Today, I am the Director of SAVAC (South Asian Visual Arts Collective), the one-time sister organization of the now defunct Desh Pardesh. In 2003, SAVAC celebrated its tenth anniversary of being an initiative that believes in promoting contemporary visual art by artists of South Asian origin. As 2004 dawns, I reflect on SAVAC’s contributions and what it means to be an identity-based arts organization today.

In 1993, I was a member of an informal group of visual artists (foreshadowing SAVAC) who curated annual visual art exhibitions for the Desh Pardesh Festival, resulting in shows such as *InSight: The First Canadian South Asian Women’s Art Exhibit*, *The Visual Art Studio*, *Against the Wall* and *naya samachar*. These exhibitions featured several new South Asian artists rather than focus on any specific theme or art practice. They launched many artists in the early stages of their art careers: Jaishri Abichandani, Ayisha Abraham, Neena Arora, Shelly Bahl, Karma Clarke-Davis, Allan deSouza, Sharon Fernandes, Ameen Gill, Tamara Zeta Sanowar-Makhan and Alia Toor, among others. These exhibitions served our goals, in that they brought together for the first time, a number of South Asian artists who were exploring issues of cultural difference through art. As we acquired a visual language to speak of our lives in terms of our cultural identities, we also challenged the negative stereotypes produced around us by the dominant culture.

Even in 1993, identity politics carried a lot of negative baggage because of its ‘perceived’ limitations. Canadian writer, filmmaker and founding member of Desh Pardesh, Ian Rashid wrote about the limiting nature of identity politics. “One begins to fear that the assertion of identity becomes the sole project – an end unto itself. There is always the anxiety that this identity might itself become too heavily characterized, narrow and prescriptive – a yoke that can no longer be seen as liberating.”¹ Another Canadian writer and video artist, Shani Mootoo applied this concern to artistic freedom. “Many curatorial choices still suggest that in order for a tape by an ‘of colour’ artist

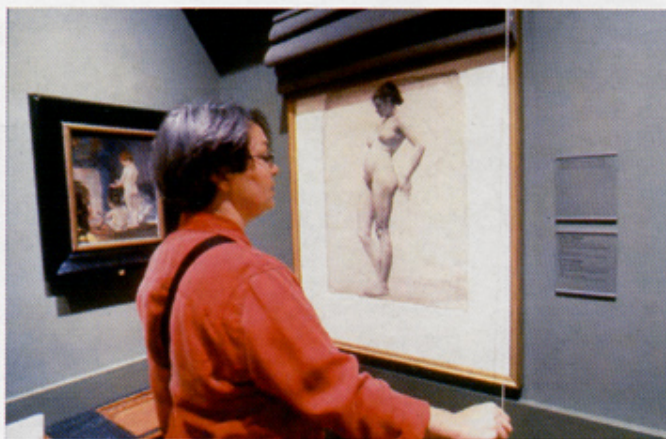
to merit screening, it must deal specifically with issues of colour and race".

Cultural theorist Gayatri Spivak suggested through her writings, a strategy for those involved in a practical engagement with identity politics – "We should act as if an identity were uniform only to achieve interim political goals, without implying any deeper authenticity".³ With Spivak's advice in mind, SAVAC established itself as a formal, artist-run centre by 1997. It still continues to operate as an identity-based arts organization at a time when identity politics is considered *pas*. Our manifesto states that SAVAC is a Toronto-based, artist-run, non-profit organization dedicated to the development and presentation of contemporary visual art by artists of South Asian origin. We do not claim an authentic South Asian art but come together as contemporary artists to encourage visibility and mutual support in accessing resources and opportunities normally limited to us as artists because of our race. We do not have a permanent gallery. Instead, we create programs in collaboration with South Asian and non-South Asian artists and other contemporary artist-run centres, galleries, museums and community organizations to critically explore and present innovative art with complex meanings and ideas, creating a platform for diverse expressions.

In 1997, artist Shelly Bahl became the co-ordinator, and with a steering committee, laid the ground for SAVAC's organizational and curatorial vision. Exhibitions descriptively titled *Dirty Laundry & Parting Thoughts*, *Tourists in Our Own Land*, and *Dia*perse*, explored issues directly affecting diasporic South Asians like cultural history, migration, exoticism, exile and hybridity. I joined SAVAC as Director in 2000 and we continued this curatorial vision with exhibitions like *alienNATION* and *Wish*.

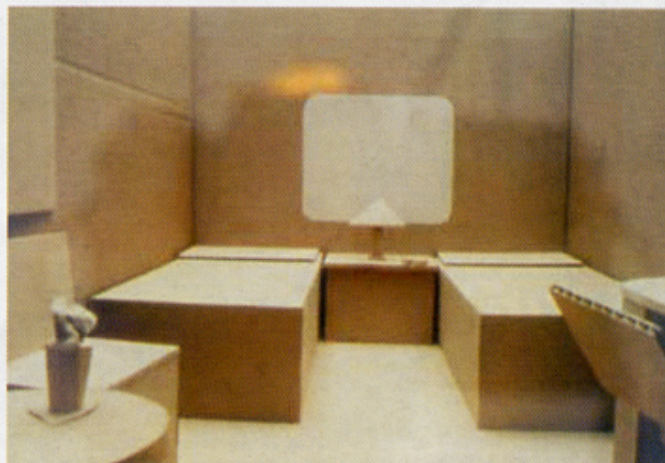
In 2002, Toronto art critic R.M. Vaughan reviewed *Wish* declaring, "Such is the dilemma of identity specific curating – while busy educating, the set-up can also limit the reading of the work to remain within the parameters of the group/cause/event."⁴ Well yes, we had been warned of this dilemma, this impasse, since the early '90s. However, what I realized from the rest of his review was that he had 'understated' the dilemma. His review revealed such gross errors in the descriptions of the works that I wondered if he had even 'looked' at them, in the first place. The problem then was not that the set-up 'limited' the reading of the works but that it actually made him deny them any proper consideration. Some artists have told us that they are stigmatized for being associated with an identity-based organization like SAVAC. Such experiences once again draw our attention to the attitudes that many artists who belong to the majority community still have. Has our existence then been counterproductive? This is a question that does crop up in our minds, once in a while.

Despite the scorn generally reserved for identity-based art, more and more diasporic South Asian art organizations, paradoxically enough, are establishing themselves around the world. SAWCC (South Asian Women's Creative Collective) and *Diasporadics* in New York, *Art Wallah* in Los Angeles and *SHISHA* in Manchester all opened their

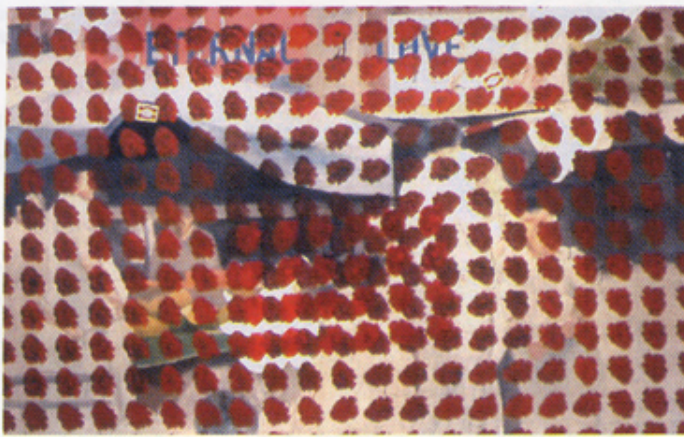


Asma Arshad Mahmood (Toronto). *The Peep*. Sound installation. 2000. (From the *Private Thoughts/Public Moments* show at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 2000.)

This is our response to the fact that being a visible minority by virtue of our skin colour and/or gender, we involuntarily become members of an identity-based group, whose opportunities are shaped by the relation of that group to structures of privilege or oppression.



Cyrus Irani (Toronto). *Zenith Outside the Stateroom*. C – print. 11" x 14". 2001. (From the *Rebirth of Space – 64 Steps* show at the CA, Toronto, 2002.)



Rashid Rana (Lahore/Toronto). Love is Eternal for as Long as it Lasts. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 4' x 6'. 2000. (From the Painting over the Lines: Five contemporary artists from Pakistan show at the York Quay Gallery, Toronto, 2002.)

With new technologies of the 21st century offering us diverse possibilities to dramatically change our identities through sex operations, cosmetic surgeries and cyborgic initiatives, it is hard to believe that identity politics could still be an enduring issue.



Jaishri Abhichandani. Durga Yantra. 2000-2001.

doors well after SAVAC. Perhaps, this is our response to the fact that being a visible minority by virtue of our skin colour and/or gender, we involuntarily become members of an identity-based group, whose opportunities are shaped by the relation of that group to structures of privilege or oppression. This being the case, I feel that the burden of responsibility really lies on the viewer's or art critic's shoulders: he/she has to develop the skills and cultivate the interest to appreciate identity-based art in the right perspective and consider the works without any prejudices. Despite the arguments, the barriers and the biases, we have to nurture diasporic South Asian artists and continue to provide them with opportunities for developing their metier. This has been SAVAC's mission.

Furthermore, I don't believe that diasporic art must abandon themes that may have become 'old and worn out' – like race, dislocation and hybridity. Explorations around these themes may bear new meanings, just like stretching old art practices has resulted in new modes of expression. For example, SAVAC exhibitions featuring performance art – *Central Nerve*; intersections between various art forms – *Rebirth of Space*; new media – *Communities Virtual, Technological Revolutions* and [esc] *electronic social culture*; and site specific interventions – *Taking it to the Streets, Private Thoughts/Public Moments*, and *Peace Taxi* (reviewed in *Art India*, Quarter 4, 2003), have broadened its profile as an identity-based organization.

In addition, the advantages of being an identity-based arts organization can be observed in the extended networks we have created with our brothers and sisters in the diaspora and our homelands. We occasionally feature international curators in our lecture series – Geeta Kapur from India, Salima Hashmi from Pakistan, Amrita and Rabindra Kaur Singh from the UK, for instance, and like-minded artists from elsewhere, in exhibitions like *Contemporary Art and Identity, Sentiment Express* and *Painting over the Lines*. New York galleries like Bose Pacia Modern, Talwar Gallery, and the Sundaram Tagore Gallery, which regularly feature contemporary Indian art, are now recognizing that exciting contemporary work is being produced in their own diasporic backyards.

With new technologies of the 21st century offering us diverse possibilities to dramatically change our identities through sex operations, cosmetic surgeries and cyborgic initiatives, it is hard to believe that identity politics could still be an enduring issue. However, until our lived experience proves otherwise, SAVAC will persist, though we would like nothing better than to be put out of business as an identity-based organization. In the meantime, my participation in SAVAC gives me, as it gives several others, a cause to fight for.

Notes:

- 1 Ian Rashid, *Blasted Categories*, Fuse, May/June, Toronto 1993, p.15
- 2 Shani Mootoo, *Off Colour: not just another screening*, Rungh, Volume 2, Number 4, Vancouver, p.11
- 3 Gayatri Spivak, *Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution* (with Elizabeth Grosz): *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. Edited by Sarah Harasym, New York: Routledge, 1990. pp. 1-16
- 4 R.M. Vaughan, *Winter of Contentment*, Eye Weekly, Toronto, February 7, 2002, p.39