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John Zarobell

University of San Francisco, jzarobell@usfca.edu

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3.5 / Maybe It Will Fall Apart

San Francisco's Indian Autumn

By John Zarobell

November 15, 2011



Image: Anita Dube. *Wound*, 2007; drywall; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the Artist and Bose Pacia, New York.

It just so happens that on the day of the press opening for *Maharaja: The Splendor of India's Royal Courts* at the Asian Art Museum, I was teaching *Orientalism* (the seminal book by Edward Said). In trying to explain to my class hegemony and the cultural aspect of colonialism that Said addresses, it was hard for me not to think of the exhibition across town. After all, the fascination with the East, the languages and histories, and the particular forms of dress and decoration associated with Orientalism are continually manifested at San Francisco's Asian Art Museum. The mere act of the museum possessing all of those cultural artifacts testifies to so many relationships of trade and of power. But the appreciation of alternative cultures, the intercultural understanding that is the bedrock of a multicultural community, is celebrated there as well. For the just-rebranded Asian, there is a critical edge to maintain, as though the museum is standing on a ridge between two chasms. In one direction, one sees the forms of accumulation (some would say looting) of precious objects from distant cultures and a means to fix their significance in place for the benefit of the powerful. On the other side, one can perceive the possibilities that a cosmopolitan engagement with Asian culture can offer to the citizens of and visitors to San Francisco. It is this double bind that makes interpretation very important and, one might say, potentially perilous.

Do we perceive *Maharaja* as a treasure trove from one of Britain's largest and most richly endowed museums (the show was organized by the Victoria and Albert Museum), or as an intervention against an outdated history of taste that proudly announces a new era of cultural and political history for the museum? It would be simplistic to think of it as one or the other, but the measure of the exhibition's innovation extends beyond the three exhibition galleries devoted to *Maharaja* at the Asian. This is because the exhibition has become a flagship for a host of other exhibitions and events taking place in San Francisco this fall. In such a case as this, it would be wrong to isolate the one exhibition and to ask what it teaches us about Indian art and Indian history, since those lessons are part of a loosely coordinated constellation of projects. Taken together, they provide a wider picture of Indian material culture and the country's burgeoning contemporary art developments.



Artist unknown. *Amar Singh II of Mewar*, 1700–1750; opaque watercolor on cloth. Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Also at the Asian, a partner exhibition recently opened featuring the work of Sanjay Patel, a local artist and graphic designer who holds down a day job at Pixar but has recently published an illustrated version of the Hindu text the *Ramayana*. This project promises a light touch, as it is titled *Deities, Demons and Dudes with 'Staches: Indian Avatars by Sanjay Patel*.¹ Also, just down the street at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA), Betti-Sue Hertz has organized a compelling presentation of contemporary art from India. Titled *The Matter Within: New Contemporary Art of India*, it consists primarily of sculptures, videos, and photography. Two other projects feature artist of South Asian descent. A monographic presentation of the work of Bay Area artist Allan de Souza, *Close Quarters and Far Pavilions* is on view upstairs at YBCA until January 8, 2012, and San Francisco State University's gallery hosted an exhibition of photos and video art, *Picturing Parallax: Photography and Video from the South Asian Diaspora*, earlier this fall (this closed on October 15, but there is a catalogue available). The show, organized by Santhi Kavuri-Bauer and Mark Johnson, highlighted some very compelling work by emerging artists such as Baseera Khan and more established ones like Jaishri Abichandani. Finally, the Center for South Asia at Stanford University organized a three-day conference with YBCA on South Asian contemporary art (held from November 10 to 12). Taken together, this array of programs constitutes something of a cultural event for San Francisco and allows many fresh insights into the history illuminated in *Maharaja* and the way that history continues to unfold today.

Before discussing why it is useful to pair an exhibition of the royal arts of India with contemporary art at YBCA, let's look more carefully at *Maharaja*. Organized by Anna Jackson, curator of the Victoria and Albert Museum, and coordinated in San Francisco by Qamar Adamjee, assistant curator of South Asian Art at the Asian, the exhibition opts for a thematic presentation of more than 200 objects covering 250 years of material culture and painting featuring the various royals around the Indian subcontinent. The first room opens emphatically with an exquisite life-size *Portrait of Amar Singh II, ruler of the kingdom of Mewar (1700–50)* by an unknown artist, and treats the issue of kingship and its constituent manifestations through a presentation of paintings, a reconstituted royal seat (displayed behind plexiglass), and a host of jeweled ornaments. The rajas (Indian kings) are presented as powerful, rich, but also devout. Here a visitor is also introduced to the tradition of the Durbar, a royal assembly for the celebration of a grand public event, often celebrated through a procession.

Artist unknown. Elephant throne (howdah), ca. 1870–1920; Chhattisgarh state, India. Courtesy of the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco.

The procession theme is readily apparent when one enters the second gallery and notices the elephant throne (known as a “howdah,” c. 1870–1920), an elaborate double settee in velvet and gilded, sculpted wood. It is intricately carved and richly decorated (and if I could take one thing home from the show it would definitely be this). Such a seat fairly exudes the significance of the sitter, who is of course shaded by a matching parasol. In a film in the gallery, a viewer can watch kings mounting such seats for processions that took place in 1928 and 1932. An elaborate scroll painting in the room shows a depiction of a procession from the nineteenth century, which includes a very large king and an equally prominent European. Here the exhibition’s interpretive framework is in full form, parsing the imagery and engaging the viewer through multiple forms of representation and historical evidence. The second half of the gallery is devoted to the personal world of the maharaja, which allows for more fantastic possession on the part of a viewer. At this point, one may be stunned by the beauty of the objects on view but a little worried that this may be the whole point.

In the third gallery things begin to change. Here the art starts to be elaborated, even qualified by the wall texts, which explain the complicated political fortunes of various regional maharajas throughout India. The late history of the Mughal empire is related, but other empires such as the Rajput, Sikh, and Mysore are also present, and viewers learn how they battled over the subcontinent from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century, when Britain explicitly took on the role of colonizer and made all the kings “princes” who ruled empires but under surveillance. A particularly compelling portrait is a large oil of Madhu Rao Narayan II, ruler of the Maratha alliance, painted by the British artist James Wales in 1792. The fact that British artists came to India to make portraits of Indian royals in some ways inverts the power dynamic, but it also manifests Orientalism, as a British artist both lionized and circumscribed a foreign monarch with his imported representational strategies. In a compelling twist, this picture

brings to life the very throne room from the first gallery, which has the effect of confirming the veracity of this representation. Said terms this effect “intertextuality” because the two presentations of a maharaja in his throne room reinforce one another, making us believe in the veracity of these concocted representations, both initiated by Europeans. The Durbar also returns in this gallery, only the British have borrowed it to celebrate their own monarchs with royal processions in India. Roderick MacKenzie's enormous oil *The Delhi Durbar of 1903* (1903) attests to how Calcutta (then known as Kolkata) elaborately celebrated Edward VII's accession.

If such a work smacks of colonial propaganda, other objects in this section work to complicate the story of the relations

between the Rajas and the Europeans. The collection of Yeshwant Rao Holkar II, the so-called Jazz-Age Maharaja, constitutes the final segment of the presentation. This highly elegant gentleman bought furniture from the most modern designers, cavorted with his wife in the south of France, and had double portraits made by Man Ray. The complexity of this chapter notwithstanding, the exhibition becomes something of a didactic parabola, mapping out the dynamics of historical contexts around a handful of state portraits, but eventually falling back upon the particularities of the characters and objects. The exhibition upends our expectations, to be sure, since the exotic ends by appearing familiar, even modish. And if one takes this realization in retrospect, it starts to seem that royalty, and maybe even statehood, is all a kind of theatrical production. Considering this show was produced by a British state museum, it is tempting to consider that a projection of the familiar might underlie this story of Indian courtly life.

Man Ray. *Yeshwant Rao Holkar II and Sanyogita Devi of Indore*, ca. 1930; gelatin silver print.
Courtesy of Sheikh Saoud bin Mohamed bin Ali Al-Thani. © 2011 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

If you walk straight across town and into YBCA, you will be greeted by several manifestations of theatricality in the works Hertz has selected for *The Matter Within*. In the lobby is a monument to a hero that seems to be toppling but is in reality a mock-bronze self-portrait of the artist Sudarshan Shetty that has been balanced on a pedestal and attached by a chain to a box meant to hold money. When the box fills up, the statue stands upright. This work counts as both spectacular and polemical, but photographs by Nikhil Chopra and Pushpamala N. feature the artists posing in a variety of guises and referencing an array of imagery from dandies to bandits to drag queens. These forms of theatricality are designed to explode the illusions of the image, to render it meaningless through repetition and subversion. If fixing one's own image results in such divergent representational conventions, one begins to understand that conventions are just that and do not express any authentic reflection of the sitter.

Hertz selected groups of artists in three mediums: sculpture, photography, and video, and each explores a distinct series of issues that overlap on the surface of the body, where glancing flesh yields a

materiality that opens onto meaning. There is no shortage of theoretical models in play, but the substance of life continually reasserts itself in these works despite divergent tactics. Perhaps because of the numerous nation-based contemporary art exhibitions that have come before, Hertz has elected to investigate subcultures or microcultures in India in order to distribute the nominal subject—the nation of India—into a fragmentary prism. The Indian artists on view here are inquiring into identity in a variety of guises, including nationalism, but not limited to it by any means.



Nikhil Chopra. *Yog Raj Chitrakar: Memory Drawing VI (16:00)*, 2010; digital photo on archival paper; 37 x 28 x 3 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai.

This generation (the artists range from their twenties to their fifties) is not primarily concerned with returning a viewer's gaze, and the artistic prototypes they engage are not all within the history of art that a viewer may be familiar with. There are other modernisms to which they respond as well. Their cosmopolitanism also applies to visual culture and the references drawn from it. Approaching art making with an intersubjective framework, groups such as Raqs Media Collective, the Otolith Group, or CAMP extend their inquiries beyond tropes of self and other at the core of the discourse elaborated by Said. In the videos produced by these artist collectives, one cannot find a stable location from which to launch an inquiry, and this displacement of consciousness undermines structures of apprehension and reception, in both India and San Francisco. Whether they operate in Delhi, London, or in Marin, where members of the Otolith Group currently have a residency at the Headlands Center for the Arts, these videos are some of the most important contemporary projects being produced. Though time-based media can be highly demanding for an exhibition visit, it is worth taking the time to watch these videos fully.

The sculptures assembled also form a very strong group of works that reflects intelligently on themes that emerged in *Maharaja*, though this was clearly not the sole intent of the curator. Anita Dube contributes candles that spell LOVE and VOID, which, when lit, emit heady fumes—even unlit, their smell permeates the gallery. Her *Wound* (2007) is another kind of word, but this one is removed from a wall. The gouged-out white surface elaborates unwritten volumes in the annals of postcolonial relations and the problems of representation. The counterpart to this work is Shilpa Gupta's *Sword* (2011), which extends out from the wall, its broken tip dangling from a string, hovering just off the floor. Rina Banerjee's playful sculptural accumulations reflect on the material extravagance of the maharajas, but along with the feathers, tortoise shells, and umbrellas, there are often animal horns and other symbolic forms that suggest subconscious impulses through Surrealism, à la Louise Bourgeois. For an inquiry into imperial power through contemporary art, nothing beats an equestrian monument of a maharaja made out of T-shirts. *Hangover Man* (2011) is by Siddhartha Kararwal, a young artist who makes his

first presentation in the United States with this work.

Sudarshan_Shetty-No_Title-2010



Sudarshan Shetty. *No Title (from "this too shall pass")*, 2010; gold leaf on fiberglass, mild steel, coin box, etched brass; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Anil Rane.

This depiction of the historical figure Sayajirao Gaekwad III, the Maharaja of Baroda—represented by two photos in the show at the Asian—also started the famous Indian art school, M. S. Baroda, that has trained generations of Indian modernists. It is where Kararwal received his master's degree. In this piece, one can see that the exhibition projects complement each other nicely, but more important still is the message that the maharajas were not just figures of Indian authority covering for Britain's indirect rule. Gaekwad III promoted a university that has become a model institution in modern India. It continues to engender cultural developments and conversations that we are having in San Francisco in the twenty-first century, including the Stanford/YBCA conference. There are very real political dynamics at work in these exhibitions, and any viewer would miss a great deal not to consider them. What is at stake when one moves from presentations of the historical to the contemporary is the way that cultural forms, the arts in general, exercise authority in their dynamics of social and political

engagement. Equality of economics and politics may be beyond our grasp, but it does start to seem that the subaltern can speak; in fact, she has been speaking. The next question is: can we learn to listen?

NOTES:

1. The exhibition opened after the deadline for this article passed so I was unable to review it here.

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