

PICTURING PARALLAX

Photography and Video
from the South Asian Diaspora

Authors:

Falu Bakrania

Santhi Kavuri-Bauer

Kasturi Ray

Paul Sherwin

Contents

- 5 Foreword
Paul Sherwin
- 9 Picturing Parallax:
Transnational South Asian Diasporas
Falu Bakrania and Kasturi Ray
- 15 PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH
Shailja Patel
- 17 The Parallax View
Santhi Kavuri-Bauer
- 21 The Artists
Santhi Kavuri-Bauer
- Jaishri Abichandani
Pradeep Dalal
Gauri Gill
Gautam Kansara
Baseera Khan
Ranu Mukherjee *by Sharon E. Bliss*
- 37 Acknowledgments
Sharon E. Bliss and Mark Dean Johnson
- 38 Checklist



Foreword

5

A distinguishing feature of San Francisco State University's Fine Arts Gallery has long been its international reach. The Gallery is well known for promoting the appreciation and study of Asian art, especially that of East Asia, and *Picturing Parallax: Photography and Video from the South Asian Diaspora*, an exhibition conceived and curated by Professor Santhi Kavuri-Bauer, represents a welcome extension of the Gallery's engagement with that continent. Moreover, the exhibit is being mounted at a time when there is intense scholarly interest in diaspora, transnationalism, and globalization as well as an awakening in the Bay Area arts world to the pleasures and provocations of work by contemporary South Asian artists and artists of South Asian descent.

The exhibition is also a manifestation of the increasing presence of South Asian culture, history, and politics in SF State's curriculum and vital scholarship emanating from a new generation of faculty across the liberal and creative arts who have banded together to form the South Asian Studies Institute (SASI). *Picturing Parallax's* opening coincides with a SASI faculty forum on the show's import and aesthetic impact, along with other public events that include a reading by Shailja Patel at the University's renowned Poetry Center and a demonstration of and lecture on the worldwide *bhangra* dance craze.

The two essays in this catalogue—one by Professor Kavuri-Bauer and the other co-authored by Professors Falu Bakrania (Ethnic Studies) and Kasturi Ray (Women and Gender Studies)—are, I expect, indicative of points of convergence and divergence that will emerge during the SASI scholarly forum. There is no disputing that the South Asian diaspora has prompted multiple, often contradictory forms of negotiation and contestation over time. Still, questions abound concerning such matters as the extent to which South Asian diasporic experience has been typical or singular, whether there is indeed a distinctive South Asian identity or sensibility independent of cultural and social milieu, and the capacity of art to bridge the divide between worldviews or to instigate real-world political change.



Pradeep Dalal. *Go West (Cosmos)*. 2006, C print. 30 x 40 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Pradeep Dalal

25

The three works that comprise Pradeep Dalal's series *Go West* intend to convey the dissonance of memory. His photographic collages are as much about the physicality of the image-making process as they are about the process of recollection. The signs and symbols that are included in the collage offer us a view of how fragments of the past are stitched together through the contingency of memory. As Dalal explains the aim of his project: "I was also attempting to bring old and new together: a nineteenth-century photograph of a pillar with Asoka's edicts in Delhi (that I visited as a child on a family holiday), a eighteenth-century watercolor, and recent family snapshot in Miami. I wanted to see how different moments in time—centuries even—can sit together, or sometimes apart, at times bleeding into the present."³

The way the images are constructed is also significant and reveals how memory stitches together and layers the disparate moments of our past into a narrative that we read as "my life story." As Dalal explains: "I want a photograph to become denser, more complex, and in the *Go West* collages I use family snapshots, favorite music, mother's embroidery, prints of palm trees and champa flowers from Mumbai streets, as well as photographs of temples and monuments visited on family trips, including my first visit abroad. I use my fingers, palms, knuckles, and arms to grab, place, hold, nudge, jog, sweep, and shake the different components of the photomontage. The discordant friction between the separate bits of the montage, and the moments when the seams dissolve and the juxtaposed bits come together, are equally desirable."⁴

3. Email correspondence with the artist, July 2011.

4. Ibid.

The Parallax View

17

Picturing Parallax: Photography and Video from the South Asian Diaspora brings together a group of innovative and compelling photographers and video artists. In addition to their geographic derivation, uniting the artists in the exhibition is the concept of “parallax,” the apparent displacement of an object caused by viewing it from two (or more) positions. It is significant to note that parallax views are not necessarily oppositional but function to enhance our visual understanding of an object. As Slavoj Žižek explains the clarifying effect of parallax: “We do not have two perspectives, we have a perspective and what eludes it, and the other perspective fills in this void of what we could not see from the first perspective.”¹ The photography and videos in *Picturing Parallax* provide this “other perspective,”¹ giving us fresh vantage points to view other, less visible realities of diaspora; they expose the gap that exists between the hegemonic perspective of the South Asian diaspora and its complex realities.

Historically, parallax has helped give accurate information about an object’s placement in and relationship to the world and universe at large. The stellar parallax allowed astronomers to measure the distance of stars, and sailors used horizontal parallax to chart a course according to their ship’s placement along the equator or among celestial bodies. In the realm of photography, however, parallax denoted an error of perspective caused by the different views that emerge between the viewer and the lens.

Celebrated upon its invention as a more objective way of capturing reality than painting, photography quickly became the preferred mode of documenting the visible world. Yet while parallax was a desired and necessary function of scientific measurement, photography regarded it as a distortion in need of correcting or suppressing, so that the modern viewer could have a secure and ordered viewing experience. Susan Sontag explains the effect of these photographic strategies on the viewer’s subjectivity and empowerment: “Photography’s ultra-mobile gaze

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 29.

² Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 81.

flatters the viewer, creating a false sense of ubiquity, a deceptive mastery of experience."² As people became mesmerized by photography's ability to move, uncontested, anywhere and to focus on anything, parallax became its excess or supplement, haunting it by refusing the photograph's supposed monocular veracity.

The parallax, however, does not rest subdued in photography. Every now and then, and in the best examples of this art, it comes forward to present alternative perspectives that disrupt the well-ordered picture to shock us out of viewing it passively and to consider it critically instead. The affective presence of this kind of conceptual parallax, which makes apparent the inherent multiplicity and contradiction embedded in the photograph, is related to what Roland Barthes called the "punctum": "It is not I who seek it out,...it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me."³ The punctum is a symptom of parallax; its presence, Barthes explains, gives us pause and compels us to look harder at a photograph, to understand the alternative view of the world it is presenting. Think of an image of a little girl running, but instead of clothed and happy she is naked and in agony. The contradictions of this singular image invited Americans to take a harder view of the Vietnam War—to look at it from an off-center perspective—and led many to question the moral authority of the State and its framing of the war.

In the realm of fine art, Surrealists, beginning in the 1920s, were the first to upend the supposed veracity of photography's structured view of the world as one of modernity's many conceits. Through the use of solarization, photomontage, and multiple exposure, Surrealists created photographic images that captured a fantastical "reality." In so doing, they sidestepped the problematic of parallax altogether. The monocular perspective of modernist visuality would not be directly challenged again until the 1980s, when postmodern photographers and video artists drew attention to the camera's parallax to reveal the contextual, fragmentary, and uncanny nature of the photographed image. Artists have since used parallax to destabilize and unmoor photography from the stasis of modernist meaning to reveal it as dialogical and processual. No longer considered a technical error of photography but a productive and dynamic phenomenon, the concept of parallax and the ambivalence it discloses today demands constant recalibration between the eye, the recording lens, and the object.

The photography and videos in *Picturing Parallax* reveal the multiplic-

3 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 26.

ity of life in the South Asian diaspora. They complicate and thereby enhance the hegemonic view of immigration, exile, and human displacement as iterated in national texts, popular media, and annual spectacles of immigrant celebration, like pageants and parades. The artists of *Picturing Parallax* reveal through their art the intimate, alluring, alienating, and liberating dimensions of living in the South Asian diaspora. Along with providing an alternative perspective, the parallax also denotes an existential condition: the gap that exists between the realities of diaspora and the symbols, stereotypes, and structures of the dominant culture that fail to contain or fully grasp it. These photographs and videos prompt us to alter our viewing practice of diasporic art from one of pure aesthetic appreciation to one of critical consideration of a human experience that is at times celebratory, at other times agonizing, but always ambivalent and multifarious. More precisely, the issues that matter to South Asians globally, such as social equality, exile, migration, assimilation, and memory, are presented in this exhibition as complex ethical problems that require diverse perspectives—in other words, the parallax view.

19

Santhi Kavuri-Bauer

Santhi Kavuri-Bauer is an Associate Professor at San Francisco State University, where she teaches Asian American art history. She is also the author of *Monumental Matters: The Power, Subjectivity and Space of India's Mughal Monuments* (Duke University Press, 2011).

Picturing Parallax: Transnational South Asian Diasporas

9

In the last decade, the United States has seen an explosion of mainstream interest in South Asian and diasporic cultural production. The films *Monsoon Wedding* and *Bend It Like Beckham* were blockbuster hits; Broadway hosted the successful musical *Bombay Dreams*; in 2000, Jhumpa Lahiri won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *Interpreter of Maladies*, and her subsequent novel, *The Namesake*, was adapted into a popular film in 2006. For a long time, the only South Asian character on television was Apu, a convenience store clerk in the animated series *The Simpsons* (and even here, the voice was done by Hank Azaria, a Jew born to Greek parents). But in recent years the list has expanded to include, among others, Naveen Andrews (*Lost*), Parminder Nagra (*ER*), Mindy Kaling (*The Office*), Aasif Mandvi (*The Daily Show*), Kal Penn (*House*), and Archie Panjabi, who won an Emmy in 2010 for best supporting actress for her role in *The Good Wife*. In popular music, Nora Jones and the British Asian singers MIA and Jay Sean have had songs top the Billboard Hot 100.

Although many celebrate these signs of increased visibility, the politics of that visibility are often uninterrogated. Commentators continue to use longstanding Orientalist themes and metaphors to describe South Asian and diasporic cultures as “exotic,” and frequently they depict these cultures as sites where “the East” (glossed as “tradition”) meets “the West” (glossed as “modernity”). Moreover, alongside this increase in cultural production has been the rapid expansion, post 9/11, of a security state that profiles, criminalizes, and deports South Asian Muslims and others whom it reads as “freedom-hating terrorists”—even as South Asians continue to be exalted for their “exotic” cultures. This easy binary obscures the complicated history and social formations of the South Asian diaspora, and often leads to a simplified interpretation of its cultural productions, not to mention its people.

The artists in *Picturing Parallax* meditate on such contradictory realities, bringing to the fore questions about racialization, gendered narratives of

immigration, queer politics, class divides, political persecutions, and the instability of identity. Refusing both a simplistic, reactionary position against the criminalization of South Asians in the long War on Terror or, on the other hand, an embrace (ironic or otherwise) of their newfound mainstream visibility, they have created art that negotiates both sides of their community's lived contradictions. In doing so, they ask us to problematize the Orientalist discourses used to both celebrate and vilify South Asians, and to examine the complex relationship between place and subjectivity.

10

Indeed, the term "diaspora" is itself complex. The English language originally borrowed "diaspora" from Greek in the late nineteenth century; it means "dispersal" or "scattering" and was used to describe the scattering of Greek communities whose intent was to colonize. Over time, the term gradually took on the meaning of persecution, exile, and the forced expulsion of minorities from their homelands; here, the Jewish diaspora became the classic example. In the late twentieth century, scholars expanded use of "diaspora" to include almost any group of immigrants permanently living outside their place of origin, thereby extending the term to populations including South Asians. These scholars found in diaspora a rich conceptual category in that, unlike prior models that implied immigrants followed a teleology that involved "letting go" of their prior identities and assimilating to the dominant cultures of their new geographic homes, diaspora instead called our attention to contrapuntal realities in which immigrants retained a sense of their original cultural identity, cultivated ties with other scattered members of diaspora, and maintained links with their homelands. As cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall writes, diaspora is a concept that "cuts across the traditional boundaries of the nation-state, provides linkages across the borders of national communities, and highlights connections which intersect—and thus disrupt and unsettle—our hitherto settled conceptions of culture, place, and identity."¹ Diaspora thus maps creative and abiding ties that defy nation-state boundaries. Although strict definitions stress orientation toward a homeland, others emphasize the transnational nature of diasporic groups. Taking into consideration the exigencies and dislocations of globalization, the transnational view questions assumed commonalities within a diasporic group, and focuses attention on differences of histories, knowledges, material realities, and politics.

The history of South Asian migration is a testimony to the complexity and diversity of the communities that form as a result of diaspora. The category "South

¹ Stuart Hall, "From Routes to Roots," in *A Place in the World?*, ed. Doreen Massey and Pat Jess (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 207.

Asia" is itself a constructed term with a complex history. Currently used to refer to Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, it has at times also included Burma, Afghanistan, and even Iran. South Asia is one of the most populous regions of the world and nearly all areas were at some point under colonial rule. Consequently, the South Asian diaspora is one of the most geographically widespread, locally concentrated, and diverse. Migration occurred in two general phases: from the mid 1800s to World War I, and then again after World War II and the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947. In the first phase, migrants left their homes to work mainly as indentured servants for British colonies (1834-1917) or as contracted laborers (1852-1937), but many also went as traders, as civil employees for the empire, or as laborers who left under many different forms of compulsion, including economic betterment (e.g., Sikhs who moved to the Pacific coast of Canada and the United States). Migration after World War II and the independence of India and Pakistan, though generally considered more "free" in comparison to the earlier waves of indentured workers, also often took place because of migrants' need for economic betterment. In this phase, the United Kingdom mainly recruited unskilled manual workers from rural areas to help rebuild its economy after World War II, whereas the United States, in response to the Space Race, favored highly educated professionals. The children of these arrivals have since come of age, many now raising children of their own, and in large part they have retained the same class positions as their parents. Their relationship to their South Asian identity is often class-specific as well, ranging from rejection to romanticization to, increasingly since 9/11 and 7/7 (the July 7, 2005, London bombings), criticism of stereotypical accounts of cultural clashes. Their navigations of identity have been influenced by the current and heterogeneous waves of South Asian immigrants, in which wealthy children of the newly neo-liberal India rub shoulders with domestic workers, restaurant workers, taxi drivers, and other service laborers.

Picturing Parallax maps out the multiple migrations, and their accompanying complex personal and social negotiations, that have increasingly characterized the contemporary South Asian diaspora. The life histories of the artists themselves reflect this complicated mobility. Jaishri Abichandani, born in India, has been working the last several decades in Brooklyn; her work evokes both the costs and gains of leaving/finding home. Pradeep Dalal, born in Mumbai, now living and working in New York, has a background in both architecture and photography.

His work often focuses on fractures within images, rather than seamless meldings, finding interest in wear and tear rather than pristine surfaces. Gauri Gill, born in India, studied in the United States but has returned to New Delhi to live. Her art, itself an act of migration in the form of a road trip across the U.S., captures the everyday realities of migrant people. Gautam Kansara, born in London, now based in New York, often considers the ways family, subjectivity, time, and space play upon each other. By presenting portals into the past, Kansara shows the importance of space and the malleability of time. Baseera Khan, a Pakistani American, was born in Texas and is currently pursuing her MFA in New York; her work brings to the fore questions of the personal and the political. Ranu Mukherjee studied in Boston and London and is currently working in San Francisco. Her work traces hybrid and nomadic identities. The work of all these artists both demonstrates and enacts the fluidity of contingent identities, within and across familial and other communities.

Given its complexity, we propose that this collection be considered part of the South Asian “transnational diaspora,” a term which more aptly characterizes the personal, political, and community politics the artists, and their subjects—other South Asian migrants—have forged. As feminist scholar Inderpal Grewal suggests, even the study of diaspora must engage with its transnational connections, by which she means (in part) the ways that diasporic subjects not only traverse nation-state boundaries (as in conventional accounts of diaspora) but also how they rearticulate them.² This pursuit, Grewal goes on to argue, allows us to map how “subjects, technologies, and ethical practices were created through transnational networks and connections of many different types and within which the ‘global’ and the ‘universal’ were created as linked and dominant concepts.”³ Scholars of diaspora are now asked to carefully track the pathways and effects of globalization, and to consider how the linking of different national economies can tamp down differences (such as through the “McDonaldsization” of the world). Through their vibrant cultural intervention, the artists of *Picturing Parallax* uncover and interrogate false universals, instead gesturing to specific ways in which migrants experience inequalities and generate particular forms of knowledge.

Picturing Parallax is being exhibited at a critical junction in the history of education in California. At the moment, the California State University system, and California’s public education system as a whole, is at risk of suffering unprecedented cuts. Already the system is severely limiting access to low-income students, thereby jeopardizing the meaning of public education. At San Francisco State Uni-

² Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 3.

³ Ibid.

versity, whose mission historically has been to impart the ideals of social justice, this means an even greater loss in the quality of education. At this moment, we not only feel incredibly fortunate to bring this exhibit to you, but we urge audiences to heed its lessons. This art inspires us to engage with questions of power and inequality, and with a sense of community that both remembers and looks forward to a more responsive and just future.

13

Falu Bakrania and Kasturi Ray

Falu Bakrania is Assistant Professor of Race and Resistance Studies and co-director of the South Asian Studies program at San Francisco State University. She is the author of *Re-Fusing Identities: South Asian Youth and the Politics of Popular Music and Britain* (Duke University Press, forthcoming, 2012).

Kasturi Ray is Assistant Professor of Women and Gender Studies and co-director of the South Asian Studies program at San Francisco State University. She writes on transnational women workers and the politics of settlement.

पुस्तक

10

和

हृत्

म
शी
रा
ही
ल
व

小兒疳積

पञ्चासनागारासलाशिका विवर्णकायाकारधारक यत्पु

जीये

शिव
एव
तद
न
वि
तन
त्रि

Acknowledgments

37

Picturing Parallax: Photography and Video from the South Asian Diaspora was organized by the Fine Arts Gallery at San Francisco State University and curated by SF State Professor of Art History Santhi Kavuri-Bauer. Several museums in the San Francisco Bay Area are presenting concurrent exhibitions of art from India, and we are honored to here reflect the vision of the international South Asian diaspora in dialogue with those projects.

We are indebted to the many artists, gallery representatives, and scholars whose engagement with *Picturing Parallax* has allowed it to flourish. Artists welcomed us into their studios, homes, and computers to discuss their work and the ideas being investigated by the exhibition. Many thanks to Pradeep Dalal, Gauri Gill, Gautam Kansara, Baseera Khan, and Ranu Mukherjee, for these in-person and virtual conversations. We would especially like to acknowledge Jaishri Abichandani, whose generosity of spirit and intellect helped to move *Picturing Parallax* in new and unexpected directions. We would like to thank Sadia Rehman, Ramand Frey and Wendi Norris, and Todd Hosfelt and David Stroud and their galleries for their support of our project. The opportunity to partner with interdisciplinary faculty from the SF State South Asian Studies Institute, including Falu Bakrania and Kasturi Ray, as well as colleagues from the Poetry Center, Steve Dickison and Elise Ficarra, has been central to the organization of both this catalogue and related public programs. Other critical assistance has come from Paul Sherwin, Dean of SF State's College of Arts and Humanities, as well as staff including Carma Zisman and Chris Morring.

All projects at the Fine Arts Gallery are researched and staffed by students enrolled in the University's Art Department. Over three years the hard work of more than 180 students has made the *Picturing Parallax* exhibition, catalogue, and public programs possible.

Sharon E. Bliss
Manager, SF State Fine Arts Gallery

Mark Dean Johnson
Director, SF State Fine Arts Gallery