



Home

[Cover Story](#)

[Gallery](#)

[Spring Board](#)

Offbeat

[The Heard Melody](#)

[Identification and](#)

[Isolation](#)

Essays

[Ignorance is Truth
The Decline of an](#)

[The Experimental](#)

[Short Films of Ashish Avikunthak](#)

[Birendra Pani's](#)

[latest show 'Boy Dancer](#)

Interview

[Mekhala Bahl](#)

[Chandramohan](#)

Features

[Sunil Lohar](#)

[Protesting with](#)

[Need a New Social](#)

[Order for Art: Neville Tuli](#)

Reviews

[OF ALL THAT IS](#)

[The Lost Article](#)

Book Reviews

[Thirst of a](#)

[Minstrel: The Life & Times of](#)

[Ganesh Pyne](#)

Regular Columns

[News](#)

[Mumbai](#)

[Kolkata](#)

[Version True](#)

Readers' Page

[Archives](#)

COVER STORY



•



•



•



•



•



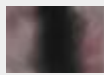
•



•



•



•



•

1 | 2

*For Art
College
Details and
Admission
Procedures
Look into »*



Debesh Goswami, *As You Like (2)*, 39[1].4 X 31.5 Inches, Photograph On Canvas, 2006



!NDIA! Indefinable!

Deborah Jenner, Paris based art historian and writer looks at the works of the eight 'Indian' artists featured in the '!ndia' show at Gallery Helene Lamarque, Paris. A specialist in 'spiritual' in contemporary art, Deborah Jenner says that this show facilitates a reconciliation between opposites without dogmatism, prejudice or the tyranny of majority rule, yet, with sincere social, political and spiritual engagement.

For the first time in France, a contemporary art exhibition "**!NDIA!**" at Gallery H el ene Lamarque is offering a *talli* of 8 Indian artists in a group show from 27 April to July 2007. The delicately balanced feast of painting, photographic, performance and installation works unveils the richness in variety of media, messages, styles and origins from the subcontinent too long neglected by the Parisian art gallery scene.

The artists, themselves, reflect a kaleidoscope of both formal approaches and ethnic roots: First, there are those born in Kerala but working in Mumbai like **Bose Krisnamachari** who also curates shows for the 'Bombay Boys' like **Riyas Komu** whose leftist political undertones make *l'art pour l'art* sound sadly narcissist. Also in Mumbai is the renowned art professor, **Prabhakar Kolte**, whose intuitive compositions make pictorial spaces materialize as epiphanies. Then, there are the diasporas like **John Tun Sein** (a Burmese-Indian working in Germany) whose sublime is not "out there" in some landscape, but "in here" within the artist, and, **Debesh Goswami** (a Calcutta native with a doctorate from Rennes University) whose installation props alternate between Banares cinders and Brittany cider. Origins blur further with artists like **Anish Kapoor** who grew up in Bombay with his Iraqi Jewish mother and Hindu father but has been London-based since the 1970s where he got together with the British Buddhist sculptors. Or, **Vivan Sundaram**, born in Himachal Pradesh with diplomas from the University of Baroda, Gujarat and the Slade School, London who is now living in New Delhi. His photography series reworks his Hungarian/Sikh family album featuring his aunt Amrita Sherghil, a painter in Paris in the 1920s. A contemporary Indian woman artist, **Anju Chaudhuri**, who came to the French capital, has several paintings in this show. Raised in an intellectual Bengali family, she has been nurtured on Hindu mythology and returns annually to India. Her work has already been presented by Gallery H el ene Lamarque in an international group show, "Landscapes of

the Mind", with Zao Wou Ki and F. X. Fagniez. Although the horizons of these 8 Indian artists are ever expanding, Nature is well rooted in their work.

The gallery floor comes alive, literally, with a *Bed of Roses*, **Debesh's Goswami's** installation piece that perfumes the atmosphere. (Rose petals have been spread along the sidewalk in front of the gallery to announce the opening.) On the walls, large format photographs of the artist's performance piece show **Goswami** in a fetal position with baby bottle nipples clinging to acupuncture points all over his body. His yoga postures and references to (sacred cow's?) milk demonstrate a corporal sensitivity that eclipses conscious focus to attain a higher state of spiritual grace. Going beyond empirical observation, he may even search for a subject's essence through its deconstruction. One of Goswami's earlier installations had revealed the imprint of a human presence through a stenciled silhouette powdered with cremation ashes. In Asia, empty space is as much a basic element as water or fire. The five elements trace endless change. Goswami plays with the totality of a subject's different states, metamorphose and transmission of like-characteristics onto new life in order to unearth its true identity.

The landscape artist, **Anju Chaudhuri**, paints mindscapes with multiple viewpoints where vegetal is spiritual. Luminous aquamarines splashing against obtruding, rugged browns make *Landscape*, 2006 a refreshingly direct experience of the elements and forces in Nature recalling her native land. Colors gently pass from blue to turquoise to green, never dull, dirty or indistinct. The lyrical forms without fixed horizons make us feel absorbed within a nourishing Mother Earth, slowly respiring, vibrating, palpable, alive.

John Tun Sein's oil canvases distill nature into abstraction. A posed tranquility is found in the generous dripped and smeared residue of spicy hues. In larger zones, rollers have met with uneven board supports depositing textured accidents. Nonetheless, colors are judiciously juxtaposed with vertical and horizontal junctions. Form is reduced to a patchwork of interwoven shapes marking a visual itinerary of remembered journeys. The artist seeks minimal symbolism –geometric yet fluid - that evokes ritual usage - perhaps a shaman's path. For Tun Sien, the sublime is not in some *pleine aire* landscape but experienced within. Here, impressionism becomes 'introspectionism'. Tun Sien strides softly along the edge separating conceptual reason and contemplative intuition.

Another painter in the show, **Prabhakar Kolte**, translates the beauty of Nature in abstract expressionist visual rhythms through inner geometries. Generous zones of gray offer a soothing, neutral ground between contrasts of light and dark. Otherwise, his pigments are unmixed. Their glossy crispness mould grid-like layers of figure and ground alternations. His compositions turn the ephemeral into tangible energy with runny, dripping paint. Instead of imitating nature, he simulates its spirit. However, he rejects claims to coherency with the external world preferring his imagery to be, as he puts it, tethered in his subconscious. "I paint first and see later, rather than see first and paint later."

Bose Krishnamachari's sumptuous *Stretched Bodies* paintings are a delight for the eye. Pure, luminous, flat colors sing in rainbow bands shooting off in all directions. Light is everywhere, even in the blacks. Bose explained to a major Indian auction house: "I refine my color to brightness. I have learnt this usage from the alternately subdued and lavish color codes of Indian ceremonies and ritual performances; the costumes, the gestures of enactment..." Detailed zones reveal a delicate, buoyant technique, which swirls distinct stripes of colors into tiny moiré patterns, abruptly scaling down the motifs' normal sweeping span. The overall composition is cropped from a shifting network of modern Mumbai's neon signs with their own ever-expanding logic. His handling of formal elements undermines the standard connection between

signifier and signified. Meaning from image is elastic. Coined as *mediatic realism*, an emerging trend in Indian contemporary art consists of transforming the media's "reality" images into unreal painterly ones.

In the opposite direction, photo-journalism offers an alternative landscape conveying an anthropological impulse for **Riyas Komu**, son of Indian trade union leader in Kerala. When he came to Bombay in the early 1990s, like so many other youths in search of a career, he witnessed the riots and bombings. The birth of the art scene in Bombay coincided with political unrest. His randomly chosen subjects to photograph are charged with significance of political disquiet and social commitment. This spring he highlighted the inauguration of London's new Aicon Gallery (a venture of *Arts India* already established in New York and California) with a sculpted airplane piece inscribed with Islamic prayers. It is placed along side the paintings of a U.S. artist and friend, Peter Drake, showing tanks invading middleclass, suburban America. Komu's other visual puns include an installation piece named "*Faith accompli*". The *Karachi Series* are black and white images of cemeteries in Pakistan. They portray the marks of natural forces - time and weather - which, due to human neglect, have broken down the dignity of the burial grounds. In a photograph of a flooded Islamic cemetery, tombstones along with uprooted trees ironically float past. Another image, this time an abandoned Christian cemetery, depicts an isolated, erect angel seen from the back hovering, in a cross-like contradiction, perpendicularly to the tombstones fallen in ruin. The series treats various religions through the optic of Heraclitus' philosophy (uncannily echoing that of the Buddha) encapsulated in the words 'Panta Rei' that all is just a river of constant change ultimately swept away as time flows and ever renewed. Komu's graveyard theme hints at Shiva, the Destroyer, in its understanding of obliteration as opening possibilities for fresh futures. Komu quite enjoys seeing his work presented at the former Victoria Memorial Hall, whose stranded, late-Raj Imperial kitsch now seems a powerful anti-colonial statement. He has been elected by Robert Storr to participate in the 2007 Venice Biennale.

Another artist of the Paris exhibition **Anish Kapoor**, won the coveted Turner Prize in 1991. His large installation sculptures play with dualities (earth/sky, conscious/unconscious, body/mind, etc.). Their mirror distortions and sculptural voids construct gaps that tease our perception. A womb suggests the edge between this world and some other, traditionally located in the heavens. He turns Plato's cave - and Western civilization - inside out:

"One of the things that I'm proposing or looking for or working towards in some dark sort of way is a space that is sort of inside out, that is the opposite of progress, the back of the cave and not the light of the front of the cave, the darkness of the back of the cave. It is a condition of seeing that I feel as being akin to the space, if you like, of the Internet which is, you know, how do we define that space? And yet, it is there." (Kapoor, BBC News interview on *Hardtalk extra*, broadcast November 10th, 2006).

His painting, *Untitled*, lets an expansive red dot invade the deep blue space. Such non-figurative work renders theology minimalist through a single gaze into a void. His colors are as pure as the mounds powdered pigments in markets and temples. They seem to have been wished upon the canvas as blown stardust. His blood reds normally dim into a rich darkness evoking a cavern's depths. Yet here, the scarlet shines outward at the viewer toward a reversed vanishing point, which Anish finds mystical. His organic forms, intuitive colors and sensual materials reveal the sublime. Thoughts are set aside. The impact of his works awakens a memory found in your stomach instead of your head.

Vivan Sundaram's *Remembering the Past, Looking to the Future*, focuses on his glamorous aunt posed next to her Sikh father, Umrao Singh Sher-gil, a Punjab chieftain, for a family portrait in their opulent, cosmopolitan residence. It is one of his series of digital photomontages

featured this spring in the monograph show, "Re-take of Amrita", at the Tate Modern. The images, whether seamless or contrived, make viewers aware of the fictional documentaries and time overlaps in which telescoped multiple selves, like Russian dolls, act out their various roles in society. The elegant young lady artist, Amrita Sher-gil, had initially been subject matter for her father's photography as were her paintings hung on the walls and other portraits framed and propped up on side tables. Her early death and immortalized presence in this series evoke themes of rites honoring the dead and an afterlife fraught with uncertainties. Vivan's grandfather's album reworked as modern photomontages, seductive and haunting, crosses all boundaries. The Indian family is literally recomposed in our times of high technology.

The exhibition at **Gallery Hélène Lamarque** shows the Paris art world what India does best: Contradict the idea of a singular truth by bringing about a reconciliation between opposites without dogmatism, prejudice or the tyranny of majority rule, yet, with sincere social, political and spiritual engagement. The 8 artists show how national identity can transcend ethnic traditions, play with western influences, confront western peers and even jumble plural-identities while remaining truly Indian, that is to say, indefinable. *!Inde infinie!*

The exhibit **!INDIA!** goes through July 2007