



Cover: *Agni*, 2009, gouache on collage and digital print on vinyl, 136.5 x 111.5 cm
 Left: *What lies beneath #1*, 2009, gouache on collage on paper, 57.5 x 46 cm (framed)
What lies beneath #3, 2009, gouache on collage on paper, 57.5 x 46 cm (framed)
 Above: *He gave her a gentle little nudge towards it*, 2009, gouache on collage on paper, 33 x 27.5 cm,
 Flap: *Pani*, 2009, gouache on collage and digital print on vinyl, 136.5 x 111.5 cm
 Inside left: *Ernst Stavro Blofeld*, 2009, gouache on collage on paper, 118 x 95.5 cm
 Inside right: *Brevipetala*, 2009, gouache on collage on paper, 91 x 67 cm
Magnolia Grandiflora, 2009, gouache on collage on paper, 91 x 67 cm
Blue columbine, 2009, gouache on collage on paper, 91 x 67 cm
Red cannas, 2009, gouache on collage on paper, 91 x 67 cm



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Hitesh **Natalwala**



Paksploitation

Hitesh Natalwala

There are five series in this new exhibition that operate like five differing ways of looking at the same thing. That object is Hitesh Natalwala's personal identity and the history that has produced it. A history tempered by his choice of becoming an artist - giving him license to reflect and speak about his own and his family's story. Hitesh's collages within these five series act like a set of re-mixes of his history; cut-and-pasting imagery from his personal experiences, he has constructed a kind of visual map - layering references from popular culture over and under his own 'Indian-ness'. In the face of the recent and rapid process of globalization any idea of a fixed cultural identity today is fast becoming rendered non-performative. The end of colonialism, while freeing millions of people from oppression, left a space in which globalization has made all cultural identity seemingly homogenous. National and localized identity has given way to multi-national consumerism and the awe of an intangible network of products and services. Today we are what we buy. The global marketplace now determines who we are and how we behave. But it is exactly the plethora of contemporary and historical visual imagery that is the stuff of Hitesh's art. In these series of collages he works and plays with the endless possibilities of image-jamming through happenstance and accident - but cleverly mediated by a personal narrative.

The title of the show, *Paksploitation* is a word made by splicing two other words together, namely Pakistani and exploitation. It is also a play on the word 'blaxploitation', a movie genre that parodied Hollywood exploitation films by mixing in a solid chunk of Black urban American culture. As a kid growing up in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s Hitesh, like other teenagers, was subject to the bombardment of consumerist driven pop culture - but being an Indian immigrant from Kenya a lot of what he saw and heard was somehow foreign and a bit strange with few if any references to his own cultural background. This sense of displacement, common to most immigrant experience, gave Hitesh a kind of personal sense of absence and much of the work in this exhibition is about re-placing himself into that context by cut-and-pasting his own image into icons of pop culture of those decades. In *Agni*, for instance, Hitesh slots himself into an image taken from the 1970 film of Chester Himes' book *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, while in *Akash* he stands in for Clint Eastwood in the *Gauntlet*. Both movies were classic over-the-top exploitation films with a heightened sense of everything. Hitesh's presence in these images

immediately re-scribes them as Bollywood making them into metaphors through which the personal becomes the political. In a way Hitesh's Indian identity stands for India and its place in a globalized pop culture - a new culture from which all personal and national histories are being refashioned and represented as stories. But hidden in this spectacle are still spaces that allow for traditions and nuances of localized experience. Hitesh's father and grandfather were both tailors - a craft Hitesh learnt but has not practiced. However the meticulousness of craft is apparent in the extreme care of the manufacture of the pixelated collages in the *What lies beneath* series. Thousands of sticky dots have been painstakingly cut and placed to make images that hide their construction under the visual power of fields of pattern and shapes reminiscent of Indian textiles and even more ancient iconography. What do lie below these pixelated images are copies of pages from women's magazines from 1959 - an eccentric juxtaposition or apparent accident for sure - but visually a beautiful remix of old and new, abstract and real, text and image.

In the most recent series - three works in which amoebic shapes seem to float on a field of chatty texts from magazine pages - you get the feeling that these shapes are somehow able to relate to each other by their shared alienation. In two of the works, *he gave her a gentle nudge towards it* and *everyone seemed to be talking at once* these cell-like forms touch each other gently joining together suggesting intimacy and closeness in counterpoint to the rigid grid of text they float upon. Their shared identity seems somehow symbolic of diasporic life. Where family and relationships form a kind of resistance to the alienation of what appears to be an almost meaningless and banal global culture of indulgence.

Hitesh's personal narrative acts like a kind of register in these works that easily flip between the autobiographical and the symbolic, reminding us that in contemporary culture the production of any sort of shared symbolic language is dependent on the ability of individual identities to be able to participate in that language. While Hitesh manages to recuperate some particular textual histories in telling his story - he does so in a way that delights us visually.

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