



Cover: *Swing Time*, 2006, paint, paper collage, 96 x 76 cm

Above: *Line*, 2004, paper collage, 20 x 13.5cm

Left: *Portrait 3*, 2006, paint, paper collage, 60 x 50 cm

Inside left: *the more Ursula thought about the scheme, the better she liked it*, 2007, paint, paper collage, 96 x 76 cm

Inside right: *meanwhile, they were more curious than unfriendly*, 2007, paint, paper collage, 126 x 101 cm

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Hitesh **Natalwala**



Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational.

Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

In a conversation over dinner one evening in Sydney, Hitesh Natalwala's father recounted the story of his family's migration, a harrowing tale of turmoil, loss, uncertainty and survival during the 1968 Kenyan exodus which saw thousands of ethnic Indians leave East Africa for Britain. Political reforms had prevented Indians – many of whom had lived in Kenya for generations – from holding jobs or running businesses, rendering them socially and politically powerless.

Natalwala's father's story was paradigmatic in that it defined the post-colonial experience as being centred on a history of displacement. Yet his story was only one chapter of an ongoing family history of migration. Natalwala's forebears had migrated from India to South Africa, on to Kenya, and then the UK. It is a history of rootlessness, improvisation, adaptability and resourcefulness. These themes are at the core of Natalwala's art practice, where art provides a strategy for recording and coming to terms with the personal and political journeys that have shaped and defined his life.

Hitesh Natalwala studied painting at St Martin's School of Art, London, from 1986-1989. In 2001 Natalwala moved to Australia to be closer to family who had left London to escape Britain's racial conservatism. An early body of work produced in Australia consisted of a series of small-scale abstract paper collages that recombined fragments from old books, papers and letters, to re-trace and re-connect with a family history of diaspora. These works explored notions of memory and the construction of a sense of self through the act of remembering. Works such as *Paper* (2004) and *Line* (2004) demonstrated Natalwala's capacity to produce very precise, ordered images which were as much concerned with an economy of material as they were with the complexities of composition and making. These works defined a process that has continued to inform Natalwala's practice.

Natalwala has since begun to develop a pictorial language to represent an ongoing multi-generational experience of migration. Works such as *Swing Time* (2006) and the cryptically titled *the more Ursula thought about the scheme, the better she liked it*

(2007), depict a range of personal symbols – flowers, plants, targets, amoebic and molecular shapes – that suggest motility, movement, adaptation and transformation. They take stock of a range of formative visual references, from Indian movie magazines to European post-war architecture to Japanese manga to American pulp-fiction graphic design.

More recent collages reveal a move to figuration with its narrative and autobiographical implications. *Portraits 1-3* (2006) are an impressionistic series of portraits of Natalwala's aunts. They are the recollections of a family dispersed through the phenomena of diaspora, combining a strong graphic sensibility with an interest in painting. On the one hand the fractured, abstracted silhouettes of Natalwala's relatives suggest a kind of dispossession, contending with the experience of a loss of place and culture. But they also circumscribe a larger network of belonging, alluding to the possibility of an expanded sense of place as affected through these relationships.

The wry *meanwhile, they were more curious than unfriendly* (2007) is a development on these concerns. This pixelated, brightly coloured, large-scale collage draws on a pop-art, Bollywood poster sensibility. Evoking the sentimentalism of a Doris Day film, the work is a seemingly nostalgic recollection of a mixed race relationship. However, as the title implies, the work addresses the personal implications and effects of decolonisation and race politics in Britain. More specifically it records the self-defining moment of realisation of the radical possibility of a shift from a place of racial marginalisation through acceptance to mutual attraction.

Thus drawing on a personal present, Natalwala undertakes an exploration of what it is to live in the post-colonial diaspora. His carefully constructed collages describe a process of tracing and re-constellating the contours of a transient, transnational life, contending with the idea of decolonised cultures as being re-formed through a dynamic social process, set in motion through the phenomena of displacement or diaspora. His collages tackle issues concerning the experience of cultural loss, disorientation and the search for community, but propose a realigned notion of cultural communities as being formed globally through a dynamic and expansive social process.

Haema Sivanesan

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