

# ARTFORUM

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## REVIEWS

### MUMBAI

## Kanishka Raja

GALERIE MIRCHANDANI + STEINRUECKE

Visitors to Kanishka Raja's "I Have Seen the Enemy and It Is Eye" were welcomed into the exhibition by *Opening Ceremony*, 2009, a giant, flattened chandelier applied in gold leaf against a stark black wall. The work was an appropriately dramatic entrance for the pro-



Kanishka Raja,  
*Cruise (Green Stripes)*,  
2008, oil on canvas,  
60 x 84"

fessional debut in India of the Calcutta-raised, New York-based painter, who has already held solo exhibitions at institutions such as the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University and the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston. Raja left Calcutta to study in the US and settled in New York following a stint in Boston. In spite of a migratory pattern common in the Indian- and South Asian-American art worlds, Raja rejects the rubric and expected identity markers of "diaspora art." Focusing on airports, aircraft, and other thresholds, Raja's paintings evoke experiences that are transient and transnational.

Most of the paintings in "I Have Seen the Enemy" are interior landscapes that integrate architectural forms, multiple spatial perspectives, and geometric design matrices from sources like fabric patterns and arabesque forms. *Cruise (Green Stripes)*, 2008, depicts the center of a private jet furnished with plush seats, a wall of televisions, and a row of machine guns. Its ground is vertically divided into two so that the left half dissolves into abstract color stripes and the right presents a rigid one-point representational reality. When exteriors are shown, they are mediated by unusual orientations, as in *Descent (Road Stripes)*, 2008, which forces the viewer to look down through the sights of a gun aimed from a tilted airplane window at an anonymous cityscape and an open airfield. People are entirely absent from these scenes, although traces of their presence are abundant and occasionally humorous—as in slabs of raw meat strewn among suitcases and tents evincing makeshift airport dwellings in *Escalate (Grey Stripes)*, 2008. Through the meeting of incongruous angles, subtle edges, and unlikely objects, the viewer's process of seeing becomes part of the

narrative of each work. Thus, the exhibition's title, which sounds at first like a throwaway cliché, suggests a theme intrinsic to this show. As implied by some of its iconography, Raja's work is often political, alluding to 9/11 and other episodes of terrorism and collective violence. The presentation is occasionally overdone, as in the wall installation *Where Were You in 92?*, 2008, which refers to the December 1992 attack on Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. The work replicates in aluminum the pattern from the mosque's *jali*—a pierced screen that acts as an outer wall or window to divide architectural space—with fragmented media images from recent global conflicts pasted on the back and made visible by a polished steel mirror on the wall. Additional cutouts of both faces of the pattern dispersed on the floor—like hot coals that require the viewer to mind his or her feet—add a bit of overkill to an otherwise engaging piece.

A better example of Raja's achievement in developing a cohesive and subtle exhibition is in the dramatic installation of *Nine/Ten*, 2007, a patterned, composite Escher-like pencil drawing of buildings attacked and destroyed worldwide between March 1993 and September 10, 2001. While the work might not otherwise attract attention, it is enhanced by being visible through the doorway of an adjacent room, which uses the drawing replicated many times over as its wallpaper. With his unusual perspectives on exhibition design and painting alike, Raja brought a substantial new perspective to the Mumbai scene, initiating a critical intervention into those identity categories that his work so constructively ignores.

—Beth Citron