

MUMBAI / GALERIE MIRCHANDANI + STEINRUECKE

## Kanishka Raja: *I Have Seen the Enemy and It Is Eye*



KANISHKA RAJA,  
*Cruise (Green Stripes)*,  
2008, oil on canvas,  
152 x 213 cm.

New York-based, Kolkata-born Kanishka Raja's first solo show in Mumbai, "I Have Seen the Enemy and It Is Eye," lived up to its tongue-twisting title: Raja's exhibition was dedicated to exposing contemporary society's baffling inability to ascribe blame for its political ailments.

The 40-year-old artist exhibited six photo-based paintings of antiseptic spaces (shopping malls, airports and stadiums) and a delicate metal wall sculpture, *Where were you in 92?* (2009), whose filigreed pattern resembles the wrought-iron grills and friezes of Islamic monuments. Patterned black-and-white wallpaper depicting collapsing urban structures covered an archway in the gallery and was meant to insert an architectural element into the display by framing the black-and-white drawing of tumbling cityscapes Raja positioned on the facing wall. Each of the artist's purposefully decorative offerings discussed destruction and toyed with notions of excess.

According to Raja, this dual concern is served because his art embraces two traditions of art-making. The first is the use of pattern, gold leaf and color as found in Indian and Persian miniatures; the second is an interest in geometric perspective, developed in the Italian Renaissance and widely employed in Western art.

Fodder for art-historical musings aside, Raja's East-West dialogues have a less pleasant rationale too: his paintings invariably make us feel guilty for failures of communication. Although all of Raja's paintings refer to human habitation—shops are stocked with expensive-looking merchandise or luggage and wheelchairs are parked at airports—we never see any people. Consequently, as spectators we are made culpable for any wrongdoing depicted in the works. The oil-on-canvas *Cruise (Green Stripes)* (2008) bluntly points fingers in our direction. A luxurious private plane with pistachio-green carpeted interiors and polished wooden

tables balancing crystal goblets of whiskey and a twinkling chandelier, has a row of black guns propped next to a window in the far right-hand corner. Are the ugly machines waiting for us to pick them up? There is no one else around. Is Raja alluding to 9/11 with his slick renderings of planes—however plush—and holding us responsible in our various ways for terrorist activity? The painting *Ascent (Gold Stripes)* (2008) is less confrontational. Raja serves up a scene of abstract luxury: golden triangles are suspended in a sea of deep blue. Viewed from a different angle, though, they could be tents in a glass building—is it an airport or a stadium? Since the structure is deserted, either of these readings makes it appear eerily abandoned. In its own low-key way, "I Have Seen the Enemy and It Is Eye" took the photorealism language of painting associated with Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke in the last few years in a new direction. The show successfully carried off Raja's mixed-marriage between a consciously Oriental love of pattern and so-called Western perspective.

In *Everything closer than everything else* (2008), his deft use of perspective propels us into the narrative. We enter the image by peering down an escalator, as if poised to step onto it and embark on a spending spree in the eight-story shopping center depicted. "The viewer," Raja reiterated when he was in Mumbai, "is always placed at the edge of the picture." Meanwhile, the artist, with his penchant for pretty patterns, inserts miniature-like elements. The building in *Everything closer than everything else* is clad in jewel-bright glory: gaudy lapis-blue, topaz-yellow and ruby-red stripes delineate the different levels of the mall. With his exaggerated palette and clever perspective, Raja effectively lectures us about greed.

Mumbai has seen a lot of diaspora art in recent years. The South Asian living in New York and exploring this supposed burden in their work is becoming old hat; Chitra Ganesh's prints inspired by the comic *Amar Chitra Katha* have been wending their way through the commercial circuit for two years. Raja's twin concerns with pattern and perspective also touch on issues of East and West. Still, his painterly dexterity in juggling the two enable him at least to see the enemy that is cliché and invariably steer clear of it. ●

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