

thought of seeing old people, old black people is really a strange thought for me, or even knowing how they live from day to day; and keeping hold of those tales is really important to me, it gives me a sense of knowing what I am about. I'm from here, but I'm also from there as well . . .

An Asian woman is sitting watching the television, quietly peeling a potato. The potato grasped in her hand and submitted to the peeler is actually the head of the former Home Secretary, Leon Brittan. Sutapa Biswas's work, titled *The Only Good Indian* . . . , is hardly softened by its humour. Many of her works use satire, as she says: 'So many things are so ironic, they can be quite funny . . . that is something I try to incorporate.' In *Unrecorded Truths* she exhibited *Blind Man's Bluff*, a work that originated from an experience on a train hearing a blind South African white man swearing about blacks to the acute embarrassment of a woman sitting near to Biswas. The pastel includes a text across it:



Blind Man's Bluff.

Storm trooping eyes of a dazed cornflake eating Mr Harry sitting opposite kneecaps not twitching or bouncing. Noticed he was blind in the eyes and thought for a minute and yes. Oh what a calamity said the woman squirming like a jelly. In tinfoil crisps pressed evenly on the top of my tongue. Fuck the bastards he grunted. I bit the vinegar pass the salt. This face the colour of dandruff spit tongue devil anecdote I smile passing grin exchanging air crossing legs and swallowing crisps sweet smile of reason blossoms and cornflakes recedes.

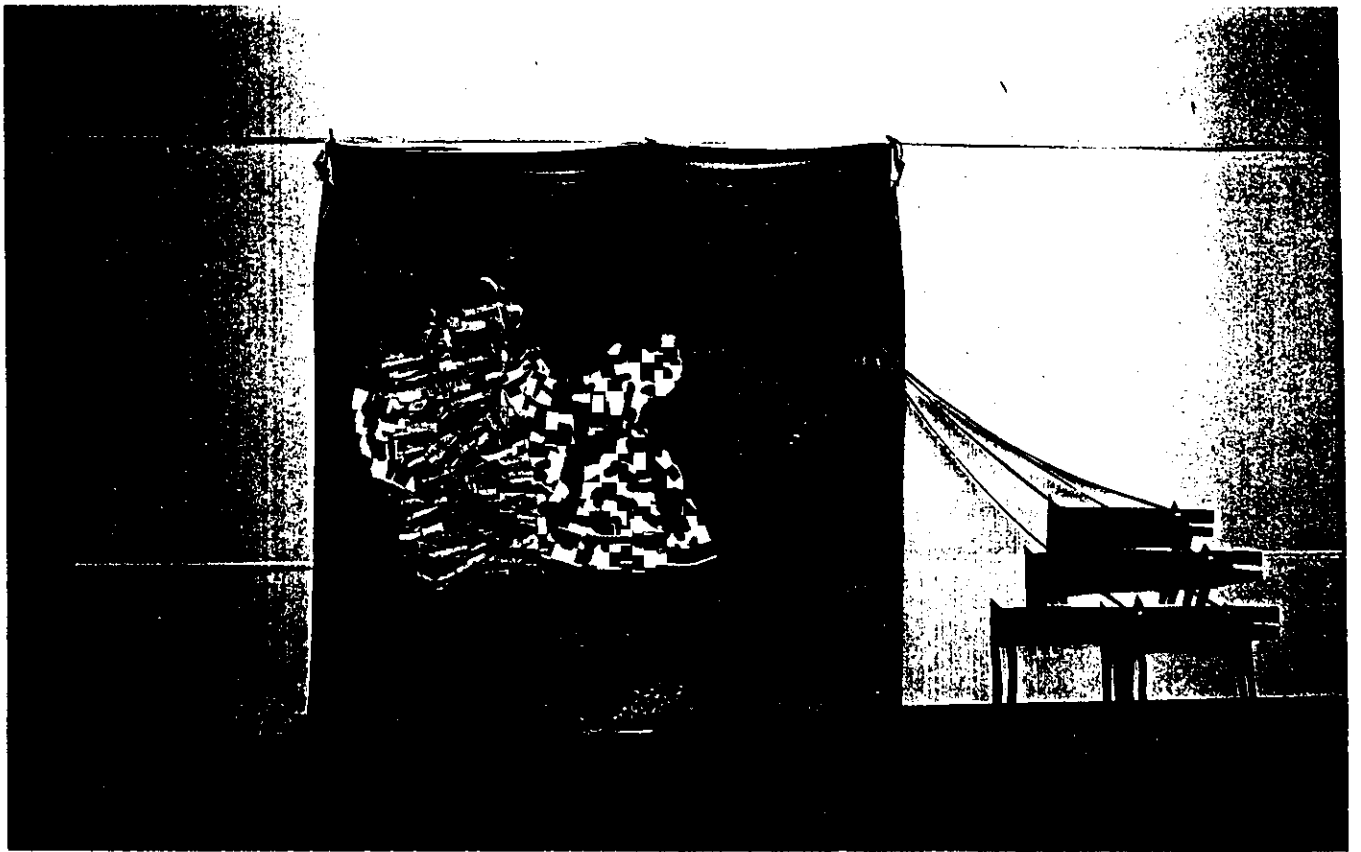
SUTAPA BISWAS

In most of my work I've tried to trace certain elements within my own cultural history . . . to use ideas of myth and to rework those ideas to signify, in very crude ways, imperialism. To try and make the viewer aware of the fact that a particular cultural history existed and to try and encourage the viewer to question what happened to that culture. How was it inverted? Where does it fit into the present-day existence of, for instance, black people, whether they're Afro-Caribbean or Asian people living within Britain? I try to link everyday events to things that perhaps are not everyday events like the idea of myth, story, heroes and heroines . . . to say that we are all goddesses, we are all heroines, we are all gods. And our histories can be within our own hands.

Whether our statement is conscious or instinctive, whether it is expressed superficially, through outward appearance, or through fundamental changes in outlook and lifestyle, it will serve to reaffirm our rejection of the dominant culture and its attempted negation of our way of life. So any act of cultural defiance or ideological independence – whether it be through song, dance, our use of language, the way we style our hair, our dress, our view of the world, a painting or a poem – testifies to our existence *outside* the roles in which British society has cast us. BEVERLEY BRYAN, STELLA DADZIE and SUZANNE SCAFE, *The Heart of the Race*, p. 212.

The dilemma of belonging and not belonging to this society is the reality these artists are addressing themselves to, not through a mythical level or some phoney spiritual stance derived from their own traditional cultures. They are fully aware of their place and responsibility in the present world. They know that our present predicament is not the result of a natural process or a conflict between our traditional cultures and the modern world. It is in fact a dire consequence of a global economic system, with a highly complex and sophisticated superstructure of ideas, values and attitudes; and this superstructure is commonly known as Western civilisation. RASHEED ARAEEN,

193 Sutapa Biswas, *Blind Man's Bluff*, 1986.



189 Lubaina Himid, *Freedom and Change*, 1984.



190 Sutapa Biswas, *The Only Good Indian . . .*, 1985.

ART

Artists explore 'Otherness'

Legacy of Festival 2000 may be more awareness of minority visual art

By David Bonetti
EXAMINER ART CRITIC

FESTIVAL 2000 might have imploded from the combined weight of unpaid bills and unsold tickets, but the positive energy generated from the festival of the art and culture of Third World peoples and their diaspora in the United States will undoubtedly enrich the Bay Area art scene for many seasons to come.

Although the theatrical component of Festival 2000 was emphasized, the contribution from visual arts presenters might turn out to be its greatest success. During October, virtually every one of San Francisco's alternative spaces scheduled an exhibition that featured work by ethnic minorities or artists from Third World countries. Collectively, they offer San Franciscans an opportunity to see what their neighbors are up to in the visual arts, and you would hope that, say, members of the Latino community would use the occasion to check out what Chinese-Americans are doing (and, of course, vice versa).

The irony is that The City's alternative spaces have long been responsible to multi-cultural expression. Now that Festival 2000 has officially bit the dust, it would be too bad if the public failed to take advantage of the plethora of interesting exhibitions, many of which continue through November.

Some of the exhibits, such as New Langton Art's "Extended Families: 250,000 Filipinos" (through Nov. 17) and Southern Exposure's "Completing the Circle: Six Artists," which features Chinese-American artists (through Nov. 8) are organized around the work of artists of a particular ethnicity. But the most interesting raise issues central to being culturally "Other."

"Disputed Identities," curated by Rupert Jenkins and Chris Johnson at SF Camerawork (through Nov. 24), explores a variety of work by artists from the United States and Britain, who by virtue of their national origin or skin color are denied a full sense of cultural belonging. Because of their allegiance to being Americans or Britons and African American, Chinese American or South Asian, according to the curators, they experience a sense of "disputed" identity, which they attempt to address through their art.

The work is indisputably political in content, and the exhibition makes no secret of its ideology. The "Camerawork Quarterly" that accompanies the exhibition opens with a statement by David Levi Strauss that makes its position clear.



Supta Biswas uses negative images to give a sense of "otherness" in a majority culture (detail from "Infestations of the Aorta — Shrine to a Distant Relative")

He writes, "The 'Culture Wars' that the political right is currently waging against cultural diversity in the United States and the United Kingdom are futile attempts to shore up a rapidly disintegrating mythology. The myth of the monoculture is promulgated in the symbolic arena by the powerful in order to consolidate their power and to restrict cultural development. The myth is fundamentally racist, homophobic and chauvinistic. . . . And it permeates our current cultural institutions like a cancer."

THE TRUTH is that post-traditional societies like those in the U.S. and the U.K. are conglomerates of many cultural groups and traditions. 'Multiculturalism' is not something arts administrators, critics, artists or planners have the power to say yes or no to anymore. It is a natural fact. But it is also a fact that individuals within these various cultural groupings are increasingly defined and controlled by the way their representation in word and image is constructed. The question, Why are certain things visible and others not? is a political one."

The artists represented in the exhibition are from African American, Asian American, Native American and — in British usage — "Black," to mean all people of color, backgrounds, including South Asian. Thus, they express a wide diversity of cultural constructs in their work. But what is

perhaps most interesting is how they interpret their "Otherness" through specific American and British patterns.

The British work is all explicitly ideological. The influence of Victor Burgin, the teacher, theorist and artist who long taught at a working class art school in London, is evident in much of it — specifically, the wedding of dead-pan photo-journalistic images with fact-laden texts from works of sociology or political theory to create a visual disjunction between the seen and the real.

For instance, in Vincent Stokes' Untitled (1989), photos taken in the streets of London accompany headlines from the Evening Standard such as "Black crime on the increase, the alarming figures," and "Police demand more powers to curb violent crime." The collusion of police authority and the press create a sense of urban dread, based on black crime, which is familiar whether located in London, New York or Oakland. In smaller print in the margins, Stokes has printed crime studies that point out that commissions of white collar crime "far exceed those of all other crime combined."

THE AMERICAN work, on the other hand, is all based in personal experience, and if there is a move to generalization, it more likely engages linguistics or philosophy. Lyle Ashton Harris's "Reclaiming Sensuality" is a lyrical

paean to black homoeroticism that, in the tradition of lyric poetry, makes little connection with anything outside the lovers net.

Carrie Mae Weems' work analyzes the limiting nature of words in a smart, if not tart, way. Three identical blue-tinted photographs of a young African American boy are hung side by side. Each is captioned by a single word — "BLUE," "BLACK," "BOY" — which are loaded with implications in a color-coded culture. The words alter profoundly the reading of the image.

Bay Area photographer Diane Tani explores the divided reality of Asian Americans through appropriated photographs and her own texts. In "My Move or Yours?" she couples the title text with the grainy image of a small Asian boy wearing the distinctive hat and holster and gun set of an American cowboy. Tani writes emotionally about her cultural paradox, "We are the 'model minority' on the one hand and 'dogeater' on the other; exotic and second class. We are 'forever foreign.'"

Camerawork and the Art Institute are sponsoring a symposium on "Race and Media Representation" at the SFAI, Sat. at 2 pm. Participants will include artist Carrie Mae Weems, Shelby Steele, professor of English at San Jose State; Bob Blauner, professor of sociology at UC-Berkeley, and Johnny Spain, ex-Black Panther activist. Admission is \$5, \$3 for students and Camerawork members, free for the SFAI community.