

COLONIAL DRIFT PICASSO AND CONTEMPORARY ART IN SOUTH ASIA

Pepe Karmel • Revoir Picasso's symposium • March 27th, 2015

Michael Fitzgerald's 2014 exhibition *Post-Picasso: Contemporary Reactions and Picasso.mania*, currently at the Grand Palais, remind us how the gigantic achievement of Pablo Picasso continues to loom over contemporary art.¹ We should acknowledge, however, that the nature of Picasso's impact has changed significantly since the 1950s. Up until that time, each successive phase of his development had triggered an immediate revolution in the work of his contemporaries. Henceforth, Picasso pursued a more solitary course. With the exception of a few key figures such as Willem de Kooning, Francis Bacon, Alfred Manessier and Antonio Saura, the leading artists of the decades after 1950 no longer painted and sculpted in dialogue with Picasso. Movements such as Abstract Expressionism, Neo-Constructivism, and Arte Povera had only an indirect, genealogical relationship to his work.

Much of the *lingua franca* of contemporary art in Europe and the Americas derives from Cubism and collage without directly engaging with Picasso's work. What we find instead is a growing fascination with Picasso the man as the embodiment of the "great artist," and with a handful of iconic works—above all the *Demoiselles d'Avignon* and *Guernica*—as symbols of the heroic era of modernism. Postmodern artists frequently "quote" Picasso but, in doing so, reinforce our sense that he has become a personage of purely historical interest—like Velazquez or Rembrandt, the Old Masters he paraphrased without imitating.

In contrast, Picasso remains a living influence in contemporary art from South Asia, playing a role comparable to that he played in Western art of the 1930s and '40s. In part, this might be ascribed to what might be described as the different temporal structure of modern South Asian art. As Geeta Kapur argues in her seminal essay "When Was Modernism in Indian Art?," different aspects of Western modernism arrived in India at different moments—often "out of order" by Western standards—and were absorbed in diverse ways reflecting Indian needs and goals. The result is that the development of modern art on the subcontinent does not follow the same sequence as the development of modern art in Europe and North America. It may be questioned whether the concept of a single developmental sequence is valid for Indian art, much less the art of South Asia as a whole. Modernism and postmodernism co-exist, instead of one following the other; so that South Asian art includes multiple modernisms and multiple postmodernisms.²

This diversity cannot be ascribed solely to the vicissitudes of "catching up" with the West. It also reflects the economic, social, and cultural complexity of South Asia, where

the experiences of colonialism and post-colonialism have created societies combining feudal systems of agriculture, mercantilist patterns of industrialization, and free market explosions of entertainment and digital communication. To a greater extent than Europe or North America, South Asia lives simultaneously in the past, present, and future, and its art reflects the contradictions of this situation.

On one hand, then, we find postmodern Indian works such as Atul Dodiya's 1997 painting *Sour Grapes*, included in Michael Fitzgerald's *Post-Picasso* exhibition. Here, Dodiya mimics the style of Indian calendar art, combining traditional Hindu iconography with pictorial conventions (modeling, perspectival space) derived in large part from nineteenth-century English painting and illustration. As if on a calendar page, a blue-skinned Vishnu reclines in front of a row of other deities, while the god Brahma, seated on a lotus blossom, emerges from his navel. But in Dodiya's painting Brahma has been replaced by Picasso's 1939 portrait of Jaime Sabartés; furthermore, Dodiya has modified Sabartés' features to resemble his own. The painting is a dazzling display of postmodern cross-references, alluding to Picasso's status as a deity of modern art and joking about the artist's own participation in this cult.



1. G. RAVINDER REDDY
Under the Tree
1997
Deitch Projects
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Picasso plays a more subtle role in Ravinder Reddy's monumental sculpture *Under the Tree* (fig. 1), also from 1997. In contrast to *Sour Grapes*, where the iconography is primarily Indian while the style reflects Western conventions, both the subject matter and the style of *Under the Tree* seem to derive from purely Indian sources. The female figure in *Under the Tree* looks back to the carved erotic reliefs at temples

such as Khajuraho and Orissa and to the cast bronzes carried in medieval religious processions, but her more proximate source lies in the carved and painted wood sculptures used in religious processions today. At first glance, then, Reddy's work seems simply to assert the right of such vernacular sculpture to be seen on the same stage as other types of contemporary art.

However, the longer one studies the figure in *Under the Tree*, the more she seems to diverge from these sources. While the erotic figures on temples were shown in the nude, the medieval bronzes manifested a more complex relationship between nudity and adornment. They were cast in a state of semi-nudity (as they are now shown in museums), but before being displayed in processions were washed with milk and other sacred substances and dressed in elaborate costumes concealing almost everything except their faces. The modern polychrome sculptures used in processions are imagined and sculpted from the outset as clothed figures. The nudity of Reddy's gilt figure represents a provocative variation on the vernacular tradition from which it emerges.

Her bodily proportions and stance also fit uneasily into Indian tradition. The bulges and concavities of her limbs and torso have little in common with the svelte plumpness of the figures at Khajuraho or Orissa, or the serpentine slenderness of Chola bronzes. Her stylized facial features resemble those of modern-day processional figures, but the detailed, non-idealized physiognomy of her body belongs to a completely different style. Furthermore, her rigidly symmetrical stance, with arms extended at either side of her body, represents a complete rejection of the "S"-curve pose that is the Indian equivalent of contrapposto, as ubiquitous in Indian sculpture as contrapposto is in Western.

It does not seem unreasonable, then, to look for a non-Indian source for the pose and anatomy of the figure in *Under the Tree*. As soon as we do so, it is a Picasso that presents itself as the most likely candidate: specifically, his *Pregnant Woman* of 1950 (fig. 2). Here we find the same rigidly symmetrical pose, the arms extended at either side of the body, and the visual rhyme between the protuberances of breasts and belly.



2. PABLO PICASSO
Pregnant Woman
 Vallauris, 1950-1959
 Bronze, 109 x 30 x 34 cm
 Musée national Picasso-Paris
 Dation Pablo Picasso, 1979. MP338
 © Paris, RMN - Grand Palais / Mathieu Rabeau
 © Succession Picasso, 2016

The juxtaposition of the two figures illuminates the artistic achievements of both Reddy and Picasso. To begin with, it helps remove *Pregnant Woman* from its conventional interpretive framework. Yes, the sculpture reflects the personal impasse of Picasso's life at this moment: he wanted his companion, Françoise Gilot, to have a third child, but she refused, inspiring him to compensate with this compensatory image of a pregnant woman. Yes, it demonstrates the technique of allegorical bricolage that Picasso had developed at Vallauris, using literal ceramic vessels to form the figure's belly and breasts, the vessels of new life and of life-sustaining milk. However, Reddy helps us see features of *Pregnant Woman* that we have overlooked. To begin with, there is her rigid symmetrical stance, as unusual in Western art as in Indian. This strict frontality should endow her with a sense of hieratic authority, but other aspects of the figure conspire to subvert it. From Pharaoh Menkaure and his wife in 2500 BC to Michelangelo's David in 1500 AD, the look of authority in Western sculpture is communicated by a large head and shoulders positioned over a narrow waist, supported by long legs. Although the *Pregnant Woman's* shoulders are heroically broad, her head is small, and her short, spindly legs seem grossly inadequate to support her massive torso. She looks as if she might topple over at any moment.

The rhyme between the *Pregnant Woman's* breasts and belly draws our attention to the fact that Picasso has reversed the usual proportions of the torso, concentrating its mass and volume at its base rather than its apex. Within the Western tradition, this reversal is usually associated with medieval sculptures of the Crucifixion (as in the Gero Cross), where the protuberant belly serves as a sign of the abjectness of the body. In contrast, in the *Pregnant Woman* it is a sign of abundant health and fertility. In effect, Picasso has conflated the Son and the Virgin, creating the emblem of a new, pagan religion.

Comparison to the Picasso helps us, in turn, to recognize distinctive characteristics of Reddy's sculpture. Where the *Pregnant Woman's* head is diminutive, hers is enlarged. Where the *Pregnant Woman's* legs are short and spindly, hers are long. Her thighs are broad and powerful, although her calves are short and her ankles narrow, creating a similar sense of instability. Her torso does not celebrate fertility. Rather, the contrast between her idealized breasts (supported by an invisible brassiere) and her realistic belly suggests that the gods themselves may have to deal with the effects of aging. In sum, Reddy's dialogue with Picasso allows him to address the tension between real and ideal in our image of the body, a tension as significant within the Indian tradition as within the Western.

From Reddy, I would like to turn to a contemporary Pakistani painter, Unver Shafi Khan, whose 2012 painting *Homage to Souza 5* (fig. 3) recalls Picasso's Surrealist heads of the 1930s. Indeed, the title of Shafi's painting allows us to define this genealogical relationship with some precision. Shafi is referring to Francis Newton Souza, a leading figure of Indian art in the 1950s and '60s. In 1947, along with M.F. Husain and S.H. Raza, Souza was a founding member of the Bombay Progressives Artists' Group.



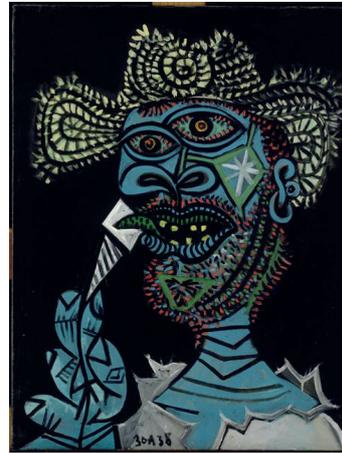
3. UNVER SHAFI KHAN
Homage to Souza 5
November 2012
Oil on canvas, diptych, 182,88 x 152,4 cm

Picasso was a valuable model for the Progressives, as for other artists in nations caught up in the struggle for independence. His incorporation of African art broke down the hierarchy between “civilized” and “barbarian,” subverting the cultural hierarchy that justified colonialism. The Cuban artist, Wifredo Lam, for instance, used the *Demoiselles d’Avignon* to create a brilliant style of Afro-Cubism. More broadly, Picasso’s strikingly varied styles demonstrated that a modern artist could select particular elements from art history and recombine them in ways that created new languages for modern art. Picasso showed that hybridity could be as modernist as purity, that you could be a student of European art history without being a slave to it. This too provided a liberating example for non-Western artists.

Souza appropriated and reconfigured elements of Picasso’s work just as Picasso had appropriated and reconfigured the work of his precursors. In a 1949 painting of a *Nude with Mirror*, for example, Souza combines the iconography of Picasso’s 1932 *Girl Before a Mirror* with the powerful modeling and gigantesque physiognomy of Picasso’s “Neo-Classical” figures.³ Souza’s “classic” nudes of the 1950s move further away from specific Picassian prototypes, but their combination of heavy linear contours with densely textured impasto draws on multiple phases of Picasso’s work as well as modern French painting more generally.⁴ In his “chemical paintings” of the 1960s, Souza uses solvents to transform found images, and redraws the faces of his figures with melting, biomorphic forms inspired by Picasso’s *Weeping Women* of the 1930s.⁵

The biomorphic features of Souza’s 1960s figures provide the starting point for Unver Shafi’s 2012 series of homages. Each blob-like form of *Homage to Souza 5* seems to correspond to a facial feature—a nose, an ear, a brow, or a chin—and the blobs have been piled up into a mountainous mass suggesting the general configuration of a human head. But there is no one-to-one correspondence between the elements of Shafi’s composition and the elements of a face. (Indeed, the literal motif represented in this series of paintings is a rhinoceros horn wrapped in plasticine.)⁶ In its monstrous lack of humanity, the head in *Homage to Souza 5* recalls Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*, an important inspiration for Picasso (as for the contemporary artist William Kentridge). Shafi’s smoothly modulated chiaroscuro also sets this series of works apart from both Picasso and Souza, making his biomorphic *fantasia* seem ominously real.

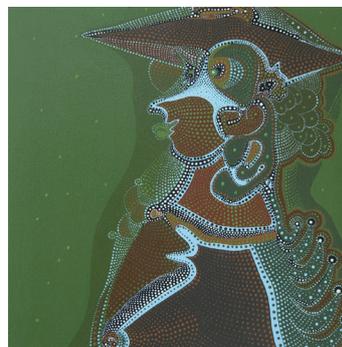
In his *Fabulist* series, begun around 2000, Shafi brilliantly invokes the linear outlines and stippled embellishments of South Asian decoration as an equivalent for the hyperactive, calligraphic style that Picasso invented in the late 1930s (fig. 4).



4. PABLO PICASSO
Man with an Ice Cream Cone
Mougins, 1938
Oil on canvas, 61 x 46 cm
Musée national Picasso-Paris
Dation Pablo Picasso, 1979. MP174
© Paris, RMN - Grand Palais / Jean-Gilles Berizzi
© Succession Picasso, 2016

In works such as *Man with an Ice Cream Cone*, from 1938, Picasso transformed each element of the face—eyes, nostrils, mouth, ear—into a powerful ideographic symbol, and filled in the spaces around these symbols with an astonishing variety of textures and colors. This *horror vacui*—the compulsion to fill every available space with a mark or pattern—grows more powerful in following decades of Picasso’s work, supplementing and challenging the architectonic sensibility that had dominated his work since 1907.

A similar tension between line and texture is evident in Shafi’s 2009 painting *Colonial Drift* (fig. 5), where hook-shaped curves define the figure’s face and garments, while the intervening spaces are filled with delicate networks of colored, stippled dots. Within each area, the curving lines of stippling suggest a three-dimensional surface, but the powerful graphic outlines flatten the image as a whole. The woman’s broad, conical hat provides an unexpected note of formality amid the uninhibited sensuousness of color and pattern.



5. UNVER SHAFI KHAN
Colonial Drift (Fabulist Series)
2009
Acrylic on Canvas, 38,1 x 38,1 cm

In other paintings of this series, Shafi depicts male and female figures engaged in elaborate dances of courtship. Within the South Asian tradition, these might be seen as updated versions of the reliefs from Khajuraho and Orissa.

At the same time, they recall the etchings of Picasso's *Suite 347* (1968), where "musketeers" in baroque costumes, with elaborate curled wigs and lace collars, paint, pursue, and peruse buxom nudes of a decidedly twentieth-century vintage. Questioned about the *Colonial Drift* series, Shafi acknowledges Picasso's inspiration, but adds "let's go further back to Rembrandt's burghers and also to British forces' hats à la the Duke of Wellington."⁷

In addition to illuminating his own work, Shafi's comments point the way to a revised and enriched view of Picasso in the 1960s. Like the *Pregnant Woman* of 1950, his paintings and graphic works of this era are too often understood in a purely biographical context. We read them exclusively as expressions of frustrated sexuality and reflections on his relationship to the Old Masters such as Velazquez and Rembrandt. However, to view Picasso from a South Asian perspective is to be reminded that Velazquez and Rembrandt painted in the era of European colonialism: that the Golden Age of Spain was based on the conquest of South America and that the wealth of 17th-century Amsterdam derived in large part from the Dutch East India Company's brutal exploitation of the Spice Islands and other parts of Asia. The aristocrats of the Spanish court and the burghers of Amsterdam were the beneficiaries of a toxic combination of enslavement and monopolies backed up by military force. Similarly, the private armies of the British East India Company allowed it to dominate trade in South Asia.

The official end of the colonial era after World War II has not brought an end to this kind of exploitation. All too often, national independence has been followed by the emergence of an elite that takes the place of the former colonizers and continues to exploit the country as a whole. The extremes of wealth and poverty, power and powerlessness, typical of the colonial era continue to characterize much of the post-colonial world. In discussions of global contemporary art, the

debate between imported modernisms and "native" vernaculars often functions as a screen concealing this tension between the elite—the main patron for contemporary art—and other social groups.

It would require a separate essay to examine the work of G. Ravinder Reddy and Unver Shafi Khan in light of these issues. Let us conclude, then, by looking at Picasso's *Suite 347* from a post-colonial—or simply colonial—point of view. In a context of court societies and merchant elites, Picasso's contrasting treatment of men and women begins to look like an allegory of social and sexual inequality: the authority of the men reinforced by their gorgeous costumes, the powerlessness of the women underscored by their humiliating nakedness. Picasso may not have intended his etchings to be read this way. But his own passage from poverty to wealth, and from anonymity to fame, gave him an intimate knowledge of the relationship between power and powerlessness, a knowledge that infuses the work of his later decades. Small wonder, then, that late Picasso is an important resource for post-colonial art.

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1. Michael Fitzgerald, *Post-Picasso: Contemporary Reactions*, exh. cat., Musée Picasso, Barcelona, 2014; *Picasso.mania*,
 2. Geeta Kapur, "When Was Modernism in Indian Art?", in Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000), pp. 297-324.
 3. F.N. Souza, *Nude with Mirror*, 1949, reproduced in Aziz Kurtha, *Francis Newton Souza* (Usmanpura,

Ahmedabad: Mapin and Ocean Township, New Jersey: Grantha, 2006), pl. 128.
 4. Souza, *Standing Nude with Folded Arms*, 1953 (Kurtha, Souza, pl. 134).
 5. Souza's *Profile of a Woman* of 1965 (Kurtha, Souza, pl. 158) is a direct homage to Picasso's *Weeping Women*. In "chemical paintings" such as his 1969 *Couple* (Kurtha, Souza, pl. 102), Souza

invents his own distinctive vocabulary of biomorphic distortion.
 6. Autobiographical text by Unver Shafi Khan, communicated by email on February 27, 2015.
 7. Shafi text of February 27, 2015. He continues: "also to the Vietnamese conical hat. I have often drawn heads with hats as in a jester or other references." This theme merits further examination.