



Sreshta Rit Premnath.

Blue Book, Moon Rock.

Multiple media and projector.

Dimensions variable. 2009.

Once In A Blue Moon

Thomas Erben's investigation of diaspora art has us running around in circles, says a pleasantly befuddled **Zehra Jumabhoy**.

BACK, FORTH AND ROUND ABOUT WAS WHAT GALLERIST Thomas Erben called a group show of three 'Indian' artists that he hosted from February the 19th to March the 21st. Videos, installations and deliberately decrepit photographs by Jaret Vadera, Vijai Patchineelam and Sreshta Rit Premnath were clustered under one roof so that Erben could "test the idea of an Indian diaspora". While, all three artists are of Indian origin, only Premnath is an Indian national - and he has lived in the U.S. for 10 years. Vadera is a Canadian of Mexican and Indian ancestry, and Patchineelam was born in Rio de Janeiro.

"Put simply," confides Erben - although there was nothing "simple" about this display - "if you remove cultural signifiers (cows, bindis, sarees, whatever clearly signifies 'Indian-ness') is there still something on a formal level or in terms of sensibility that could be described as 'Indian' in an artwork?"

As it turned out we got no straightforward answers. For, luckily, Erben's exhibition was multifaceted enough to avoid reductive pronouncements on ethnicity. Meanwhile, we encountered some exciting art on our quest. (A laudable rarity given the quality of the India-obsessed surveys we've been served up recently.)

Premnath's *Blue Book, Moon Rock*, featured a photograph of a shadowy moon rock, a chalkboard, a screen print of the moon and a light projector. Propped on a wall, each object revealed a different aspect of man's relationship to the moon. The dusty blackboard reminded us of science projects at primary school, while the fraying photograph recalled old magazine articles celebrating America's triumph in getting the first man onto the moon. These rational readings gave way to more mysterious

ones as we approached the shifting light cast by the projector onto softly gleaming silver-sprayed acetate. Was Premnath recreating the bewitching effects of moonlight?

Equally elliptical was Patchineelam's humungous black-and-white photograph named *Arthur*. Here, we were treated to the bulky backside of one of the artist's friends, as he leaned over to touch his toes. From a distance, the ungainly figure could be mistaken for an upended vase. Standing next to the rudely presented *Arthur* was a painting - which also showed *Arthur's* black-clad behind off to similar effect. By presenting a person like an object (i.e. a vase), within an object (the photograph) as a reflection of another object (a.k.a. the painting), Patchineelam had turned the debate around to its point of departure: what's so unique about the self in the world? Are we just images of images or - worse - doomed to be seen as objects by others?

Unusually, even the most obvious artworks contributed something positive to this carefully tricky exhibition. Such as Vadera's mixed media 'decollage': this represented the idea of multiple identities obfuscating each other with literal zeal. A photograph of a tiger hunt had been torn up and re-assembled as a sculptural object; layers of paint and gold glitter making it difficult to glimpse the image of the dead tiger nestled in their midst. With this 'disappearing' tiger, Vadera might have been critiquing or catering to ill-informed New Yorkers' identification of India with bright hues, gold spangles and untamed animals. Whichever way, in a show of muted tones - Erben's investigation of the grey areas of identity assumed mainly monochromatic forms - the 'decollage' injected a seductive splash of colour into an otherwise austere exploration.