



## The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today

Until Fri May 7 [Saatchi Gallery](#), Duke of York's HQ, King's Rd, London, SW3 4SQ

**Art: Art museums & institutions**

**By JJ Charlesworth** Posted: Thu Feb 4 2010

Unless you've been living under a rock for the last couple of years, you've probably noticed that India has become a big deal.

Whether it's Gordon Ramsay 'effing' his way round India's authentic cuisine, or another telly re-run of 'Slumdog Millionaire', we open-minded Brits are being culturally habituated to the prospect of a century in which India, along with China, will be ascendant, economically and politically. And the art world is happy to get in the culture game. After the Serpentine's 'India Highway' last year, The Saatchi Gallery rocks in with 'The Empire Strikes Back'.

It's a witty title for a show. Here, 'The Empire Strikes Back' is saying, is the product of India's struggle for independence from the old British Empire, finally realised in 1947. The show opens with Jitish Kallat's wall-sized rendering of Gandhi's 1930 speech on the eve of the 'salt march', the first great march of civil disobedience following the Indian National Congress's initial declaration of independence. Gandhi's words, calling on Indians to defy the British taxes on salt production, are formed out of letters shaped like human bones. It's a haunting piece; Gandhi's living, defiant words sitting now in dead silence.

To give shape to such an historic expression of the desire for human liberty in a mass of bones might suggest that this desire is futile - free or enslaved, we all die in the end - but by combining these opposites so precisely, Kallat's piece manages to point to how an ideal as elevated as liberty is always the product of a multitude of ordinary living, mortal people. People die, but liberty lives on in the world's biggest democracy.

Remarkably, then, Charles Saatchi's taste for big, visually striking chunks of sculpture manages to alight on art works that can contain more than a single, obvious message. This is perhaps because art made out of India's complex encounter with archaic tradition and democratic modernity can never be one-dimensional. So many of the artists work across three distinct questions - Indian art's dialogue with a once dominant Western modernism, India's political past and present, and an often conflicting attitude toward the cultural consequences of rapid economic growth and secular attitudes.

Subodh Gupta's sparkling accumulations of cheap, stainless steel pots and vessels, for example, offer a sort of Indian neo-pop-art - a giant UFO saucer, or a huge water-bucket overflowing with many smaller water pots - that buzzes with the intoxicating sense of an economy producing ever more, ever faster.

There are of course more pessimistic visions of accumulation; Tallur L.N.'s grotesque pile of black latex mattresses stacked on a hospital bedframe, inflating and deflating, offers only the accumulation of poverty that is still an Indian reality. Elsewhere, Mumbai painters T Venkanna and Atul Dodiya variously hijack twentieth-century westerners such as Henri Rousseau and Jasper Johns, in paintings that force Western primitivism and avant-gardism into historical dialogue with the mixed iconography of India's aesthetic traditions and its urban present.

And yet, catchy title notwithstanding, this isn't quite a show of 'Indian' art. Out of the 26 artists, five of them, though of Indian descent, were born and work in the USA. Two are from Pakistan, and one British artist, Shezad Dawood is included.

The 'Indian experience', then, isn't quite the same for those artists not actually living there, and it shows. Unlike their India-based colleagues, the 'diaspora' artists make work that is more formally complicated, more thematically inscrutable, and far less interested in the realities of Indian society. No doubt this is a product of the fact that contemporary art in India is only just emerging as a substantial public culture, with a sense of urgent realism that more comfortable Westernised artists can afford to do without.

Yet there are standout works here too; Chitra Ganesh's disturbing reworkings of comic strips depicting classical Indian mythological stories, rewritten into violent and subtly erotic narratives of feminine power and desire, exist at the border of Indian tradition viewed through western identity politics. There's no clear 'message', just some questions, and that's a good thing.

Of course, there are some classic Saatchi-style slabs of bog-obviousness to bump into. Huma Mulji's taxidermied cow, its body forced through a concrete sewer pipe with its head emerging from the other end, makes me wonder if there's a factory somewhere in India making big, lazy, comedy-prop sculpture for international art collectors to fill their foundations with. Rashid Rana's images of muslim women in burqas, composed of thousands of tiny porno images, grinds home another 'message' without too much subtlety. And there's no video. Video cannot be art, it seems, in the slightly surreal world of the Saatchi Gallery. But that air of surreality just about suits this Indian art, for whom Indian reality is not immutable, but changing every minute.