

Born in England, raised in India, and currently residing in the United States, Annu Palakunnathu Matthew has struggled with issues of identity and her relationship to the culture of her ancestry, her place of birth, and her current place of residence. This exhibition and catalogue bring together two recent series of work, *Bollywood Satirized* and *An Indian from India*. Both series pose the question "where do I belong?" which is a recurrent thread that runs throughout the artist's work. In her artist statement Matthew writes, "My mixed or 'masala' background continually shapes my life. My photographs are interpretations rather than a documentation of my life as an Asian-Indian woman living in a diaspora. The work serves as an invitation into my personal reality shaped by influences that are cultural, personal, and photographic."

In the *Bollywood Satirized* series Matthew deconstructs the images and messages contained within Indian film industry posters. India is home to the world's largest commercial film industry, producing nearly one thousand movies in forty different languages each year. Using Adobe Photoshop Matthew digitizes actual film posters and then alters the images and text to create a new poster which at first appears to be the genuine article until one begins to discern the intervention of the artist. "Indian movies and their posters reflect the melodrama and stereotypes of Indian life," according to the artist. Employing biting social critique and parody she challenges traditional gender roles and behavior in contemporary Indian society and subverts the messages that are conveyed in these film posters which are widespread throughout the streets of India. Bringing into question issues such as arranged marriages, the dowry system, discrimination based on skin color, interracial relationships, and attitudes toward "liberated" women, Matthew also underscores the very aspects of Indian society which in turn separate her from this culture as much, if not more, than geographic distance.

In her latest body of work, *An Indian from India*, Matthew combines nineteenth century photographs of Native Americans with digitally manipulated images of Asian Indians, primarily herself, striking similar poses. For the original source material for this series Matthew obtained images from historical archives documenting

nineteenth century Native Americans. Her selection of the photographs of Edward S. Curtis and others was deliberate in order to illustrate how these images serve to reinforce stereotypes of native peoples. At the time of their creation these photographs were presented as documents of this culture, although it is commonly known that in the case of Curtis many of the images were staged and in some cases fabricated to make the final images appear more dramatic, or closer to the idealization of what whites imagined or expected Native Americans or Indians to look like. By viewing these subjects as exotic natives and curiosities these images and similar representations functioned more as fetish objects rather than historical records of indigenous peoples. For Matthew, these photographs hold a particular resonance when compared to similar period images of Asian Indians that were produced by British photographers. In this series Matthew also draws a parallel between the injustices inflicted on both Native Americans and Asian Indians by the prevailing white culture which occupied their lands.

As an immigrant Matthew is often questioned about where she is "really from" and often has to clarify her origins as an "Indian from India," even though this description does not accurately characterize her relationship to India, England, or America. Throughout her career Matthew has used photography as a means of making connections to her own cultural background but also as a method of pointing out those aspects which distance her from the same heritage. While photographs can serve as an invitation to better understand cultures other than our own, conversely, photographic representations also have the ability to emphasize and exaggerate cultural differences. In the two bodies of work, *Bollywood Satirized* and *An Indian from India*, Matthew looks to both historic and contemporary examples of how images continue to shape perception and reinforce stereotypes which she must fend off both as a woman and an Indian (from India).

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