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Using Beauty to Examine Ugly Political Truths

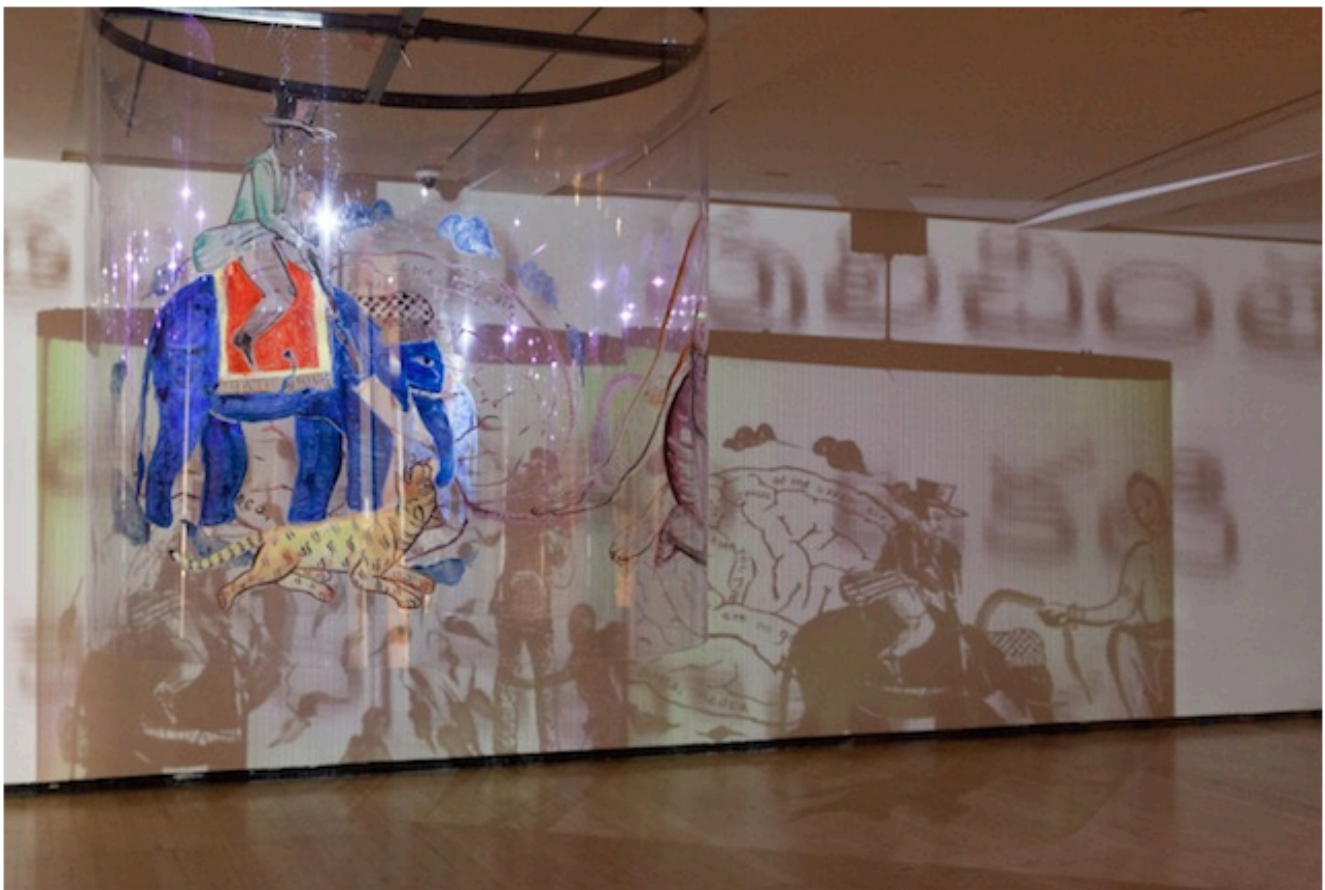
by [Laura C. Mallonee](#) on July 14, 2014



Installation view of "Transgressions II," a 2009 video/shadow play from the Asia Society Museum Collection, currently on view in "Nalini Malani: Transgressions." (image courtesy of Eileen Costa/Asia Society)

Beauty has long occupied an inferior rank in the modern art world. At best, it's deemed inconsequential — at worst, shallow. But this puritanical sentiment may be misguided, if two video works on view at the Asia Society are any indication. "Transgressions II" (2009) by Indian artist Nalini Malani and "Lotus" (2013) by Iranian artist Shiva Ahmadi both demonstrate how beauty can be a powerful agent, luring audiences toward an examination of ugly political truths.

In Malani's [immersive work](#), three video channels shine through four rotating mylar cylinders, each bearing figures whose interweaving shadows dance across the wall. These specters include the Hindu goddess Kali, an English hunter, fanciful creatures, brains, and the word "Orientalism." The latter is an overt reference to Edward Said's 1978 book about the West's domination over the East, a subject teased out in a poem written by Malani and read by her in the audio track. At one eerie point in the 13-minute video play, neglected Indian scripts seem to be falling into the ground; the sweet voice of a little girl begs, "Amma, please send me to English school."



Installation view of "Transgressions II," a 2009 video/shadow play from the Asia Society Museum Collection, currently on view in "Nalini Malani: Transgressions." (image courtesy of Eileen Costa/Asia Society)

Ahmadi's single-channel video *Lotus*, based on her 2013 painting of the same title, is equally haunting. As the animation opens, an enlightened Buddha sits atop a golden lotus throne. Monkeys and humans frolic in the surrounding landscape, holding offerings in the form of bubbles representative of spiritual wisdom. Over time, this Utopia fades. The Buddha's subjects grow violent, their bubbles turning into bombs. Birds take flight. Stained by blood, the formerly virtuous ruler becomes an ordinary despot.

Both works are as visually striking as they are politically dark, so it's no surprise their creators identify as painters. As Malani's lush images are projected on the wall, they bleed together like watercolors — vibrant extensions of her painting practice. Similarly, watching *Lotus* feels very much like seeing Ahmadi's original painting come to life; the narrative formerly frozen in time comes to pass before our eyes.



Shiva Ahmadi, "Lotus" (2013), Mixed media on acquaboard. Triptych. Overall dimensions 60 x 120 in.
(image courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery)

Each work's whimsical, two-dimensional shapes are also reminiscent of illustrations in children's picture books. This is underscored in *Transgressions II* by the way the cylinders themselves resemble shadow lamps installed in children's nurseries, and also how Malani's poem rhymes like something out of *Mother Goose & Grimm*. But any such association with children's literature seems to be coincidental.

Instead, the artists' styles stem from different traditions in Eastern religious painting. Malani look to 19th century [Kalighat painting](#). A flat, bold genre mixing Eastern and Western techniques, it formed after the British opened art schools in Bengal. In one cylinder, we see the goddess Durga, mounted on a lion wrestling the demon Mahishasura — a direct quote from a Kalighat painting. (The cylinders are also modeled after Buddhist prayer wheels, in memory of the 6th century Bamyán Buddhas, which the Taliban destroyed in 2001). Ahmadi draws similar inspiration from Persian and Indian miniatures, a flat art form less concerned with perspective and anatomy as with symbolism and storytelling. That the Buddha in *Lotus* is so much larger than his subjects reflects his power, not his diet.

Regardless of their source, these stylistic effects put the viewer in the trusting, curious mindset a child might enter when opening *Aesop's Fables*. And like those wise stories, both works are didactic. The moral of *Lotus* — that absolute power breeds corruption — is universally accessible and easy to understand. This is partly due to the linearity of the single channel film, and partly also to Ahmadi's preference for well-known Eastern and Western imagery. As the drama unfolds, we recognize camels as well as horses, arrows as well as guns, monkeys as well as robots. All are susceptible to the same wickedness, the artist suggests.

The more specific message of *Transgressions II* — that globalization and capitalism in 21st century India is destroying its culture — is conveyed through dozens of rich allusions that a Western audience might not immediately grasp. At one point in the audio track poem, the artist references Orange, a mobile phone company in India that advertised talk time for half a rupee, the cost of a traditional drink you can buy cheaply on the street — that association would be lost on most Western viewers. But Malani isn't worried about accessibility, because she doesn't privilege the West over the East. Though bewildering, her work forces you to seek out an entirely new lexicon of language and mythology from an unfamiliar part of the world.

Though such critiques are nothing new, the sensual nature of these works allows you to encounter them in a deeply visceral way. And if their political angle seems a bit heavy handed, consider that they are also forms of social protest informed by the artists' own histories. Born in Karachi in 1946, Malani's family was forced to flee after the [Partition of India](#), and she has struggled to overcome the legacy of colonialism. Ahmadi was born in Tehran just four years before the Iranian Revolution and came of age during her country's

eight-year war with Iraq. These events profoundly shaped the artists' perspectives. They have the right to speak boldly and bluntly, using any tool — most of all the alluring power of beauty — to get us to listen.

[Nalini Malani: Transgressions](#) *and* [Shiva Ahmadi: In Focus](#) continues at the Asia Society (725 Park Avenue, Upper East Side, Manhattan) until August 3.