

## [Be/Longing: A Slice of Feminist Art](#)

By Sita Reddy



This is not the first time Washington DC has seen provocative contemporary art by women artists of the South Asian diaspora. Exhibitions on Rajkamal Kahlon (Provisions Library, 2005) and Simryn Gill ([Freer-Sackler Galleries](#), 2007), to take examples, have spoken powerfully to issues of postcolonial identity and transnational migration, to histories of passage and geographies of place. But this is certainly the first major *collective* exhibition of this scale to grace the nation's capital, and the combined scope, quality, and range of conceptual *feminist* art – shown together in ways that create new dialogues -- fundamentally alters both the landscape and the aesthetics of diasporic art and immigrant activism.

The South Asian Women's Creative Collective (SAWCC, pronounced 'saucy'), is a NYC-based group that, on March 1 2013, opened [Be/Longing](#), its debut exhibition in Washington DC at the Smith Center's Joan Hisaoka Gallery. For over fifteen years, the collective – founded by Jaishri Abichandani in 1997 as a creative space for feminists who make art – has nurtured and catalyzed the work of more than 100 artists, filmmakers, writers, many of whom were represented in the beautifully curated 2011 retrospective [Her Stories](#) at the Queens Museum of Art.

*Be/Longing*, SAWCC's premiere exhibition in DC, offers a small (but tasty) slice of the group's work, featuring ten artists from three South Asian countries in the subcontinental peninsula, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, and one artist from Iran. Curated by Brooke Seidemann and Monica Jahan Bose, whose installation, performance photographs, and mixed-media drawings bookend the gallery space, the 30-odd artworks address multiple meanings of 'longing' for diasporic South Asian women: the erotic longing of female pleasure and desire; the immigrant artist's longing for home, nostalgic, imagined or dystopic; the activist's longing for rights to public space, equality, freedom, creative self-expression. Intelligently juxtaposed photographic prints, paintings, mixed media works, sculptural pieces and installations engage, resist, defy and ultimately escape conventional stereotypes of sexuality and conservative ideologies of immigrant assimilation. If *Be/Longing* the exhibition succeeds, it is in suggesting that 'belonging' itself – as artists, citizens, activists, migrants, tourists,

wives, partners, lovers, daughters, mothers, laborers – is no simple matter for South Asian diasporic women. Far from being monolithic or seamless, the process is often fraught with conflict, whether the ties are local or global, national or regional, civic or familial, erotic or economic, religious or commercial, of tourism or of trade.

It is this sense of struggle, of *feminist* struggle, that quickly emerges as a running leitmotiv in *Be/Longing* – particularly the ways in which these struggles and aspirations are marked, inscribed, etched, on female bodies (against a politics of gender, segregation and hierarchy). For this is a decidedly feminist exhibition, in keeping with SAWCC's deep activist origins, about diasporic bodies and diasporic female voices. It is about bodies that speak and bodies that are silenced; dismembered bodies and invisible bodies; bodies that are objectified by the media and bodies that are surveilled by the state; dead bodies and liminal bodies that spring to life from unexpected places or cracks and margins of society. And indeed, the installations framing the gallery space perfectly echo these themes. Marcy Chevali's odd, amorphous tiny grey animal bodies made from lint (each with a pink spot for its heart) are strung above Amina Ahmed's large charcoal-on-paper musings on weeds, roots, hair, that seem to grow out of the everyday, the ordinary, the mundane (and what could be more mundane or ubiquitous than dryer lint collected from friends and family?). Monica Jahan Bose's chilling *Agunmukha* – the singed sari and stones hinting at victims of gendered violence and dowry deaths – speaks diagonally across the gallery to Shelly Bahl's installation of wax votive candles in the shape of an invisible body, marked in ways that recall both a sarcophagus/reliquary and a Keith Haring-like chalk outline in a forensic crime scene. Are these missing female bodies memorials, shrines, forgotten relics, mute witnesses to unspeakable crimes, markers of sad demographic realities, objects of worshipful veneration – or all of the above?

Elsewhere in the exhibition one finds fragmented body parts and fragmented languages that draw on and subvert media ranging from traditional doll-making (Ruby Chishti and Samira Abbassy), mythological paintings (Chitra Ganesh), global airport signage (Shelly Bahl), and religious iconography (Jaishri Abichandani). Chishti's heart-breaking sculptural work of bulbous, fleshy, headless bodies (made from stockings) sits uneasily alongside Abichandani's disembodied 'fighting' heads on kitschy, pink, boxing gloves. In the next room, text and image collide in an iconographic dialogue worthy of a graphic novel: Abichandani's powerful *Allah hu Akbar* (God is great) – leather whips encased in decorative Swarovski crystals – hangs overhead and across from Shelly Bahl's foot-level *Leila O. Leila* – an evocative ink on vinyl piece, a paneled storyboard on transcultural women and the underbelly of mass tourism using the universal language of airport signage. Abbassy's rich oil paintings, drawings, and exquisitely fabricated (and mischievous) dolls seem to have little in common with Nida Abidi's pastel-colored mixed media papier maches and grainy video, or with Ganesh's beautiful but disturbing photographs of twisted bodies, except for the sense of a peepshow in reverse, of women (ordinary and extraordinary, unnamed and mythological) defying the media 'gaze' to look back at us – many defiantly -- through handmade objects, animations, and hidden narratives. All is not what it seems on the surface; the textures of diaspora come apart on close examination, fabric tearing at the seams. Chevali's performance piece *Unraveling* at the exhibition opening offers a case in point. The sweater she wore was slowly unraveled and transferred, skein by skein with knitting needles, onto a functionless tube. Now displayed in the exhibition next to each other, sweater and tube, both rendered mute as 'useful' objects, turn the semiotics of form and function on its head.

Dangling over the entire space – indeed, the heart of the gallery – and picking up on all these themes is Sa'dia Rehman's extraordinary installation *Divine Guidance*, an octopus-like chandelier of young

girls' legs clad in white tights, chopped at their waists, hung upside down by the tips of their little black maryjanes, tulle skirts falling open – near-naked, forlorn, vulnerable, exposed. Rehman's artist statement describes addressing erased memories from her Pakistani American past to give new meaning and voice to oppressive taboos and silences that were hidden even as they were aggressively enforced. The piece is a haunting reminder of play interrupted, sexual vulnerability exploited (or hidden), work left unfinished, stories that remain untold.

Not every group exhibition storyline needs resolution. And nor should it. The diverse art emerging from activist-inspired identity-based movements (such as the UK's Black Arts movement that inspired SAWCC) should be thoughtful and provocative, should reflect on diverse lived and imagined experiences, and should raise new questions, not answer old ones. Political and moral engagement should inspire art through a multiplicity of viewpoints, never dictate content or hit viewers over the head with a one-note message.

And here, the very name of the collective – in this case, the acronym SAWCC – proves instructive, inviting reflection not on difference but on shared legacies. Saucy, the Oxford English Dictionary tells us, can mean impudent, irreverent or sexually suggestive. The verb form (to sauce or 'be sauced') is to add spice, interest and excitement, to make things fluid, dynamic, animated. Both turn out to be remarkably apt descriptions of *Be/Longing* if sauciness is taken to mean an irreverent in-your-face resistance that speaks back to conservative ideas of sexuality, identity, and belonging itself. Equally, to take the analogy further, the exhibition ends up 'saucing' conventional narratives and trajectories of globalization from periphery to center, offering transgressive, fluid, hybrid stories that escape fixed categories (of why women migrate) and spill out of defined boundaries (of how they do so).

As Women's History month ends, in the week when the Supreme Court is hearing arguments in defense of marriage equality for gay and queer citizens, when American public opinion seems to weigh overwhelmingly in favor of rejecting sexual difference as the legal basis of family, when South Asia itself is undergoing a scathing self-examination of its horrific gender violence, rape culture, and genocide histories, perhaps exhibitions like *Be/Longing* point toward a new *saucy* diasporic aesthetics of feminist resistance.

The artworks do not all sing the same song, or even the same political mantra from the activist's picket line. But if there's a shared refrain in this exhibition, perhaps it is best captured by that old adage on equality: what's sauce for the goose may be saucier for the gander! Feminist art exhibitions from women of the South Asian diaspora – indeed from all women of color -- have never seemed more timely or more urgent. Go see *Be/Longing* before it closes.

Monica Jahan Bose will lead a walk-through every Friday, or by appointment, till the exhibition closes.

Closing events on April 13 include:

3:30-4:30 pm. Monica Jahan Bose's performance/installation "Indelible Scent"

4:30-5.30 pm. Artists' talk with special guest, Masum Momaya, curator of the Smithsonian's HomeSpun project

5:30-7 pm. Closing reception

[Be/Longing](#)

Art from the South Asian Women's Creative Collective

March 1-April 13, 2013

The Joan Hisaoka Healing Arts Gallery

Smith Center for Healing and the Arts

1632 U Street NW, Washington DC, 20009

W-F 11-5 and Saturday 11-3 and by appointment



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