

daCunha, Xiao. "Shadow bodies dancing under the sun," *Reader*, 26 June 2024.



ARTS & CULTURE

Shadow bodies dancing under the sun

"What Is Seen and Unseen" unearths the marks left by South Asian artists in Chicago.

by Xiao daCunha
June 26, 2024



An ambitious project is unfolding at the South Asia Institute (SAI). As part of this year's programming for Art Design Chicago, "What Is Seen and Unseen: Mapping South Asian American Art in Chicago" is a journey from the past into the future, unearthing the marks left by South Asian artists in Chicago.

South Asian culture has had an irreplaceable influence on nearly every American art form. "South Asian American poets transfuse a wealth of new images into the bloodstream of U.S. poetry," wrote the editors of *Indivisible: An Anthology of Contemporary South Asian American Poetry*, and the same goes for other art forms. Afro-South Asian collaborations flow through music history, from John Coltrane's embrace of Indian culture to the six-note tumbi melody in Missy Elliott's "Get Ur Freak On," borrowed from bhangra, a dance music form in Punjab, India. A stroll through Chicago will quickly spotlight many buildings inspired by South Asian and oriental architectural characteristics, from the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette to the James M. Nederlander Theatre right in the Loop.

Once you look, you begin to notice South Asian influences everywhere throughout America and Chicago's art history over the past century. And that makes one wonder: Why don't we hear about South Asian art's influence on our city's culture more frequently and regularly?

"What Is Seen and Unseen" is the first comprehensive study of South Asian artists' contributions to Chicago's art history. Connecting a past that has been largely overlooked until now with a group of artists that has been actively making spaces for themselves and their community, the exhibition has two components. "Shadows Dance Within the Archives" is a chronology of the underdocumented South Asian exhibitions and cultural history over the past century; "Are Shadow Bodies Electric?" is its contemporary counterpart, featuring work by eight Chicago-based South Asian artists. Cunningly playing with words, the two subtitles summarize this exhibition's fundamental principle: the shadow bodies who were encapsulated by darkness will, from this point on, be so audaciously bright that they can no longer be ignored.

The archive exhibition follows a chronological order, starting when traditional South Asian art forms were first introduced to Chicago in 1893 under colonial-era perspectives, including documentation at the India Pavilion at the World's Columbian Exposition and the Indian delegation at the World's Parliament of Religions. The exhibition demonstrates a growing interest in South Asian culture and artifacts, reflected in the increased acquisition of Asian antiquities in the U.S. between 1920 and 1940. Though still regarded through a colonial approach, it is undeniable that South Asian art forms had a powerful impact on America's counterculture movements throughout the 1980s.

The curatorial process was similar to an archaeological discovery. "Everything was in the records. But they're buried in the archives," said Shelly Bahl, the exhibition's curator. "Nobody is aware of it. This project shows there are these nuggets of gold buried in the archive [that] are forgotten today and are also not necessarily seen as part of American art history. And what we're doing is not an exhaustive kind of survey. Maybe other research will happen [after this]."

The survey is organized by the core themes that helped define and develop contemporary South Asian diaspora and immigration identities. These artists honor their heritage while reshaping South Asian identity by integrating their unique personal and collective experiences into their creative practices. Many pieces are a combination of traditional motifs and modern objects. For example, Saira Wasim mashes biblical characters with a smartphone in her painting. Others are purely conceptual pieces that stray from traditional visual art formats, such as Amay Kataria's *Momimsafe*, featuring messages the artist received during the pandemic printed on blue receipt paper, and *Antidote*, where those messages are rolled up and stored in glass tubes.

One piece that manifests this fearless stance is *Move in Place I* by Brendan Fernandes. Fernandes, a local artist of Kenyan Indian descent, created this body of printed digital assemblages by collaging body parts of ballet dancers onto 3D scans of objects from the Seattle Art Museum's African collection and the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre. The piece shows a ballet dancer's graceful arms spreading to the sides, fingers elegantly pointing downwards. However, the body is replaced with an African totem, which resembles the dancer's garment. This juxtaposition explores how African culture, like South Asian culture, has long been regarded as a visual, discursive object by Western museums.

These contemporary artists are part of the future generations of the shadow bodies unveiled in the archive exhibition. They have been and will continue to walk out of the darkness that has shrouded their community and tell their stories loudly and fearlessly. It is only by viewing "What Is Seen and Unseen" that one can understand how far the South Asian community has come and how much further they will continue to venture.

At the end of our conversation, Bahl shared a quote from a South Asian woman from the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago: "We are here. We are going to be the women of the future. We are going to be the doctors, engineers, and artists of the future." By making visible what has always existed in the archive and mapping through the past into the contemporary, this exhibition investigates the absence and presence of the South Asian body through time and helps write the true experience and influence of South Asian art in Chicago's cultural landscape.