

Publication: Bangkok Post

Type: Newspaper

Date: August, 2008

Author: Rath saran Sireekan

Language: English

# New dialogue, different India



Works of art depicting intercultural views shared and renewed by Indian-Thai connections

RATHSARAN SIREEKAN

**D**isorientation, frustration and, perhaps, a tinge of discontent are the initial results of visiting "The Ethics of Encounter". But don't leave just yet; stay on. There is more to see. Well, at least within yourself.

The puzzle is hovering above your head simply because you come to the exhibition with certain assumptions of what India and being Indian is: maybe exoticism; maybe mysticism. But no, there are neither elephants, nor beggars, nor sacks of colourful spices, nor mysterious landscapes, nor ancient temples we usually associate being Indian with.

As Thailand's first art venue to find its niche in contemporary Indian art, Gallery Soutflower's current group exhibition pivots on the process of our psyche when it encounters the Other, in this case, India.

The contradiction between the Thai's attitude toward Indian settlers and their utmost reverence for the Lord Buddha, as Pandit Chandrochanakrit, the curator, pointed out, serves as a good example here.

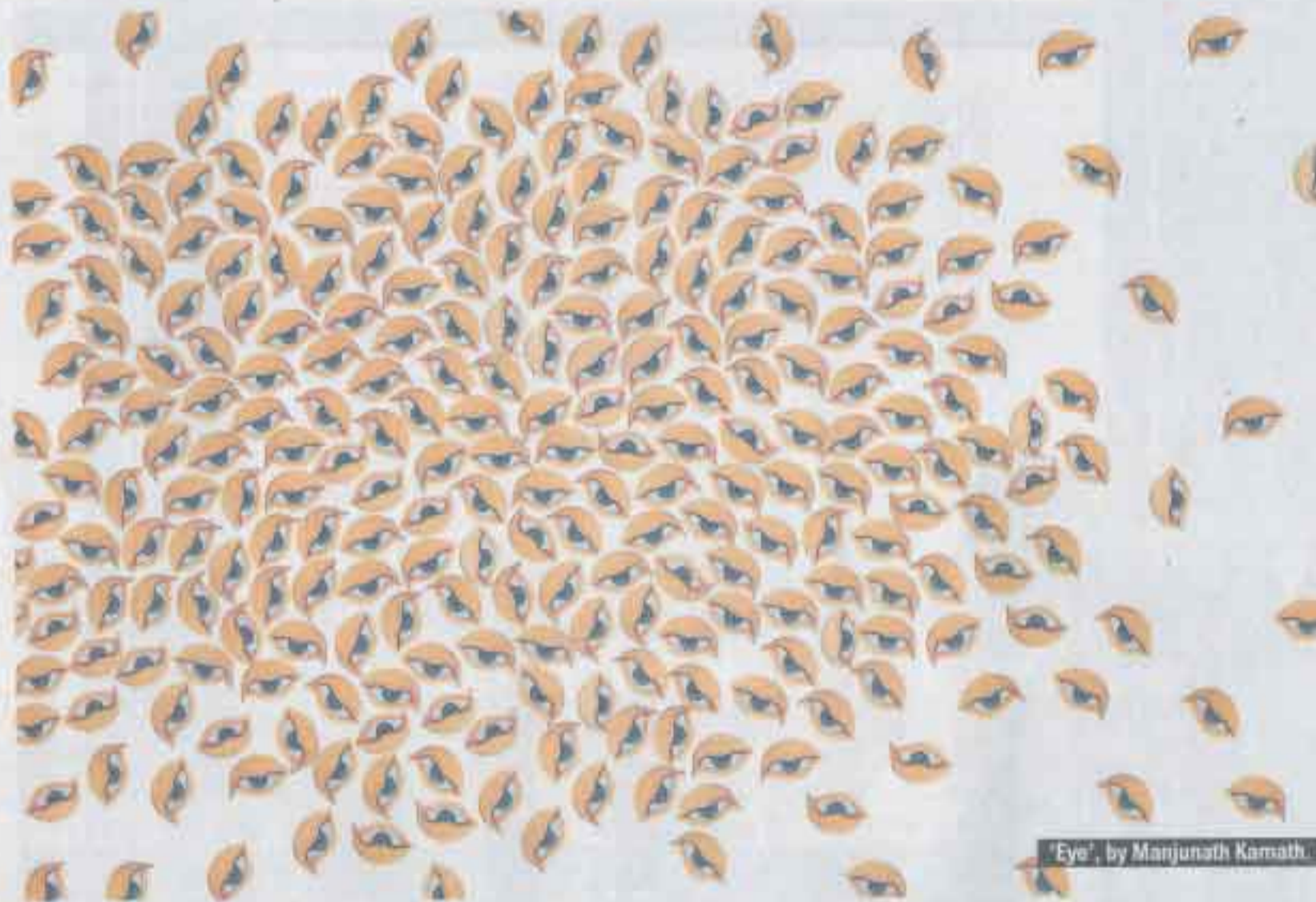
It's funny to see how a local Thai axiom discriminates against Indians, preaching to do away, first, with a fellow from the subcontinent, rather than a snake, which suddenly becomes less perilous in a simultaneous encounter. Yet, we Thai forget the Buddha to whom we pay homage, prostrating with our head lowered to the ground, is, according to Pandit, actually of Indian descent and that Buddhism is originally from India.

Alienation is often an effect when we meet someone not quite our own. But to allow the possibility of living together, we make compromises by means of cultural appropriation.

Noticeably, Buddha images in Thailand are faced as such that they barely retain traces of Indian facial features. As soon as we imported Buddhism into our country, we adjusted it in a way we felt more comfortable with before naming it ours, says the curator, with his PhD in political science from the University of Hawaii at Manoa, specialising in contemporary Thai art and the national imagery.

The work in point here is Navin Rawanchaikul's *Hong Rab Kaek* (the Living Room), with *kaek*, in Thai, being cleverly punned with both meanings of guests and Indians. The work literally invites us to sit on a cozy couch and watch Indian settlers in Chiang Mai recounting their stories of how they were assimilated into the northern Thai society, and vice versa. Producing the same effect as when the Thai appropriated Buddhism into the culture, the *kaeks* in the video are not speaking Hindi, but the Chiang Mai northern dialect — to the *kaeks* who are being received as guests — most of them, presumably, Thai.

Despite its location further back in the rear part of the spacious gallery, Navin's "Living Room" is central to the exhibition not only because, by means of language assimilation, it tangibly seeks to efface the sense of alienation foreign traits are capable of producing. His work is important because it cunningly reverses the role of *kaeks* as no longer a guest, but a host welcoming Thai visitors. Whether this role reversal has something



to do with Navin's own background as an Indian-Thai himself is subject to interpretation, but the experience unique to this change in the pattern of power relations is something only the visitors can feel and tell. If a good work of art means something enabling you to feel a way you've never felt and see a way you've never seen, without it, Navin's *Hong Rab Kaek* surely passes.

Another happening art calling for the audiences direct involvement in ridding of prejudices of encounter is Pinaree Sanpiak's "Breaking the Ice", a workshop in which visitors can make their own traditional Thai frosty sweets by literally breaking the ice through a traditional Thai ice scraper and top it up with colourful flavoured syrups, but this time with special Indian toppings.

Having the audience-turned-participants enjoy their own marriage of encounter between the Thai content and Indian condiments, Pinaree not only gives Thais an opportunity to enjoy little things from India, but also, like Navin, draws our attention to the process of cultural appropriation in its becoming. In this workshop, participants are reminded — with these Indian toppings in front of them — they can actually choose and pick up only certain items and rearrange them according to their predilection before taking them in, hence the brilliant symbolic meaning of eating as assimilating.

Re-interpreting and re-presenting the "Indianness" is another theme dominating "The Ethics of Encounter". According to Natasha Tuli, the gallery owner, there is an immediate need to exhibition contemporary Indian art in Thailand.

"Quite alarmingly, when India is represented in Thailand, there are only elephants and beggars in the story. I have been living here for eight years and never have I seen a drop of contemporary Indian art that genuinely takes on modern India as it is today.

"You see, Indian artists have already roamed the streets of art across the globe for years, but, unfortunately, the Thais who are so close a friend still see us with wrong ideas about what India today actually is," said Natasha, who was trained as an architect, but whose connections with leading Indian artists of her generation were forged.

Indeed, India is booming; India is expanding and India is seeing a growing number of the middle-class whose needs to consume and be critiqued by new kinds of art are responsible for the emerging trends in the contemporary Indian art circles.

Such a novelty in artistic expressions that *The Ethics of Encounter* puts on includes works, among others, from Vidya Kamat, Chintan Upadhyay and Rabir Kaleka.

## Vidya Kamat's 'Birthmark Series'

Kamat's "Birthmark Series" is classified as digitally modified prints, based on the manipulation of a computer graphic programme to blend layers of images before arriving at a desired meaning. The series shows different parts of the body being feminised by means of engraving familiar Indian motifs onto birthmarks as a metaphor. At once informing and being informed by the feminist theory on the cultural construction of femininity, Kamat takes a further step beyond her feminist colleagues by reversed de-sexualizing the already feminised body. She dyes these feminine motifs into something of a peculiar ghostly illuminating effect, a fluorescent quality that stands out as an estrangement technique, calling into question the naturalness of femininity, and its graceful and desirable body.

Quite like Kamat who plays with layers, Upadhyay's "Welcome" and Kaleka's magical tapestry "Man with Cockerel Two", are two contemporary Indian

works making good use of the palimpsest technique.

The welcoming, but culturally unidentifiable, baby in the middle of Upadhyay's burning reddish space is at stake of being seen to have lost the quality of "Indianness", despite the *namaste* posture, signalling the welcome. But a more careful and closer look will change your perception. A graceful Indian goddess is subtly integrated onto the baby's skin, suggesting the artist's desire to go out there in the space of globalism with Indian qualities being compromised, and yet struggling to keep his Indian root intact.

## Upadhyay's 'Welcome'

Such a struggle to accommodate one's local identity to the commonality of the Global Village finds a more peaceful path in Rabir Kaleka's magic tapestry, which hangs loose in the middle of the gallery. Meditative in its fluidity, the "Man with Cockerel Two" significantly makes use of special computer graphic techniques to revolutionise the rigidity of the spatial presentation paintings in general, has to offer. In this fantastical work, the boundary of time and space and cultural identity is dismantled. A layer depicting a literally walking Indian bald man holding his cockerel, for instance, is interfaced with an egret; an unmistakable Chinese motif ubiquitously found in traditional Chinese watercolour paintings. Kaleka's amazing palimpsest technique, which recently drew the attention of the Spertus Institute for Jewish Studies and exhibited his work there in Chicago.

Ambitious in its scale, there are more artists featuring in this intercultural dialogue between Thailand and India. Though a big difficult-to-digest chunk of meat, "The Ethics of Encounter" is surely worth a visit not only because it is a good chance to be reintroduced to your Indian friends, but significantly, it's a journey back into the inner realm of yourself.

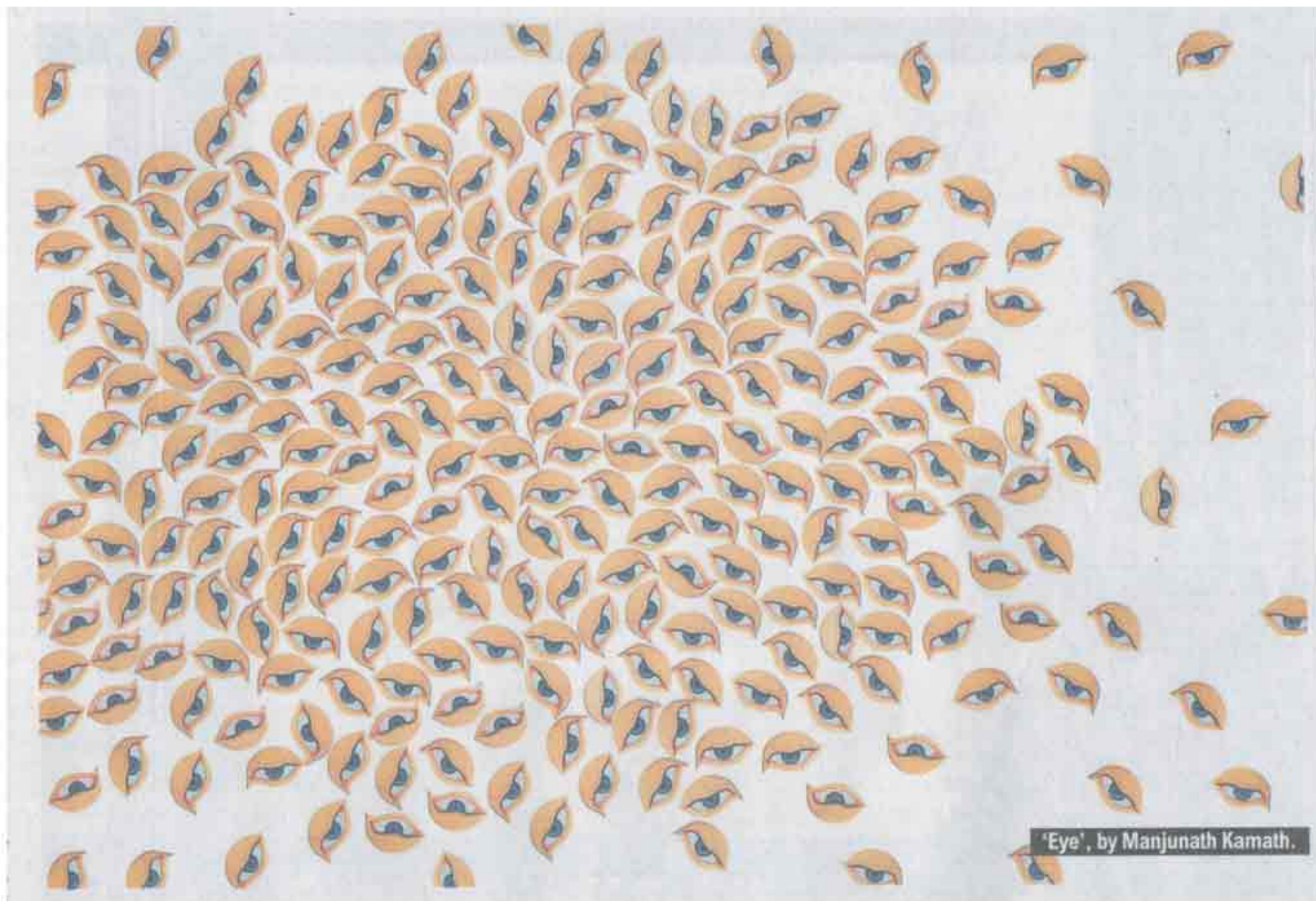
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'Eye', by Manjunath Kamath.

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