



ARTIST

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew

TITLE

Dowry - Series, Movie Posters - Bollywood

DATE

1999

DIMENSIONS

16 in H x 20 in W

MEDIUM

Inkjet Prints

CATALOGUE NUMBER

2000.007

CURRENT LOCATION

Warehouse

ANNU PALAKUNNATHU MATTHEW

BORN

1964

BIRTHPLACE

Stourport on Severn, England

GENDER

Female

CITIZENSHIP

United Kingdom

CULTURAL HERITAGE

English, American, Indian

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 1999

Main Gallery, 2002

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 107
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Contact Sheet 173

BIOGRAPHY

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew's photo-based artwork mines issues of identity, immigration and inter-generational memory with the insights of a woman who has twice lived the Immigrant experience. Matthew's work takes advantage of the viewer's uncertainty between the reality of photography and its manipulation through digital tools to get the viewer to reexamine and construct parallel identities and histories.

Matthew's recent solo exhibitions include the Royal Ontario Museum, Nuit Blanche Toronto, and sepiaEYE, nyc. Matthew has also exhibited her work at the RISD Museum, Newark Art Museum, MFA Boston, San Jose Museum of Art, Museum of Fine Arts (TX), Victoria & Albert Museum (London), Fotofest Biennial 2018, Guangzhou Photo Biennial 2009 as well as at the Smithsonian. Her work will be featured in the upcoming 2018 Kochi-Muziris Biennale.

Grants and fellowships that have supported her work include a MacColl Johnson, John Guttman, Fulbright Fellowships and grants from the Rhode Island State Council of the Arts. In addition, she has been an artist in residence at Yaddo and MacDowell.

As Holland Cotter of the New York Times wrote about her 2016 solo exhibition at sepiaEYE in New York "... The mostly album-size photographs in this compact but far-ranging gallery survey are about the intensities and confusions of a cultural mixing that makes the artist, psychologically, both a global citizen and an outsider, at home and in transit, wherever she is. And it's about photography as document and fiction: souvenir, re-enactment and imaginative projection. A beautiful show that could too easily slip away."

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew is Professor of Art at the University of Rhode Island and Director of the URI Center for the Humanities. Matthew is represented by sepiaEYE, NYC and Tasveer, India.

circa 2018

ESSAYS

India is home to the world's largest commercial film industry, producing nearly 1,000 movies each year in multiple languages. The name Bollywood was coined because the majority of these films are produced in the city of Bombay. In the series Movie Posters – Bollywood, Annu Palakunnathu Matthew deconstructs many of the prevalent themes found in contemporary Indian films. Matthew, whose work until now has primarily been an exploration of her Indian identity, uses this new series to comment on practices of gender and racial discrimination, the dowry system, and arranged marriages still common in Indian society and reinforced through mainstream Bollywood cinema. The film poster, which is a well-constructed fiction in itself, relies on seductive imagery and catch phrases to lure the viewer into the theater. Like political posters and propaganda imagery they promise more than they deliver. In the manipulation of these images Matthew collages additional imagery and alters the text, and then reprints these images as large as the original poster where they can be displayed in a gallery setting, or in a public space where they could potentially subvert the original source material, and bring into question these practices in contemporary Indian society. According to Indian-born journalist Ira Mathur, the custom of arranged marriages is still common in many societies. In India, it is estimated that ninety-five percent of all marriages are arranged. The traditional dowry system of the bride's family negotiating with the groom or his relatives for a substantial offering of money, jewelry, land, livestock, or other expensive commodity is still prevalent in contemporary Indian society. However, this long-practiced tradition is meeting greater resistance from more educated middle-class families. It is still not uncommon to hear reports of 'dowry deaths' when the bride's dowry was not considered adequate, or of families that go into bankruptcy in order to pay for a daughter's dowry. In more progressive families, sons and daughters are allowed to meet before making a commitment of marriage, giving them the option to decline their parents' choice of a spouse. This option is rarely exercised in a society where such importance is placed on duty and obligation to family, and where daughters are treated as property. In the images Arranged Marriage and Dowry, Matthew interjects her own perception to the prevailing courtship rituals in modern day India. In the images Jungle Fever and What Will People Think? she remarks on the attitudes and perceptions of a woman whose choice of a romantic partner may not meet familial or societal approval, and in the process critiques the culture in which she was raised. Ironically, the Bollywood films that Mathew uses as her source imagery have achieved cult status outside of India, spawning a plethora of videos, audio CDs, books, and fan websites. Joining the ranks of other cult film genres such as blaxploitation films, Hong Kong action films, and Japanese anime. Whether or not the audiences of the Bollywood films take them to be an accurate reflection of contemporary society, or as tongue-in-cheek entertainment, they directly and indirectly perpetuate traditional attitudes about race and gender in Indian society. By manipulating the imagery and text in these film posters Matthew uses her Movie Posters - Bollywood series as a vehicle to undermine the message behind the Bollywood films and the values that they project. Gary Hesse Annu Palakunnathu Matthew lives in Providence, RI, and participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in June 1999. 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 irony

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 served 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 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 cultural background. 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 these 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). Gary Hesse Associate Director Light Work