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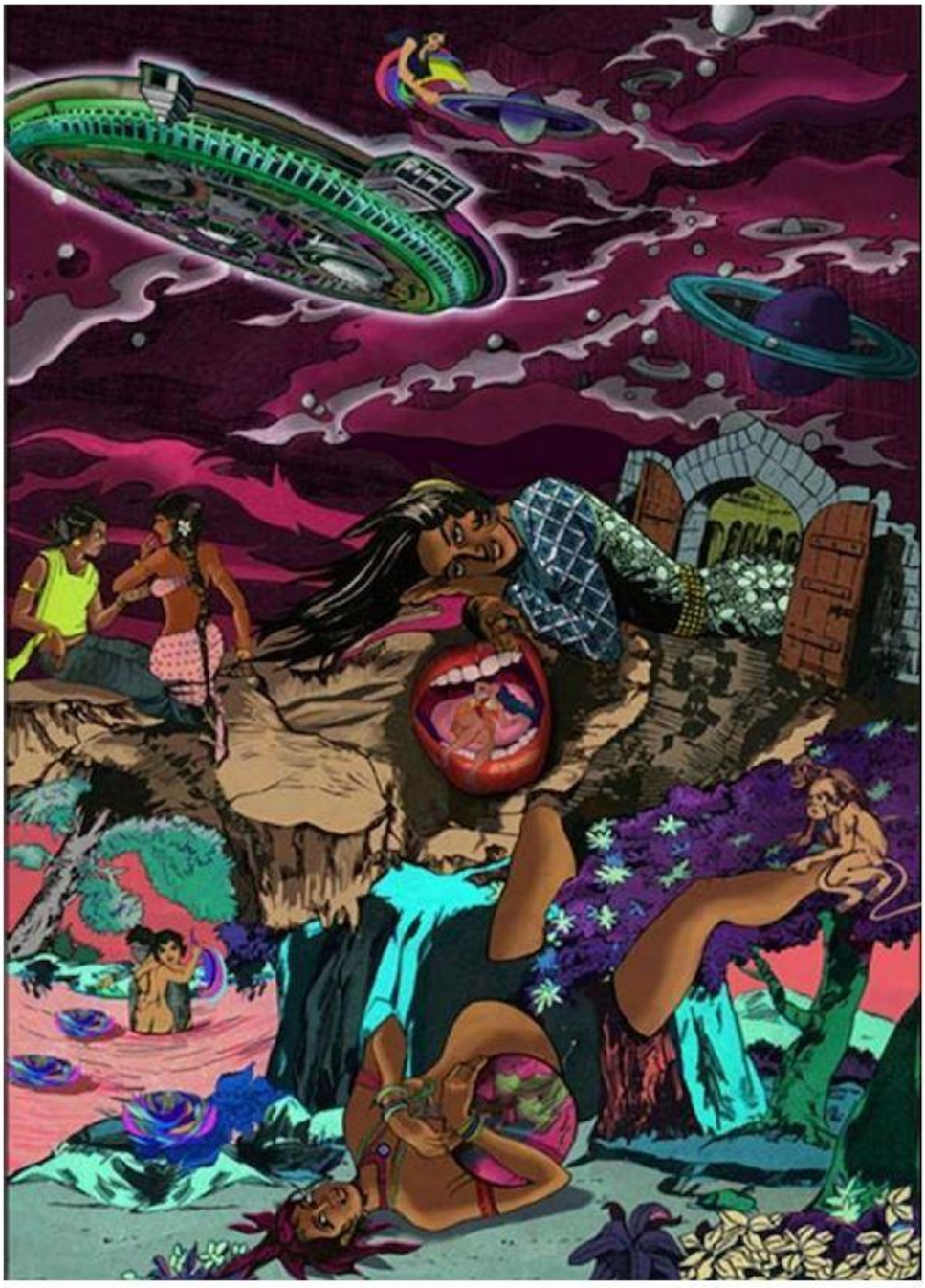
# ‘Eat Pray Thug: Das Racist’s Himanshu Suri Curates Indian Art’

By Anneliese Cooper


You probably remember Himanshu Suri, a.k.a. “Heems,” as half of Das Racist, the New York rap group who hit the Internet running with their single “Combination Pizza Hut and Taco Bell” in 2008. From there, they produced three albums’ worth of tracks that took on politics in step with alliterative lists of junk food — a career perhaps best summed up by the cheeky hypnotic loop of a chorus on 2010’s “hahahaha jk?”: “We’re not joking. Just joking, we are joking. Just joking, we’re not joking,” and so on. Now, however, Suri has jumped into the (marginally) more serious business of curating his own gallery show: “Eat Pray Thug,” the same moniker he’s given his forthcoming solo album, which runs through March 10 at Aicon Gallery on Great Jones Street. The multimedia group show of artists with ties to India and Pakistan, including Suri himself, also features a parallel series of live events, including an appearance from Muslim punk band The Kominas on March 7.

To hear Suri tell it, the art bent is nothing new: “I feel like a lot of times I would have referred to Das Racist as an art rap project — you know, whatever that means,” he said. “We always had an interest in art, whether we were doing an 8-bit video game slash music video, or a lot of our interviews often we thought of as performance art.” Since the group’s split in 2012, he has released two solo mixtapes, “Nehru Jackets” and “Wild Water Kingdom,” but “Eat Pray Thug” will be his first album. Though it’s officially slated to drop March 10, visitors can preview the tracks in the gallery, courtesy of the headphones hooked up to its original framed cover art, a collage collaboration between Suri and Chiraag Bhakta (above).

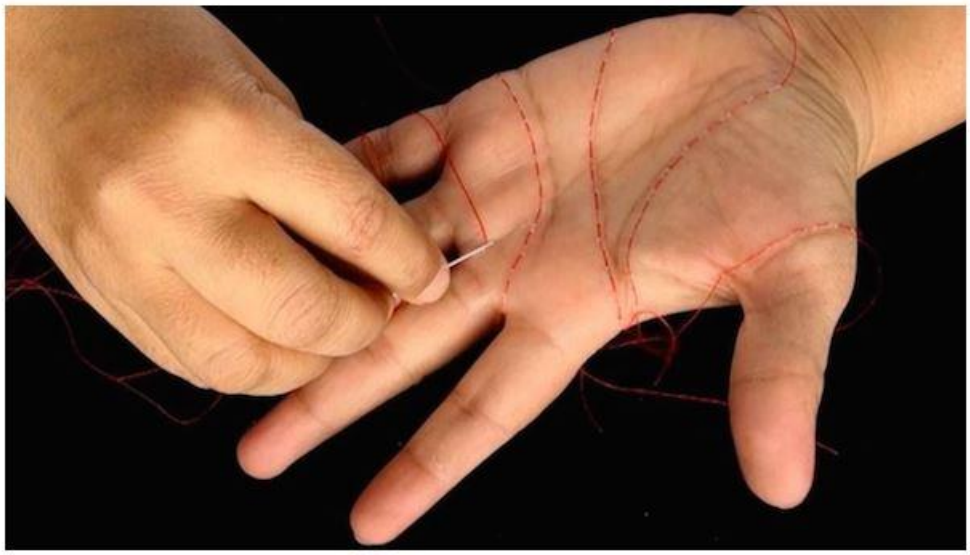
“I thought of this album as an opportunity to do a lot of the things that I wasn’t able to do with Das Racist,” he explained. “I wanted to tie art into it, and I also wanted to use this as a platform to shine a light on this gallery and what they do.” Aicon is one of only a handful of New York galleries devoted to Indian art, set apart even further by its focus on contemporary works; Suri first came across the space when he bought a piece there in 2012 and has been a staunch supporter since. “It just so happens that there’s a gallery devoted to my favorite type of art that’s on my favorite street where one of my favorite artists lived and died,” he said, noting that Basquiat was housed at 57 Great Jones, just a few doors down.



This same affable ethos carried over to his choice of artists: “My curation always starts with my friends,” Suri explained. “Even [his label] Greedhead was a record label where, if you were my friend and I believed in you, then I would put it out, put my name on it.” Aakash Nihalani, for example, did the album art for Das Racist’s “Shut Up, Dude,” while Bhakta also designed some of the band’s merch. Suri met Ranbir Kaleka during a five-month South Asian tour just a week before recording the new album; the two hit it off and collaborated on “Beard Mentor,” an image that represents pretty literally “[Kaleka] training me how to grow my beard, as an older artist to a younger one.” And Chitra Ganesh — whose brilliant, surreal cartoons are also currently on view at the Brooklyn Museum — is both a friend and an artist Suri collects. (He owns a smaller edition of “How We Do at the End of the World,” above.)

But through all the palling around, Suri does have a curatorial axe to grind. “When you think of Indian art, you think of ethnic art or diversity inherently, but it’s about the further diversity within what you consider to be diverse,” he explained, noting the myriad languages and religious expressions within a country we tend to treat as a cultural monolith. This credo led him to select artists who represent a range of sexualities, genders, and religions — and moreover, who brought something besides the stereotypical brightly-colored reappropriations of Hindu iconography one might expect, as in the stark, anonymous geometry of Nihalani’s pieces.

“Not all Indian art has to be inspired by our epics or inspired by identity,” Suri added. “If I choose to look at myself as an Indian artist, I can do that. But that doesn’t give you the right to do that. To you, I should just be an artist.” (Not for nothing, when Columbia University came up in passing, he was quick to hype longtime professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and her famous postcolonial essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”)



As to his own artistic identity, Suri clocks it as “a juxtaposition of New York and India, my world and my parents’ world,” his subject always returning to “working class South Asian people in New York” — about whom he hopes to write a novel someday. For example, the three collaged-on tin works, collaborations between him and Bhakta, are themed around 9/11, colonialism, and his mother, respectively. (“When she first came to this country with a master’s in economics, she still worked at Pathmark bagging groceries,” he added, going on to point out the lotto ticket in his another collage that nods to the convenience store on Queens Boulevard his parents owned.) Meanwhile, in the gallery’s front window, his video compilation of ads for skin-bleaching projects runs in a 15-minute loop, intermittently marred by datamoshing: “In this world [of the video], we’re all pixels, we’re all the same,” he said, as cascades of neon squares stuttered across the models’ faces, “but in the real world, it’s that on the inside, we’re all the same.”


"With art, I get to be much more direct than with music," he added, drawing the parallel between his penchant for collaging images and composing "hyper-referential" verbal patter. "My style of rap, my thinking is very anxious and attention-deprived, so those direct messages get hard for me to do. I think a lot of my music wasn't straightforward, because I was hiding behind humor or hiding behind Indian samples. But on this record, there's no more hiding." In short, it seems Suri's ready to do away with the joking/not joking run-around: "I'm constantly just trying to explain that I'm not a novelty, and now in this situation, that my people aren't a novelty."

Which is not to say the show is humorless — far from it, as evidenced by that tongue in cheek title — nor is its showman, savvily balancing international themes with hometown edge. Pointing at the New York City subway map that fills his album cover's face, he noted, "Even after my big art show here, I got on the Long Island Railroad and went home."

— Anneliese Cooper (@DawnDavenport)

(Photos: Himanshu Suri & Chiraag Bhakta's "Eat Pray Thug I (Ed. of 5)," 2015; Roohi Ahmed's "Sew and Sow," 2012; Chitra Ganesh's "How We Do at the End of the World (Ed. of 5)," 2011; Himanshu Suri & Chiraag Bhakta's "Untitled (Tine Series 2)," 2010-15)