

**“I think I know who you are” Lopdell House Gallery, Titirangi, Waitakere City, Aotearoa
16 July-15 August 1999
Curator: Rebecca Lal**

“The home and the world” by Rebecca Lal, curator

Of all the artists in the show, Mandrika Rupa’s work deals most directly with issues relating to identity and the Indian diaspora in the South Pacific. Her films focus on the journeys to self-determination of women living in a cross cultural environment. Rupa employs a realist approach to film making, exploring social issues experienced by working class immigrants. Rupa has used documentary and short narrative to describe a diasporic sense of both belonging and disattachment.

Within Rupa’s films are dislocations of space and self. The ongoingness of tradition (usually represented by the mother involved in religious ritual) parallels the ongoingness of sexual choice, capital, and contemporaneity. Movement into and out of these spaces conjures up metaphoric associations of past and present. In her short films, **Naya Zamana**, and **Laxmi**, the presence of India enters into the New Zealand landscape in the form of correspondence, or a visit from relatives. Similarly, in **Poonam**, (her documentary of Indian women in New Zealand), the women from New Zealand go to India. The characters in Rupa’s films find themselves traversing the two way road between tradition and modernity made available to them in the post colonial societies they live in. The transgressions they make and their ability to do so, to find familiarity amongst other sub cultures of the dominant culture, points to a view of society based on “interracial interdependence”. Self, for all groups, is constructed in relation to these other elements. A singular identity is posited as impossible. In Rupa’s films we see Indian and Maori, Indian and Pakeha, Indian and Westie, Indian and Lesbian, Indian and American, interacting and sharing the same social space.

The resolution of self into these different social spaces is not always simple or even achieved. For the young Laxmi, whose family has recently immigrated to wartime New Zealand from India, the ability to be loyal to what her family values clashes with her entrancement with the glamour and sophistication of western life. **Laxmi** raises issues of belonging and duty, especially in relation to the father who struggles with others’ perceptions of him. To the American soldiers he appears poor while to his family in India he represents economic freedom and opportunity. Laxmi’s namesake, the goddess of wealth and abundance, has lost her footing in this new land as the traps and demands money engenders become obvious.

In **Naya Zamana**, Shabnam from moves between three worlds; work, home and her social group. Her responses to others (her family and workmates), are stunted and muted. Her lack of exchange isolates her from the demands of family and society, from their aspirations with which her life does not comply. Her aunt demands in exasperation, “Well, say something.” Shabnam’s outward appearance plays with our preconceptions. Her apparent conservatism positions her as a dutiful, traditional, Indian daughter. But Shabnam is a lesbian and our initial interpretations of her silence are shattered. The paradoxes of her life, choosing an unconventional path, but disguising herself from those she lives with, creates ambivalence in the character. Shabnam is not a resolved character as she can neither fully embrace her chosen lifestyle or leave behind the expectations of both her immediate family and wider society.

While these characters might not resolve their conflicts they do possess a continued mobility and an awareness of their surroundings. The female characters are all keen observers, their constantly changing positions in society allow them to gain different perspectives for self knowledge.

Self- Definitions:

An interview with Mandrika Rupa in “I think I know who you are” Lopdell Gallery 1999

You were born in India and emigrated with your family to New Zealand at a young age. How do the differences of both cultures (east and west) affect your work?

Mandrika: The concepts of east and west are constructed ideas. I would say caste issues in India affect my work as do class issues in the west. I work to challenge these ideologies by attempting to identify individuals in my films who subvert the dominant modes of each culture. And to define the resulting, emerging culture. In **Poonam** I am trying to show how tradition is cast aside, and women like myself define themselves in another way. We are not stereotypically Indian, in fact we are very far removed from that culture without taking away anything from our inherent “Indian-ness”.

In **Naya Zamana** the boundaries are broken between tradition and modernity with “subgroups” influencing the young ones. From this position the mother and aunt are aware of these threats to their culture, and are stressed. The shock at the end is meant to convey how much the freedoms of the new country are willingly accepted by the girl.

Laxmi is set in 1942. New Zealand was still a British colony at the time, and American soldiers were stationed in N.Z. during WWII. The Indian family are affected by the Colonial British and American values. The father, who left India due to caste oppression, is stressed by the American soldiers who criticise his adopted country, which has offered him freedom. Tension is also created by his loyalty to his brother back in India, who writes and asks for funds for his passage to N.Z.

What is the purpose of showing ritual in your work, and are these rituals Hindu?

Mandrika: I wish to illuminate the fact not all people in India are Hindu, nor are all people of Indian descent in the diaspora. Portraying intimacy through ritual and giving personalised examples in my work is a way of expressing the psychology of a people who are outside the organised, dominant religion of India. These rituals will be recognized by some Indians, who will see significance in their context. There are visible codes to them and they are meant to resonate with the working castes. To me, ritual is important as a signifier because it is not usually portrayed in this way. The ancient lawbooks of Hinduism prohibit some people in India from performing ritual or uttering holy verses. There is a resurgence of punishment today, for not abiding by their rules. In **Laxmi** the mother puts kohl around the eyes of the child to protect her from the evil eye of the oppressor, which is an ancient ceremony. I chose the title “Laxmi” not because she is a consort of a “Brahmin” God, but because she is an extension of the Mother Goddess, the original Earth Mother. In that context she represents abundance.

What kind of filmmaker would you call yourself?

Mandrika: I’ve been an independent film maker from the start because I want control of my own artistic and cultural voice. If you work for a commercial market or television your work gets diluted for a certain audience. I work towards the festivals and art exhibitions, and more recently the Universities. I am presently at the University of California, at Berkeley, presenting my work to Ethnic Studies, Asian Studies, and Anthropology. One of the professors has written a book about the American diaspora from India. It identifies many things left out of mainstream publications and films. My work resonates with the work of other diasporas. In **Naya Zamana** I raise the question of having a life without tradition, breaking away from cultural and religious control, exemplified by the young characters. They have escaped the separatist upbringing of some immigrants. I want to show that we are not all homogenous, we do not all have the same values. I am breaking away from the stereotypes, of how Indian people are seen. The Neo Realists have also influenced me. And Feminism. More recently the Third Cinema. (Not to be confused with Third World Cinema).

Various ethnicities and sensibilities have communicated to me our parallel processes. In **Poonam** I put myself into the work, through the subjectivity it may have a sense of representation for others. The folk song, "Eastern Dancer" is like an objective, western gaze contrasting with the three Indian women whose subjective stories are inherently feminist. In **Laxmi** the immigrant family are occupied with various stresses to highlight their ongoing struggle for freedom in a new land.

As an Indian woman living in New Zealand what questions of identity pose themselves and do you see yourself belonging to any one community.

Mandrika: Strategically, I position myself in many communities. I was born in India, that makes me an Indian. My family has been in New Zealand for 100 yrs. so I am a New Zealander. There is the feminist community. I lived in a very working class community as a child. I have a strong knowledge of class politics which I am loyal to. I do not necessarily choose to identify with any one community, but as defining myself as something 'more', never closed.

The subjective voice is very important to me as a film maker in expressing this multiplicity of identity. I can embrace differences, identify with the struggles of others, both political and personal. If we don't define ourselves, we risk someone else defining who we are and our history.

For example, in my Indian community it concerns me that some first and second generation people are looking back to the old laws in the old land. They have regressed to the influence of the old ways. They think this is their culture and it is not. It is ironic that their forefathers left India to rid themselves of this ugly hierarchy, the caste system. Their ancestors would have a fit. They could not come to New Zealand to mix freely and take up opportunities they were denied at home due to caste. There are many Indians throughout the western diaspora who now have been co-opted into the national fold again, for fear of losing their identity in the west. They assert their caste, marry within their caste, and obey tradition. Especially the "shudras" and the so called backward castes.

My short drama **Laxmi** portrays a family in New Zealand from India who left not because of British rule, but were freedom fighters of a different kind. They prefer to live in a foreign (British colony) country where it would be safer than India when the British were thrown out, and the Hindu caste system resume its power over them.

In **Poonam** issues of identity are explored by the women of Indian descent. They forge out new identities to create a new sense of belonging. It is their choice, not the tradition. I was given a chance to explore my relationship to my spiritual roots through my matrilineal line. It was a culture of the people of the land, the village people. The characters in my films are self defined, outside the order of any dominant ideology.