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ARTS / MUSEUMS

Three Must-See Houston Art Shows — From an Asia Society Stunner to Indian Mythology to Cat Butt Parfait

It's a Wide World in H-Town

BY CATHERINE D. ANSPON // 08.09.19



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Amita Bhatt's "Desire, Motives, Assassins," 2014, at Deborah Colton Gallery

Those in Houston this summer have been rewarded with dual exhibitions that challenge art norms via the interweaving of beauty and activism. Both exhibits feature artists with connections to the Asian continent.

A third combines a sense of the grotesque, ridiculous, and surreal — alongside one of the most popular subjects in the entire art world, and on social media. Read on.

Asia Calling

Talk about timeliness, and a respite — and a response — to the current climate of xenophobia.

A museum and a gallery both spin stories of diversity around artists of Asian descent who are connected to our community and state.

At Asia Society Texas Center, “Site Lines: Artists Working in Texas,” curated by the museum’s Bridget Bray, culls five visual talents from China, India, Japan, Pakistan and Vietnam who incorporate varied media, practices and materials to address immigration, identity, and sociopolitical and cultural concerns.

As the title indicates, this quintet all make their respective homes in Texas.

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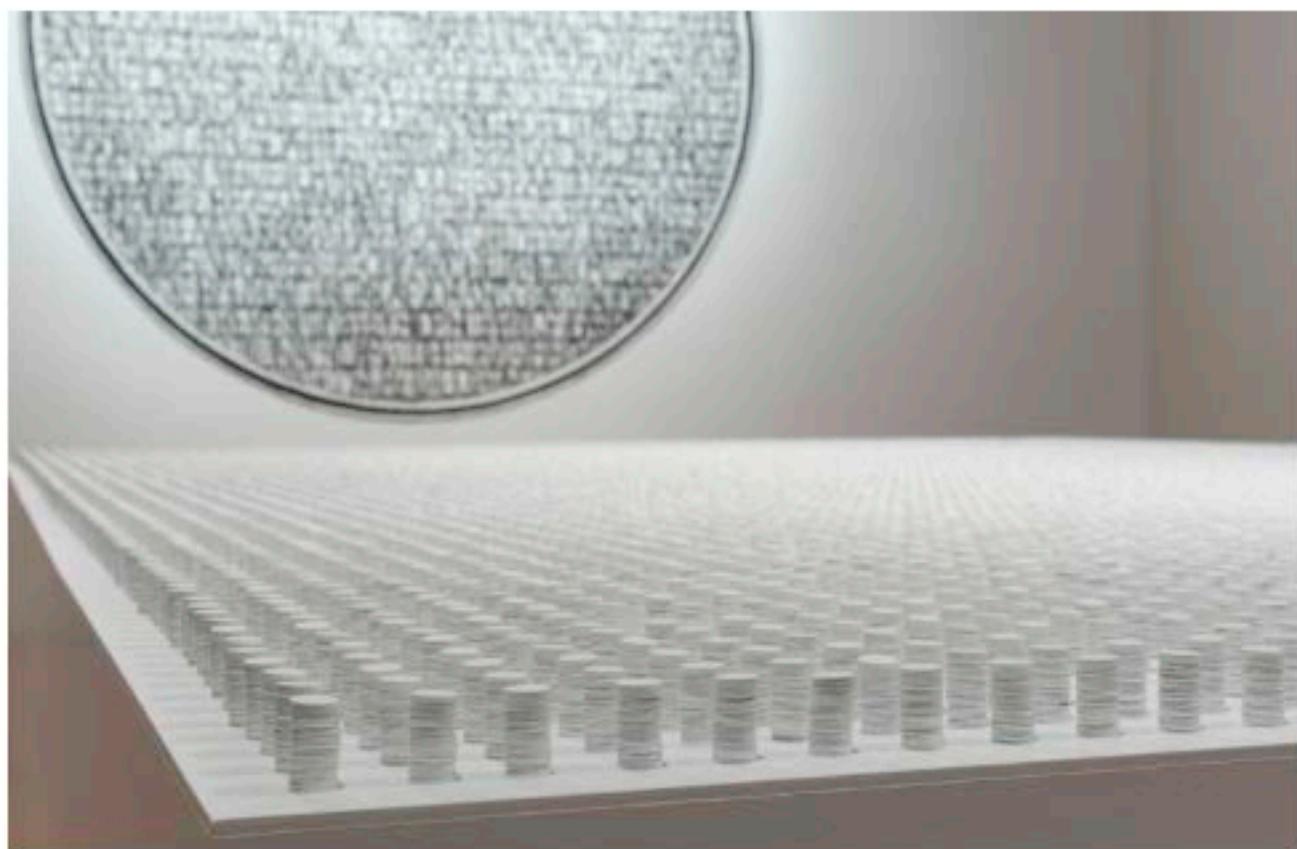


The two takeaways in the pristine space of the Asia Society are serene, commanding installations, both with hidden depths. One references Iraqi deaths in the ongoing war, and the other, a personal relationship evidencing the fragility of life.

Houston-based Prince Varughese Thomas and Tyler-based Abhidnya Ghuge respectively employed 195,000 copper pennies and 8,000 paper plates — their scene-stealers were created with the help of a dozen local volunteers.



THE RESULTING ARTWORKS BY THOMAS AND GHUGE WOULD BE THE TALK OF ANY TOWN, INCLUDING EVEN JADED MANHATTAN — AND UNDERSCORE ASIA SOCIETY’S NEW COMMITMENT TO BECOMING A DESTINATION FOR CONTEMPORARY ART IN THE HOUSTON MUSEUM MIX. FOR “SITE LINES” IS THE RARE SHOW THAT IS A MATCH TO ASIA SOCIETY’S YOSHIO TANIGUCHI GEM OF A BUILDING.



INSTALLATION VIEW OF PRINCE VARUGHESE THOMAS AT “SITE LINES: ARTISTS WORKING IN TEXAS” AT ASIA SOCIETY TEXAS CENTER (PHOTO BY PAUL HESTER)

Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, an international filmmaker residing in Houston who’s a veteran of many biennials, uses baseball as a metaphor to tell the history of the art-centric Japanese island of Inujima.

Rounding out the exhibition are complex, instinctual collages by Austin-area Ambreen Butt and nuanced hand-cut paper and graphite drawings by UT Austin professor Beili Liu that pulse with quiet energy.

Wondrous Wall Works

In the gallery world, former Texas painter [Amita Bhatt](#) returns from her native India to exhibit canvases featuring her signature mythology informed by the Indian subcontinent in “Between Light and Shadow” at Deborah Colton Gallery.



Amita Bhatt's "A Fantastic Collision of the Three Worlds V," 2009, at Deborah Colton Gallery

The whip-like lines of the drawings within Bhatt's paintings, rendered against simple backgrounds, conjure beings within a world.

While her paintings are very good indeed — displaying mythological creatures and deities rendered in the rich, lapidary tones of the Indian subcontinent — it's the drawings that linger in the consciousness. Made with charcoal and oil stick on what appears to be unprimed canvas, they are fantastical at every turn, evidencing an intuitive grasp of the concept of horror vacui spun into its most anthropomorphic conclusion.

Titillating Title

What do you say about an exhibition whose title alone stops us in our tracks.

That's certainly the case at Galveston Arts Center, where curator Dennis Nance brings the Dallas duo Chuck & George — aka Brian K. Jones and Brian K. Scott — to town for their Houston debut.



At Galveston Arts Center, Chuck & George's very strange installation made for some startling social media. (Photo by CDA)

For this grand solo, "Cat Butt Parfait," the collaborators and real-life partners invoke painting, sculpture, drawing, ceramics, furniture and installation vignettes, including a participatory photo backdrop of the oddest nature, to offer an ode to "the ecosystem of domestic feline digestion."

There's also a message about gay rights manifested here.

The unforgettable parfait that is “Cat Butt Parfait” signals one of the most captivating exhibitions in a string of strong shows that Nance has curated since picking up the scepter from former GAC talent scout, the iconic Clint Willour, almost three years ago.

“Site Lines: Artists Working in Texas,” through August 18, at [Asia Society Texas Center](#).

“Amita Bhatt: Between Light and Shadow,” through August 10, at [Deborah Colton Gallery](#).

“Chuck & George: Cat Butt Parfait” through August 18, at [Galveston Arts Center](#).


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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT // ARTS & THEATER

Art review: Immersive cave drawings for the 21st century



Molly Glentzer

July 17, 2019

Updated: July 17, 2019 5:17 p.m.



1 of 3



An untitled fiberglass sculpture and panels on canvas from the series "A Fantastic Collision of the Three Worlds" are on view in Amita Bhatt's show "Between Light and Shadow," up through Aug. 10 at Deborah Colton Gallery. The sculpted figure also appears within the drawn works.

Photo: Molly Glentzer / Houston Chronicle



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Is this a war? A circus? A crowded jazz club? A zoo? An orgy? Some epic about the beginning or the end of existence?

All of those things seem present in Amita Bhatt's "A Fantastic Collision of the Three Worlds," a series of monumental drawings on canvas that fill two rooms, floor to ceiling, at Deborah Colton Gallery. This is no polite little show of framed ideas on paper. It's an immersive viewing experience. A whole lot of charcoal and oil stick.

Humans and animals tumble across these walls on waves of humor, paradox and irony — a turbulent tangle of absurd characters who collectively represent some mythical truth. Two things about this realm seem certain: It is chaotic and violent.

Cycles of life, karma and nature drive the drama, although there is no specific narrative to unravel, or even a particular sequence of events to follow. Bhatt's visual trajectories may be fractured or random, drawn also from tantric philosophy, children's fables and history.

One might glimpse San Sebastian, Mary Magdalene and Bubbleman, say, among the figures. They're out of context yet contributing to the crazy whole. Bhatt often uses characters to symbolize a range of human emotions that continually morph: indifference, pleasure, fear, confusion, playfulness, sarcasm, irony, anguish, joy, anxiety, hope, hegemony, agency, resilience. Bhatt purposefully makes it hard to tell who is who. "I like the dizzying ambiguity that this heavy density brings about," she says.

Stylistically, her flat figures are inspired by Indian miniatures of the 15th to 17th centuries, paintings that celebrated powerful people. "My work is

perhaps less celebratory and more a questioning,” Bhatt says.

Given her fine and sure lines, the figures’ akimbo limbs and the patterned bodysuits, the three worlds colliding look like they might also owe something aesthetically to Picasso. Bhatt, who is from India, says her influences include Paula Rego, Hieronymus Bosch and Anselm Kiefer.

She notes that the pieces have no boundaries or edges, to suggest infinity. “Creating this dense space also facilitates ideas of good and evil, victim and perpetrator, empire and colony, perception-deception, aversion and desire, knowledge, catastrophe, monumentality, sacrifice, passion and destruction,” Bhatt says.

“Having grown up on large doses of Hindu, Christian and Buddhist stories, I have always found myself looking for life’s existential (and philosophical) answers in mythology. We all carry so many layers of information and identities within us as we navigate a multicultural and transnational world, which is also very turbulent. My drawings are mirroring that.”

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Bhatt also paints beautifully. Colorful, surreal canvases fill the gallery’s large front room, but the immersive panels steal the show. In some ways they feel as primal as ancient cave drawings. Bhatt has also sculpted a few of the figures in fiberglass, grounding the rooms. If the characters weren’t so odd, you might take them for devotional icons.

Some of the panels date to 2008 and have been shown at other venues, including San Antonio's Blue Star Contemporary. Others are new. Bhatt suggests that their larger-than-life characters "allow for a certain amount of awe and reverence."

"In the end, this series is an homage to mankind for surviving its own follies," she says. "But will it?"

Amita Bhatt: Between Light and Shadow" is on view through Aug. 10 at Deborah Colton Gallery, 2445 North Blvd.; 713-869-5151, deborahcoltongallery.com.

molly.glentzer@chron.com

AUGUST 14, 2019

Meet Amita Bhatt



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Today we'd like to introduce you to Amita Bhatt.

Amita, can you briefly walk us through your story – how you started and how you got to where you are today.

I arrived in Houston in the early 90s, when I was the only Indian artist I knew. Most South Asian immigrants still predominantly worked in the Engineering and medical fields.

Life in Houston brought fresh perspectives on a range of things. Western philosophical and social theories introduced a new dimension to my work that dealt with identity-based political violence. Artistically, this was a period when I needed to move from my primary language, which was street photography, to a new language that addressed the personal with the political. Painting best suited me. I started to fuse all my influences and new experiences to build work that would allow me to make sense of the political world around me.

We're always bombarded by how great it is to pursue your passion, etc. – but we've spoken with enough people to know that it's not always easy. Overall, would you say things have been easy for you?

Art is rarely a smooth ride. Besides struggling to get one's voice heard, one also has to find an art community in which one is understood and acknowledged. It can be a difficult task for anyone, leave alone an immigrant who is new to the culture. I have to admit how lucky I have been to find acceptance and have made lifelong friends in Houston.

Please tell us more about your artwork; what you are currently focused on and most proud of.

I primarily paint and draw. My current solo exhibition—"Between Light and Shadow." at Deborah Colton Gallery in Houston includes a range of work encompassing drawings, paintings, and sculpture. My work illustrates my explorations within the realm of political violence and fuses world mythology, philosophy, popular stories, children's fables, and political events, as I examine the universal crises of conflict, desire, struggle, domination, displacement and transcendence. I have personalized the mythology and the imagery remains unrestricted."

I have enjoyed building the drawing installations for this show. My work explores not just the obviously visible rights and wrongs we negotiate in our politics but also the more difficult choices between two wrongs.

Has luck played a meaningful role in your life and business?

I consider myself very lucky to have met so many wonderful, thinking people through my journey. Each of them has brought brilliance, love, and fresh frames of reference that have fed my life and work in unique ways.

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Virginia Billeaud Anderson (BoudinandBourbon.com)

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Wednesday, June 19, 2019

Slobbering Cow: Questions for Amita Bhatt - Interview



"...you take partial inspiration from the Greek maenads, drunk frenzied bitches who'll tear you to shreds..."

Slobbering Cow: Questions for Amita Bhatt

In my yoga studio there is a sculpture of the Hindu god Ganesha. Yoga practitioners leave him offerings, a piece of fruit, for instance.

Ganesha's appearance is absurd, four arms and an elephant head, but don't let that bother you. Super-imposed onto this god are the notions of good-fortune, peace, and wisdom.

I recently came upon a Tantric scripture that offered instructions on how to

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About - Virginia Billeaud Anderson

meditate on Ganesha. The text described the proper mantra, breathing and visualization. Despite his fat belly and wine-flushed complexion, do internalize the god, he removes obstacles. Critical to the practice, it stated, is to thank one's guru, preferably with gifts of cows, land, gold, clothes, drinks and jewels.

Ganesha's hybrid nature, in my opinion, embodies the fundamental truth that our miserably tiny human form contains within it the energies of the entire cosmos. We have in us the destructive as well as regenerative forces that fill the universe. Accordingly, the human psyche has good as well as demonic impulses.

To contemplate paradoxes in human nature, artist Amita Bhatt placed Ganesha's elephant ears on a nude figure with breasts. The elephant-ear figure punches or fondles another figure with penis and Medusa-like snake hair. Scattered throughout Bhatt's art, you'll find a Christian saint here, a jackal there. I'm partial to her human-like figures with goat horns.

Interaction is comically perverse, chaotic. The figures fight, dance and have sex. There's a hint of violence, a whiff of ecstasy. Bhatt mines from sources as disparate as Hindu religious iconography, Greek mythology and contemporary culture, then refashions into unhinged scenarios. "Personalized and unrestricted," the artist called her images.

The ecstasy and terror I gleaned in her scenarios is somewhat reinforced in Bhatt's artist statement. It describes energy-filled worlds with "ecstasy and benevolence as well as darkness, suffering, and turmoil." Meditative contemplation of this type, in my opinion, constitutes an enlightened search. It is through expanded awareness that consciousness approaches Ultimate Reality, sometimes called the peace which passeth understanding.



Initially, I avoided the painting *Ibrahim Dawood Why Did You Have To?*

Jesus Christ Amita! That title reeks of tragic associations.

Crime Boss Ibrahim Dawood, it is said, masterminded the bomb explosions that killed over 250 during the 1993 Mumbai Riots. Hoping to de-stabilize



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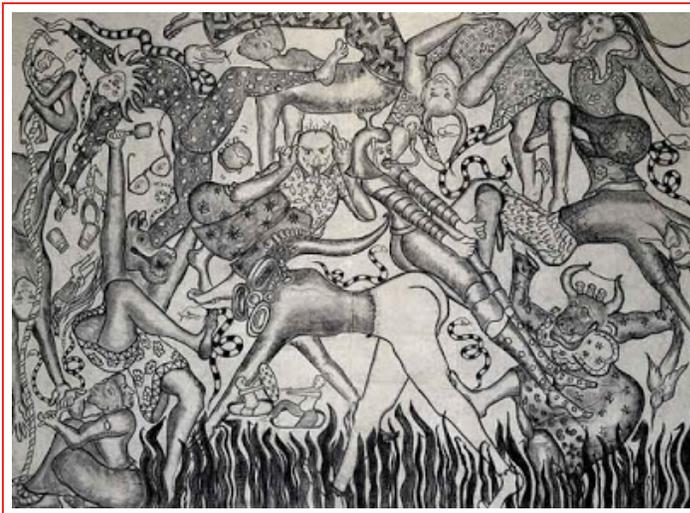
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the Indian government, he stirred up festering sectarian conflict, and incited or bribed people to behave violently, and employ terror tactics such as deadly blasts. Rioters ignited buses, temples, mosques and madrasas, they burned homes and businesses, and blocked streets so authorities could not respond. Seven hundred died in the riots, many from stabbings.

Mobster Dawood was, however, kind to his friends. His syndicate generously gave the al-Qaeda organization a helping-hand by sharing smuggling routes across South Asia, the Middle-East and Africa. It also sent large scale shipments of narcotics to the United Kingdom and Western Europe. Dawood had cordial relations with that jackass Osama bin-Laden.

When Bhatt artistically pondered Dawood, she did not render a fat-faced murderer and money-smuggler, slickly-appeared in the fashion of a Bollywood kingpin, committing despicable acts. Nor did she depict burned victims. She painted instead two mysterious floating figures, with missing parts, one being slobbered-on by a scrawny cow.

The painting is a philosophical and psychological exploration of human nature. Man is sacred and profane. Two apparent opposites are in fact aspects of the one reality. Bhatt reflects. Nothing is resolved.



Recently Bhatt notified me she will exhibit over 30 paintings and drawings in her solo exhibition *Between Light and Shadow* which opens on June 22, 2019 at Deborah Colton Gallery, though August 10. I decided it would be fun to ask Amita a few questions.

Virginia Billeaud Anderson: Were you injured or in danger during the Mumbai riots?

Amita Bhatt: The Mumbai riots will remain one of the most eye-opening experiences I've had. It opened the doors to a view that I found was a global phenomenon. Identity based killings are sadly the norm across the world now, and have gained currency at shocking speed everywhere. The 20th and 21st centuries have seen a resurgence to ethnic and religious conflicts and identifications which continue to be in the center of political discourse. In addition the rising popularity of right wing politicians in different parts of the world, all point to a multiple collision course the world is headed toward. I

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A Closer Look



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A Closer Look

use irony, paradox, and humor to work through the absurdities of our war ravaged societies.

VBA: You indicated dismembered figures and compositional chaos occasionally refer to dislocation, which causes human misery today, as it has since the beginning of time. Unsurprising dislocation is a primary theme in the world's great mythological and narrative traditions, Homer and Exodus are examples. We find the theme, as well, in the Hindu epic Mahabharata, in which Arjuna arrogantly boasted about the carnage he stirred-up, and died with the other Pandavas. I'm curious, did your ancestral family suffer dislocation during partition, which of course caused an obscene number of deaths and displaced over 14 million?

AB: Fortunately no one in my family was directly affected by the partition of India and Pakistan.

VBA: You're probably aware that Hindu scripture states my buddy elephant-head Ganesha composed the Mahabharata. My blog readers know I'm as interested in the life of the person who creates, as I am in the creation. Do you work a "day" job, teach or research or whatever? You remained in the U.S. after graduate school in Baltimore, what brought you to Houston? How often are you in India?

AB: I got my MFA at the Maryland Institute College of Art, and taught a few semesters at MICA after graduating. Houston had been home base for almost two decades until I had to go back to India to take care of ageing parents. I am mostly studio bound and don't do anything outside of my studio practice at the moment.

VBA: Do you make preliminary sketches before you paint?

AB: I sketch a lot Virginia. However the process remains organic and the work might suddenly take a completely different direction from my original intent.

VBA: Do you consult visual references while you work, or do images flow from the imagination?

AB: I am always looking at historic, contemporary as well as random images. Right now I want to develop my - "politics as circus"- theme and I'm looking at a lot of contortionists, gymnasts, and circus imagery. The essential idea comes from researching and contemplating certain ideas and/or a philosophical comment I want to make. The character that is developed must be able to visually embody that thought using visual codes. Sometimes these characters are direct references as well. My characters are signifiers and are transformative in nature. They live in a constantly changing world as they locate their space on the canvas.

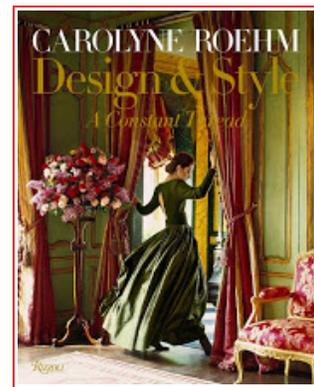
VBA: Say something about your choice of colors. Are they strategic? Symbolic? Ancient Indian and Greek sculpture was coated with bright colors.

AB: My palette certainly has Indian influences but they don't have any art historical references. They can be emotional responses that are meant to excite certain sensibilities in the mind of the viewer.



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A Closer Look

VBA: Amita, your females are fierce. Battleaxes on equal footing with the males. It's fun to think you take partial inspiration from the Greek mythological maenads, drunk frenzied bitches who'll tear you to shreds. And surely you draw on the Hindu goddess Kali, with fang-teeth and severed heads to adorn her body. That broad is a manifestation of the feminine principle, and encompasses the fact that death, fear and pain are as much a part of nature as its positive aspects, and are necessary. In Tantric tradition, woman has an equal share of the Source's energy, recall Kali danced on Shiva's corpse. Comment on taking influence from feminine concepts as interpreted through Tantric practices.

AB: The divine Feminine is central to the study of Tantra. My early influences (I thank Professor Deepak Kannal for introducing me to Tantra - a topic that might still be considered taboo in certain circles) were certainly rooted in Tantra albeit loosely. One of the more blatant examples of female energies is the goddess Chinnamastak - a predominantly Hindu goddess who will sever her own head to feed her devotees. Several miniature paintings illustrate the goddess severing her own head with one of the spurts of blood feeding a copulating figure and another feeding her own self. She is symbolic of sacrifice and re-generation. While both Kali and Durga are hugely celebrated across India, Kali probably finds more prominence in Bengal. Chinnamastak is powerful in her directness and matter-of-factness.

But the mere study of political violence, or Tantra (which states that violence is an essential part of the cycle of creation and destruction) isn't enough. Once one researches it, one also has to understand his/her own position in this constantly churning world.

VBA: I've been thinking about the slobbering cow in *Ibrahim Dawood Why Did You Have To?* It's possible the painting contemplates "cow vigilantism," where sectarian extremists use the protection of cows as an excuse to commit violent acts, misbehavior becoming more prevalent. Want to say something about the show at Deborah Colton Gallery?

AB: It opens June 22, and I intend to show about 10 large drawings, about 12 paintings (mostly 4 by 4 feet) and about 8 or 10 smaller works.



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Images:

Amita Bhatt, "No Straight Answers," 48 x 48 inches, Oil on Canvas, 2015

Amita Bhatt, "Ibrahim Dawood Why Did You Have To?" Oil on Canvas, 48 x 48 inches, 2014

Amita Bhatt, "A Fantastic Collision of the Three Worlds – XXIX," Charcoal and Oil Stick on Canvas. 9 x 12', 2017.

Amita Bhatt, "Desire, Motives Assassins," 48 x 48 inches, Oil on Canvas, 2015

Images from Amita Bhatt's website

www.amitabhatter.net

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Posted by Virginia Billeaud Anderson at 10:38 PM



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Deborah Colton Gallery presents Amita Bhatt: "Between Light and Shadow" opening reception

f 0 t 0 ✉

Deborah Colton Gallery presents the dynamic multi-media exhibition, "Between Light and Shadow," featuring a new series of work by international artist, Amita Bhatt.



Photo by Amita Bhatt

Bhatt digs deep into world philosophies and mythologies to answer questions pertaining to our political as well as personal belief systems. Unafraid to explore uncomfortable territories, the artist mines from a range of sources to create hybrid creatures that are often symbolic of man's psychological condition in an angst ridden zeitgeist. Bhatt's work is derived from a variety of sources including popular fiction, children's fables, world mythologies, as well as current political events.

Following the opening reception, the exhibit will be on display until August 10.

EVENT DETAILS

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6.22.19 | 6:00 pm

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