



## Shotgun Review

# Absorption into the Nomadic and Luminous

By *crystal am nelson* June 13, 2011

Ranu Mukherjee's exhibition *Absorption into the Nomadic and Luminous* features eleven works: eight ink paintings and three hybrid films. One might be tempted to casually frame her work within a sometimes-essentialist postcolonial discourse, if one accepts postcolonialism as the study of two separate sites of cultural knowledge, one dominant and the other marginalized. Elements of this paradigm exist in the work, but they do so right on the surface, where any viewer can see them. This suggests that Mukherjee knows this reading is inevitable and presents it as a give-away, while daring viewers to look closer for what cultural theorist Homi Bhabha calls "the third space," where cultural specificity gives way to ambiguity and hybridity.<sup>1</sup> By calling her video works "hybrid films" and using magical realist aesthetics, Mukherjee underscores the exploration of creolization in her art practice.

The first hybrid film viewers encounter, *Auspicious Picture, Multiple Sources of Power* (2011), depicts an anonymous ocean roiling toward the shoreline at dusk. At first, the waves are calm as a sunlike disc burns brightly above them, calling to mind saintly visions. As the bright image fades, the ocean waves appear closer and more violent, carrying with them an assortment of Indian tapestries and apparel. At one point, an uprooted tree appears in the bottom corner. This hypnotic and poetic film subtly introduces processes of identity destruction and formation that result from the collision of old and new paradigms.



*Ecstatic Picture, Spilled Milk*, 2011; hybrid film; duration variable.  
Courtesy of Frey Norris Contemporary & Modern, San Francisco.

The other two films, *Abundance Picture, as told by the element of itself* (2011) and *Ecstatic Picture, Spilled Milk* (2011), are densely layered environments where sacred and profane objects converge and transform into something unexpected but familiar, new and yet known. For example, in *Abundance Picture*, an array of golden objects, from traditional Indian jewelry to wrenches and tire rims, float across a partially painted landscape and land on the back of a crocodile where they shift into the form of a sacred statue. In *Ecstatic Picture*, cell phones cascade into view among floral wreaths and decorative feathers before they ooze colorful streams and fade away. One cannot help but think about India's position as one of the world's information technologies capitals and how this status relates to its identity as one of the world's most sacred sites. Most importantly, these films raise questions about how communities cope with paradigmatic change and highlight the authority such communities assert in determining which of the old traditions they will maintain and marry with new cultural forms borrowed from colonial powers.

*Absorption into the Nomadic and Luminous* is on view at [Frey Norris Contemporary & Modern](#), in San Francisco, through July 31, 2011.

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