

CHIRAAG BHAKTA

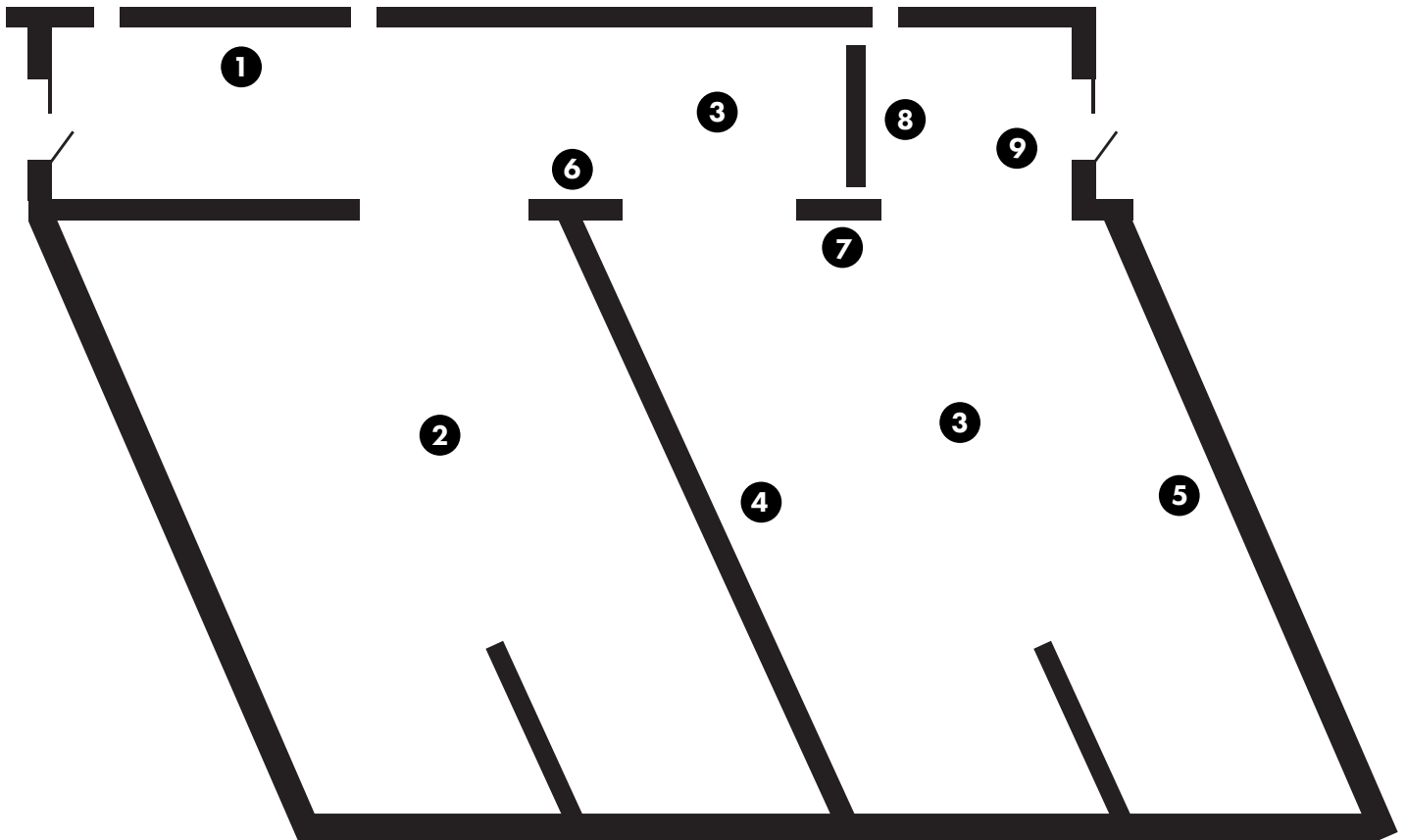
DESIGNING THE DREAM STATE



The Inaugural Whitney Artist-in-Residence Exhibition
Joseloff Gallery
February 23 – March 25, 2023

This exhibition features new work created by Chiraag Bhakta during his tenure as the Hartford Art School's inaugural Whitney Artist-in-Residence. Graduating from HAS in 1999 with a degree in Graphic Design, Chiraag is now expanding his understanding of design beyond graphics. **Designing the Dream State** looks at empire building, specifically the evolution of South Asian-American identities post 1965, when new immigration policies were designed to bring highly educated South Asians to the U.S. in pursuit of the "American Dream." The exhibition includes new work in video, sculpture, screenprinting, and assemblage, alongside Bhakta's ongoing photo-documentary series, *The Arch Motel Project*. Taken together, the artwork sheds light on the many ways that design enters our everyday lives, from banal marketing to the construction of personal memories.

This gallery guide provides information about the work on view in **Designing the Dream State**. With the exception of *Health, Wealth, and Self*, none of this work has appeared in previous exhibitions.



1 *I Am You and You Are Me, 1975-2023*

Stills from found Super8 films

During a trip to India in 2016, Bhakta was digging through a stall at the Chor Bazaar in Bombay when he came across two small Kodak boxes, each containing a reel of Super8 film with the handwritten labels, "Ches-peaky Bay Verginia" and "Great-Adventure. New Jercy." Vernacular objects such as snapshots and home videos have the uncanny ability of being both intensely personal and universally relatable. Just as we see ourselves in other peoples' pictures, when watching these films Bhakta is reminded of his own parents and their early days in the U.S. Here, he intersperses stills from the films with one from his own family archive in a reflection on the collective identity of the first generation of South Asians invited to participate in the "American Dream."

2 *A Great Adventure: New Jercy / Verginia, 1975-2023*

Video work from found Super8 films with sound design by Arshia Fatima Haq

A young South Asian couple flirtatiously films each other as they take in the sites of the American dreamscape—a New Jersey theme park (fraught with moments of cultural appropriation) and the Chesapeake Bay (its vista periodically branded by military aircraft). Whose memories are these, so preciously recorded, only to end up decades later in a second-hand market in India? A stamp on the original box from the Kodak processing laboratory tells us that the films were mailed to Deepak Shah at a New York City address on July 22, 1975. It is easy to imagine, as Bhakta does, this newly emigrated couple visiting sites of sacral import (i.e. tourist destinations) as they embark on their "great adventure." Screened in six iterations from floor to ceiling within Arshia Fatima Haq's sound design ("*main tere peechhe peechhe aa gayee, saat samundar paar,*" she repeats, "I followed you, I followed you, across seven seas"), Bhakta immerses us in the Shah's act of memory making, forcing viewers to feel the full weight and expectations of their decision to pursue the "American Dream."

3 *Ful-Fillment, 2023*

Resin printed sculptures, Screenprints on wood

The commercial airline Air India was one of the first companies to attempt to draw bridges between India and the west through branding, unveiling its mascot "the Maharajah" in 1946. Sanskrit for "great ruler," the airline's Maharajah dons the dress of a king, but there is little else that is royal about him. Light-skinned and subservient in pose, Bhakta interprets the mascot as "bowing to the west," designed to entice westerners to visit India just as the airline became a means of transportation for South Asians immigrating to the U.S. post 1965. Bhakta's army of warped Maharajahs sit aloft a series of boxes printed with the phrase "Living the Dream State™" alongside the tagline "Prosperity with Partnership," mimicking corporate visual and written language. Earlier modes of transport and commercial exchange are referenced in the British and Dutch East India Company's merchant marks on the sides of the boxes, supported by a wooden palette finished with teak oil. As opposed to tea, jute, rubber, and spices—the primary products that Britain extracted from South Asia for centuries—here, humans are the product.

4 *National Origins Formula, No. 1-8, 2022-23*

Screenprints on eco-printed linen

Bhakta learned about the process of eco-printing on linen in the summer of 2022. He found that printing with plants such as marigolds and coreopsis produced an aesthetic that evoked the spirit of the 1960s and 70s, which occupied his mind and work. In the *National Origins Formula* series, he collages imagery sourced from a variety of materials, from radical underground American publications to Indian advertisements. Images of civil unrest are overlaid with that of industrial and military operations, alongside advertising for more mundane consumer products, such as soft drinks. The figures pop in blue

and red against the eco-printed linen, evoking the clash between high consumerism and hippie counterculture that defined the era. The series is named after the umbrella term for a series of qualitative immigration quotas from 1921 to 1965 in the U.S., to restrict immigration from the Eastern Hemisphere on the basis of national origin.

5 *The Arch Motel Project, 2006-present*

Giclée prints created with Daniel Dent and Michael Martinez

Named after Bhakta's first home, The Arch Motel, this ongoing project documents life at independent motels across the U.S. owned and run by Gujarati-Americans (Gujrat is a state along the western coast of India where Bhakta's parents were born). Living and running a business in the same space necessarily creates an environment of dualities. Such dichotomies are enhanced by the meeting of cultures, as the owners of these motels create space for their own identities alongside (or, at times, out of sight from) that of their adopted home. In these medium-format photographs, made at motels in California in 2016 and in Texas in 2018, we see fennel seeds stored in a salsa jar, rice bags repurposed on a laundry cart, security monitors abutting a Hindu shrine, an outdoor pool that has been transformed into a garden, and a one-way mirror that looks out to the front desk from the family's kitchen table. In one image, patriotic stickers hold together a cracked window—an evocative allegory for the fraught realities that await those who come in pursuit of "The American Dream."

6 *Health, Wealth, Self, 2020*

Found objects with mirrors

Created as a part of Bhakta's series, *Visions and Nightmares (ThisOnly)*, this installation features a found tin of skin lightener amidst a display of fractured mirrors. The skin lightener Fair & Lovely (renamed Glow & Lovely in 2020) is one of the most popular consumer products in India today. It is owned by the multinational British consumer goods company Unilever, and Bhakta sees it as evidence of the ways that Britain continues to benefit from insecurities planted in South Asian populations during the colonial era. Set within a frame of mirrors, Bhakta asks viewers to consider their own complicity in these ongoing forms of cultural violence.

7 *I Don't Taste Spice, 2023*

Installation of found curry tins

This installation of found curry tins is emblematic of Bhakta's artistic practice, which involves the collecting of vernacular objects, consumer products, and stories. It also reflects a larger interest in the branding and re-branding of cultural identities in the context of global consumerism. The word "curry" is a British invention from the colonial era, used as a blanket term for any gravy-based dish. The curry tins on display here were all created by western food companies whose design choices—from the fonts to the mascots and taglines—reflect degrees of value and palatability with respect to Indian culture.

8 *Harry Jack's Gray Area, 2023*

Machine-cut wood with acrylic paint

Upon beginning his residency at the Hartford Art School, Bhakta took an immediate interest in the design and branding of the University of Hartford's campus. In particular, he found himself wondering about the connections between the University, United Technologies, and Harry Jack Gray, for whom buildings on the campus are named. Here, he has revised the University's newly crafted Land Acknowledgement to bring to light the financial resources (specifically, the military industrial complex) that support the University.

9 Reading Room

Selected by Chiraag Bhakta, Vivek Boray, Carrie Cushman, and Andrew Shaw, the books on display expand on the issues addressed in *Designing the Dream State*. Visitors to the exhibition are invited to pursue the books while in the gallery.

- Karma of Brown Folk / Vijay Prashad
- The Darker Nations: A People's History Of The Third World / Vijay Prashad
- Understanding Jim Crow / David Pilgrim
- The Politics Of Design / Ruben Pater
- Capitalist Realism / Mark Fisher
- Prisoners of the American Dream / Mike Davis
- Passport Photos / Amitava Kumar
- Prisoners of the American Dream / Mike Davis
- White Borders: The History of Race and Immigration in the US / Reece Jones
- Minor Feelings / Cathy Park Hong



You can learn more about the history of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 and its impact on the design of South Asian-American communities in the nearby newspaper or on the artist's website.

Chiraag Bhakta is a multidisciplinary artist whose practice is rooted in collecting objects and stories from various times and environments. Raised in an independent motel on a New Jersey freeway surrounded by a rotation of extended family, Bhakta received his BFA in Graphic Design from the Hartford Art School in 1999. While working as a graphic designer he has been exploring his own work, at times under the pseudonym *Pardon My Hindi. His work varies in medium, including printmaking, collage, photography and assemblage. His work has been shown at the Whitney Museum, the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, and the Brooklyn Museum, among other institutions.

—
@PardonMyHindi

—
ChiraagBhakta.com

The exhibition and related programming are made possible by the International Distinguished Artist Symposium and Exhibition Fund and the Beatrice Fox Auerbach Foundation Fund held by Hartford Art School Endowment, Inc.

