



MONIKA JOSHI

Since his visit to India seven years ago through an architecture exchange program, James Banta hasn't gone back. But the artist, many of whose works are inspired by Bollywood, continues to journey through India — through Hindi films, and continual study of the geography and history of the country.

October 28, Banta, auctioned off five of his Kashmir-related paintings to raise money for children affected by the recent earthquake in South Asia. The map paintings, acrylic on canvas, are abstractions of the geography of the area where India and Pakistan meet.

One of them is 'Siachen

Glacier,' where Banta summons up texture on a white canvas. 'I have specifically depicted sites of historical conflict — such as the Siachen Glacier where India and Pakistan fought over territory of questionable strategic importance at 20,000 feet above sea level — to call attention to the absurdity of such endeavors,' he explains in a statement. 'My aim is to point out how we have allowed simple lines to dictate our national affiliation and intellectual or cultural identity to the point where continued misunderstanding threatens to carve up the globe.'

The funds of over \$2000 raised from the sale of four of his five paintings will go to Child Nurture and Relief Earthquake

Relief Fund, a Virginia-based non-profit whose mission is to work toward psychological rehabilitation of children in conflict areas.

The 'India' theme is omnipresent in the work of Banta, a 34-year-old Filipino-American artist, whose exhibition, 'Encounters' is on until November 14 at the Square One Gallery in Union Square, New York.

The binding force in this mixed-media exhibition — whose protagonists go from actress Vyjayanthimala, to a Nigerian musician, the tsunami-hit regions in the Indian Ocean, to the West's impressions of the Orient (gathered during the year Banta spent in Genoa, Italy) — are slides that he calls "cells of memory" of his travels and things that impressed him.

Banta keeps a simple palate.

India, his obsession

Driven by Bollywood and conflict, James Banta explores culture — on canvas



■ James Banta (right); his shrine to Bollywood (above) and his paintings: Siachen (top); and Sadhana (left)



He is partial to gold. "I find it decorative and beautiful; especially for small pieces, it makes the work stronger," he says.

He has also discovered the virtues of Holi powder. "I buy different colors, and I love them because they are like pigments," he says, cheerful and unhurried. "Many of my Bollywood works have Holi powder sprinkled throughout."

The artist, whose mother is from the Philippines and father from America, was born and raised in New York. He was very young when his parents divorced, remarried, and traded countries (His father now lives in the Philippines, his mother in the US).

"I grew up with one foot in each place, traveling back and forth," he says. That is something he loves.

And the fascination for India

began after his trip there in 1998.

"I just had an incredible experience. It was challenging and exciting," he says. The three-month stay in Jaisalmer introduced him to Hindi movies. Soon, he was hooked.

Bollywood's influence on him is evident in paintings such as Ash vs Sush (2004, mixed media), Nimbooda (2004, acrylic on canvas), Paro (2004, mixed media), and SRK (2005, mixed media).

He lives in Jackson Heights, New York, not only because it has a huge South Asian population but because it also houses Hispanics, Filipinos and everyone else.

"Queens is very diverse, and I love that about our neighborhood," he says. "It makes a lot of sense of us." His wife Andaleeb (meaning 'nightingale' in Arabic) is also of mixed heritage.

Banta, who feels he has always had an artist's instinct, studied art history and historical preservation related to architecture. His day job is in historic preservation working in an architecture firm.

His art he pursues in evenings and weekends from his home studio. While in Genoa, he hosted a solo exhibition of his Bollywood works; in 2004, he walked the perimeter of Manhattan island and mapped the route, discovering parts of

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Manhattan he had never seen before.

His ideas spring from current events and politics.

"I'm interested in geography that changes hands," he says. "Who's claiming what piece for themselves and why, and what's the history about..." One of his works deals with the battle of Lepanto between the Ottomans who were invading Europe and European coalition forces of that time trying to repel them. "That historic battle Lepanto is a parallel to our own world struggling with immigration," he says. "As we get more connected in this world, we have a lot of growing pains. That inspires me to think about things."

Banta, who is working on grant applications for his artwork, is planning to hold a Bollywood exhibition in the spring of 2006. He also wants to showcase, though collages (with little slides and pictures within that he seems fond of), his personal effects, including life in the Philippines and in New York.

The dream project, however, remains tied to Bollywood.

"But more than just hang paintings on the wall, I would love to coordinate the exhibition with a film series for a theater," he says. "It will not just show my artwork, but also tie it into the films."

For more details, visit www.jamesbanta.net

Encounters, mixed media artwork by James Banta

Square One Gallery until November 14, 2005

1 Union Square West, Room 501 New York, NY 10003

212-414-0250

Hours: Monday to Friday (by appointment)