

## Homeward bound



**Word is out** Gautam Kansara's grandmother translates lyrics of Hindi and Urdu love songs in *Grandma, Gautam and Ghalib*

A show about diaspora art hopes to explore new territory, reports **Zeenat Nagree**.

Sometimes, it's hard to name one's homeland. Gautam Kansara grew up in the United Kingdom and the United States and doesn't think he is tied to a single nation. Mala Iqbal is part German and part Pakistani but feels that her country of origin is the US. Though Samanta Batra Mehta has been living in New York for the past seven years, she sees it as an extension of living in Mumbai. Maryam Jafri believes that her Pakistani origins are just one part of her multiple identity. Fawad Khan sees himself as an American artist even though he was born to Pakistani parents and spent his early childhood in Libya.

These five New York-based artists are part of an exhibition titled *A Place of Their Own*. Through their works, curator Sharmishtha Ray is attempting to tease out the cultural and physical dislocations that result from

migration. Except for Mehta, who grew up in India, the artists admitted that they don't have strong ties to their countries of origin. Their fluid identities seep into their art, which lacks the nostalgia for an imaginary homeland often associated with diasporic artists.

That's apparent from the works of Fawad Khan, whose parents migrated to the US when he was eight years old. His colourful collages combine graphic design and pop art styles to depict fragmented parts of army vehicles, vintage cars and camouflage patterns. Khan draws from his early childhood spent on a military base in Libya with his father, an officer in the Pakistan Army Medical Corps. "The automobile, an invention intended for transportation, has turned into a tool of destruction," he said. While Khan's works point to the conflict-ridden history of Pakistan, they also address the broader issue of war and violence.

A direct link to a homeland is also unclear in the works of Maryam Jafri, who said that she

considers herself a "global artist". *Staged Archive*, a 2008 video by Jafri, plots the fictitious story of a man who sets out on a journey into the unknown and ends up in a courtroom filled with people from his past. The video, which Jafri said takes place in an "unidentified West African country", references nineteenth-century travelogues, colonial expeditions and the film genre of road movies.

*A Place of their Own* also showcases the jarring landscapes of Mala Iqbal, which combine cheery

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colours with a foreboding atmosphere. Neither Khan, Jafri nor Iqbal deal specifically with South Asian themes, motifs and references. "Not all the artists see themselves through a diasporic lens and they

aren't necessarily tracing their roots," Ray argued. "But I think their art is distinct because it is concerned with migratory patterns and the straddling of cultures."

These ideas emerge strongly in the works of Gautam Kansara and Samanta Batra Mehta. Kansara's videos record the reminiscences of his immigrant grandparents, who left India for the UK in 1947. Even as he evokes strong reactions from his family, Kansara remains detached. His 2006 video titled *Grandma, Gautam and Ghalib* shows his grandmother listening to old Hindi and Urdu love songs and translating the lyrics for Kansara. Though his grandmother experiences a sentimental longing for the past, Kansara shifts from being mildly interested to completely distant. "I am not tied to one homeland," he said. "But having connections to multiple places has been a big influence on my work."

Samanta Batra Mehta also draws material from her home country. The artist, who grew up in Mumbai and moved to New York in 2003, has been influenced by this displacement. "When I moved, I started thinking of issues such as identity, gender constructs and colonisation," she said. Mehta's intricate photographic work *Last of the Uncolonised Lands* depicts a woman in a flowing white dress passively lying down in the middle of a dark landscape. Unidentifiable figures loom around the woman in white, bare trees dominate the frame and form intricate patterns and shadows that appear to engulf her. There is an impending violence that seems to threaten the virginal land or female body.

Even though an obvious diasporic connection seems to be stronger for some artists than the others, Ray hopes that viewers will be able to join the dots. "At the root of the works of these artists, there is obviously a certain adjustment and re-integration that stems from the diasporic experience," she said. *See Gallery BMB in Exhibitions.*