Gautam Kansara was born in London in 1979. He received a BA in Studio Art from the University of California, Santa Cruz in 2001 and an MA in Studio Art from New York University in 2004. Since graduating, he has exhibited his works internationally in museums, galleries and festival screenings. He currently lives and works in New York City.

Snapshots, the Airport, and Lunch
By Stephen Maine

In the audacious videos he has produced in the last four years, Gautam Kansara brings us into close contact with the warm if quizzical relationship he has had with his maternal grandparents. Real Art Ways recently presented us between us, which included nine video-based pieces from this absorbing body of work. Also on view was a suite of photographs taken in and near his grandparent’s flat in Ealing, in West London, where many of the videos were shot. Intimate but never sentimental, the works candidly record Kansara and his family in spontaneous conversations, revealing the shifting dynamics of influence and support.

The artist’s grandparents were born in India and moved to London in 1947; his parents were educated in Britain and moved to the US when he was very young. Unsurprisingly, talk sometimes turns to issues related to cultural displacement. But at heart, the work addresses familial hierarchies, emotional availability, and Kansara’s attempts to find meaning in his beloved elders’ memories when those are set half a world away.

People From Before is a three-channel video in which Grandma and Grandpa, prompted by a trove of old photographs, reminisce about their families in India and try to untangle their
sometimes contradictory recollections. Grandma visibly delights in conversation for its own sake; she seems more mentally agile than Grandpa but defers to him anyway. During the course of the interview, they reveal aspects of their upbringing, such as the disparity in their economic backgrounds, and the imprisonment of Grandma's father during India's struggle for independence.

Kansara generally shoots with a single stationary camera and ambient light; though often heavily edited, each video unfolds at a leisurely pace. His grandparents appear to be oblivious to (or unimpressed by) the unobtrusive equipment, but when Grandpa rises unsteadily to his feet and shuffles out of the frame, the resulting disappearance of his reflection has a resounding finality. The grandparents play supporting roles in the engrossing, hilarious I'm Leaving, in which the titanic egos of the artist's parents and his brother Vikram clash over the dinner table. Much visual information is skillfully veiled via a time-warping hybrid of still and motion photography, but the soundtrack amply conveys the company's fraught interaction in variously antagonistic and grudgingly tolerant tones:

"I didn't say it's excellent, I said it's good!"
"I said it's excellent that you think it's good."

The family bickers over topics both global and quotidian, from the legacy of India's colonial past to which cell phone phones have urine and germs all over them. Tensions mount; eventually Father accuses Mother of lying, though about what is unclear. In the end, Vikram is assigned the task of cooking the duck for Christmas dinner, "as penance for fomenting the family argument."

Meanwhile, Grandpa's unmitting cognitive failure is further documented in the grueling These Are The Gods. On the central screen of this twenty-six-minute work, the old man nods in and out of an uneasy sleep. His slack jaws and bushy white eyebrows frame his enormous eyeglasses. In the background runs faint footage of happier, more lucid times. On the flanking screens are shots of household shrines, amalgamations of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jainist deities. In response to Grandpa's agitated, redundant questions about eating lunch and going home, Kansara shouts to make himself understood. His exasperation is palpable. Grandpa is simultaneously befuddled and demanding: "Please don't tell me anything. Just tell me what to do." The video captures a sad milestone in an elderly person's decline: the point after which, even with assistance, going out to eat is no longer an option.

At Real Art Ways, a series of large digital c-prints titled Chiltern House 1–10 punctuated the gallery walls, providing context and counterpoint to the moving images on view. In one, the couple pose at their front door dressed for cool weather—Grandpa stoic, Grandma appearing bemused as usual. But most of the photos are unpeopled, and turn our attention back to the rooms of the flat itself in a way that evokes a stage set, a microcosm of the wider world. A shot of the unremarkable brick building suggests that similar domestic dramas might well be unfolding in other homes. Such private traumas are public in scale, universally recognizable, and intuitively understood.

Stephen Maine is an artist and critic based in Brooklyn, New York.