

**REAL
ART WAYS**

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This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways "Go" competition in 2007, which requested proposals from emerging artists living in New York or New England. "Go" was juried by Derrick Adams (Artist, Founding Director and Curator at Rush Arts Gallery and Resource Center, New York); Olu Oguibe (Visual Artist, Writer, Scholar, and Curator, Connecticut); Jane Philbrick (Digital Artist, Connecticut).

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Real Art Ways is one of the leading contemporary art organizations in the United States with an emphasis on supporting contemporary artists, fostering the creation of new work, and working in creative ways with community.



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE ARTS

Gautam Kansara



2008 installation view at Real Art Ways of multi-channel video, sound, c-prints, and photos, 2005–2008.

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 conversation, 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

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.

On the cover: *People From Before*, photo installation, and 3-channel video, TRT 9:20, 3:23, 7:40, 2008 (detail).

All images courtesy of Real Art Ways. Staff photographer John Groo.

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Chiltern House (1–10), c-prints, 30" x 30" or 30" x 40" each, 2004–2008 (detail).

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, and that feeds the central conflict enlivening this work, namely the imbalance in the participants' conception of what is going on. Insofar as "performance" implies awareness of an audience (or its proxy, the camera), Kansara's grandparents are not acting, but he is.

The artist teases out the implications of this arrangement in a two-channel installation titled *Rangpur Therapy*, in which he records himself in "conversation" with Grandpa's projected image. The old man recounts details of growing up in a large family of straitened circumstances, going to boarding school in Bombay, and launching his professional career in London.

From time to time Kansara pauses the footage and interjects questions and comments, as if enacting an idealized version of the original conversation—perhaps, what he wishes he had said in the first place. On the floor nearby, a monitor plays a simultaneous head shot of the artist, underscoring that despite the illusion of human interaction, the piece documents a solo performance.

In *I'm Leaving*, Kansara reminds his grandparents over dinner that he is "leaving tomorrow," a phrase Grandpa emphatically repeats as the meal progresses, as if to ease his shock and bafflement. He offers to take Kansara to the airport—an obviously extraneous but loving gesture designed to prolong contact, and to return a modicum of the attention he has received during his

grandson's visit. The old man's mounting anxiety is the subject of *Very Worried Redux*, in which he is seen in an easy chair, fretting over matters large and small, real and imaginary. Off-camera, Kansara tries to reassure him, but he is inconsolable. His image fades in and out, while his reflection in the glass coffee table in the frame's foreground remains. Kansara flirts with the cliché of the elderly "fading away," 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 *Last Christmas/Eve*, 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 company offers the best deal. Vikram, an eager provocateur,

suggests that Father get rid of his troublesome phone and use Morse code or smoke signals instead, since "public 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 unremitting 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 jowls 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.

Chiltern House (1–10), c-prints, 30" x 30" each, 2004–2008 (detail).

