



Himanshu Suri

For the cognoscenti, the Lower Manhattan intersection of Great Jones Street and Bowery is hallowed ground. In 1983, Andy Warhol rented a loft space at 57 Great Jones to the Haitian-Puerto Rican pop artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose short career would take him from spray-painting subway cars to being canonized for artwork like “Irony Of Negro Policeman”. For five years, the brilliant, tortured Basquiat worked and lived in the loft as he sunk deeper into paranoia and drug addiction. Finally, in 1988, Basquiat was found dead in his bath, a collection of bloody syringes crowning the ledge of the tub. He was 27 years old.

In 2015, the front of 57 Great Jones hosts a Japanese butchery that displays fine cuts of Wagyu beef like diamonds, and in the back there’s an unmarked, cooler-than-thou restaurant called Bohemian. On a blisteringly cold winter day, three trailers and various barriers manned by movie-crew types block the entrance to Number 57. The production leads to a line of young black men in tight pants and greying-at-the-wings white guys, all waiting for clipboard-toting PR chicks to admit them into a Nike Pop-Up Store.

As these hype-beasts vie for ostensibly rare yet mass-produced sneakers, it’s heartening that Himanshu Suri seems completely uninterested in entering Phil Knight’s church of consumption. Instead, “Heems”, best known as one-third of Noughties rap group Das Racist, mugs for pics out front of the Great Jones Street Cafe, right across the road from where Basquiat worked and died.

It's not a coincidence we're shooting here. Himanshu draws several parallels between himself and Basquiat. "New York person of colour takes art world by storm, influenced by the streets and graffiti," explains Heems. "Eventually, he can't take it and dies. Cautionary tale for people like me who put all of themselves into their work."

57 Great Jones is also just a block away from the Aicon Gallery, where as part of the lead-up to his first full-length solo album, *Eat Pray Thug*, Heems curated an art show of the same name, featuring desi artists like Ratna Gupta, Ranbir Kaleka and Abdullah MI Syed — as well as art he created in partnership with Chiraag Bhakta, aka Pardon My Hindi. As in his music, Heems' visual art references borrow heavily from his north Indian family's experience in the United States.

But before you scoff at the self-described "chubby guy from that Das Racist fad" trying to summon a legendary person-of-colour on home turf, listen to "New York City Cops" off 2012's *Nehru Jackets*, Heems' debut solo mixtape. Its lyrical palette is as charged as any Basquiat canvas. In contrast to NWA's defiant, in-your-face classic "Fuck Tha Police", Heems seems resigned to police brutality, tediously listing off every time the NYPD has killed an unarmed black or Hispanic man over the last four decades. Similarly laborious repetition appears on the 11 track *Eat Pray Thug*, released this March, where the listener — of whatever skin colour — can feel trapped in Heems' head, especially as he confronts, more than once, the moment where his otherness became inescapable.

Heems attended Stuyvesant High School, one of three elite New York City public high schools that require students to pass an entrance exam. And though Stuyvesant marked the beginning of a scholastic career most Indian parents would dream of for their kids, something terrible happened very early in his second year. On September 11, 2001, Himanshu Suri, Vice President of the student council, watched from less than a kilometre away as American Airlines Flight 11 hit the North Tower of the World Trade Center at 8:46am. Seventeen minutes later, United Flight 175 hit the South Tower.

When he speaks about it, Heems' voice quivers. "As a 15-year-old," he tells me, "I basically saw people jumping and it really messed with my head. We were close enough to hear people hitting the ground. Even now it triggers a lot of anxiety for me." The spoken-word conclusion of *Eat Pray Thug*'s "Flag Shopping" describes how: *from then on they called all of us Osama, the old Sikh men on the bus were Osama. I was Osama, we were Osama... are you Osama?*

"I feel like on my last couple records I made a habit of hiding behind humour or my Indian identity or Indian samples, and on this record it's all out in the open," says Heems. (That and the fact that his label didn't clear the Indian samples meant to appear on the album.) "I'm talking about collateral damage from the war on terror, language barriers and mental health in communities of colour... I'm at a place in my career where I want to say these things." Heems' unfiltered Twitter feed often touches on similarly unsettling subject matter. And in tweets like, "My album's about me trying not to die and also be a voice for my peoples", Basquiat's tragic spectre doesn't hover too far away. Yet when I ask Heems if it's hard to be so sensitive in such a mean business, he doesn't miss a beat. His humour, his armour, quickly reappears.

"Who told you I'm sensitive?" he laughs.

Becoming a rap star was never the goal. In late 2008, after graduating from Wesleyan University, a prestigious liberal arts college in Connecticut, Heems was working as a recruiter on Wall Street and living with classmate Victor "Kool AD" Vazquez in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. But then their band Das Racist's song "Combination Pizza Hut And Taco Bell" suddenly took off. It was both

infectiously catchy, and by simply repeating the song title with a few variations in syntax, it became an artistic statement on the ubiquitousness of American fast-food chains. The pair soon added hypeman Ashok “Dapwell” Kondabolu to the line-up for comic relief, and by the end of 2011 Das Racist had gone from playing free shows to appearing on *Late Night With Conan O’Brien* and gracing the cover of *Spin*. In the *Spin* story, written by comedian Hari Kondabolu — Dapwell’s brother — readers learn of how surprised Hari was that his little brother’s band, which he didn’t take all that seriously, had actually “made it”.

Das Racist planned much of this comedic offensive about four blocks from Aicon Gallery, at Minca Ramen, Heems’ favourite Japanese Noodle Bar. And it’s here, over steaming bowls of spicy ramen, that Heems reflects on his whirlwind sweep into fame. “It was cool because I got to travel,” he says, seated at a tightly packed five-top with me and three prep-schoolers. “It was like a vacation from Mama and Papa at the end of college.” In *Das Racist*, Heems and Kool AD enjoyed baiting their listeners, challenging them to figure out whether they were joking or not. But if you listen really closely to songs like “Fake Patois”, where they recount how many Nineties rappers affected really bad Jamaican accents, it’s actually a love letter to hip-hop, written by guys close enough to the culture to take the piss out of it.

Heems remains frustrated that listeners didn’t get that. He averages what seems like one retweet per day where he mocks fans who breathlessly tell him that they hate hip-hop but love his work. “[Hip-hop] is my favorite genre,” he says, sounding exasperated. “How am I am supposed to respond to that?”

But Heems also felt limited by *Das Racist*’s reliance on satire. And underneath the non-stop bacchanal that Dap and Heems chronicle on their web series *Chillin’ Island*, the guys weren’t getting along.

On December 3, 2012, the band was scheduled to play a festival in Munich, Germany, but only Heems appeared on stage. “You guys wanna know a secret?” said Heems, smiling wryly to the crowd. “Alright, so I’m going to do some *Das Racist* songs, but *Das Racist* is breaking up and we’re not a band anymore.” Kool AD struck back on Twitter: “for the record i quit das racist 2 months ago and was asked by our manager not to announce it yet. apparently @himanshu wanted to do it tho”.

Their major-label debut was shelved. And just like that the never-ending party was over. “I was bummed when we actually broke up because it was a way to make money really easily,” Dapwell memorably told *Spin*. “I probably won’t be able to make money that easily ever again.” More than two years later, slurping ramen and drinking sake at *Das Racist*’s old de facto HQ, Heems isn’t anxious to revisit the break-up. The band’s implosion, followed by two years of Asian touring — including the stint in India that birthed the sarcastic nod to Elizabeth Gilbert’s best-selling book, *Eat Pray Love* — left Heems “feeling dead inside”, he’s said.

“Do you still talk to the guys from the band?” I ask, nosing the pork-infused steam rising out of my bowl.

“I talk to Dap and Dap talks to Victor,” he says languidly, almost nodding off at the table. “I mean we might shoot each other an email here or there occasionally, but we’re not like...” He trails off, and snaps back to attention a few seconds later: “Dude, I love this dinner. They did not skimp on the pimp.”

Heems leans back against the wall, crossing his arms in a red varsity jacket, one of three looks he picked for his photo shoot across from where Basquiat took his last hit. He looks dazed, or incredibly exhausted.

“Why is it hard for you and Victor to get along?” I ask.

“It’s not hard,” he says. “We just don’t get along. He doesn’t get along with me. He doesn’t like me. I don’t know. Off the camera I’ll be like ‘what up bro, how you been?’”

“You ever feel like young men in their 20s are destined to fight these battles?”

“My album’s about me trying not to die and also be a voice for my peoples”

“Yeah, I mean I am almost 30 so that was one of the main factors for me [to get focused about my life]. I mean it’s not often that I get to curate a room,” he says, jumping to the *Eat Pray Thug* exhibition, “let alone one in Manhattan.” Then he gets up. “Let me use the bathroom. Excuse me for one moment.”

When he comes back after a few minutes, I attempt to revisit the Das Racist break-up, but he shuts me down. “Wow,” he says, almost inaudibly. And a minute later, “So what’s up, Adam?... Is that the angle you want? Like what happened with our band?”

We sit and trade uncomfortable non-sequiturs for a couple more minutes. “I got to use the restroom,” he says, excusing himself again.

“Such – good – ra – men,” he muses, to no one in particular, on his way back to the toilets. Girish and Veena Suri came to New York City in 1980. Like many South Asians, they landed in one of New York’s most diverse boroughs, Queens; in Flushing, its most diverse neighbourhood. Despite earning her Masters degree in Economics in India, Veena took work as a cashier at a local grocery chain, making just four dollars an hour. Girish found a job as a clerk. On the side, he drove a cab. That year Veena gave birth to their daughter, Shivani, and five years later baby Himanshu arrived.

To see how far the Suris have come in the past three-and-a-half decades, I ride the Long Island Railroad to the Hicksville station, past the Queens neighborhoods of Glen Oaks, where the family bought their first apartment, and Bellerose, where they owned their own detached home. About 20 minutes later, I can tell I have arrived when four middle-aged men conversing in Hindi stand up and get off the train, where outside the station waits a white Lexus with the vanity plate “HIMANSHU”.

Heems immediately seems more relaxed, more friendly – more awake – here than he was at the ramen shop in Lower Manhattan a couple of weeks ago. After stopping for an hour at Apna Bazaar, a desi supermarket near at least five dosa hawkers, we drive five minutes to a huge, two-storey brick home with massive white columns out front. The inside is decorated in what Heems proudly calls “Punjabi Greco”, a style that screams new money. Around here, pics of Heems are less pouty Williamsburg hipster, more chubby-cheeked chhotu bhaiya in bedazzled wedding suits. At home in Long Island, the self-destructive artist is invisible. Here, Heems is both mama’s boy and doting uncle to Zoe, his sister Shivani’s two-year-old, who greets him by jumping into his arms and yelling “Manchu!”

Heems and Zoe are close. When he's home, there is dance time, yoga time and plans for a thorough grounding in arts and culture. And it's easy to see why Heems moved back in with his parents after he came back from India, where he recorded *Eat Pray Thug* over three days at Bandra's Purple Haze studio with engineer Gaurav Gupta. In Mumbai, there was much notorious partying and debauch, but as we sit around the Suri's kitchen table, it's all about Veena's chicken kheema, shammi kebabs and the freshest dhaniya chutney this side of South Delhi. When we finish, she packs some for my wife and gives me a hug goodbye.

Himanshu's life here provides something crucial: set boundaries, something he's long struggled with. But this polarity is also typical Himanshu. He even jokes about being bi-polar on Twitter, and says he plans to move back to Mumbai later this year. "I can live in New York but I don't feel I can thrive in New York", he tweets. But with Heems, you never know if he's being serious about any of it.

As we drive half an hour from his parents' home in Long Island to the old haunts of his Das Racist glory days in Brooklyn, he asks how much time I will need, and I say "However long I can be around so I have a sense of who you are." "What if I'm like 'Adam I'm done?'" he says, laughing, "Then I am a dick!"

If you read or watch other interviews with Himanshu, it's apparent that he knows much of his appeal derives from the tension between oversharing and then throwing up walls again. By now we've crossed the boundary between textbook desi life in Long Island and the party life in Williamsburg, a kind of theme park for young adults — just imagine the Hindutva fun police's worst nightmare. The neighbourhood also attracts a particularly virulent breed of bearded, tattooed, skinny-jeans newcomer. And while Heems says these are the douchebags who drove him out of here, I'm kind of wondering if, in this milieu, he's more than a little like them. What other neighbourhood in New York, or the world, could have launched the ironic, maybe-joking maybe-not ethos of Das Racist?

"I'm the Mayor out here," Heems says proudly, as we pull up in front of the first of three bars we'll visit that evening. It's garden-variety Williamsburg, complete with the edit staff of Complex magazine holding down a table up front. Heems is composed, confident and nice to people.

After half an hour we leave the bar and walk two blocks to the ATM, where Heems sees a man passed out. While withdrawing money, Heems notices the man's US Army issued boots and speaks to him. He's a Polish immigrant who has struggled with PTSD since returning from Afghanistan. Heems asks the man whether he'd shot anyone or seen people killed. Then he worries that he asked too many questions. This is also essential Heems: being smart, then smart-ass, then feeling guilty. Going through the motions with him is like living through one of his tracks.

When we try to hit a cool-guy club for his former manager's birthday party, the bouncer tells us calmly that the club is full, but Heems doesn't pull the whole "don't you know who I am?" routine. "I like the way he spoke to us," he explains as we walk. "He could have been a dick."

Instead, we head to a far more humble abode where his friend Allyson is deejaying. The bar, which abuts the McDonald's parking lot, is one of the last remaining real dive bars in Williamsburg, the kind of place where the bartenders look like they actually drink.

In the next room, everyone dances as Allyson spins a mix of old and new hip-hop. And it's here that Heems looks most relaxed. He circulates, and seems to know everyone from his days at

Wesleyan. Towards the end of the night, a beautiful white woman named Jocelyn arrives. She and Heems talk. They both look smitten.

At 3am he apologizes, but he won't be able to drive me home as planned. But before we part, he sends one of his friends home with me in a cab to save some cash. How very mayoral indeed. Later in the week, he emails me, "Does your piece end with me going home with a beautiful white woman?"

(You know, just in case I thought he was too much of a sensitive soul and not an accomplished player, which would be way too desi and not nearly hip-hop enough.)

"Because it should," he writes.