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EAT PRAY THUG

Featuring **Roohi Ahmed**, **Chiraag Bhakta (*Pardon My Hindi)**, **Chitra Ganesh**, **Ratna Gupta, Mark Hewko, Ranbir Kaleka**, **Aakash Nihalani**, **Adeela Suleman**, **Himanshu Sur**i, **Abdullah M. I. Syed**, and **Salman Toor**.

Curated by Himanshu Suri

February 7th, 2015 – March 10th, 2015

Press Preview & Opening Reception: Saturday, February 7th 6:00pm – 9:00pm
35 Great Jones Street, New York NY 10012

Aicon Gallery is proud to present *EAT PRAY THUG*, a group exhibition curated by **Himanshu "Heems" Suri**. To commemorate Suri's upcoming debut solo album release, he has curated a group show of the same name, along with a schedule of events and performances. The exhibition represents a wide array of mediums and artistic backgrounds - straight/queer, Hindu/Muslim, male/female, established/newcomer, Asia/Diaspora. Though all these artists may trace their roots to India or Pakistan, they live and work in varied mediums around the world and not all the work revolves around issues of identity, for example, the abstract geometric studies of Nihalani and Suleman's black comedic commentary on current events in Pakistan. Taken as a whole, the exhibition examines the richly varied contemporary artistic voices resonating from out of South Asia and its Diaspora.

Himanshu Suri & Chiraag Bhakta, *Eat Pray Thug I*, 2015, C-print on archival paper, 18.5 x 18.5 in.

In addition to the exhibition, Suri has also put together a series of events for the month. There will be a performance by Pakistani punks The Kominas with Rizwan "Riz MC" Ahmed, the Nightcrawler actor and Suri's partner in the post-partition hip-hop duo Sweat Shop Boys. Viewers will also be able to witness an exclusive performance art piece by Deepak Choppa. February 28th, Deepak Choppa will turn the gallery space into a recording studio for a full 24 hours. Heems will write and record an EP of all new material over this time period, with the gallery open to the public throughout.

Born in Karachi, Pakistan **Roohi S. Ahmed's** video drawing performance, titled *Sew and Sow,* examines the conceptual process, physical gestures, and emotional and personal narratives of literally marking the body and the cartographies arising from it. The stitching and unstitching of her skin leaves visible tactile traces as a memory of actions and corrections made by the other hand. In 2002, after encountering his family's South Asian film collection**, Chiraag Bhakta** began his series of nostalgic Bollywood-inspired prints under the name *Pardon My Hindi. Using humor mixed with stark social commentary, Bhakta seeks to explore cross-cultural interpretations of identity as a first generation Indian American. The *Arch Motel Project* photographic series, a collaboration with photographer **Mark Hewko**, has been shown at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C. Bhakta's *Washed Series* collage works are being shown for the first time in New York.

Ranbir Kaleka, *Man with Cockerel – 2* (Video still), 2004, Single-channel video, 6:00 min loop.

Chitra Ganesh was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY, where she currently lives and works. Her artistic praxis is inspired by buried narratives and marginal figures typically excluded from official canons of history, literature and art. She is widely recognized for her experimental use of comic and large-scale narrative forms to communicate submerged histories and alternate articulations of femininity to a broader public. Her works have been featured in several publications including the *New York Times, Flash Art, Art Asia Pacific,* and *Time Out New York*. **Ratna Gupta** studied graphic design at St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, and book arts and crafts at the London College of Printing, The London Institute. She has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions. Her work re-contextualizes natural surfaces such as bark and skin by rebuilding them with molds, latex, canvas and thread, preserving them against the destructive forces of both man and nature.

Born in 1953, **Ranbir Kaleka** is a formally trained painter who has progressively transitioned into video art by developing a distinctive painterly language for his multimedia projects. In *Man with Cockerel - 2*, a man is caught in a circle of endless pursuit and capture of his escaped 'cockerel'. The viewer's reverie is jolted by a play with diegetic and non-diegetic conventions of sound: domestic, industrial, everyday and the environmental. The only relief is the long silent lapping of the waves on an empty screen at the end of the loop before the man again finds his 'cockerel' and enters the frame. **Aakash Nihalani**, born in Queens, studied at the Steinhardt School of Culture in NYU, New York. Heavily inspired by local street art, Nihalani is drawn especially to isometric rectangles and squares, often creating highly illusionistic installations simply from color, line and space. His work is a reaction to forms and structures we readily encounter in both public to private, where we're required to establish our own placement within a larger picture.

The mainstay of Karachi-based **Adeela Suleman**'s artistry explores a series of dichotomies that point to the fragile and fleeting ephemerality of life as experienced by the artist amidst the chaotic and perpetually deteriorating religious and political violence of Pakistan. Her figures of headless soldiers and courtiers decapitating and disemboweling each other function as a grotesque yet somehow humorous representation of the ambiguous roots and perpetuators of the horrific violence wracking Pakistan, where nothing is ever quite as it seems. Working and living between Karachi and Sydney, **Abdullah M. I. Syed**'s practice is rooted in the long history of discourse and debate surrounding Colonialism and Orientalism, now forever altered in apost-9/11 political landscape. His exuberantly colored outsized *Brut* medallions use traditional Pakistani arts and crafts techniques to explore the warping and stereotyping of notions of masculinity both within Islamic societies and from myopic Western preconceptions. Throughout his work, Brooklyn-based painter **Salman Toor** deftly presents a subtle melding of the confused consumeristic and social fantasies of the mass-medias of India, Pakistan and the U.S. with a Renaissace-era handling of light, painting and draftmanship. In the works *Newscater I and II*, Toor depicts a set of dueling characitures of impossibly idealized South Asian news anchors humorously surrounded by the scribbled disconnected notes, lists and rants of a fictionalized and neurotic contemporary artist.

Himanshu "Heems" Suri, formerly of the rap group *Das Racist*, has exhibited his work at the Guggenheim, New York, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and curated projects for instituitions including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. In addition, he has maintained a constantly evolving output of collaborative musical and recording projects. His work on diplay in this exhibition will include unique pieces as well as collaborative installations and limited edition album artworks all based on Suri's travels in India and experiences and upbringing in New York City. This is his first curatorial project with Aicon Gallery.

Please contact Aicon Gallery (Andrew@Aicongallery.com) for more information.

BLOUINARTINFO

FEBRUARY 27, 2015, 4:57 PM

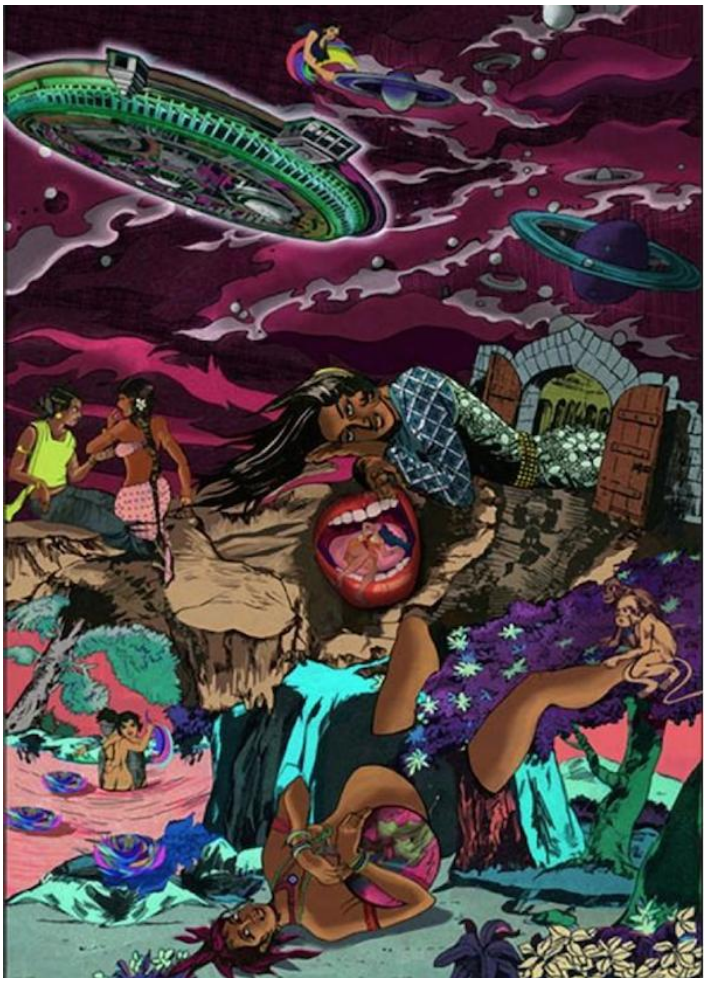
Eat Pray Thug: Das Racist's Himanshu Suri Curates Indian Art

You probably remember Himanshu Suri, a.k.a. "Heems," as half of Das Racist, the New York rap group who hit the Internet running with their single "Combination Pizza Hut and Taco Bell" in 2008. From there, they produced three albums' worth of tracks that took on politics in step with alliterative lists of junk food — a career perhaps best summed up by the cheeky hypnotic loop of a chorus on 2010's "hahahaha jk?": "We're not joking. Just joking, we are joking. Just joking, we're not joking," and so on. Now, however, Suri has jumped into the (marginally) more serious business of curating his own gallery show: "Eat Pray Thug," the same moniker he's given his forthcoming solo album, which runs through March 10 at Aicon Gallery on Great Jones Street. The multimedia group show of artists with ties to India and Pakistan, including Suri himself, also features a parallel series of live events, including an appearance from Muslim punk band The Kominas on March 7.

To hear Suri tell it, the art bent is nothing new: "I feel like a lot of times I would have referred to Das Racist as an art rap project — you know, whatever that means," he said. "We always had an interest in art, whether we were doing an 8-bit video game slash music video, or a lot of our interviews often

we thought of as performance art." Since the group's split in 2012, he has released two solo mixtapes, "Nehru Jackets" and "Wild Water Kingdom," but "Eat Pray Thug" will be his first album. Though it's officially slated to drop March 10, visitors can preview the tracks in the gallery, courtesy of the headphones hooked up to its original framed cover art, a collage collaboration between Suri and Chiraag Bhakta (above).

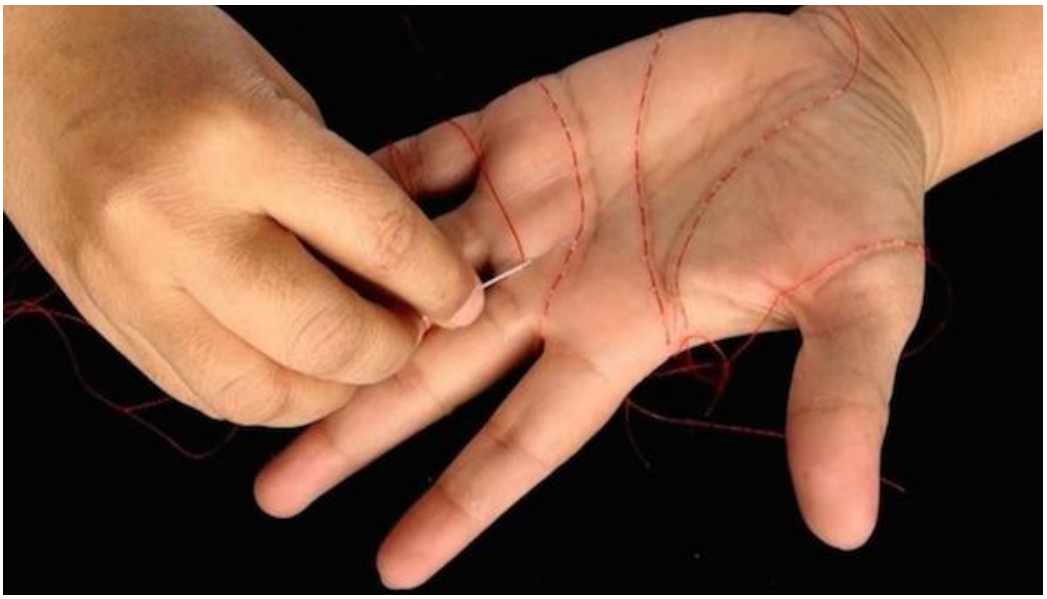
"I thought of this album as an opportunity to do a lot of the things that I wasn't able to do with Das Racist," he explained. "I wanted to tie art into it, and I also wanted to use this as a platform to shine a light on this gallery and what they do." Aicon is one of only a handful of New York galleries devoted to Indian art, set apart even further by its focus on contemporary works; Suri first came across the space when he bought a piece there in 2012 and has been a staunch supporter since. "It just so happens that there's a gallery devoted to my favorite type of art that's on my favorite street where one of my favorite artists lived and died," he said, noting that Basquiat was housed at 57 Great Jones, just a few doors down.



This same affable ethos carried over to his choice of artists: “My curation always starts with my friends,” Suri explained. “Even [his label] Greedhead was a record label where, if you were my friend and I believed in you, then I would put it out, put my name on it.” Aakash Nihalani, for example, did the album art for Das Racist’s “Shut Up, Dude,” while Bhakta also designed some of the band’s merch. Suri met Ranbir Kaleka during a five-month South Asian tour just a week before recording the new album; the two hit it off and collaborated on “Beard Mentor,” an image that represents pretty literally “[Kaleka] training me how to grow my beard, as an older artist to a younger one.” And Chitra Ganesh — whose brilliant, surreal cartoons are also currently on view at the Brooklyn Museum — is both a friend and an artist Suri collects. (He owns a smaller edition of “How We Do at the End of the World,” above.)

But through all the palling around, Suri does have a curatorial axe to grind. “When you think of Indian art, you think of ethnic art or diversity inherently, but it’s about the further diversity within what you consider to be diverse,” he explained, noting the myriad languages and religious expressions within a country we tend to treat as a cultural monolith. This credo led him to select artists who represent a range of sexualities, genders, and religions — and moreover, who brought something besides the stereotypical brightly-colored reappropriations of Hindu iconography one might expect, as in the stark, anonymous geometry of Nihalani’s pieces.

“Not all Indian art has to be inspired by our epics or inspired by identity,” Suri added. “If I choose to look at myself as an Indian artist, I can do that. But that doesn’t give you the right to do that. To you, I should just be an artist.” (Not for nothing, when Columbia University came up in passing, he was quick to hype longtime professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and her famous postcolonial essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”)



As to his own artistic identity, Suri clocks it as “a juxtaposition of New York and India, my world and my parents’ world,” his subject always returning to “working class South Asian people in New York” — about whom he hopes to write a novel someday. For example, the three collaged-on tin works, collaborations between him and Bhakta, are themed around 9/11, colonialism, and his mother, respectively. (“When she first came to this country with a master’s in economics, she still worked at Pathmark bagging groceries,” he added, going on to point out the lotto ticket in his another collage that nods to the convenience store on Queens Boulevard his parents owned.) Meanwhile, in the gallery’s front window, his video compilation of ads for skin-bleaching projects runs in a 15-minute loop, intermittently marred by datamoshing: “In this world [of the video], we’re all pixels, we’re all the same,” he said, as cascades of neon squares stuttered across the models’ faces, “but in the real world, it’s that on the inside, we’re all the same.”

"With art, I get to be much more direct than with music," he added, drawing the parallel between his penchant for collaging images and composing "hyper-referential" verbal patter. "My style of rap, my thinking is very anxious and attention-deprived, so those direct messages get hard for me to do. I think a lot of my music wasn't straightforward, because I was hiding behind humor or hiding behind Indian samples. But on this record, there's no more hiding." In short, it seems Suri's ready to do away with the joking/not joking run-around: "I'm constantly just trying to explain that I'm not a novelty, and now in this situation, that my people aren't a novelty."

Which is not to say the show is humorless — far from it, as evidenced by that tongue in cheek title — nor is its showman, savvily balancing international themes with hometown edge. Pointing at the New York City subway map that fills his album cover's face, he noted, "Even after my big art show here, I got on the Long Island Railroad and went home."

— Anneliese Cooper (@DawnDavenport)

the village VOICE

With *Eat Pray Thug*, Heems Moves Past That Funny Rap Group With the 'Dumb' Name

By Jay Ruttenberg Tue., Mar. 3 2015 at 11:24 AM

Photo by Jesse Dittmar for the *Village Voice*

Himanshu Suri, a/k/a Heems, at his parents' Hicksville, Long Island, home

It was in north Brooklyn that Himanshu Suri spent his post-collegiate years — a period that began in 2007 with the Wesleyan grad working on Wall Street and terminated, a half-decade later, with the dissolution of his surprise-hit hip-hop trio, Das Racist. The group had made him an unlikely big shot, but as it went, so too did Suri's closest friendships, his serious girlfriend, and, eventually, his bacchanalian ways.

Williamsburg, once the epicenter of his glories, became potholed with demons. And yet it is in the neighborhood where Suri wishes to meet, at a café with erudite bathroom graffiti and an $11,000 coffee pot.

Suri, who performs as Heems, wears a dark beard that ends abruptly at his sideburns, which are shaved short, as are the sides of his head; his thick hair begins again atop his head, undaunted by the razor's interruption. An imposing gold chain inherited from his grandmother dangles from his neck, giving Suri the look of a man who decided to dress as Mr. T minutes before leaving the house for a Halloween party.

The rapper orders his drink, tips handsomely, and throws a wink at the barista. He snaps a photograph of the shop's bulletin board, where a flyer advertises the gallery show he recently curated, and tweets the image. He greets a fellow customer, telling him about the new Heems album — titled, like the art show, *Eat Pray Thug* — ducks into the bathroom, collects his drink, fidgets with his phone, and, finally, takes his seat.

"I feel like a lot of the association with me has been Williamsburg and Wesleyan and that type of world," Suri says, by way of introduction. "But this is not where I'm from. It's not the world I grew up in. I lived here in Brooklyn for five or six years. Eventually, I realized that it wasn't what I grew up enjoying about the city. I went to India for a while. I went to Asia for a while. When I returned, I refocused. I wanted to pull back and remember where I came from and remember what I like. I like family, Hinduism, and Sikhism. I like women. I like money. I like helping people and being a voice for my community."

His beverage is not yet cool, but Suri has had enough of the coffee shop and of Brooklyn. And so we retreat to his parents' Lexus and drive to Queens, where his heart struck its first beat and where — more than Williamsburg, Wesleyan, or India — it remains, 29 years hence.

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Das Racist announced themselves to the world in 2008 with "Combination Pizza Hut and Taco Bell," a novelty song in which Suri and his co-star, Victor Vazquez (Kool A.D.), trade lines about a fast-food hybrid on Jamaica Avenue. The song caught fire with the young and Web-savvy; to many in demographics yonder, it proved impenetrable. Even now, it remains difficult to appreciate why anybody would find "Pizza Hut/Taco Bell" particularly funny or exciting — but of course, older cranks once thought the same of "Loser" and "(You Gotta) Fight for Your Right (To Party)," to say nothing of "Blitzkrieg Bop."

Within a New York minute, Das Racist were minted stars, albeit in a vaguely underground, smarty-pants vein. The pair, who had met at college, were joined by a third member, Ashok Kondabolu (Dapwell). When Das Racist began, Suri — with his fancy economics degree and proud Indian parents — was working as a Wall Street headhunter while daydreaming of the creative life. Now the creative life was his. Through Suri's Greedhead label, Das Racist released a pair of mixtapes and, in 2011, a proper album, *Relax*. All were made in a more classic hip-hop strain than the initial single, but still conveyed the beautiful irreverence of youth and privilege.

"It was very internet and very rap," Suri says of his group, "and both those things were very zeitgeisty." Das Racist appeared on the cover of *Spin*'s "Funny Issue" and in the *New York Times Magazine*'s interview page. (Q: "Why, as two Wesleyan graduates who met in college, would you think you could rap?" A: "Would we even be on the page of this publication if we had not gone to Wesleyan?") They performed at splashy music festivals and on *Conan*. In one of the "five most exciting moments" of Suri's life, they were praisedby one of his (non-Hindu) divinities, Lou Reed. As with much novel pop music, the group seemed an accident, underdressed gatecrashers to a formal event.

Nate "Igor" Smith

Heems at Das Racist's *Relax* record-release party in 2011

Das Racist seemed poised for a broader breakthrough, signing a deal with a Sony affiliate, Megaforce. Yet in late 2012, at much the same speed as it had arrived, the group collapsed, with an unfulfilled recording contract and a degree of acrimony. "*Relax* had come out amidst some creative tension between Victor and Himanshu," Kondabolu says. The strife involved "the music, touring, even the name — which was dumb and we all always hated. But imagine if a group like Das Racist was around for five, even ten years? That shit would be corny as fuck. We were a punk-rap group that exploded and imploded."

For Suri, a child of identity politics, issues of heritage were present even in the disbanding. "If you're in a rock band you might sing about love and girls," he says, inching along the BQE with Hot 97 thumping softly in the background. "But with rap, it's identity. A lot of the project was about being brown, and how the discourse in America has always been black and white. Das Racist was about wanting to insert ourselves in that discourse. Now, the project I wanted to do was about my community and about Queens."

The period surrounding the group's conclusion seems the calamity of Suri's young life. "I wasn't talking to my two best friends," he says. "My girlfriend of over two years and I broke up. And I was partying a lot." The musician pauses — a rare event, like a lunar eclipse — to let his words resonate. "I've always struggled with mental-health issues. In communities of color, anxiety and depression are seen as a joke. I felt very alone."

Having exited the highway, Suri is currently circling the type of residential neighborhood that, during such drives, would appear to dominate the city and yet still seem wholly removed from it. "What the...?" he exclaims. His phone has requested that he hang a left onto the same block that he has already twice traversed. He ignores the direction and takes in his surroundings. "Shit," the rapper says. "I think we're back in Brooklyn."

Struggling to get his act in check, toward the end of his hellacious 2013, Suri flew to India. By the time of his birth, the extended Suri clan had settled in Queens, but Himanshu had spent pockets of time in their homeland throughout his life. Now he retreated to the beaches of Goa. "I was away from the vices that had plagued me," he says. "I wasn't playing these big shows like Bonnaroo — I was playing at the side of the road with friends. People would stop and park their scooters. One scooter would light us and if a car drove by you couldn't hear the music. I remembered that this was what I liked — rapping, freestyling, the way words fold into each other."

In December, he booked time at a Mumbai studio operated by Bollywood machers, writing and recording most of *Eat Pray Thug* in a three-day whirlwind. The record is the first Heems solo album following a pair of well-received mixtapes that were unleashed during his Das Racist tenure. Whereas in Das Racist the rapper claims he hid behind humor, on the new disc he appears as a man unmasked. He raps and sings of traumas personal (breakups, sobriety), political (drones, cops), and, especially, occupying the areas in between: say, his community's weird obligation to shop for American flags in the wake of September 11th. In "Home," the one song completed before his Indian trip, Suri dispenses with rapping altogether to sing, accompanied by Blood Orange's Dev Hynes. "You addicted to the H-man," he croons, addressing a former squeeze. "I'm addicted to the H, man."

The most revealing track on *Eat Pray Thug*, however, is its most ostensibly celebratory and airheaded: "Sometimes," the leadoff track and single. Over a cavernous beat from Gordon Voidwell, Heems sounds off on his paradoxes. "Sometimes I got game/Sometimes I'm mad shy," he raps. "Being sad in the club/Weird when you're this fly."

Even the most straightforward dullard can seem to host more than one persona. But Suri, like many second-generation Americans, negotiates worlds by the score. Days spent in his company reveal sundry Himanshu Suris. There is the poised art-world charmer at his Noho gallery opening, bedecked in a polychromatic suit of his own creation, holding himself with the regality of somebody who tested well as a child. There is Himanshu the lecturer, dourly discoursing about community issues in outer Queens and the Indian diaspora. There is the Himanshu who speaks deferentially with elders in Flushing and the Himanshu who rolls onto Bedford Avenue with all the subtlety of Genghis Khan's Mongol warriors rampaging through Eurasia. And then there is Himanshu the mess — sending torrents of fretful texts following each interview, tweeting that "doing press for this album has given me two panic attacks thus far...I don't know if I want to be an artist anymore." He is as

neurotic as your average New Yorker, provided that your average New Yorker happens to be a mid-period Woody Allen protagonist.

His conflicted identity — American and Indian, rapper and visual artist, imbiber and thinker — is his central battle, that which renders him most absorbing and threatens to tear him apart. Its roots run deep. Suri's grandparents grew up speaking Punjabi in what is now Pakistan; as Hindus, they later emigrated to India. "So my grandparents' first language is Punjabi, my parents' is Hindi, and mine is English," he says. "I actually never thought about that before." Growing up, he spoke English at school, Hindi at home, and a hip-hop-informed parlance with friends.

That cultural schizophrenia can lead to that stalest of rap clichés: the well-bred nerd with a street patois. ("One time this kid from Bronx Science had beef with my boy," he recounts at one point.) It's a characterization that's not lost on Suri. "I'm very conscious of the fact that I'm appropriating a black art and I feel guilt about it," he says. "But at the same time, hip-hop is what I was raised with. It's what I think in. People are like, 'Oh, you can talk white, that means you're faking when you talk rap.' I just don't get that. I have my fun voice and my work voice. Being Indian, you have to navigate your way amongst cultures anyway."

Having shunned his phone's mapping advice, Suri is now driving along Queens Boulevard, through tony Forest Hills. "Growing up, it wasn't just being immigrants in America," he continues. "It was also being in Queens. We always looked at Manhattan with this gaze, being outside the city. In *Here Is New York*, E.B. White talks about how the commuters are the ultimate New Yorkers. I always felt like a New Yorker, but I've always felt like a commuter. And I think that's an important distinction. We were looking at America from India and then Manhattan from Queens."

Suri's father landed in the States in 1979. The following year he returned to India, got an arranged marriage, and, with his bride, returned to New York. The couple settled in Flushing, where they remained through Himanshu's early years, ultimately squeezing thirteen family members — grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins — into a two-bedroom apartment. Suri's parents took a variety of jobs and operated a candy store, ultimately working for the city (dad) and selling life insurance for New York Life (mom). As their fortunes swelled, the Suris moved to more suburban areas of the borough: Glen Oaks and then Bellerose, where Himanshu came of age.

"As far as the diaspora goes, a lot of people had the same story," he explains. "They come to New York and settle in Flushing, then in Bellerose, and later go to Hicksville or New Hyde Park or Manhasset, and eventually to Dix Hills. Somebody was telling me that I was from 'fake Queens,' 'cause I'm from the part near Long Island. But that's what I love about Queens. It's so diverse — not just culturally, but in terms of city planning. You've got projects and then you drive five minutes and you're in a 'hood with backyards and mansions."

By the time he was twelve, Suri understood that he was expected to gain admittance to Lower Manhattan's prestigious Stuyvesant High School, long the city's beacon for its academic overachievers. "Asian kids start studying for the Stuyvesant test when they're in elementary school," he says. "It was a huge deal when I got in." Attending the high school exposed him to a cross-section of students — "Korean and Chinese kids, Upper West Side Jewish kids, a few black and Latino kids" — whom, had he gone to his local school, the rapper says he never would have met. He was vice

president of his class because, he claims, he "got along with everybody. But even though I was always popular at school, I was living two lives. I came home to this Indian existence. The only sandwich meat I knew about was bologna until I was fourteen. Then I was like, 'Oh snap, turkey.' "

On Kissena Boulevard, in east Flushing, Suri suddenly U-turns and deftly parallel-parks. His parking spot is just outside a pink building with a small gold dome — architecture, it seems, as practiced by a birthday cake designer.

"We're here, yo," he says. "This is my temple."

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"Shoes off?" Suri is asked upon entering the temple.

"Dude," the musician responds. He shoots a look — as if the question had been "pants on?" — and points out a yellow sign reading: "Shoes and ego not allowed in the Temple."

Suri enters the building's main room. It is a mix of outer-borough shabbiness (folding chairs and patterned carpeting) and Hindu fabulousness (the shrine, wreathed in lights, is like a Matisse cut-out as viewed through a kaleidoscope). The rapper informally greets a priest in Hindi and heads upstairs. But for the priest, the temple is empty; Himanshu explains that things won't heat up for another hour or so. He has been coming to Flushing's Hindu Center Temple since he was too young to form memories. Upon entering, he seems to unload the weight that he typically carries atop his shoulders like some de rigueur accessory.

A balcony circles the temple's main space, with rows of flamboyant statues representing the various Hindu divinities lining the walls. Each window is covered by a plastic sheet, with a small red box out front for donations. Suri approaches the first statue, kneels before it, and softly recites a prayer. He breathes in the dramatic fashion now familiar to Westerners via yoga, rises to his feet, and moves to the next deity. "This," he says casually, "is the goddess of music." (The statue, which hardly resembles Beyoncé at all, must be fairly old.) Suri drops to his knees once again and recites a Hindi prayer.

On a typical visit to the temple the musician meditates, but today he wishes to give a tour instead. Although he has always been observant, his interest in Hinduism has spiked in the last decade, especially recently. "You might think that my American side pushes me toward capitalism and my Hindu side pushes me toward spirituality," he says, standing before the statue of Saraswati. "That's not the case. Because we're immigrants, and it's all about making money. Going to Wesleyan and places like that is what taught me more about the hippie-dippy shit. It's ironic. It encapsulates not just me but the whole phenomenon of why the West has hippies. It's because we feel guilty about our capitalist system. We assume that the East has the answers because of exotification Orientalist bullshit. But in reality, do you know how many billionaires are in India? We're coming for you guys."
Suri crosses to the balcony's other side, where Ganesha, the elephantine god of obstacles, awaits him. "The title *Eat Pray Thug* is about my own hypocrisy," he continues. "Even me, when I freaked out, I went to India. It wasn't spiritual tourism, but it was where I went searching for answers." He mentions that he's not that different from Elizabeth Gilbert, the author whose spiritual journey to India inspired the memoir that inspired the pun that would become the title of Suri's solo album. "Maybe when you see me you see Indian," he says, "but inside I'm just as American as her."

As he passes the statues, the musician explains the various gods' provenance and meaning. Ganesha gained his elephant head after an unfortunate sequence in which a sword robbed him of his original, human head. Rama contends with a wicked stepmother. Krishna, with an ever-present flute, was adopted by the Hare Krishna movement. Finally, Suri reaches his deity of choice. "This is Shiva," he gushes. "Shiva's considered the destroyer. People look at the others as regal, morally correct gods. Everything else was put into Shiva. People say he used to eat meat, drink wine, smoke weed. People say he took mushrooms. I like Shiva because he appreciates music and dance. Shiva used to hang with the bottom of society — the vagabonds, the musicians, the prostitutes. Those were his people."

Himanshu quietly raps a line from his new record's "So NY": "I'm like Shiva, I roll around with freaks/I'm on my play, a player/Yeah, I roll around with freaks." He looks the statue up and down.

"Shiva represents everything good to me," he continues. "He's male but he's also female — he's in touch with his feminine side. He's at once about dance, 'shroooms, and weed. He's also this guy who represents living in the mountains and pulling away from society. Mondays, I fast for Shiva. I find my faith in Shiva helps. The idea that even gods are evil shows me that we have moments of evilness, but we don't have to remain evil. If the gods have moments of imperfection, then who are we to be perfect?"

Jesse Dittmar for the *Village Voice*

Bored with music, Heems is considering writing a novel set in Queens.

The most typically hip-hop aspect of Suri's life is his house in Hicksville, Long Island. It is constructed of red brick, built only recently, and covers seemingly every legal inch of its plot — the Goliath of the block. "Oh *that* one," the approaching cab driver says, his derision unchecked. "The

house that doesn't belong in this neighborhood. It looks like it should be on the North Shore." The Lexus — at rest following the previous day's excursion to Queens — sits on the driveway, alongside a BMW. Inside are vaulted ceilings and colorful works of art, generous flatscreens and plush sofas. The master bedroom seems the resting place of kings.

And yet the rapper does not sleep in the master bedroom. His mom and dad, to whom this well-appointed house belongs, get to do that. Himanshu, who moved back home last year, stays down the hall, in the small room with the displayed diplomas and shoeboxed relics from his teenage years. He is that rarest of creatures: the boomerang child with a record deal.

The Suris built their house about five years ago, after saving for the suburban haul for much longer. "Especially in Punjab, the goal is often getting land and building your own house," says Himanshu, who, as the eldest son, has always chipped in on bills. "Even in Queens you'll see Indian people build these gigantic houses that don't fit in their neighborhood and have columns for no reason." In a song, he christens the style, which so offended the aesthetic sensibilities of the cab driver, "Punjabi Greco."

Suri's mother and father seem gentle and cute, in the universal parental sense; his mother is adamant that he offer a guest coffee and dress appropriately for the cold. The Hindi translation of "My son, the rapper," seems planted in her thought balloon. Soon, the Suris beckon Himanshu to their room with big news: India has bested Pakistan in the Cricket World Cup. Himanshu, a Yankees fan in spite of his Queens heritage, returns to his bedroom beaming, pleased to once again be on a winning team.

It is noted that the musician has displayed nary a single Das Racist artifact in his room. "I have thousands of dollars of contemporary art on my wall," he replies. "Why would I have a photo of myself? I took Das Racist money and spent it on art." Although his official background in visual art does not extend beyond some college courses, Suri is no dilettante. Not surprisingly, his interest lies in South Asian art with an urban slant. He bought his prize piece, painted by a Bengal School artist and displayed at the home's staircase landing, at auction. "There was this old Indian man in a business suit," he says. "I didn't like his vibe, so I kept bidding against him." And $8,000 later, the painting was his.

Suri was drawn to the painting in part due to its theme of aviation. Airplanes, depicted on his modest arm tattoo, initiated the two central events of his life: immigration and the World Trade Center attacks, which he witnessed from Stuyvesant, blocks way. He was sixteen, "engaging in all the adolescent existential things that a person goes through — and then I saw that." The afternoon of the attacks, making his way uptown with friends, Suri witnessed a construction worker taunt a classmate who was wearing a hijab. "We were taken aback at how a grown-ass man could yell racist shit at a fifteen-year-old girl," he says. In the wake of the attacks, Suri, as student union vice president, gave a speech at assembly about tolerance. He earned his first round of press attention. (From the *Los Angeles Times*archives: " 'The fact we haven't had school, you know, classes, well, I didn't like that,' said Suri, the student union vice president.") He was sent to Germany courtesy of a cultural exchange program intended to show the world to public school students who were affected by 9-11, meeting then-chancellor Gerhard Schröder.

The attacks and their aftermath cloud his life and inform much of his work. The themes are especially acute in the exhibition Suri recently curated, which unites artists from India and Pakistan

with second-generation Americans. For Manhattan's Aicon Gallery, which specializes in Indian art, showing work by younger and American-born artists was a particular draw. "A lot of the show is allowing the art from New York to interact with the art from South Asia," explains Aicon director Andrew Shea during a tour of the gallery. "Many of the artists deal with 9-11. There's a connecting thread of this huge traumatic event that brings all South Asians together, whether they were down the street or sitting in Karachi."

The featured work is current and chic. Chitra Ganesh, a New York–born artist, appropriates Hindu educational comic books, like Lichtenstein with an unexpected accent. Adeela Suleman, born in Pakistan, adds gruesome drawings of beheadings to traditional plates she buys at bazaars. In an edifying series of photographs, Chiraag Bhakta and Mark Hewko depict Indian-owned American roadside motels. One photograph shows a lobby's welcome desk, with a cross and American flag displayed for guests and Hindu religious objects concealed behind the counter for staff.

Suri's own work at Aicon includes a video depicting a skin-lightening process and a collage involving the MTA map. (He notes that coming from rap, collage fits naturally.) Most notable is a series of boxes he created in collaboration with Bhakta. The boxes are overtly indebted to Joseph Cornell — another Queens artist, Suri points out, who lived with his mother — with various objects displayed inside antique Indian tins. In one, the Dunkin' Donuts logo rings an inlaid airplane safety manual; an inhaler and pillbox sit within, suggesting the approximate contours of a "9" and "1." Shea claims that the boxes "are actually among the strongest piecesin the show. It's not a musician screwing around."

The Aicon exhibition illuminates the astonishing fluidity with which Suri moves between worlds. "I like his drive, which goes in so many directions — writing, music, visual arts," says Salman Rushdie, the author with whom Suri has kindled an unlikely friendship. "And he's helped me to get a better understanding of a younger generation of Indian Americans."

In the past few years, Suri has lectured at Princeton and Stanford, acted in small films, dispatched more than 76,000 Twitter posts, and directed a music video featuring au courant comics Eric André and Hannibal Buress. His Greedhead label continues operations, releasing work by rappers, a bhangra act, and even the stand-up comedian Joe Mande.

Suri is especially eager to begin work on a novel that he has been turning over in his head, involving working-class immigrants in Queens during the Nineties. With a chutzpah that Kanye himself might envy, he sought creative counsel from Rushdie after the two met at a 2013 Asian American Writers' Workshop event. (One man was being fêted, the other DJ'ing.) A few weeks later, the pair met for drinks at Soho House. "He's very smart and sharp," Rushdie tells the *Voice*. "I've been encouraging him to write the novel he's thinking about, which sounds very interesting."

Still apparently bored, Suri recently took a day job at the digital advertising company Moat — more for structure and his interest in business start-ups, he claims, than for money. "I was trying to figure out what I want to do in my thirties," he says. "I thought, 'Start-ups — those sound hot!' The greatest minds of our generation were no longer going into banking, but tech and start-ups. It's funny, 'cause the people at work kind of know who I am. They'll be like, 'Oh, I have you on my iPod.' "

While musically he remains rooted in hip-hop, his tentacles reach further afield. Over the years, he has collaborated repeatedly with Vijay Iyer, the acclaimed jazz pianist and composer, who says he

shares with Suri "the peculiar plight of being brown in public and being involved in black art forms that are largely marketed to white people." Iyer, who recently invited the rapper to perform as part of his residency at the Stone, adds that with Suri, "there's a rawness that almost scares people, or makes them laugh nervously. But as a musician I'm familiar with that kind of energy. It's actually a big part of making music, and particularly it's the part of ourselves that we tap into when we improvise — that unfiltered expression of self."

Nonetheless, Suri is considering pulling out from music altogether. "I turn 30 in July," he says, standing in his parents' living room by his niece's toy pink piano. "I really think this might be my last work. In the music cycle, you get chewed up and spat out. It's just a constant hustle." He begins to check off the various fields he wishes to explore, tapering off somewhere around choreography and fashion design.

"I'm quite confused," he says.

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A day prior, Suri exits the Hindu Center Temple, breathing in the crisp air along Kissena Boulevard. He walks a block to a Shanghainese restaurant, places a take-out order for soup dumplings, and tells the waiter he will return in fifteen minutes. Then he traipses through sleepy, snowy Queens streets to Dosa Hutt, where, speaking Hindi, he order $21 worth of food. He arranges for take-out but then decides to eat at the restaurant. "Yo, this should blow your mind," he warns before taking a bite. "If you have any soul."

As he eats, Suri expresses worry about his album. As a byproduct of the fruitless Das Racist deal, it is being released through Megaforce, which generally traffics in heavy metal. Thus far, the label's grasp of hip-hop has left Suri, long accustomed to handling every last detail himself, underwhelmed. When he rented the studio in Mumbai, Suri was fronted $4,000 from his parents, not the deep-pocketed record company. While he remains proud of his album, he was unable to use certain tracks after Megaforce declined to clear Indian samples or pay the fees of producers who had sent Suri beats. These included high-profile friends Diplo and A-Trak, who, as with the sampled Indian records, do not appear on the finished album.

Upon completing his dosa and label rant, Suri gets a panicked look: the dumplings! Returned to the Shanghainese restaurant, he apologizes to the waiter, who hands him his take-out bag. "I think I'm gonna eat one here," Suri says.

"Did you eat here last week?" the waiter asks.

"Yeah — my temple's here. Hindu Temple?"

The waiter looks at Suri blankly, as if unaware of the pink Hindu temple on the corner.

"I'm not supposed to eat meat," Suri tells the waiter. "But after temple I come and get dumplings. I'm addicted."

The musician takes a seat in the empty dumpling house, which appears to have been placed on Kissena Boulevard by vindictive gods toward the singular purpose of tempting Himanshu Suri. He wolfs down his soup dumplings, failing the test anew.

Suri needs to head home to Long Island, but first wishes to meet friends in Williamsburg, and begins piloting the Lexus back to Brooklyn. The sun has set — and with it, seemingly, the musician's spirits. *Eat Pray Thug* has been in the can for well over a year, and he feels uneasy reliving bygone woes. Toward the end of Das Racist, he had been suffering panic attacks, at times in the moments leading up to performances. "Sometimes," he says softly, "it's tough to get on that stage."
Suri is all talked out, his voice assuming a gravelly tone, like Bruce Vilanch but for the occasional "yo." "Every time I leave my house I get nervous," he says. "I have legitimately really bad anxiety. And I'm afraid of medication." A couple of days later, in his endless Twitter stream, he will claim: "I wrote an album about 9/11 and breaking up w my ex and recovery from dependency and now I have to do interviews about it. No more. Done." Before long, however, his feed will be boasting of all the glowing press the album is picking up. Although he may claim allegiance with rappers and Indian artists, the figures Suri resembles most may be Lady Gaga and Lena Dunham — fellow New York natives of his generation, all with their anxiety issues and social-media confessionals, posh schooling and oddly tight parental ties. September 11th shrouds the lot of them.

The rapper rolls down his windows to smoke a cigarette, allowing frigid air to flood the car. "A lot of people expect me to be some funny fucking guy, but that's not what this album is," he says. "If you read those high school articles about me, it's always about how my mom didn't want to let me out after September 11th because she was worried I'd get killed by people who thought I was Muslim. I keep thinking about this in terms of the way black parents felt after Michael Brown. How many parents have to have that conversation with their children?"

The car shoots off the highway, winding through Williamsburg. "I've cried a lot this year," he continues. "Maybe you're not supposed to say that, but how are you not supposed to cry when all these things are going on? It really upsets me, man." Suri pauses, verklempt, swallowing his tears. "It really upsets me! That's not why my parents came here."

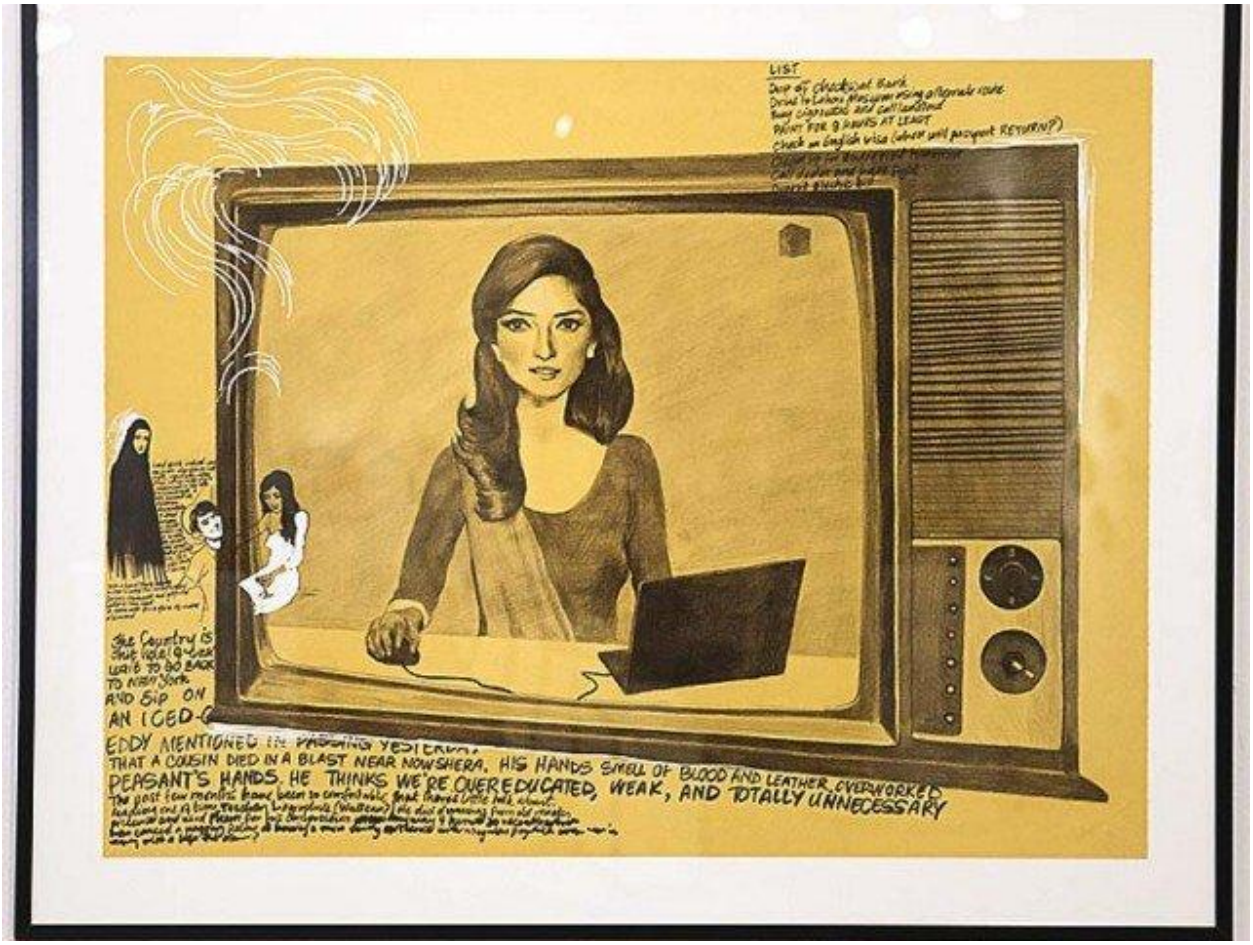
The Lexus turns onto Bedford Avenue. It is early on a Saturday night, and the neighborhood is gearing up for its usual festivities. Finished with his cigarette, Suri rolls up the window. Throughout the day, Hot 97 has kept pulse in the background at a gentle urban purr. Now "Fuck Up Some Commas," the Future song, comes on the radio, and the musician abruptly raises the volume. The deep bass resonates ominously, the sound of trouble. Suri turns the volume up again, and then again, as pedestrians survey his car. "*Fit it, critic, get it, hit it!*" Suri raps alongside Future. The musician raises the volume a final time, as if testing the limits of his parents' car stereo. The Lexus is now, officially, the menace of the block.

As if alone in the city, he raps along with the radio, louder and more frantically. "Let's fuck up some commas!" Suri yells to the night. "Give no fucks, yeah, we don't give no fucks."

THE EXPRESS TRIBUNE
WITH THE International New York Times

Review: The art of music

By Carol Khan
Published: March 15, 2015



Newscaster I, 2014, by Salman Toor. PHOTO CREDITS: RYAN MUNIR

If music could take on colour and shape, the results would be strikingly similar to the group exhibit titled 'Eat Pray Thug', curated by American artist and former member of the now-defunct American alt-rap trio Das Racist, Himanshu Suri. The exhibit, held at New York's Aicon Gallery, marks the release of Suri's first solo album this month by bringing

together a wide range of established and emerging South Asian and American artists whose works reference daily life and pop culture.

The show fuses Pakistani with Indian, Islam with Hinduism and North American with South Asian, without highlighting the major chasms separating these dichotomies in the Eastern world. The subtext of the works largely communicate with Suri's music: both are compendiums of deep knowledge of pop culture and both American and South Asian.

An antique Indian tin and mixed media, by Himanshu Suri and Chirag Bhakta. PHOTO CREDITS: RYAN MUNIR

Collage and street art seem to be the common threads tying the works together. In a work by Suri and the artist known as Pardon My Hindi, household objects, including an asthma inhaler and a prescription bottle, are juxtaposed with imagery from an

airplane's safety guide, in reference to assemblage curiousity cabinets by the venerated 20thcentury American artist Joseph Cornell. Other works, such as the optical illusion of a black-and-white 3-D sculpture of a stack of 1-D boxes which spirals upwards and into the distance, directly refer to top pop art artists like Andy Warhol and Patrick Caulfield. South Asian culture is also under scrutiny with works such as the brightly-coloured relief of a caricaturised Hindu god.

Much like Suri's album *Eat Pray Thug*, the exhibition draws upon personal, lived experiences, while casting a critical eye at western commercialism. The media and day-to-day life are the targets in this eclectic exhibition. In line with mid-20th century pop artists who fed contemporary culture to high-end audiences via advertisements and television serials, the exhibit includes the work of artist Roohi Ahmed from Karachi who entered a visceral video of herself sewing red thread through her hands. But the artist who most caught my eye was another Karachi-based practitioner, Adeela Suleman, whose comedic work captures the dark Pakistani sense of humour, often taking current events into critical consideration.

'Eat Pray Thug' is a nod to the hugely popular travel memoir *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything across Italy, India and Indonesia* by American author Elizabeth Gilbert. With this reference, the exhibit points towards two cultural tenets integral to both Pakistanis and Indians alike: food and prayer. Suri's cheeky inclusion of 'Thug' in lieu of 'Love' is a reminder of the prevalent negative stereotypes attached to being a minority in the United States. For Suri, it may be referencing his skin color and Indian heritage; yet, it resonates equally with how born-in-Pakistan Muslims are categorised in the international media as well.

Upright, 2012, by Aakash Nihalani. PHOTO CREDITS: RYAN MUNIR

Overall, the show brings forward a strain of South Asian voices represented but not fully recognised. It appears local yet foreign which manages to appeal to younger audiences as well as the more seasoned gallery visitors.

Carol Khan is a subeditor and coordinator of The Express Tribune in Peshawar. She tweets @carolkhan_

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The New York Times

Heems Talks About ‘Eat Pray Thug’

By JOE COSCARELLI MARCH 6, 2015

Himanshu Suri, the musician and artist known as Heems, is an operator across worlds that may seem, at first, incompatible.

An Indian-American rapper with a degree from Wesleyan and a day job doing data entry at an advertising agency, Heems is releasing his first solo album, “Eat Pray Thug,” on Tuesday via the metal label Megaforce, once home to Metallica. Recorded largely in Mumbai, the work is focused on racial identity and 9/11 — Heems was blocks away, at Stuyvesant High School, when the towers fell — and is made up mostly of discordant and gravel-voiced protest songs (“Suicide by Cop,” “Flag Shopping,” “Patriot Act”) until it’s not, and he’s singing sweetly about a breakup.

“Sometimes I’m ’bout chicks, sometimes it’s politics,” Heems raps, ever self-aware, on the lead single, “Sometimes,” which he described as being about “dualities,” a mission statement that applies to the entire album, pop songs and sociopolitical bombs alike.

“When I was younger, it was cut and dried: I go to school and I’m American; I come home and I’m Indian,” Heems, 29, who grew up in Queens with Punjabi parents, said of his chameleon nature. “But when I became an artist and stopped putting up those divisions, I had to deal with myself as myself, and that was quite a difficult process for me. I found a certain protection living in two worlds.”

That in-between — he described it as “the space between black and white, with Latino and Indian as ‘brown,’ and unity across diversity” — was the safe zone Heems’s former group, Das Racist, which rose from cutting Internet novelty to professional rap act without losing its smirk-and-wink silliness. But it wasn’t until Das Racist broke up in 2012, and Heems decamped for his ancestral homeland, that he truly could explore his own individuality without defenses. “Das Racist hinted at a lot of things,” he said. “But this is the most personal work I’ve ever done.”

Heems discussed his creative process in an interview at Aicon Gallery in Manhattan, where he organized and contributed to an exhibition tied to his album that runs until Tuesday. These are excerpts from the conversation.

Q. Why the nod to “Eat, Pray, Love” in the album title? Were your travels a spiritual experience?

I was in Asia for five months. The name speaks to my identity confusion, because in a certain way I fell victim to the spiritual tourism bug just like any white American. I'm just as guilty of exoticizing as Elizabeth Gilbert.

I would be reading about Mughal history while listening to Ravi Shankar with incense lit in my room. And I would be like, "I'm Indian — I don't need to be doing all this!" But I'm not Indian — I'm American.

Specifically a New Yorker — so much so that you rap, "I still don't bump Tupac."

The album is all about New York. It was one of those artist-in-exile things, like the Beastie Boys in L. A. or E. B. White leaving New York to write about the city. When you leave New York, it's all that you think about. In India, I wasn't the Indian rapper — I was just the rapper. Ironically, it was there that I was able to look past being Indian, and that allowed me to make this record.

Did being overseas leave you disconnected from what was happening in rap music here?

My favorite rappers right now are Meek Mill and French Montana. They're not inherently political guys, but so much of their music is about the justice system. In light of what happened in Ferguson, it's important for people to talk about that stuff.

But I was listening to a lot of Indian music — Bollywood songs on Spice FM. I like that the album wasn't influenced by contemporary stuff, especially because rap is regionally moving so much to Atlanta.

But you're still subtly weaving in your hip-hop influences, as well, borrowing flows or lyrics.

Rap has always been quote-unquote hyper-referential. It's collaging. [On the song "AL Q8A"] I referenced French Montana saying, "Hi haters, our guns from Al Qaeda." I think it's funny because a lot of Al Qaeda's guns were from us, so it was kind of a misguided quotation.

There was also this whole thing with Dipset, where they referred to themselves as the Taliban — it was just for shock value. And Chicago, in rap, becomes Chi-raq. From a certain standpoint, it was about reclaiming that from hip-hop as a brown person.

You've worked on Wall Street and now in advertising, but have you made a living off rap?

I dropped 20 stacks [$20,000] on art here, so I'm doing all right. But I had a certain amount of guilt about being an artist. I thought working-class people shouldn't be artists because it's a luxury. My father drove a cab, and my mom worked at Pathmark bagging groceries for $4 an hour. But I try not to validate myself through the labor of my

parents. They worked their butts off and I did, too, in a different way. In India, I realized that I need to own this. I finally accepted that I am inspired by sound and language, and I'm fortunate that this is my career.

For people who are used to you in Das Racist, there's now a lack of ——

Jokes.

Why?

It's not realistic to be happy like that all the time. You put yourself out there, and it's extremely vulnerable. That's why I think we were much more comfortable hiding behind humor. Something like race is an extremely personal, depressing topic. I would always reference Langston Hughes's "Laughing to Keep From Crying" because that's what we were doing.

Now I'm just crying. [Laughs.]

ANIMAL

DAS RACIST'S HIMANSHU CURATED A SHOW FOR HIS SOLO ALBUM *EAT PRAY THUG*

By Aymann Ismail | February 9, 2015 - 02:17PM

Himanshu "Heems" Suri, who goes by moniker Deepak Choppa these days, is celebrating his first solo album since his rap group Das Racist disbanded in 2012. He kicked things off with an exhibit at New York's Aicon Gallery titled "Eat Pray Thug" after Suri's upcoming album of the same name. The show, which opened on Friday, deals with race, identity, and culture with a distinctly South Asian perspective featuring art by Suri, Chiraag Bhakta (*Pardon My Hindi), Chitra Ganesh, and several others.

Himanshu Suri & Chiraag Bhakta

"A lot of the art work is sourced from my travels in India and my childhood in New York," Suri told ANIMAL at the opening, explaining that "Both the album and the art are about my life. They are both one and the same to me." On one wall, gallery-goers could view artwork while listening to *Eat Pray Thug* streaming from two iPods.

"This show is really cool, we have American artists, Indian artists, Pakistani artists. It's interesting to see it all together and how they interact," Bhakta said. "Instead of putting us in an 'Indian' bucket, this show is trying to burst that bubble. That first layer of American culture is pretty special. We are not Indian, we are American. It's cool to experiment with that and see what comes out of it."

Aakash Nihalani

Throughout the next month, the exhibition space will also host a 24-hour performance by Choppa and live music by Riz Ahmed + Kominas. The exhibit closes on March 10, the day of*Eat, Pray, Thug's* official release.

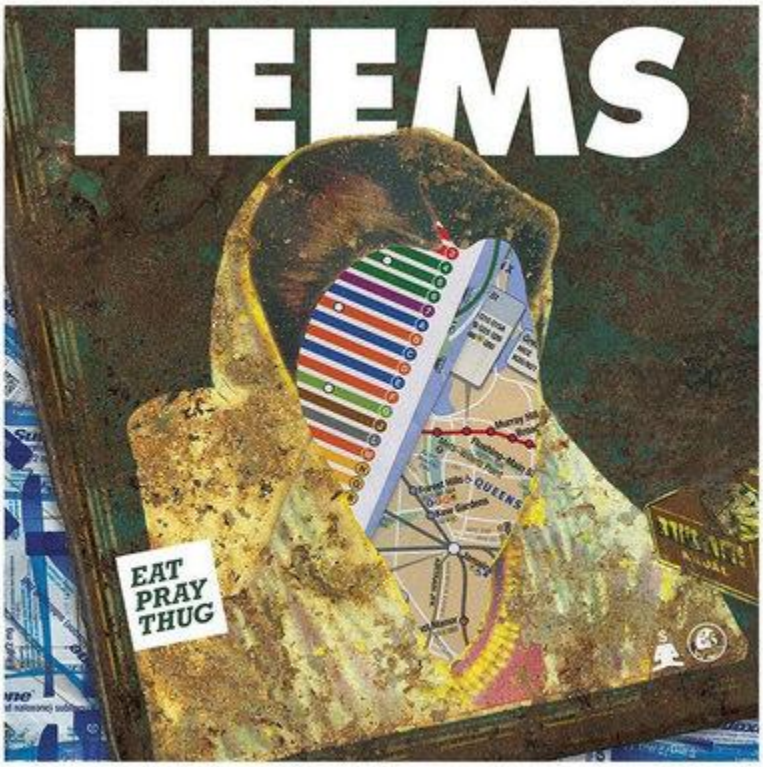
"Eat Pray Thug," Himanshu Suri, Chiraag Bhakta, Chitra Ganesh, et al, Aicon Gallery, Feb 7 – Mar 10, NYC

(Photo: Aymann Ismail/ANIMALNewYork)

Review: Heems, 'Eat Pray Thug'

MARCH 01, 201511:03 PM ET
TIMMHOTEP AKU

Binary thinkers beware: If you're the type who's uncomfortable with contradiction, or would rather deal in stereotypes than nuance, then rapper Heems and his new album,*Eat Pray Thug,* are not for you. That kind of thinking in black and white won't work here, where Heems is making what he's described as "post-9/11 dystopian brown man rap."



Eat Pray Thug
Courtesy of the artist

Heems is the alter-ego of Queens, N.Y., native Himanshu Suri, the Indian-American MC formerly of the group Das Racist. The now disbanded trio made its mark on music with a pair of mixtapes that often read as skilled satire and send-ups of hip-hop and popular culture as well as America's absurdities. When the group broke up, each member continued to produce the kind of content that had made their group noteworthy in the first place. Rapper Kool A.D. (Victor Vazquez) released projects featuring his signature serpentine wordplay and free associative rhymes; hypeman/DJ Dapwell (Ashok

Kondabalu) took his irreverence to Internet radio, co-hosting the show *Chillin Island*, and joined his brother Hari performing comedy as the Kondabalu Brothers. And Heems? He put out well-received solo tapes *Nehru Jackets* and *Wild Water Kingdom* and toured South Asia basically finding himself, reconnecting with his South Asian Hindu heritage — confessionally tweeting and Tumbling all along the way. The product of that touring and soul searching is his solo label debut, *Eat, Pray, Thug*.

On *EPT* Heems presents himself as artist, activist and addict all at once. The tone is set by its first song, "Sometimes," something of a take on Nice 'N' Smooth's "Sometimes I Rhyme Slow" and Busta Rhymes' "Touch It." The song is as much a description of his own multitudes as it is a meditation on everybody's duality — or all our fickleness — set to producer Gordon Voidwell's raucous uptempo beat. "Sometimes they like me and others they really don't / I'm too white, I'm too black / I rides waves like boat." Rap and race are recurring themes on the album — rap for reference/reverence's sake (see: "So NY" a very Queens, very '90s kid, very Heems take on Fabolous's not-so-anthemic song of the same name) and race for the sake of identity exploration and assertion.

Hip-hop's dominant narrative is that of the young black male — Heems comes from the margins to give us his perspective. On "Flag Shopping" we get a heavy dose of the aforementioned "post-9/11 dystopian brown man rap": "We're going flag shopping for American flags / They're staring at our turbans, / they're calling them rags / they're calling them towels. / They're more like crowns, let's strike them like vipers." Rarely have hip-hop artists addressed the insidious xenophobia that lumped together Sikhs, Muslims and Hindu and basically any brown person who appeared to be Middle Eastern as Jihadist "threats to the Homeland" and perpetrators of 9/11.

Heems might be his most affecting on "Home," featuring and produced by Dev Hynes. A ballad about powerful attraction and dysfunctional love between Heems and a woman, the tale reaches peak sadness when Heems sing-raps "And company love misery / you with him while you tellin' me you wish it's me. / You addicted to the H-Man / I'm addicted to the H, man," alluding to his own struggles with substance abuse.

Eat Pray Thug doesn't resolve. And if complexity sits just fine with you — if you don't like it nice and easy, you like it nice and rough — then this album is what you've been looking for.

PIGEONS & PLANES
THERE'S SMOKE IN MY IRIS, BUT I PAINTED A SUNNY DAY ON THE INSIDES OF MY EYELIDS

GLOBETROTTING BACK HOME: HEEMS AND THE CREATION OF "EAT.PRAY.THUG."

By Graham Corrigan

To describe Heems' debut solo album as "anticipated" is insufficient. This is the man who turned rap on its head as a founding member of Das Racist, only to disband once the band's notoriety started to balloon. Heems was never here for sponsorships or a festival's big font. He is here to investigate his existence and the world around him. That is, in part, what led the Queens-born Himanshu halfway around the globe to return—ancestrally speaking—home to India.

Once there he recorded *Eat. Pray. Thug.*, out March 10. It's his first studio release—there were a couple mixtapes after Das Racist split, and a fantastic Swet Shop Boyz EP Heems made last year with Riz MC.

This music, however, is to be a departure from those projects. *Eat. Pray. Thug.*belongs to Himanshu alone, the only listed feature coming from Dev Hynes. Another of the

names he answers to is Deepak Choppa, an play on/homage to the Indian-American scientist/mystic Deepak Chopra. The two have a few similarities—classical training, cult followings, fervent beliefs—but these days, Heems has one notable advantage over the real-life Chopra: he's just getting started.

How long has it been since you came back from India?

I recorded the album at the end of 2013, and since then I've been spending a lot of time with friends and family. I've gotten to be around to help raise my sister's kids. They're two years and two months old, it's great to be around to see them grow up.

And they factor into more than one of the songs. You've always drawn on your personal life for musical inspiration, but it's been a while. How are you adjusting to being back in the current of the industry? Is there still excitement, or are you apprehensive about diving back in?

I'm totally happy and excited about it. Very excited about the music itself, and I'm looking forward to representing myself and my people through the music again, partly by continuing to be an activist for the Indian and South Asian communities in New York.

Right now we're really trying to get taxicab stand in front of the Punjabi Deli on the Lower East Side, which is a huge landmark for South Asian cab drivers. Since construction started picking up in that area, the cabbies can't stop to have some food or some chai without getting a ticket. It's been a landmark for years and years, and construction is putting it out of business.

You also worked with a group of "straight/queer, Hindu/Muslim, male/female, established/newcomer, Asia/Diaspora" artists at Aicon Gallery this month. Tell us about the *Eat. Pray. Thug.* gallery show.

I've done what I wanted to do in terms of representing myself and my culture with this album. One of the ways I'm doing that is by curating a show at Aicon gallery in Manhattan from February 7 to March 10. It's a show done with ten other artists, including myself. All ten are of Indian or South Asian descent, but that's not the point of the show—not all the work has to do with our heritage. It's a pretty diverse crew that came together, and *Eat. Pray, Thug*, is one of the pieces being presented.

I've done what I wanted to do in terms of representing myself and my culture with this album.

Are there any parallels between *Eat. Pray. Thug.* and the *Swet Shop Boys* EP you put out with Riz MC?

Eat. Pray. Thug. doesn't have as much to do directly with Indian culture in terms of sounds or samples. Also, we didn't have to clear any samples with *Swet Shop Boys*. It was a free mixtape, so we could just put it out there.
Being in India when I recorded *Eat. Pray. Thug*. obviously had an impact, but the sounds and songs are mine in a different way than anything I've done in the past. Before, I felt as though I was hiding behind my humor, putting on a mask through these dual identities I had. Choosing between being a New Yorker and an Indian-American. With this album I was in a different place—Das Racist had broken up, a relationship had just ended. That's where I was as an artist, that's where the songs came from.

Are there any moments that stand out from that recording process?
The studio where we recorded was in the same place as a lot of these big movie studios, all these mega-producer Bollywood teams. I was just this no-name renting a studio for a week, I'd walk down the hall and pass Shah Rukh Khan.
He's probably reached demi-god status by now, no? Were your relatives and friends freaking out about you seeing Shah Rukh Khan?
Not as much as you'd think. I spent time hanging out with artists and poets, mostly highly educated people. The upper class in India doesn't watch Bollywood as much. They were all educated in NY and London, and just as highly-educated upper-class Americans look down on Hollywood blockbusters, the upper class in India sometimes looks down on Bollywood.
The title of the album speaks to that. It's not just a play on *Eat Pray Love*, it's not just about white people coming to India as tourists to find spiritual enlightenment. Sure, India is kinda hippy-dippy, but that's not all there is to see.
That confusion of diasporic identity is central to the album. The exotification of India that we see so much in popular culture—I was guilty of it too, and it wasn't until I had a chance to hang out with friends and family that I could step outside of that.

That confusion of diasporic identity is central to the album. The exotification of India that we see so much in popular culture—I was guilty of it too, and it wasn't until I had a chance to hang out with friends and family that I could step outside of that. A "thug" in India doesn't have the exact same meaning as it does in America.

Any other singles or material coming before the album drops March 10?
Right now we're wrapping up the video for "Sometimes," it's going to be a collaboration with Adult Swim.
Amazing. There was a pic of you recently on Instagram with Eric Andre and Hannibal Burress, is it with them?
I can't say, sorry.
Ok. Don't answer if it's Eric Andre.
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Leaving NYC For Long Island: A Q&A With Himanshu Suri

Himanshu Suri, a.k.a. Heems, is probably best known from the now defunct Das Racist, but he's continuing to make "post-9/11 dystopian brown man rap" on his own. We briefly chatted with Heems in anticipation of the release of his first solo album Eat Pray Thug, speaking to him about some of his most defining experiences as a native New Yorker. He's currently living on Long Island after a lifetime in Brooklyn, Queens, and even a brief journey down Wall Street.

You're living in Hicksville now, right? Why did you choose to move back home... to leave Williamsburg and all that "white drama" you talk about on Eat Pray Thug?

My lease ended at the end of April and I just didn't want to sublet or get an apartment again, which I had to do for like years. So I think since around May of last year I've been living on Long Island.

So how's living with the parents? Oh, I love it. It just so happens that my sister and her husband were also living there. I'm on my way back to them right now. [Last night] I had a show at [Aicon Gallery] where I have my art. I had a performance there with the Kominas and Riz MC, they're like this Pakistani punk band and this Pakistani grime artist.

Okay, let's talk about other collaborations. Talk to me a little about the Dev Hynes collaboration. What was it like for a "So NY" born-and-bred Queens kid to work with a guy who has such a deep-set love of the place as his adopted home? Yeah, I feel like he does qualify as "native." I was thinking about the production and I was like Harry [Fraud]'s from New York, Boody [B]'s from Washington Heights, Gordon Voidwell's from the Bronx and like Keyboard Kid and Bill Ding are not from New York, but I thought about Dev and I was like, he's basically a New Yorker. I've been bugging him for like three years to do this thing we had spoken about. We mentioned working together and it never happened and then Cupid Deluxe came out and I was like, "Great, now you're never going to work with me." But one day I got him to come by a studio and he banged that riff out in like a minute and then I wrote my lyrics in like 20 minutes and then in an hour we had the song.

You commented somewhere that there are no Indian samples on Eat Pray Thug, right? Why's that? Well yeah, the label didn't clear any samples. It's a budget thing. You have to clear publishing... But a lot of people, when the samples are obscure like '60s Bollywood, they would just risk it. But my label didn't want to.

Do you think that compromised the integrity of your album? I mean initially when it was happening, I was very upset about it, but looking at it in retrospect, I like the fact that I'm not relying on samples or relying on humor or anything like that. I guess the samples were almost like a defense mechanism. I can rely on them and it takes the pressure off of me.

So moving onto your experience of what it was like being a brown person in post-9/11 New York City... Yeah, it sucks. [laughs]

Yeah, in so many words. Can you tell me about that day and the days thereafter? I don't really want to do that... it's kind of difficult for me and I cry. Like basically I was close enough to see people jumping and hear their bodies hit the floor. Um... so it's quite a traumatic experience for me and I've never really come to terms with what it all meant, which I'm trying to do with the music. So that's kind of like... what it is.

Going to Stuyvesant was obviously an integral part of that experience, but what was the rest of your time there like? Did going there bring you back to the arts in some way? Since you worked on Wall Street before returning to art? Stuyvesant is just a super competitive place where like everyone was wanting to get into Harvard. But ultimately beside the proximity to 9/11, what the takeaway was learning how to manage my time better. There's good grades, sleep and social life and at Stuyvesant you can only have two out of the three.

Obviously "Patriot Act" and "Flag Shopping" are both incredibly personal powerful songs. Tell me about the writing process for those songs. I didn't go into the studio with this like idea of doing these 9/11 tracks. I recorded most of the album in India and then my label was like, "We couldn't clear all the tracks, we need two more songs." So I went in and "Flag Shopping" and "Patriot Act" just came out of me. You know, I'd been in India for a while and then I returned to New York, so maybe upon returning I just kind of remembered... But I had never thought of New York as this racist place until 9/11, you know?

Did you have a particular experience? Oh yeah. I mean I live out in Long Island and whenever a journalist cabs over to interview me, the cab driver dropping them off will make comments about my house... Because "It's one of these big Indian houses that doesn't fit in the neighborhood." But you know in Queens, that's totally common. And like the cab drivers will always say, "Oh yeah, the one that doesn't belong here" or "Oh yeah okay, the Indian one." Like one of the writers was an Indian girl and she told the cab driver the address and he said, "I don't speak your language," and she said "English?" So being on Long Island it's kind of cool because it grounds me in a way. Because if you're in Brooklyn or Manhattan it's like, "Oh, you're Indian, that's so cool, I love Indian food." But it's now like these guys think I'm moving in and building fucking Taj Mahals in the neighborhood, and I feel more comfortable with that racism than with like "liberal appreciation."

So then what was it like when you lived in Williamsburg for a while? I liked it at the time. I mean a lot of friends, we were all in bands and it was good to be around your peers. It was a good vibe. But eventually I was like, "This is not the New York I know, the New York I grew up with, that I cherish." That New York's Long Island now.

I was just reading your New York Times Q&A that came out and was curious about your statement that "Chicago, in rap, becomes Chi-raq. From a certain standpoint, it was about reclaiming that from hip-hop as a brown person." Can you talk about that a little more? It's not ultimately about "reclaiming" it. The intention was to draw parallels between the black body in America and the brown body in the world, and that intention was about unity. So I feel like "reclaiming" poses it as like "I was upset," but no, it's about unity.

Right, and that ties into another question about rap and hip-hop being integral components of NYC-based music, but how exactly do you navigate that strange in-between place? We're brown men who make black art that is marketed to white people. I feel weird about it, but it's fine.

But a lot of people think Queens hip-hop is all tongue-in-cheek now, it's considered quote-unquote smart. What do you think about those implications?...Oh, is that what I did? I don't know, maybe it is...

Speaking of my reading list, I know you've been retweeting some people who've had problems with the Village Voice's recent profile on you, starting with the title: "With Eat Pray Thug, Heems Moves Past That Funny Rap Group With The 'Dumb' Name." What are your thoughts on that? I was pretty happy with it. I mean the piece is a little snide, but it's fine. I think in 5000 words, you don't have to make everyone happy. I'm pretty proud of it. But yeah, the title's stupid, but that's not the takeaway. I liked the piece, just not the title.

I know you were really embedded in the predominantly Sikh Richmond Hill community. Tell me a little bit about that. Are you still working with SEVA? What kind of projects have you been pursuing? Oh, I'm not really working with them anymore. But I am working with the Punjabi Deli on the Lower East Side right now. Construction has affected business so we are petitioning for a cab stand so cabbies can patronize the deli without getting a ticket.