DIVYA MEHRA IS INTERESTED IN POWER; particularly the way power is manifest in contemporary culture, but also the role history and capital play in its dissemination and interpretation. For the most part, we understand power in the way it is linked to wealth, luxury, property, and allegiances. How is power exerted though? Through various gestures that are crass and obnoxious as well as subtle and irritating: the flashy sheen of a sports car; the bestowed accessibility to backrooms and rolodexes; a small plot of sand that could shift with the political tide. With TURF WAR., Mehra’s debut solo exhibition, she filters these signs of power and wealth only to disembowel them and treat them like trophies all the while revealing the economic underpinnings of personal and cultural interaction. Who gets to benefit from which territory? Who gains access into which lands? How does this power transfer from one side to the next? And who is on whose side anyway?

In TURF WAR. Mehra calls into question again and again the notion of the trophy, the sign of wealth, of elitism. With I am the American Dream (still just a Paki), Mehra presents a shiny 1987 Jaguar Vanden Plas sprayed gold with blacked out windows, eviscerated of its engine and its wheels excised, mounted on the wall like a plaque indicating the membership to some order of distinction. Can this be read the same way as the remainder of a deer whose head and antlers are all that is left to adorn the wall, with its once elegant and now cumbersome legs having gone by the wayside? This symbol of leisure, class, and wealth comes with a history that Mehra is pinpointing: once the ultimate icon of playboy status in the United Kingdom and abroad with allusions to a colonial jewel, the British brand Jaguar was acquired in 2008 by India’s largest automobile company, Tata Motors Ltd, a multinational corporation headquartered in Mumbai. It should also be noted that as of 2004 Tata Motors Ltd was the first company from India’s engineering sector to be listed in the New York Stock Exchange, with revenue exceeding $14 billion by 2009. By presenting this commodity as trophy, Mehra makes evident the transfer of wealth from one superrich to another, and in so doing calls into question the appropriation of status symbols. What does it mean for India, a country whose history is rife with their wealth having been pilfered throughout colonial rule, to take back a small piece of their symbology -- the Jaguar? What are the ramifications of reclaiming your jewel from the crown of another country? Does it mean war? For Mehra, the intention is more personal. By acquiring this iconic symbol and stripping it bare -- essentially rendering it useless -- and then having it sprayed out with an amateur backyard paintjob, the original colour still leaking through in certain places, she forces the stereotype of an immigrant looking to fit in with her “I can do it myself” mentality. The title also traverses lines of interpretation. By declaring, "I am the American Dream", the question of authorship arises, as does the quandary of prevalence this particular dream has held for so many seeking a better life. What does it mean for a first generation Indo-Canadian woman to proclaim status through the symbol of such a trophy while restating her position in terms of a racial slur with British origins (still just a Paki)?
Just as *The catalyst for change so often in history is War,* though a text piece made of latex paint and vinyl acts as a mural, it is also implicitly a work in reference to digital culture and more to the point social networking and the site facebook™. The twenty-foot-long white vinyl text reads, plain and simple, in the site’s instantly recognizable font against blue paint, along the upper third of the gallery wall: “I don’t want to be friends.” In an era where camaraderie has been reduced to numbers, and actual face-to-face meetings with these virtual friends are few and far between, what does such a statement really say? Is it a negation of the form, or more tellingly, a call to arms against new social conventions of collecting friends like jewels in your crown? Does Mehr’s statement imply the obvious retaliation to unrequited friendship is battle? And if so, are we all at war? Or, perhaps the unimaginable legions of ‘friends’ listed on facebook™ is really a public troop count staving off an impending battle for fear of retribution. We find ourselves in an era where voicing (typing) you opinion has never been so nauseating and at the same time dangerous. This danger is unquantifiable as we run the risk of offending legions of invisible enemies with our latest status update / tweet / myspace song choice / ‘like’ or ‘dislike’. This mural is part of a recent investigation into text-based work by an artist known primarily for her performative video work, the titles of which over the last five years have become increasingly more telling to the point where the video might be read as secondary. With this text work Mehr is taking a (seemingly) simple element of contemporary life and mining the unseen nuance. In this declaration of abstaining, of not wanting ‘friends’, the worst outcome for this not-so-brave new world is hinted at. This strategy is visible throughout *TURF WAR.*

Continuing in this vein is *Tryst with Destiny,* a neon sign which states, in stark white lettering -- ‘real paki’ -- installed in the gallery’s window facing King Street. This perhaps rude proclamation must be read in context: The title is taken from the speech delivered August 14th 1947 by Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, on the eve of India's independence. This historical moment is also known as The Partition -- a division along religious lines (primarily Muslim Pakistan and mainly Hindu India) enforced by the outgoing British. The Partition led to the drawing of borders, numerous wars and skirmishes over such lines, and subsequently millions of deaths. In his address, Nehru spoke of the tasks that lay ahead for the entire country, in particular the end to poverty, ignorance, disease, and inequality of opportunity. More than half a century later, this ‘tryst with destiny’, as extolled in Nehru’s speech, is yet to be realized. Kashmir, the land whose borders are shared by Pakistan and India, is still the cause of so much bloodshed. The placement of the work underlines this uncertainty. The Gault Building (renamed Artspace in 1984), where PLATFORM is housed, was once a dry goods storage warehouse and was involved (as so many warehouses in Winnipeg’s Exchange District once were) with the trade industry of a bustling city at the turn of the century. One hundred years later Pakistan is now occupied more than ever with commercial export to North America, but still at war. By truncating her sentiment to ‘real paki’, Mehr also appropriates hip-hop language phrasing. This is further mirrored in the fact that the statement is written in a technique similar to graffiti lettering, a form culturally linked to hip-hop and rap music. The term ‘real’ carries significance in rap lyrics, as it has become known to signal authenticity and originality. In teaming it with ‘paki’, Mehr re-appropriates the derogatory nature of the term, just as African Americans have taken back hate language and incorporated into their culture to varying degrees of acceptance and success. All of this adds up to Mehr wondering if the ‘destiny’ promised at the outset of independence has been met, or has India (as a whole, including the Diaspora) failed to meet its potential.

A compendium to *Tryst with Destiny* is the sole photograph in the exhibition -- *The Pleasure in Hating.* This portrait of the artist’s father and mother in their family livingroom pictures them wearing jersey sweatshirts with the emblazoned lettering which states, respectively, each parent’s home country: Pakistan and India. The sweatshirts worn by Mehr’s parents in the photograph are also coloured blue (Father / Pakistan) and red (Mother / India). This sly visual
clue alerts us to another famous feud -- this time between the Los Angeles street gangs, Crips and Bloods, which has been ongoing since the early 1970s. However, Mehra is interested in other possible dualities within this image, including: man / woman; husband / wife; father / mother. The simple block lettering on their sweaters also references collegiate sports teams and loyalties that could seem innocent yet have powerful and violent implications lurking just beneath the surface.

The allusion to team sports, as well as Crips and Bloods, is carried to the streets, literally, with the artist's off-site text work seen on Winnipeg Transit buses, The Adversity of Exclusion can be made to go hand in hand with the Gifts of Inclusion, which reads -- 'I WIN' and 'YOU LOSE' in blue and red along the side of the vehicle. As these buses travel the streets of Winnipeg, turf lines are transcended, ignored, and maybe even ignited. Mehra chose to have the colours corresponding to the statements alternate in an effort to blur the outcome of who is ahead and effectively underline the fact that wars are cyclical and no one ever wins. The title comes from a theoretical understanding that with every inclusion, there is potential for equal exclusion. With each person invited to a certain conversation, there is the likelihood of a non-invitation to that person's enemy.

An additional off-site component to TURF WAR. can be found in Border Crossings Magazine, Volume 29 / Number 3 / Issue 115 / page 162. The full page text work masquerading as an advertisement reads in black on white: “DIVYA MEHRA PAID FOR THIS PAGE.” Titled Real Estate Tycoon, Mehra is not pulling any punches when she literally flaunts her ability to occupy territory in a magazine that reports on contemporary art. The artist has blurred yet another territorial line by placing a framed version of this edition in the gallery administration office, out of view from the public. Playing with these vehicles of mass media to disseminate, the magazine and buses, even placing the edition in the curator’s office, her message is clear -- I’ll go wherever the fuck I want.

Just as Mehra inserts herself into someone else’s turf, she also brings turf into the gallery with Silver Bullet (Drawing a Line in the Sand), where a 200 lbs mound of white decorative sand is arranged on the gallery floor in order to call attention to various real turf wars taking place over contested lands. By jokingly conflating the notion of a straightforward solution (silver bullet) with an arbitrary boundary on a moveable surface (a line in the sand), the artist’s dry wit underscores the inherent failure in searching for a peaceable end to war by equating it with finding a tropical utopia. If so, do these granules visually double as a mound of cocaine (another form of escape) and therefore bring up associations of illicit drugs to gangs, war, and wealth?

As with every war, it is those behind closed doors that are in fact controlling the situation. The List acts as allegory for disputed territory in an urban setting. Mehra altered an existing stairwell in the gallery to make it look like the back entrance to a nightclub. Complete with a play list of rap songs all about turf wars, strobe lights, rusted out metal, a cluster of empty champagne bottles, and on occasion a hired bouncer, The List personifies many symbols of turf, backdoor hopefuls, and the notion that we’ all want what ‘they’ve’ got. This ghetto fabulous installation is an investigation into those who acquire power through posturing; those whose bravado fills otherwise uninteresting and unappetizing spaces with elite charm. Would such a superficial boundary resemble anything close to the divide between India and Pakistan? Like a car without wheels, a pile of sand, and an unaccepted ‘friend’ request, the stairwell literally goes nowhere ... but don’t we all still want in?

J.J. Kegan McFadden
Commissioning Curator
Divya Mehra’s TURF WAR.
EXHIBITION 10 September - 16 October, 2010

RECEPTION Friday 10 September | 7:00PM

ARTIST TALK Saturday 02 October | 3:00PM

PLATFORM J.J. Kegan McFadden, Director | Curator
Larry Glawson, Administrative Coordinator
Natasha Peterson, Outreach Coordinator
Glen Johnson, Technician
Alexis Lagimodière-Grisé, Intern

WORKS EXHIBITED

I am the American Dream (still just a Paki), 2010
1987 Gold Jaguar Vanden Plas | 75" x 192" x 40"

The catalyst for change so often in history is War, 2010
acrylic vinyl and acrylic latex deep base paint | 48” x 236"

Tryst with Destiny, 2010
neon light | 10” x 60” x 4”

The Pleasure in Hating, 2010
digital c-print | 22.5” x 30”

Silver Bullet (Drawing a Line in the Sand), 2010
200 lbs white sand | dimensions variable

The List, 2010
altered metal staircase with railing, rap music, strobe lights, champagne bottles, sporadic performance | dimensions variable

Real Estate Tycoon, 2010
offset printing on Chorus Art Silk FSC | edition of 5500 | 11.75” x 9"

The Adversity of Exclusion can be made to go hand in hand with the Gifts of Inclusion, 2010
silkscreen on Styrene | varied edition of 7 | 30” x 139"

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Divya Mehra

DIVYA MEHRA is a multimedia artist who earned an MFA from Columbia University, New York, and obtained her BFA with Honours from the University of Manitoba’s School of Art. In her practice Mehra explores issues of cultural displacement and hybridization, deploying a humorous perspective in the execution of the works. Her work has been included in a number of exhibitions and screenings across North America and overseas, most notably at Plug In ICA, Queens Museum (NY), A Space (Toronto), Groupe Intervention Video (Montreal), and Gallery OED (Cochin, India). Turf War. is Mehra's debut solo exhibition and has been supported by the Winnipeg Arts Council's New Creations Fund. <www.divyamehra.com>