

BIG STORIES, LITTLE INDIA



'We're creating a history from shop owners and residents': Artist and designer Rashmi Varma will bring her work to a shop window on Gerrard. RYAN CARTER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Getting the real story on Little India

A public art project brings the Gerrard strip's past and present into bright focus

BY NADJA SAYEJ

Like many other fashion stores in the Gerrard India Bazaar, Sonu Saree Palace has window mannequins draped in a flamboyant mélange of sequined saffron, silk and lace. But this week, artist and fashion designer Rashmi Varma will strip the stage bare, soak it in fresh paint and move in a sculptural portrait of longtime owners Inder and Bhupinder Jandoo, topped up as king and queen.

Last Friday afternoon, while Ms. Jandoo, 60, was ringing up a sale at the cash register, her eyes teared up at the thought. "What an honour," she said.

Ms. Jandoo's elevation to

the throne is part of *Big Stories, Little India*, a public art project set in storefronts, restaurants and on the street that aims to sketch out a history of the vibrant Gerrard East neighbourhood. "When we started this project, I thought 'This is perfect,'" said Umberreen Inayat, the event's production manager. "There's no recorded history on Little India. We're creating a history from shop owners and residents, some of who have been here since Day 1."

Joining forces with Murrur, an ongoing audio project that lends an ear to a neighbourhood's personal histories, the artists have, for the past month, been wandering Gerrard with microphones. One

Saturday afternoon, artist Avantika Bawa stopped passersby in their tracks. "Tell me something about Little India you wouldn't read in a tour guide [book]," she said, and listened to 21-year-old Divya Patel emphatically explain how she lost her tooth after eating candy from the gumball machine in the Motimahal restaurant.

But the recordings are only half of the project, according to organizer Haema Sivanesan, executive director of the South Asian Visual Art Collective. "We were inspired to make a visual aspect to what Murrur is doing," she said; that was why she chose storytelling from the heart of the strip.

There's flickering Super 8 footage of storeowners posing proudly before their establishments, which Zaheed Mawani, an Indian-Canadian filmmaker, will screen in the Gerrard/Ashdale Library. Or, over at the former Naz Theatre – the first South Asian landmark to jumpstart Little India in the late 1970s – storefront before-and-after shots pasted up by 25-year-old artist Ambereen Siddiqui. Though the Naz is now closed, it was once a hub of activity that drew hundreds of Bollywood fans, including Mr. and Mrs. Jandoo, who soon opened their nearby clothing shop. "When we opened in 1979, there were only three stores on this

strip," said Ms. Jandoo, who began selling Japanese saris (an inexpensive take on the South Asian sarong dress), but now sells high-end formal garments that can run to \$1,300. "Twenty years ago, we only had an immigrant clientele, but now we have all kinds of people coming into the store."

The Siddhartha restaurant has experienced the same change in customers, and with so many asking about their names, they now have a history on the founder of Buddhism on the back of their menus. It makes sense that their front window will host one of 10 poems by Pakistani-Canadian artist Amin Rehman, 50, who will weave

What to see

Don't pass along Gerrard this weekend without checking out these six key projects:

STOREFRONT STORIES: Hear what owners have seen since the 1970s, as part of Zaheed Mawani's screening in the Gerrard/Ashdale Public Library (1432 Gerrard St. E.)

PATHWAYS: Avantika Bawa's paths of coloured masking tape meander through Pal's Home Hardware (257 Coxwell Ave.)

DEAR ART: Ambereen Siddiqui displays letters from residents in 1988 asking then-mayor Art Eggleton to rename Gerrard after Mahatma Gandhi (1430 Gerrard St. E.)

PROTEST POEMS: Amin Rehman's vinyl storefront poem reflects on movie director Yash Chopra's non-Western style at the Bollywood Music Centre (1428 Gerrard St. E.)

KING AND QUEEN OF GERRARD: Rashmi Varma's royal duo fashioned out of fabric stand proud at Sonu Saree Palace (1420 Gerrard St. E.)

MADE IN LITTLE INDIA: Along all storefronts, look for postcards bearing that phrase (which Brendan Fernandes hopes passersby will mail back with a message).
 ▸ Nadja Sayej

each shop's back story into his work. "Really," says the restaurant's owner, Tiqu Chowdhury, 55, "this is something we need."

But here in Little India, cultural exchange goes two ways. While Ms. Varma, 32, was digging through fabrics in Sonu Saree Palace last week for her royal window duo, she turned to a staff seamstress in need of a second opinion – gold or silver animal pendants?

From the expression on Asha Batra's face, it was clear which metal she thought was fit for royalty. Citing an old Bollywood tune, she said, "Everything that is old is gold."

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