

# BOMB

## Forms of Exchange: Rina Banerjee Interviewed by Tausif Noor

*The artist discusses her current retrospective.*



Rina Banerjee, *Her captivity was once someone's treasure and even pleasure but she blew and flew away took root which grew, we knew this was like no other feather, a third kind of bird that perched on vine intertwined was neither native nor her queens daughters, a peculiar other.*, 2011. Anglo-Indian pedestal (1860), Victorian birdcage, shells, feathers, gourds, grape wine, coral fractured charlotte doll heads, steel knitted mesh with glass beads, Kenyan tourist sculptures, and apple gourds. 84 x 84 x 72 inches. Courtesy of the San José Museum of Art.

For the past two decades, Rina Banerjee has scrutinized the processes of cultural exchange and circulation vis-à-vis their material products. Cowrie shells, beads, fabrics, feathers, and assorted gewgaws: vestiges of the colony and its *post-* prefixed progeny are all in attendance in the artist's remarkable sculptures and installations. In affixing these assorted residua of empire into sprawling assemblages, Banerjee investigates the changes that necessarily take place once culture is forced into flux. We discussed the mutability of our shared cultures, the limits of learning in art school, and the clumsiness of trying to fit everything into neat narratives.

—Tausif Noor

### **Tausif Noor**

You and I happen to share a similar trajectory in terms of our being here together. We are both from Bangladesh and immigrated to America at a young age—I was four, and I believe you were also quite young. Growing up, did you have a strong connection to Bangladeshi culture?

### **Rina Banerjee**

I was seven years old when my family and I arrived in Queens, New York; and my parents were the only people I know who identified as Bengali. My father distinguished himself as from “Calcutta proper,” but my mother grew up in Dhaka. She had a few friends, but at that time there wasn't the same density of people in India or South Asia as there is now, which created another layer of isolation—besides the fact that we were not considered white or black here in the United States. In London and Manchester, where I lived before, South Asians surrendered to the identification of black. My family, while not traditional because religion was not closely practiced at home, feared and revered Americans as exotic. In school I had difficulties with accents and cultural difference. I was sent to speech therapy because my Indian-English needed to be adapted to American culture. To white Americans, my lunch smelled of curry, and other South Asians would say that Bengalis smelled “fishy.”

## **TN**

*Make Me a Summary of the World* takes a long look at your career over the past twenty years, including pieces that have been exhibited before alongside more recent work. In preparing for your exhibition, how did you work through your archive? Were you surprised by anything? Did anything feel different from when you had initially made it, or did the show transport you back to a specific time and place?

## **RB**

It was a journey to stand in front of my own work with curator Jodi Throckmorton and realize that I'm able to address our struggles through the work as a connective medium that launches these conversations into crevices and corners. It's realizing the potency, the failings. The mystery is how each part wanders on its own while also helping to page together a different side of the world and you. An essential and transparent image is impossible. To summarize is to destroy the parts. I did not believe that the pieces could form one recognizable body of work. I thought for sure that it was a fragmented and misplaced parcel—a clumsy process of bringing the loose objects to bond and become sculpture. With the culturally specific objects that I choose, there is a danger in creating emotional provocation between wounded colonized spaces unable to heal.



Rina Banerjee, *Friendly Fire signal to me this limb lean without width long as sudden snake made phantom to eye disarm him of his tired heel and spectrum of distaste...*, 2015. Emu egg shell, cowry shell, pigeon feather fans, trim, plastic netting, cotton thread, Himalayan goat skin, glass beads, crystal beads, silk. 46 x 48 x 35 inches. Courtesy of the San José Museum of Art.

## **TN**

You were in art school at Yale in the early 1990s, and teaching and exhibiting at Penn State and in New York in the latter half of the decade. It's around that time that "globalization" became a term of the cultural zeitgeist. How would you characterize the intellectual energy and discourse of that time?

## **RB**

After graduating from the Yale MFA program, I was looking for teaching jobs. I wanted to stay in touch with reading and stay connected to cultural studies as a kind of art education. I took interest in teaching art theory, but my colleagues dismissed it as trendy and a burden to artists' minds. This was very common. In the 1980s, the dominant reaction to multiculturalism was the belief that it was something whining minorities did. But theorists and philosophers such as bell hooks and Gayatri Spivak, Gloria Anzaldúa and Homi Bhabha, Arjun Appadurai, Raymond Williams, Jamaica Kincaid, and Mary Shelley all came to the surface during my artistic journey.

While the subject of migration is popular now, it was harder then to talk about the large flow of people and the transformation of culture. My professors never mentioned artists who were not white males, nor did the program have tenured female faculty at the time. I was very lonely and hungry for more, and welcomed a drastic opening out of this narrow thinking. It was an exciting time to branch out, explore, redefine, and resurrect what had been lost and left behind. I leaned into ideas from barrio artists to understand different types of marginalization, and this came to me openly because I wanted to understand

South Asians' racist attitudes toward other brown minorities. I was often confused for, or inaccurately categorized as, Mexican, Filipina, Tibetan, and so on. South Asians were in crisis over this slippery identification that white Americans had activated around the color brown.



Rina Banerjee, *Take me, take me, take me ... to the Palace of love*, 2003. Plastic, antique Anglo-Indian Bombay dark wood chair, steel and copper framework, floral picks, foam balls, cowrie shells, quilting pins, red colored moss, antique stone globe, glass, synthetic fabric, shells, fake birds. 161.4 x 161.4 x 226.4 inches. Courtesy of the San José Museum of Art.

**TN**

There is this conflation, which I agree is a very particular American tendency, of race and place. It runs counter to a lot of the themes in your work, which deals with forms of exchange: cultural, economic, spatial. Were you reacting against this US-centric notion of identity?

**RB**

I taught these subjects—marginalization, cultural politics, race theory—to my students at Penn State, Bucknell, and Yale; but needless to say, the faculty at these places hated what they perceived as threatening to their authority, and they were simultaneously fearful that artists would have to make “smart art.” The anti-intellectual climate—which the US still fosters—held the artist with contempt. Teaching was a way to cope with the oppressive norms of American identity that excluded other voices. I also think that at this time, in the 1980s and 1990s, there was a deliberate force from dominant white culture to separate black from brown. I saw this as a student at Yale, and I heard this from African American students there as well. I wasn’t going to let that happen. Africa and India have too much to talk about, to share, to split. I gravitated toward textiles and the global history of colonial commerce of these cloths as they flooded Western markets. I remember being in Amsterdam in 1993, looking for opportunities to exhibit my work, and hearing gallerists say, “Oh, that’s not art; it belongs at the tropical museum where cottage-industry crafts from hot countries belong.” I was not offended, but I was saddened by this belief that art can only be made by certain types of people and not others. What kind of stupidity is that?





Rina Banerjee, *In full blooms she made all the world sweat with unnatural flora*, 2006. Ink, acrylic, enamel painting on paper. 29 x 21.5 inches. Courtesy of the San José Museum of Art.

## **TN**

Do you think the remnants of that culture have preempted conversations about your work today? What do you make of contemporary conversations about identity politics and appropriation with respect to art-making?

## **RB**

Appropriation and authenticity were discussed with respect to my work as a graduate student; apparently, to be authentic you couldn't appropriate, or be a "culture vulture." I was meeting all these artists and professors who were so inspired by India and its colors and forms, and artists like Francesco Clemente would make a body of work that came to them seemingly from apparitions. They felt this was legitimate and true and different from, let's say, Paul Gauguin. But, the policing meant I could not look at Chinese or African culture because I was Indian, and, simultaneously, I should not expect anyone to accept that I was *really* Indian because I grew up in New York City. I was told that I should assimilate more and try to fit into the Abstract Expressionist painting community.

*Make Me a Summary of the World*, Rina Banerjee's first retrospective, co-organized by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, and the San José Museum of Art, is on view at the San José Museum of Art in California until October 6.

*Tausif Noor is a writer and contributing editor at Momus.*

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