

149 views | Jan 8, 2019, 08:28pm

Rina Banerjee, 'Make Me A Summary Of The World' At Pennsylvania Academy Of The Fine Arts



Clayton Press Contributor
Arts

"I could never be a Minimalist artist: I am interested in corrupting fine art with everything I wish for. I want adventure and to feel the same sense of command that I imagine an explorer or a scientist would—like a visitor trespassing." Rina Banerjee, *Artforum*, June 2011.

"Banerjee's work embraces the messiness of contradictory meanings."^[1] This is an uncommonly succinct and genuinely respectful description of the artist's work, which is dazzling, breathtaking and confounding. Reality and fantasy, history and mythology partner with each other. Her work is like a cartographic fiction, in which Banerjee schematizes and visualizes an imaginary world based on real world pliable fact. Banerjee is a rarity among artists, who can simultaneously enable and enrich meaning without being intentionally didactic or moralizing. Hers is a poetic activity that creates opportunities for viewers to awaken to alternative meanings in art.



Rina Banerjee. Installation view of *Take me, take me, take me...to the Palace of love*. 2003. COURTESY OF ARTIST AND GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA, PARIS/BRUSSELS. © RINA BANERJEE. IMAGE COURTESY OF PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS, PHILADELPHIA/BARBARA KATUS.

From the outset, The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) has innovated. In December 1805, Charles Willson Peale, the American painter, and a group of Philadelphians ratified the articles of the Academy to cultivate the fine arts and to “gradually unfold, enlighten and invigorate the talents of our Countrymen.” At its inaugural exhibition in 1807, PAFA combined plaster casts, selections from the collection of the artist-inventor Robert Fulton, paintings by Benjamin West and Peale himself, as well as examples of then contemporary British art. In modern terms, the exhibition was a mash-up, a mixture or fusion of disparate elements interacting with each other.

Many Post-War exhibitions by interventionist artists have played in and with museum collections and have used their “artifacts” as readymades or found objects, which could be re-contextualized and manipulated. This mash-up was

intended to create new meanings or, even, reveal hidden ones. In 1970, for example, Andy Warhol experimented with the idea of a collection intervention when he moved some objects from the Rhode Island School of Design (Providence) into the galleries of The Menil Collection (Houston). Changing contexts, changed meanings.



Rina Banerjee. *She drew a premature prick...* 2011. COURTESY OF OTA FINE ARTS. SHANGHAI/SINGAPORE/TOKYO. IMAGE COURTESY OF PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS/ BARBARA KATUS.

Banerjee's current retrospective at PAFA epitomizes how an artist can effectively and seamlessly collaborate and interact with an existing collection. This exhibition is among several in situ collaborations she has done previously, including Sackler Galleries, Smithsonian, Washington DC; Musée Guimet, Paris; Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA and Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, MA. Although Banerjee's works—primarily sculptures, but also paintings, drawings and videos—have been made as standalone works, they have frequently been exhibited in and around the permanent collection installations of museums. These projects created new contexts for the museums' collections, as well as transforming the elements Banerjee found or bought to incorporate into her sculptures.

As Banerjee sees it, although objects may seem to be fixed things, their meanings have real plasticity when objects are reused, relocated and reassembled, transmitting new knowledge. This is a very established Duchampian concept. But, Banerjee takes "objecthood" or "objectness" further. She looks for the essence and mutability of objects. She buys, scavenges, finds "objects that have been released, no longer owned by the owner, they're in some sense like orphans. For me finding the objects means to go into the dark forest. The object I believe remembers the past owner, has in them alive the memory and historization that is created out of individual people."



Rina Banerjee. Installation view of *Make Me a Summary of the World*. 2014. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA, PARIS/ BRUSSELS. © RINA BANERJEE. IMAGE COURTESY OF GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA, PARIS/BRUSSELS.

The works at PAFA are of two types, paintings and sculptures. The paintings—

often mixed media on paper—are like contemporary renderings of 18th and 19th century drawings from the royal courts of India, even to the use of materials (if not ingredients), like multiple colored inks, watercolors and pigments. There is a simultaneous presence of organic and inorganic materials, a natural versus the synthetic, especially in paintings where she has collaged diverse materials.

Banerjee alludes to the importance of multiple cultures and histories saying, “I get a real charge from ancient Tibetan, Himalayan, and Indian art. I am obsessed by the clouds in Chinese and Tibetan paintings and their representation of strange creatures and mystical worlds . . . Both Eastern and Western references are deposited in the work.” But while Banerjee’s Asian heritage is evident, her art is more about a global identity rather than an Asian one.

The sculptures are wall-mounted, floor-based and installation; there is no single motif or composition. Her work is often an amalgamation of myths, histories, places, and times. Each sculpture is situated in and among the museum’s existing collection and even intruding upon the architecture, accentuating dualities, differences and sameness. Like her paintings, Banerjee’s heritage feels more evident than obvious. Her sculptures, assemblages of many non-traditional art media, sometimes feel like symbolic, almost spiritual, offerings.



Rina Banerjee. Installation view. *Her captivity...* 2011 CORNELL FINE ARTS MUSEUM, PURCHASED WITH FUNDS FROM THE MICHEL ROUX ACQUISITIONS FUND, 2016.20. IMAGE COURTESY OF PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS/ BARBARA KATUS.

Banerjee's wall-mounted sculptures sprout from the wall like tendrils and vines, reaching into the galleries. The artist comments, these vines are "Like the tree of life, it delivers fruit, as well as poison." They are also like exuberant, yet static, explosions of all manner of objects. *She drew a premature prick . . .* (2011) is a concoction of a female mannequin form, amber bottles, epoxy American buffalo horns, steel arm brace, Banarasi Indian wedding sari trim (silver, silk), Victorian replica doll head, Indian jewelry (22 Kt gold-plated), glass magnifying dome, replica deer eye (glass), wooden elbow bangles (Congo), and wood. As she explains, "The materials and objects I choose often have archaic, nostalgic, romantic, and sentimental baggage attached to them." *Viola, from New Orleans-ah...* (2017) extends from the second-floor gallery to the atrium's brilliantly painted vaulted ceiling, seemingly dimensionless like the heavens. This work alone incorporates all of the major themes in Banerjee's work: the lasting effects of colonialism and its relationship to globalization; immigration and identity; gender and sexuality; and the global causes and impacts of climate change. It is not one thing.

Rachel Kent, Senior Curator, MCA Australia, wrote, “Excess is reflected in Banerjee’s art works and their extended titles, which often read like poems.” As the catalog describes it, “an important part of Banerjee’s practice [is] to use idiosyncratic language patterns in her titles. In addition, the artist carefully crafts the language used in her media lists.” Banerjee’s titles are “abundant,” sumptuously rich and dreamy. Often more than 50 words long, with idiosyncratic spellings, Banerjee’s titles amplify her work. The titles lead the viewer, revealing the artist’s intention lyrically.



Rina Banerjee. Installation view of *Viola, from New Orleans-ah...* 2017 © RINA BANERJEE. IMAGE COURTESY OF PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS, PHILADELPHIA/BARBARA KATUS.

The physical context of *Make me a summary of the world* is the Furness and

Hewitt Historic Landmark Building (1876), which combines the architects' whimsical tendencies with Moorish, Victorian and Gothic architectural details. PAFA's exterior combines rusticated brownstone, sandstone, polished pink granite, red pressed brick, and purplish terra cotta. The galleries' interior walls are rich, sumptuous hues of plum, ochre, sand and olive. It is almost as if it was purpose-built for this exhibition. *Make me a summary of the world...*, a 2014 sculpture that lends its title to the exhibition does not look out of place or out of context.

Banerjee's work is fresh, original and exhilarating. It does not look like mainstream contemporary art that fits with "white cube" gallery norms, like Abstract Expressionism or Minimalism. The artist Santa Barraza, Banerjee's mentor at Penn State, told her "that the places that hold power can only see you if you make things that look like what they already know." Banerjee knows how to walk that fine line between the familiar and the new, challenging us to learn more about the world.

[1] Alpesh Kantilal Patel, 2015.

Rina Banerjee: Make Me a Summary of the World at Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia (through March 31, 2019.)

- San José Museum of Art, San José, CA (May 16, 2019 – October 6, 2019)
- Fowler Museum at University of California, Los Angeles (December 8, 2019 - May 31, 2020)
- Frist Art Museum, Nashville, TN (July 24 - October 25, 2020)
- Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, NC (February 18 - July 11, 2021)