

TAKE
SCULPTURE

Conversation with Rina Banerjee

Hervé Mikaeloff



Take me, take me, take me...to the Palace of Love, Plastic, antique Anglo-Indian Bombay dark wood chair, steel and copper framework, floral picks, foam balls, cowrie shells, quilting pins, red-coloured moss, antique stone globe, glass, synthetic fabric, shells, fake birds, 161.4 x 161.4 x 226.4 inch, 2003. Image courtesy: Gallery Espace



Rina Banerjee is an artist based in Manhattan, after having moved there at the age of seven. Banerjee's experience growing up in urban sites and in communities of mixed cultural/racial locations provides content in her work. She says her work explores "specific colonial moments that reinvent place and identity as complex Diaspora experiences." Trained as a polymer engineer, she obtained a master of Fine Arts degree at the Yale University in 1995. Since coming into prominence through her inclusion in the Whitney Biennial in 2000 and 2005 and 'Greater New York Show' at PS1 Moma she has to her credit 13 solo shows across the world.



Hervé Mikaeloff Independent Art Consultant and Curator, Hervé Mikaeloff currently advises and curates for the LVMH group, most particularly for Louis Vuitton. In 1991, the native Frenchman graduated from l'École du Louvre in Paris and then worked for two years at La Fondation Cartier for Contemporary Art as assistant director. He later spent three years developing his career as deputy director at the renowned Parisian art gallery Emmanuel Perrotin. His first work as curator began at the Caisse des dépôts Art Collection. He was in charge of the collection and exhibition program which included many shows in France, Portugal, USA, Brazil and Japan. Hervé Mikaeloff has received 'les insignes de Chevalier des Arts et Lettres' by the Ministère de la Culture.



"From the jungle in lore of the Colonial frontier eagereexplores compelled by fantasy and fortune savoured oral texts, imagined more held the foreign captive as part of an untidy garden". Steel, dancing bells, fabric, coconut shell, plastic fruit netting, floral picks, light bulb, Hindu ceremony thread, glass beads, wire, 284.4 x 111.7 x 61 centimetres, 2009.

Hervé Mikaeloff (HM):

How did you start your career as an artist?

Rina Banerjee (RB):

Being a professional artist while being Indian in the United States was unimaginable – growing up in New York City especially because it was socially restricted.

There is an expression here in the United States (having been a slave nation) that you can be guilty of 'driving while black' and pulled off the road to be given a ticket for no other reason. This expression is used to demonstrate the pervasive nature of injustice; inequities driven by racial profiling that restrict your movements, your everyday functions that can make you invisible and simultaneously conspicuous. In America, Asians are the obedient minorities that do not hold real minority status.

Here, Indians as well as other Asians were identified as an unimaginative community, lacking people skills and leadership skills. Stereotypically, Asians are rigid, conservative, hierarchical, docile and tradition bound, and naturally did not belong to the fine arts club.

America takes pride in its individualism, an identity that sets itself apart from Europeans and was the hallmark of its brave new world. I think Americans feel they are gutsy and challenge the norms – like their heroes and heroines in John Wayne movies and characters such as Scarlet in *Gone with the Wind*. Identities here are mapped out as ethno-racial by employers, school officials and government consensus bureaus, and here heritage is a colour coded biological heritage which

could also identify your cultural heritage. Occupations also are customised to solicit an ethno-racial group. Asians are suited for creating handicrafts, driving taxis, and perhaps being science professors.

Historical precedence demonstrated that the Western world dominates this very area of critical thinking and the genius club of artists well revered in the museums showed empirical proof of this. During this time South Asian art was shown in US museums in dark basements along with art and artefacts from Chinese, African and Oceanic people. These 'others' just didn't graduate from the ancient world into the modern/contemporary – they were left behind.

Asians are very good as followers, yes this is their calling. Their natural disposition makes them suitable for professions in risk free careers. These are the arguments and explanations counselled to me by educators in New York. I came to New York City in 1970 as a seven year old child, back when the first wave of South Asians arrived as engineers, doctors and other professionals. I was always the one non-white student in the classroom, sometimes in the whole school. I can't help but think of myself as Indian and simultaneously as coloured.

My father, a civil engineer, forbade me to study anything else other than science...to be educated to become a computer engineer or a doctor was the dream. I studied polymer engineering and worked a couple years as a consultant in research, and then quit. The affirmative action movement which promoted the education of

disadvantaged communities did not include me. Asians where not targeted as part of those communities. I joined Yale School of Art for graduate studies at a time when only two out of 25 students accepted were non-white: one Asian and one of African descent. I heard that every 5-10 years there would be a South Asian.

It was here at Yale that I found and explored what my subject matter would be for rest of my life. During this time in the 1980s and 1990s, multiculturalism debates opened new ways to see art production as intertwined with visual, cultural and identity politics. The United States had just accepted bussing of minorities into predominately white upper-middle schools when I was in high school and curriculums that were gender specific had been broken.

I remember my father walked up to my middle school principal and said "I did not bring my daughter to the States to do this, and she will not take Home Economics (cooking class)



"A lady of commerce- Wooden , her domain is worldwide denies no one her transparent beauty, her eager sounds, her infinite and clamorous land and river; ocean and island' earth and sky ...all contained bottled for delivery to an open hole a commerce so large her arms stretched wide and with her sulfurous halo a ring of glass swallowed it all, Doll hands, wooden chinese doll, chandelier, wooden vessels, 2012. Photo credit: Simon Chantasisirivisal.



Lure of Place, Nine globes from the geography class, 230 pieces of scientific glassware from chemistry class, 12 American classroom chairs, garden hose zip ties, lights, green bamboo and tea ceremony linen garden mosquito net vintage post war Japan, Installation view at Echigo-Tsumari Triennial, Hatchi.

while the boys take Mechanical Drawing. I was admitted to this drawing class the next week. I was overjoyed by this drawing class which taught the drawing language to visualize objects in 3D. It was very hard being hated by the boys in the class and my liberal free thinking teacher had higher expectations for me than others. Sculpture, architecture, etc. were defined as subjects for boys.

My family was very confident of their Bengali ancestry and considered themselves more than competent in fine art, literature and theatre. Given the mood of multiculturalism in the US and the subsequent backlash, a critique of mainstream artists and collectors as 'culture vultures' produced the tumultuous decade of the 1990s. I remember reading Edward Said's book *Orientalism* just before entering the Yale graduate program. Significantly impacted by his books, my embrace of the fine arts was because I found it a significant place where visual language could redirect and transform a whole society.

HM: What is your relationship with art, craft, and know-how?

RB: I am curious about the things that are difficult to embrace as art, as craft, and about what is the criterion for good taste. Class/culture/gender direct our value system what is quality and what is in bad taste is deciphered by this lens. I think being aware of the whole cottage industry way of making handicrafts and the subsequent abundance of consumer objects that flood stores in New York City with the label 'made in India' is remarkable. I always feel a pang of identity ring in my head that says, "This is where you are from too." I am made in India. Rough-cut, beaten-up, and unabashedly not-white, there exists a body of recognition, and perhaps a beauty that is forced out of fewer resources, but is genuine.

As you see from my works I am also really seduced by fashion and textiles. The cloth/skin during Indian independence was a pivotal symbol of bondage and expression (transformation of body). Clothing, like skin is a way of identification. When I get dressed I think should I wear my Indian clothes or American clothes? Dress my age, or younger? Should I dress more like a man, or more feminine? These are facets of the same stone. I think it's interesting with Obama's presidency that issues that would disqualify him from office are accusations of him being foreign. I think it's interesting that women who are raped are still being questioned by society about what she is wearing that day, and I think it's interesting that your possessions define your communicated class, but your behaviour, education, and ethics, can disqualify you.

I love that work by Salvador Dali – *Lobster Telephone*, 1936. It all swings into humour when two worlds collide and forms congeal into new meaning. Appropriation of one's own culture when transported and the culture of one's residence (the adopted culture) – when these disparate things collide you can have new experience, a sensation that shifts all that you saw before toward a heightened complexity that reveals some truth about our human nature.

I like the awkward handicraft of a low-tech building: the slowing down of what you think when you are not holding a power tool – you see something that is magnetic but is not really beautiful. This happens to an object when it has been re-contextualized as it is collaged or associated with others that are sometimes ill-suited as partners. I am enamoured by collections that ordinary people have in their living rooms that express their taste...so often it's about showing who they want to be as if they haven't yet grown up... the wondrous quantity of objects that strive to prove they are sophisticated, travelled, adventurous, knowledgeable, interesting, and even naughty. This stretch is an armchair person's way of expressing their cultural identity while carving out their individualism, a formidable task of battling opposites. There is a duality and conflict that occurs when things do not fit together, almost falling apart at the seams, but there also exists a hint or spark that convinces you that it's not that at all – but rather contains a new meaning...well, that's always part magic.