



Rina Banerjee

Make Me a Summary of the World

Ingram Gallery

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Bacteria (detail), 2012. Acrylic on watercolor paper, 30 x 22 in. Courtesy of Ota Fine Arts, Shanghai/Singapore/Tokyo.
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Rina Banerjee explores the idea that in the current social imaginary, characteristics of society that were once thought to anchor identity—languages, political and economic ideologies, nationality, race, and sexuality—limit the ways individuals can define themselves or be defined by others. While the resulting ambiguity may seem to be a sign of cultural disarray, works in this exhibition offer the tantalizing possibility of a more inclusive and open-ended future.

Reflecting the interconnected nature of the global marketplace, Banerjee's works incorporate things like cowrie shells, Chinese umbrellas, Pyrex tubes, glass beads, alligator heads, and epoxy buffalo horn replicas. Their strong colors, patterns, and frequent allusions to South Asian cultures recall her heritage while critiquing the notion of the exotic “other” that is the legacy of colonial trade and exploitation, in India and around the world. Banerjee was born in Kolkata in 1963, and in 1968 moved with her family to England after her father, a civil engineer, was recruited to work there by a multinational company. In 1970, her father accepted a new position in New York City, and the family moved again. In the Queens neighborhood where she grew up, Banerjee observed firsthand the dynamic interaction and creative adaptations occurring within immigrant communities.

While containing echoes of the displacement that resulted from India's history of colonialism, independence, partition, and religious nationalism, her works also relate to diasporas worldwide. They raise a question: when people are uprooted from their place of origin, how do they cultivate a new identity that goes beyond the cultural legacy that has been left behind? A dilemma for any migrant, this question is particularly acute for

the transient artist. Banerjee notes: “In Western art, to explore something you cannot identify with is a kind of dishonesty, because authenticity is a compass . . . [but] authenticity does not exist for the diaspora.”¹

The story of an authenticity that has been stolen, shattered, or sacrificed is perhaps most painfully evident with regard to the African diaspora, at least in the United States, with its deep systemic racism. But it occurs in the history of colonialism worldwide, particularly in lands of the Global South like India, where from the seventeenth century through 1947, the British imposed language and social structures, seeking to suppress the shared sense of national identity. But authenticity has a way of morphing; the history of humanity is of movement, migration, and assimilation. Cultural purity is rarely absolute—language, cuisine, music, and other such expressions have typically absorbed influences from the outside, sometimes by force or necessity, but always as a creative hybridization of influences. By embracing this porosity, Banerjee’s works move authenticity from being a measure of geography, history, and genetics to being an encapsulation of human fluidity. This recalibration affirms the role of displaced individuals in redefining contemporary society.

Make Me a Summary of the World presents a baroque amalgamation of ideas and experiences that are at times complicated, grotesque, and beautiful. For Banerjee, it is in the ecstatic confluence of materials that a transcendent authenticity of displacement can be truly revealed.

Note

1. Interview with the artist, *FWD Media*, February 29, 2016. Quoted in *Rina Banerjee: Make Me a Summary of the World*, edited by Jodi Throckmorton (exhibition catalogue, co-published by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the San José Museum of Art, 2018), 70.

About the artist

Born in Kolkata, India, in 1963, Banerjee moved with her family to England in 1968 after her father, a civil engineer, was recruited to work there by a multinational company. The family moved again in 1970 when her father accepted a position in New York City. After starting her professional life as a polymer research chemist, Banerjee realized that her real passion was for art. Since receiving her MFA from Yale University in 1995, Banerjee has exhibited in museums, galleries, and biennials internationally. Her work is in the collections of the Centre Georges Pompidou, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the San José Museum of Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, among others.

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