

PYAARI



PYAARI AZAADI
KAMALA'S INHERITENCE, 2020
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

IN CONVERSATION WITH MEENA HASAN

AZAADI*

I have known the veritable force that is the artist, organizer, curator, activist, and feminist Pyaari Azaadi for close to fifteen years. I, like countless other South Asian women artists, would not be where I am without her steadfast, relentless work organizing to build visibility and dialogue around the complexity of our collective output. Just a few of Pyaari's vital achievements include: the founding of the South Asian Women's Creative Collective 26 years ago; serving as director of public events and projects at the Queens Museum, conceiving of the powerful trio of inaugural exhibitions at the Ford Foundation Gallery; catalyzing a #MeToo protest at the Met Breuer bringing to light the predatory violence of the Indian photographer Raghubir Singh; and putting on a groundbreaking museum survey of her works with curator Anuradha Vikram, *Flower Headed Children*, at Craft Contemporary in Los Angeles, CA in 2022.

Pyaari's deeply felt artworks span multiple mediums and are as exuberant as her organizing practice, moving on and off the wall and embodying a powerful vision of a feminist beauty catalyzed through an abundance of color and form. She adeptly navigates a variety of languages, from the care for material affected by sensitive, emphatic touch to the grandeur of feminist narratives rooted in South Asian

traditions, and the declarative aesthetics of mass media visualizations. Recently, Pyaari has been hosting gatherings of South Asian woman at her studio, aptly named the Xenana, adorned with marigold garlands and the sweet scent of herbal remedies. It has been a pleasure to come together, meet new people and celebrate Pyaari's recent work. The following is a selection from our conversations in this space.

* Artist formerly known as Jaishri Abichandani

MEENA HASAN

I appreciate the way that your work builds consciousness and I admire how you engage activism in your practice. Can you share some of the core issues that drive your making?

PYAARI AZAADI

My work functions in opposition to organized religion, white supremacist patriarchal capitalism and Brahmanical Patriarchal Fascism. It is rooted in social justice politics that have grown out of my experiences as an immigrant feminist educated in public universities from a blue collar, working class background. I find it hard not to focus on the urgency of the moment. Overwhelming concerns like the climate catastrophe, the threat to

American and Indian democracies especially by organized and weaponized religious right wingers, racial and caste-based equality, the autonomy of trans and cis women's bodies are my obsessions. Whether through sculpture or portraits of feminists actively working towards social change or a daily dialogue on social media, I find it imperative to use my voice to bring visibility to the issues in direct ways.

MEENA HASAN

Has there ever been a reading of your work that surprised you?

PYAARI AZAADI

Yes, recently an Indian Muslim friend confided that she had to prepare herself before she could encounter my sculptures because she had been raised to think of Hindu icons as evil. She had to

bypass her conditioning to be able to enter the work. That was so real and understandable. Different parts of the practice resonate for different people.



PYAARI AZAADI
TEEN DEVIYAN (3 GODDESSES), 2022
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

MEENA HASAN

I see Hindu mythology as shaped by ideas of transformation and mutability, which, to me, implies an openness, but I'm realizing that there are boundaries to that openness...

PYAARI AZAADI

You don't know what the line is, right? There are a few conflicting things that go against each other. One is the fact that the Vedas were written a thousand years ago and they actually prescribe the form of each deity. If you want a deity to be recognized as a particular god, there are signifiers of the things they hold. There is a formal codification of compositions, the proportions of the body and postures, both in painting and sculpture when it comes to deities. But then there's also the ritual practice that includes rendering the goddess in many forms, even in abstract forms, through

rangolis on the floor which are based on sacred diagrams. When I was growing up there was a magazine called *Femina*, and in every issue there was reproducible art. They would have patterns you could follow to make a goddess out of cut paper. All around the country women were using those instructions to construct the goddess. There's that kind of making which is ritualistic, but it's never elevated to being in a temple and being permanent. Those idols are always carved by men and codified by the Veda's.

MEENA HASAN

You have shown in many esteemed museums and galleries in the past, but I'm curious if there is a particular context that would serve as an ideal platform for your aesthetic voice?

PYAARI AZAADI

I am really interested in addressing the public, and I have a public sculpture in mind of the Dalit author Yashica Dat seated on a canopied decorative Indian swing with space on either side of her, for the public to sit. There, you can scan in a barcode that would lead to listening to her reading from her biography and from texts by other radical feminists, subaltern organizers. The sculpture would be placed on a tiered pedestal. Built into the stairs it would include a seed bank, food pantry, book library, so people could come and exchange resources, knowledge, and information, and activate the sculpture by actually sitting in it and swinging. Something that brings together the idea of the playground with the monument and through that invitation brings you into a radical feminist space. That's the dream sculpture.

Here are spaces where I think it would be ideal, across from the Gandhi statue in Union Square Park, or in Flushing Meadows Corona Park, or across from Grand Army Plaza in Prospect Park.

An antidote to the war memorial is this playful invitation to feminist rest and resistance. Hrag Vartanian mentioned that he would like to see it in Edison, NJ. That would be amazing, to actually place it within conservative Indian communities as a provocation and invitation. My practice is this space of resistance of white supremacist and Brahminical patriarchy, as well as joy, and community, and bringing all of those things together in ways that are at once critical and inviting.

Part of my caste privilege and diaspora privilege is that I get to speak about these things without the kind of backlash that the Dalit feminists face every day for saying those things. For the most part, I'm not even saying my own words, I'm amplifying their messages, and the kind of violence they're faced with for just existing is something I never have to think about. So I feel like it is incumbent upon me to speak, because I have that freedom and privilege and safety to do so.

MEENA HASAN

You are relentlessly courageous; maintaining energy and motivation must be a challenge. I can see that beauty and pleasure feed and further the work. Do you consider beauty when making?

PYAARI AZAADI

It's so crucial. I always felt a little cautious or ambivalent about the fact that I want the works to be beautiful in this exuberant, decorative, embellished, adorned way. Then I listened to Robin Wall Kimmerer, the author of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, who talks about how there is so much restorative and healing beauty in nature, and how important beauty is as a healing, generative space. Growing up in India, there was enough poverty and filth and ugliness along with the beauty, that I don't feel

MEENA HASAN

Beauty as an access point. The way you do it is particular, where everything is reflective. There's a protective quality, and your beauty insists on being materially and physically present. I'm curious about how you think about nature in the work?

the need to create works that replicate that. The works that I want to make, I want them to evoke bodily, visceral joy and emotive response. If the subject matter, content, and intention is really difficult and challenging to the viewer, then beauty and humor become the tools to disarm the viewer and invite them into the dialogue. There's a gentleness and lovingness to that approach that I prefer to the shock of something horrific.



PYAARI AZAADI IN THE STUDIO, BROOKLYN, NY, COURTESY OF ANDRES SMITS

PYAARI AZAADI

The way the light bounces off the iridescent surface is a very intentional move because it comes from divine space. Temples, churches, and mosques; light is divine in those spaces. whether it's through the

gold or the windows or whatever. That is why they all have this iridescent surface, for the light to shine back into your eyes the way they do in that sacred space.

MEENA HASAN

The sacred in a person-made space.

PYAARI AZAADI

Yes, which is really different than nature. Because all those spaces are actually trying to evoke the natural awe that the Yoniverse holds. Beyond all organized religions is a human being on a really incredible planet. I think a lot also about the fact that the materials I use are artificial materials. They're not natural or traditional materials, they mimic them. It's a total contradiction because

here I am talking about climate change and climate catastrophe and I'm doing it through really toxic, man-made, artificial materials. But, the truth is that, this fucking shit is gonna last. And it is of this moment and this time, there's such a contemporaneity to these materials, they did not exist before. And the whole world is coated with fine plastic.

MEENA HASAN

It's not about going back or resisting progress.

PYAARI AZAADI

It's talking about today and it's talking about tomorrow and how our bodies are these functioning machines that have absorbed plastics and chemicals. We are no longer natural human beings. That's the place that I've come to with the

dichotomy of talking about nature and precarity in our human existence, by using these fucking crazy-ass materials. Those are the contradictions that we cannot exist without in our contemporary society.

MEENA HASAN

I think artists in our nature build and feed off of contradiction, as a value. You also mentioned humor. I'm curious about how you allow humor in?

PYAARI AZAADI

Humor becomes a way to almost allow the darkness to be in the work or in the space without judging it. Or it becomes the tool that diffuses the charge in the question that's being asked. I think of Hasan Minhaj, for example, and the amazing ways in which he uses humor to communicate about social justice issues. The whole idea of Rasa Theory that I use in my work, posits that all artwork is a psychic, emotive communication between the

creator and the viewer which can be enhanced by formal tools. The emotive aspect of the work is so important to it. Joy, beauty, the feeling of awe engendered by beauty and humor, I can use all of these an artist to evoke that response. But it's never just humor, never got to be a one liner. It has to be a very complicated narrative that's diffused by humor.

MEENA HASAN

The humor feels strong and clear, an amplification. There's no way not to smile when looking at these works. They feel so animated, I could see you working in video someday, with an animator. The videos you make on your instagram are incredible!

PYAARI AZAADI

I use the medium of the web to make them do things they can only do on the web. I love that they have their own life in a virtual way that they don't in real life. It would be amazing to work with animators who could do more than make them just sing, to make them move. You know, truth be told,

my long held secret dream is to be like Niki de Saint Phalle and find some place in the country where I can just make giant sculptures that live in the land, and work with nature and trees. Like Angkor Wat, the way the trees grow out of the temples, and how magical that is.



PYAARI AZAADI
MOTHER OF KAILASH (DETAIL), 2022
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

