

A COFFEE WITH



JAISHRI ABICHANDANI



Portrait of Jaishri Abichandani
© Josh Steinbauer

Jaishri Abichandani, *Blue Moon Goddess*, 2019
© Jaishri Abichandani



Jaishri Abichandani, *The Alchemist (For Anantha)*, 2021
© Jaishri Abichandani

a coffee with

T.V.: mention of sexual assault in the eighth question (p. 32)

Bold, unapologetic, sensual, and subversive: such is the captivating work of Jaishri Abichandani, which follows traditional Indian aesthetics and iconography yet takes a life of its own. In her art, Abichandani gives birth, quite literally, to a renewed pantheon, hybrid, and dramatic, morphing her models into mythical beings with earthly qualities. An artist, curator, and cultural producer, she is—like her work—located at the intersection of many worlds. Born and raised in India, she emigrated to New York in the 1980s, where she began her career as a photographer before turning to painting and sculpture. She has always worked with and for the South Asian American community, but also with many other—often overlapping—social groups, including feminists, queer, and people of color.

The way you blend traditional Hindu iconography with current social and political issues is unprecedented. Where does your approach come from?

I grew up in a small town in India, near the Hindu and Buddhist caves of Ajanta and Ellora, which are thousands of years old. Because of that, my relationship to art has always been centered around the sacred. Walking into religious spaces in India is a whole immersive experience, and in a way, I feel compelled to distill that into my work. It's a part of who I am; I may have lived in the U.S. for 40 years, but that doesn't change the impact that those first 15 years had on me. In India, aesthetics are completely integrated into all aspects of society. There is a strong impulse to decorate things, a maximalist approach to beauty that creates a visual cacophony.

There's an aesthetic theory called *Rasa* that has dictated artistic production in India for thousands of years—*Rasa* being the emotive essence of what

the artist makes. In the West, theater can be divided between tragedy and comedy, depending on its emotion. The same goes for all arts in India, where the emotional impact of the creation on the audience is understood as crucial to its success. When I make something, I think about how to maximize that impact so that it can become a bodily experience as much as an intellectual exercise. I want the viewer to feel compelled to touch the work.

In *Rasa* theory, all colors are associated with different emotions. So, when I did my solo show in L.A. in 2022, I worked with the space to integrate the sculptures into the architecture, and thought about the artworks, their emotions, and how to amplify these through color and placement. That is, how to create something that extends the emotive value of the work.

Your art often reinterprets religious scenes, particularly Hindu ones. Is there a reason for that?

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First and foremost, my work is a critique of Hinduism. Coming from India, I was very proud of being Hindu. But, as time went on, I understood how misogynistic, oppressive, and violent Hinduism can be on a daily basis, so I chose to abdicate this religion. For me, there was no trying to resolve it. But I remain tied to its visual language, to communicate South-Asian lived experiences in the world. I use Hindu iconography to speak about contemporary issues of social justice, from the climate crisis to feminism and queer politics.

When I look at my *Dalit* [outcast] feminist friends, none of them are trying to reform Hinduism. They're simply leaving it far behind them, because it kills them every day. We often say, "if you want to ask about America, ask a Black woman." So, if you want to ask about India, ask a *Dalit* woman. I take my cues from my *Dalit* feminist friends and let them lead me into the kind of support that I should be providing. My work is a form of allyship that upholds, amplifies, and celebrates the voices of my brilliant peers. I feel like I have the privilege of being able to do that here, in the U.S., where I'm safe enough to do so.

Caste is an important topic in your practice. Can you tell us more about this influence?

I'm interested in caste within the spectrum of social justice issues to which I'm committed. For example, my series *Portraits of South Asian American Feminists* includes eight paintings of *Dalit* feminists, but also other members of the South Asian diaspora, including atheists, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, and Sikhs, all of whom are working on a variety of socio-political issues. My primary resistance is to White, supremacist, and patriarchal capitalism, as well as

to Hindu fundamentalism, which is as dangerous for religious minorities as it is for *Dalits*.

I approach caste the way I do with other social justice issues: I make alliances with people of color who have the same interest in social change and justice as myself. My work addresses local concerns as much as international ones, including police brutality and trans rights in the U.S.

Since Isabel Wilkerson wrote her book [*Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*], a lot more people outside of India have become interested in understanding the caste system. Many non-Indians have engaged with Hinduism through practices like yoga, without realizing that there's violence and caste apartheid being executed in the name of this religion.

There are two incredible books on the issue of caste; one is by my friend Yashica Dutt, titled *Coming Out as Dalit*, and it is a powerful first-hand account of her experience growing up in India as a *Dalit* person. The second one, *The Trauma of Caste* by Thenmozhi Soundararajan, just came out, and I strongly recommend it.

It's important to remember that caste exists outside of India too. It's in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal... A lot of second- and third-generation South Asian Americans are ignorant about it, because their parents have taught them to practice the religion without thinking critically about this system. Meanwhile, the people who have suffered from this discrimination haven't had the resources to share their experiences until now. The powerful *Dalit* organization Equality Labs offers workshops on how to unlearn caste supremacy.





View of the exhibition "Jaishri Abichandani: Flower-Headed Children"
Craft Contemporary, Los Angeles (U.S.), 2022
© Jaishri Abichandani



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Jaishri Abichandani, *Two Boys in Saris*, 2019
© Jaishri Abichandani

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You have a strong focus on South Asian visual culture and communities, but also explore outside of those realms. What is your thought process behind the combination of different traditions?

I've lived in New York for almost 40 years now. I'm influenced by the diverse communities that live here, and all my friends who are Black, Latinx, Asian... And because my work is very handmade, I explore other craft and folk traditions from around the world and obsess over sculpted forms, particularly that of female sacred figures. I'm pulling from everywhere, and letting all of these practices be translated through my hand, with my South Asian lens.

For example, I spent months looking at Baulé reliquary sculptures from West Africa for the *Shrine to the Abortion Goddess*. I then put so much South Asian stuff into the piece that it became both South Asian and West African, and, ultimately, its own thing. The last sculpture that I made, *The Secrets of the Yoniverse*, was based on a Mexican tree of life, but it had elements taken from East Asian sculpture and painting, while some of the figures were dark enough that they could be read as Black. For me, this approach is true to the way in which we live: there's so little 'purity' left, hybridity is everywhere. My work reflects that lived experience.

Feminism and intersectionality are at the core of your artistic practice, but also of your everyday life. How do you see the relationship between these two spheres?

I think that I was a feminist before I was an artist. I must have been seven years old when my mom first told me what feminism was. It just made so much sense to me; it gave me the knowledge to fight for myself and

everybody else for the rest of my life. I knew I wanted to be an artist when I was very young, but it just took a really long time for me to get where I am now. As an immigrant, choosing art as a professional career was a very risky proposition, but I felt like I had to try. I worked full-time as a high school teacher, as a caseworker for kids in foster care, in organizing positions for the Census for Asian Americans and the Queens Museum, along with having founded the South Asian Women's Creative Collective. Becoming and existing as an artist remains a struggle. Curating has been a way to sustain my practice, working with institutions like the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, the Asia Society, and the Ford Foundation Gallery. There is no separation between my practice and my politics.

There is a freedom about the body in your work, something that is malleable and fluid. What draws you to that topic in particular?

The female body has traditionally been rendered by male sculptors, but I'm interested in the things they don't understand: our internal landscapes and physical states as women. These are things that you see in the work of female artists like Louise Bourgeois, Nikki de Saint Phalle, or Marisol Escobar, female sculptors that have a particular way of understanding and representing what their embodied experience is.

When I was making my first 108 sculptures for *Before Kali*, I really explored things that I knew male sculptors would not understand—whether it was a female form with a fish head and bleeding lava, or a woman with a pregnant belly being choked by an umbilical cord. I gave form to all of these emotional states and physical ways of being that only women know,

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and I found a space of liberation and joy in doing so.

Something unique about your work is the multiple media that you use, sometimes including elements like jewelry or mirrors. How did you develop this practice?

I began making sculptures out of found or reused objects. The first works I made were cameras turned into *retablos* or miniature shrines, by opening their back and turning them into small altars. The second were *lingams* [phallic representations of the god Shiva] made out of sex toys and whips—if we are to worship penises, let's make it literal.

Then, I discovered the figurines of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa in Pakistan, which are around four thousand years old. I felt an ancestral pull when I saw them, because my family hails from that region. I fell so deeply in love with them that I started recreating them, making 108 of them, and that's how I taught myself to sculpt. I started with unfired clay, until two years later the sculptor Sheila Pepe suggested that I work with epoxy. Somewhere along the way I found polymer clay, which can be baked in a domestic oven. After this first phase of experimentation, I'm now in a place where I know exactly what each of these material does, and can use and combine all three.

Do you have any interest in exhibiting your work in India?

In 2017, when I went public about my rape by photographer Raghubir Singh, I pretty much got blacklisted within the Indian art world. So I've kind of burned all bridges in India, where my rapist continues to be celebrated. The truth is that my art addresses everyone in India without needing to be physically there.

The longer this work exists, the longer this dialogue will continue to happen. Under the current government, I doubt I would ever be able to safely show this work with its critique remaining intact—it would either be co-opted or destroyed.

What is your personal opinion on the display of Indian art in Western institutions?

I say: send those deities back to be worshiped again. Those aren't sculptures for Hindus, they're literally deities. And, if they were at home, worshippers would be walking around them, touching them. We saw this engagement in December 2021, when a looted Nepalese sculpture kept by the Dallas Museum of Art was returned to its home country. The way in which the local community celebrated the return was really powerful. Hinduism may be terrible, but let Hindus have their deities back. They don't belong to anyone else but them.

The Brooklyn Museum recently reopened their Indian art galleries, and I was shocked at my response when I visited them. I cried my eyes out. There was a sacred figure exhibited with its feet missing, clearly a sign that it had been cut off from a temple and likely stolen. That felt like a violation.

At the same time, I got to discover the Pakistanese figurines from Harappa and Mohenjo Daro here, in the U.S. I wouldn't have been able to do so otherwise. So I don't know what the answers are.





Jaishri Abichandani, *Myself, Daughter of Indira, Granddaughter of Ganga*, 2021
© Jaishri Abichandani

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You have previously worked within art institutions. How has this experience impacted your practice, if at all?

I worked at the Queens Museum as director of public events and projects from 2003 to 2006, at the same time as Tom Finkelpearl got hired to run it. He had a whole vision for the museum to engage with local communities, and I was the first person hired to do that. The trajectory that the museum went on for a decade was incredible and unprecedented. I was really proud to be a part of that, even if it had its limitations—as positions of power have always remained in the hands of White people at the Queens Museum, when it

is the work of people of color that got the museum where it is today.

There are just a handful of people of color, queer, and folks on the margins who are really doing the work to shift power in the museum context, and it's exhausting. We face a lot of backlash, as none of the professionals already in positions at the top want that work to be done, as it would require them to relinquish their power. We come into institutions with lots of fanfare but, over time, that acclaim turns into hostility. Yet, when we get it right, we make magic, and it's such perfection that keeps us going, in the hopes of being able to do that again.

Louise Deglin

Jaishri Abichandani
jaishriabichandani.net
Instagram | jaishri.abichandani