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The Long Game of Care Work: Jaishri Abichandani Interviewed by Melissa Joseph

A feminist artist fighting all the fights all the time.

Mar 15, 2022

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Installation view of *Jaishri Abichandani: Flower-Headed Children*, 2022. Photo by Josh Schaedel. Courtesy of Craft Contemporary.

I don't remember exactly how or when I first heard about Jaishri Abichandani, but looking back there isn't a time when she wasn't in the forefront of my mind. She is one of my heroes, and it is on her shoulders that I (and many others) stand as a South Asian womxn artist. Until recently much of her labor and the groundwork she laid for our community was underrecognized, yet she and her work are as insistent today as they were twenty-five years ago. I believe history will correct this oversight in time, but in the present moment I am particularly honored to shine some much-deserved light on Jaishri's powerful, incisive practice. Her first comprehensive museum survey, *Flower-Headed Children*, is currently on view at Craft Contemporary in Los Angeles.

-Melissa Joseph

Melissa Joseph

I think of you as the "Padrina" of South Asian artists and curators. I have some ideas why, which are based on your expansive and generous spirit, but what's your perspective?

Jaishri Abichandani

I think it was a kind of natural progression, not something that I set out to do. That's what being in community has always been for me. When I started out there was an artist named Vijay Kumar who connected many South Asian artists. In 1997, I started the South Asian Womxn's Creative Collective (SAWCC), in a way because I was a connector. I just really believe that we're stronger when we have a collective voice.

MJ

I heard you say that after many years of curating other people's work, you are finally focusing on your own practice. Can you speak a little about this?

JA

In the time that I've been doing this work, the art world has shifted to a certain extent. I don't need to curate in the ways that I used to because there are all these other amazing WOC curators doing great work. It's a



shift that I'm making very deliberately now. I got a huge platform and visibility for my curatorial work. I got to say a lot, and that part of me is super satisfied.

Curators like Dr. Kelli Morgan and La Tanya S. Autry talk about curating as care work. It's not just putting a show together. You're investing in a community and creating one; you're responsible for how work is framed, looked at, and read. It's work. I've enjoyed doing it, but it was a lot of time away from my studio practice. The truth is that I got into doing all of this because I wanted to be an artist, and my commitment remains to art and social justice. I realized that what I was doing was benefiting other people a lot, but I need to take care of myself along with everyone else.



Installation view of *Jaishri Abichandani: Flower-Headed Children*, 2022. Photo by Josh Schaedel. Courtesy of Craft Contemporary.

MJ

Your work is deeply influenced by and in dialogue with South Asian art history. People who are well versed in these symbols and signifiers can relate to the works as pluralities in a way that others may not. How can both approach the work?

JA

I think the best part of being an artist is learning the ways in which your work communicates beyond its intention. What's nice about speaking to those who are informed about South Asian art history is the levels of information they come with and can then apply to decoding the work. For those who aren't from that background, what they read in the work and the ways in which they interpret it informs me.

MJ

I appreciate that answer. A colleague of mine told me that he uses historical, archetypal figures in the hope that his work will be legible through time. Do you think about legacy?

JA

I'll be very honest with you. I'm more concerned about the existence of the human species and the planet rather than my work. My work will only survive if humans survive, right? So I don't worry too much about legacy. I worry much more about existence. My job right now is to make work that provokes the kind of thought process and change that I want to see in the world. What it does after I'm gone is, on one level, irrelevant to me. I would rather be able to witness its impact in my lifetime.

MJ

Do you want to discuss the relationship between your activism work and your artistic and curatorial practices?

JA

I think they have always been perfectly intertwined. My art-making is situated within a South Asian community and social justice space. That's where I began making it, and that's where I continue to make it from. There are all kinds of other worlds that have segued into those spaces, but that community remains constant in my practice. I used to photograph my community. Now, twenty-five years later, I'm painting and sculpting the exact same people.

The work documents the changes in the community too. My moon goddess sculpture tracks the progression of queerness as it existed to the way that it is now, which is very different in its kind of non-binary manifestation. The work mirrors that transition in society, just like language evolves to accommodate our life experiences. Before we didn't have language for things like predators, grooming, and Me Too. In the same way, my work evolves to reflect that change in culture and language.

There's a lot of porousness between community spaces and art spaces and the ways in which they intersect. For people like me there is very little separation. When I worked at the Queens Museum, my community organizing experience was useful in being able to throw open the doors of the museum and say, "Hey, Community, here's free space and resources that you can utilize!" Everyone was really happy to be able to access that. Making those kinds of interventions, connections, and the exchange of resources are things that are very much part of my practice.



Installation view of *Jaishri Abichandani: Flower-Headed Children*, 2022. Photo by Josh Schaedel. Courtesy of Craft Contemporary.

MJ

I love the word porous to describe it. You once stated that rather than having a seat at these institutional "tables," you would rather burn the tables down. The art world is not an easy place to navigate, period—but especially not with such a subversive agenda. Has this impacted how you have been able to move through some of these spaces?

JA

Yeah, you don't live like a feminist killjoy without facing the backlash for it. And my experience is a very common one for most WOC in art-world institutions. We go from being a token to a threat when we do the work that we were brought in to do, work that actually challenges the hegemony of white supremacist patriarchal capitalism.

Part of it is that if you talk so much shit about a particular system, that system won't want to reward you. For instance, for the most part the work I sell is to our community. Our community happens to be a massive one, so my work is with collections all around the world, but the larger works that should be in museums are still in my studio. This doesn't stop me from making it though, because at some point people will stop ignoring it.

MJ

They definitely will! It's not easy to face that pushback and keep going. Most people quit. It's very inspiring to see that you never back down. You keep moving forward and making things happen. I wonder how it is for you emotionally. Are you fatigued? What keeps you going?

JA

Truthfully, what keeps me going is the constant exchange of love between people like you and me. I am constantly inspired by my friends and my peers and the secret satisfaction of knowing that I had some hand in soand-so's success and feeling great joy for them because I believe in them and their practice. I'm not going to lie and say that there aren't days when I'm discouraged, depressed, and defeated. But when I look at my own practice and where I am now, I'm in a much happier space because I'm making what I want to make on my own terms, and that is not to be taken for granted.

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MJ

What is on view at Craft Contemporary?

JA

The title of the show is *Flower-Headed Children*. It was chosen by the curator, Anuradha Vikram, and it's based on how many sculptures I have with animals or flowers attached to female bodies. It also refers to the creative work of women. The flower-headed children are the art we make, the books we write, and the change we make in culture and society. I'm excited because it's a great survey of my practice, and it'll allow the art and the activism to be displayed together. I'm trying some new things and really aimed to push the ways in which I use space and how I integrate the sculptures into the architecture to build a true conversation between the two. I'm excited to be able to do things that I haven't done before and make it even more extravagant!

MJ

Final question: What is important for people to know about you?

JA

I am a feminist committed in the absolute core of my being to anti-caste, anti-racist, social justice work. Dreaming of a world where we survive with some dignity and equality is at the center of everything that I believe and do.

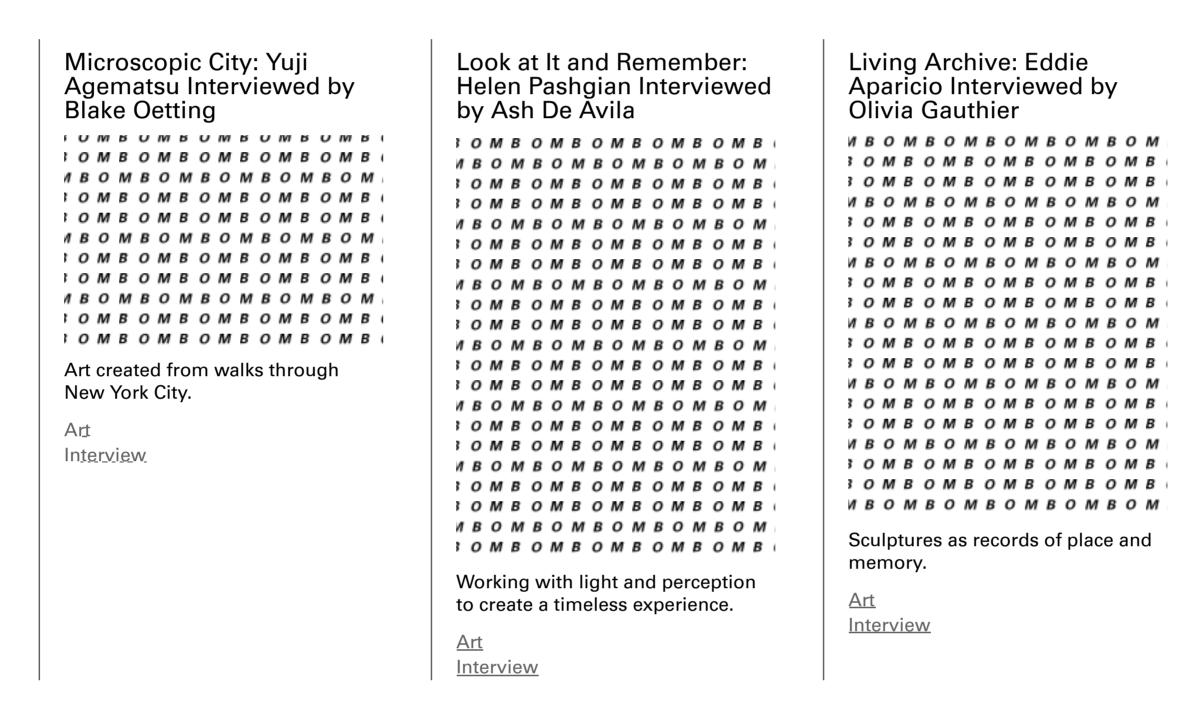
Jaishri Abichandani: Flower-Headed Children is on view at Craft Contemporary in Los Angeles until May 8.

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Melissa Joseph is a Brooklyn-based artist interested in connecting people through shared memories and experiences. Her work addresses themes of diaspora, family history, and the politics of how we occupy spaces. She has upcoming exhibitions at Bradley Ertaskiran Gallery in Montreal, the Brattleboro Museum and Art Center in Vermont, and is curating a show of her late father's work at Soloway Gallery this spring.

Jaishri Abichandani Flower-Headed Children Craft Contemporary Melissa Joseph sculpture installation feminism South Asian

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But the idea of transformation has always been something that I romanticize in a work. I'm cautious of it but I also need it to connect my thoughts with the process of making. That's really important.

– Nari Ward

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