Mārvelløus Beïngs: The Wörk of Rina Banerjee

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"They have wild elephants and plenty of unicorns, which are scarcely smaller than elephants. They have the hair of a buffalo and feet like an elephant's. They have a single large, black horn in the middle of the forehead. They do not attack with their horn, but only with their tongue and their knees; for their tongues are furnished with long, sharp spines, so that when they want to do any harm to anyone they first crush him by kneeling upon him and then lacerate him with their tongues," Marco Polo, the most famous traveller of all time, writes in his observation from Basman, a kingdom in Sumatra, in his famous journal, *Travels.* The colourful and unexpected have also captivated the Kolkata-born, New York-based artist Rina Banerjee for over a decade. As a painter and sculptor, Banerjee made her debut in 2000 with the wall piece *Infectious Migrations* (1999) and subsequently with the hanging vertical installation *A Stranger Is in Our Paradise* (2002), each an unusual assemblage of both artificial and natural materials – including plastic tubing, latex gloves, turmeric powder and peacock feathers – that embody a broad range of cultural references. As a traveller might ask oneself when making contact with something new and unfamiliar, Banerjee's works elicit questions: Who are we, where do we come from and how do we comprehend the world around us?

Long before Marco Polo, though, encounters between people of different cultures took place on the prehistoric trade routes between the Sumerian and Indus Valley civilisations. Tourism – the more pedestrian form of visiting far away lands – originated in the 19th century as a leisurely pastime for the wealthy. People travelled to distant parts of the world to see "exotic people," as well as architecture and art, to study new languages, to acquire objects of curiosity and to experience different cuisines and cultures. All of that changed in the late 20th century with the development of jumbo jets and relatively affordable flights and hotels. Today, tourism has transformed itself into a mass industry with the World Health Organization stating that 500,000 people are on planes at any given time. Banerjee's first major solo show in London, "Forever Foreign", reveals a world lured by travel, in search of the marvelous and unexpected whether real, virtual or imagined.

Banerjee gravitated towards strange objects in 1994 when she took her first sculpture class while pursuing a MFA at Yale University. It was a bold step as she broke with the heavy abstract oil paintings that helped her gain admission to one of the world's most prestigious art schools. "The professors were very unhappy when they found out I was taking a sculpture class," she recalls. But Banerjee, who prior to attending Yale, was a self-taught painter with a chemical engineering degree, who worked in her home studio in rural Pennsylvania. Without the usual pedigree of an undergraduate art degree like her fellow classmates, she felt that she should take advantage of as many of the classes and resources as possible offered at Yale during the two-year programme.

Looking back at those early works, one can identify a relationship to Banerjee's current sculptures. She recalls, "They hated what I was doing. I had huge rubber gloves and I was smearing

and gluing things together, with bolts going through the canvas, to hold it up". Banerjee also began to use feathers, wires and clamshells, all recurring elements found in her best works, including the most recent expansive installation made for SITE Sante Fe in 2009, *I'll Get You My Pretty!* Despite the impulse to push beyond the dour paintings that pleased her professors, Banerjee's media mash-up was met with resistance. Yale professor and American still-life painter William Bailey told her on graduation day, "I don't know why you are trying mess up your life by choosing to do this sculpture stuff on painting". But she took the criticism with humour. "I could see he was pretty upset by my work, but it was nice to get that much attention from the professors. They were hard asses."

Upon graduating in 1995, she moved to New York during a period in which the expression "global" had yet to gain currency and "international" meant the United States and Europe to most of the art world. "People didn't understand why I would be interested in Mexican Art. I was also interested in Oceanic Art and their use of certain materials. Or how art functions in those societies, which is in many ways similar to all societies. Also Polynesian Art. I didn't understand why I had to look at Indian Art exclusively, just because I am Indian, or Western Art, because I like all those things." When she was not in her studio, both at Yale and in New York, Banerjee would go to libraries and museums and look at what was on display and how things were classified. Some of her classmates accused Banerjee of being a shallow tourist with her use of exotic materials, and she admits that even at art school she felt more like an outsider looking in than a student, out of place but fascinated by her experiences there.

In New York, Banerjee attended the now legendary Bronx Museum of Art's programme Artist in the Marketplace (AIM) in 1997. The programme still exists today as a crash-course and mentorship programme that teaches artists how to navigate the New York art world. Through AIM, she met Jane Farver, who became one of her strongest advocates. At that time Farver, already known for her global perspective, was the chief curator at the Queens Museum of Art (QMA), one of the rare institutions in New York that regularly engaged with the city's diverse mix of ethnic communities. That year, Farver selected Banerjee's installation *Home in a Harem* (1997) for the survey exhibition "Out of India: Contemporary Art of the South Asian Diaspora" at the QMA. The work consisted of a makeshift bed suspended from the ceiling, surrounded by neon light tubes, cherry red sarees, furniture stuffing, tree branches and dried yellow flowers. She recalls making this work in a moment of deep ambivalence about her identity as an artist, particularly for this show, "I had never met another Indian artist before in my life and it was awkward and remarkable to be a spokesperson for the subject matter".

Another direct response to her interaction with Farver was *Postcolonial-Spider-Broom Woman* (1997/2000), an insect-shaped soft sculpture made of old sarees and organza. Identity politics were hotly debated in the art world during 1980s and 1990s, and issues of race, gender and class were addressed in

many artists' works and exhibitions. Banerjee remembers being very self-conscious of her own history as an immigrant, but reflects, "I felt that getting too involved with discussions about dominant culture versus immigrant culture would compromise my work". Instead, she opted to explore the effects of interactions between different groups of people, particularly through the colonial experience. In her artist statement for an AIM catalogue published in 1996, she wrote: "I make objects that use the sensual qualities of materials ... to lure the viewer. Arranged in a disturbing, often surrealistic manner, these elements create a psychologically charged space. The viewer is both pleasured by the exotic object and simultaneously perplexed by its assertions." *Postcolonial-Spider-Broom Woman* was later included in the group show "Good Business is the Best Art," which celebrated the Bronx Museum's 25th anniversary of AIM in 2000. Holland Cotter, writing about the exhibition in *The New York Times*, sensed the possibilities in Banerjee's work and described it as "a fantastic web of gauze, beads and industrial tubing, [which] has many things to say about the dangers and seductions of exoticism, but says them indirectly".

The dialogues instigated by identity politics, however, paved the way for new directions towards the end of the 1990s. New curatorial positions challenged the status-quo, such as the appointment of the Nigerian-born poet Okwui Enwezor as the artistic director of Documenta, the prestigious contemporary art exhibition which takes place every five years in Kassel, Germany. New biennials began popping up in far-flung places such as Johannesburg, South Africa; Cairo, Egypt; and Gwangju, Korea. It was during this time that Banerjee was selected for the Whitney Biennial in 2000.

New York's homegrown biennial was originally an annual event, established by the Whitney Museum's founder Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in 1918 to provide attention to neglected American artists when European art was the rage. Soon thereafter it became the Whitney Biennial and championed the latest in American art. But the event was often surrounded by criticism and controversy, such as the 1987 protest by the anonymous artist group, the Guerrilla Girls, who accused the show of promoting sexism and racism. Only in the mid-1990s did its curators attempt to truly pick apart the definition of "American". In 1995, for instance, the show included only two Mexican artists and two Canadians, who one could argue were technically Americans. The 1997 edition organised by Whitney curator Lisa Phillips and Australian-born art magazine editor Louise Neri, defined "American" as those living and working in the US, and made a sincere attempt at achieving pluralism by including Kara Walker's now iconic silhouette cutouts depicting stereotypical scenes of the Antebellum South, contemporary interpretations of Indian miniatures by Lahore-trained Shahzia Sikander and the historical mural-style paintings of African-American life by Kerry James Marshall. The critics still derided the approach and selection, and the subsequent edition in 2000 – organised by a six-person curatorial team, all working outside of the Whitney Museum – hailed itself as promoting internationalism, and slowly inched towards an opening up to different ideas and styles.

One of the six co-curators was Farver, who became director of the MIT List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Farver selected Banerjee for the biennial, and for this she created *Infectious Migrations* (1999). It was a sprawling feat of sewing, fastening, sprinkling and pasting. The amalgamation seemed to bleed into and off the wall with its fabrics, incense sticks, red ***kumkum*** powder, Vaseline, artificial fingernails and eyelashes, foam, feathers, Spanish moss, light bulbs, wax, Silly Putty, sewing pins, intravenous plastic tubing, latex gloves and dried coloured pigments rupturing out of found 1968 electrical engineering blueprints from Columbia University's Center for Disease Control, which covered part of the wall and surrounding floor.

The work tapped into Banerjee's preoccupation with a movement towards things taboo, but this time a more politically-engaged attempt to address the transmission of disease, and more specifically the AIDS epidemic through her birth country India. AIDS was ravaging the Subcontinent, which was becoming the second largest infected population after Africa, and researchers identified its spread through extensive labour migration, especially among the poor and the illiterate. Thomas Hoving, the former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, described the piece as a " gorgeously crafted visual allegory of the AIDS epidemic ... deft, elegant and sinuous". The relationship between human exploration and disease also resurfaced two years later, in 2001, in delicate watercolour drawings of strange alien beings floating in a small cell-like wood frame, such as *Leishmaniasis* and *Larvea Siphonaptera*, works titled after parasitic diseases carried by insects.

Banerjee's inclusion in the Whitney Biennial was a turning point in her career. She remembers many gallerists coming to her studio asking to see work, but then not following up. Still, she continued to explore her interest in materials and creating oddities that perhaps seemed difficult to sell from the dealer's side of the desk, but beguiled critics and curators alike. In 2002 she was one of the five young artists invited to show in the Whitney Museum's show "Five by Five: Contemporary Artists on Contemporary Art" curated by Shamim Momin. Each emerging artist was commissioned to make a new piece inspired by a work in the Whitney's collection. Banerjee looked to American Donald Lipski, known for his sculptures of quotidian objects, particularly *Water Lillies No. 61* (1991), a curved, sealed glass tube containing an American flag preserved in water.

With Lipski's work in mind, she made *A Stranger Is in Our Paradise* (2002), a large vertical installation that begins on the floor with an island colony made up of feather palms, American flags and a globe-shaped piggy bank nestled comfortably in the middle. Just above and attached by a trail of hospital tubing and an ochre glass lantern is a birdcage styled in traditional Indian architectural motifs and adorned with red, blue and black feathers. Hovering just overhead is another mini globe entangled in the tubing and feathers with a black umbrella sheltering everything from the top. Made just a year after the September 11th attacks, Banerjee created her own delicate totem for the US, or

perhaps New York, the melting pot of many cultures and reference points, more fragile than the preserved America that Lipski's work suggests. In Grace Glueck's review in *The New York Times*, she responded to Banerjee's intervention as, "The most intriguing of responses". *A Stranger Is in Our Paradise* showed Banerjee more confidently nuanced in her approach and use of materials. And the umbrella and the vertical presentation would appear again in later, more ambitious work.

Investigations of cultural authenticity through objects acquired during periods of colonial conquests and expedition travel began in earnest for Banerjee during her time spent at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) in 2003. Here, Banerjee, along with eight other artists, including African-American artist Lorna Simpson and Paris-based Chinese artist Huang Yong Ping, were given access to borrow from the archives and artifact storage of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA) to create new work for the exhibition "Yankee Remix". She remembers with some delight that the museum described the objects in the SPNEA as, "our country's treasures". But what Banerjee found in this treasure trove was not just Victorian-style furniture typical of the region, but also objects from travels to the "Orient" that had belonged to many of the first families of New England – or *Brahmins*, as they were also commonly referred to, which coincidentally is also the same term for the highest caste in the Hindu religion. "I loved the idea that all your most precious things are from some other foreign place and that becomes your heritage, or your adopted traditions." She chose the love letters and old photographic portraits belonging to a Boston *Brahmin* named Ogden Codman based in Calcutta and his fiancée in Massachusetts during the 1850s, along with an old Anglo-Indian wooden chair that was out of fashion in the Subcontinent but in great demand among the posh New England set.

Banerjee's three chosen objects inspired the work *Take Me, Take Me ... To the Palace of Love* (2003), a massive translucent flaming-pink plastic Taj Mahal that floats literally as a hanging sculpture, in the popular imagination. The Taj Mahal, a mausoleum built in the 17th century by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in honour of his beloved wife, has evolved over time into a transcultural icon representing not just the finest example of high Mughal architecture, but also more simple things like love, the good life (Taj Hotels and Trump Taj Mahal Casino), as well as a kitschy 1950s Bollywood film. While making the work, Banerjee never anticipated the wide appeal it would have on the exhibition circuit. It was subsequently exhibited in 2004, first at "Agra" for the Peabody Essex Museum and later on a three-year tour throughout the US for the group show "Figures of Thinking". In 2006, when she was invited to participate in the third Echigo-Tsumari Triennial in Japan, the exhibition's organisers told Banerjee that they too wanted a Taj. For the Japanese show, she considered her designated exhibition location of an old school house in the small rice farming village of Hachi, and created *Lure*

of Place". It was a Taj Mahal made of green translucent fabric stretched around a bamboo armature. Inside, instead of a crystal chandelier, a hanging cascade of old Japanese school chairs, plastic measuring cups and beakers, orange plastic tubing and big science room light bulbs filled the space.

Elements of all her strongest works made since *Infectious Migrations* for the Whitney culminated in the seven-metre-tall work entitled *In an unnatural storm a world fertile, fragile and desirous, polluted with excess pollination, hungry to seize an untidy commerce also gave an unknowable size to some mongrel possessions, excreted a promiscuous heritage, sprayed her modern love, breathed deeper than any one place arching her back threw new roots that would light, sparkle and glitter on hard ground, make fire of crown, empire, religion bathe unseasonable hope to alter what could not be warm.* Made for the "Art Unlimited" curated section of Art Basel, it seemed as if a small yet complex universe had touched down in the cavernous art fair exhibition hall. According to the artist, her titles, almost logical nonsense, are rhythmic journeys, or rather a long rambling movement, much like travel by steamship or through desert terrain by Jeep. The work itself seemed to float into Art Basel with a massive domed-shaped hot air balloon capped with pale pink feathers and gray and turquoise Japanese umbrellas jutting out of the assemblage. Anchoring it much like the cascade of chairs and beakers inside the green Taj in Japan, is a microcosm of shells, dried gourds, an ostrich egg, feathers, plastic beads, brown glass vials, horns, light bulbs, fake eyeballs and small antique-style globes. Below from the ground, similar to *A Stranger Is in Our Paradise*, another world is conjured: clusters of glass bottles in various shades of colour – brown, clear, blue, green, amber – and size, an organic borderline constructed of small shells and two identical plastic toy deer that stand on opposite sides of the constructed shell border.

Although the last decade has ushered in a self-aware internationalisation of the art world, in which auction houses have chimed in to organise dedicated "BRIC" (Brazil, Russian, India and China) sales, in many ways what Banerjee's work suggests is that so-called distinct or pure identities such as "Indian," "British," "Mexican" or "Dutch" seem more culturally constructed than the "exotic". It is through the simple act of basic human encounters – whether it be travel, conquest, commerce or advancements in technological communications – that connections and shared experiences are established. Like the Jesuit missionaries recruited by the Qing emperors to create their own hybrid form of European-inspired Chinese art, or the Anglo-Indian chair that piqued Banerjee's imagination while rummaging through the archives in Boston, fascination with the foreign seems second nature to us. Some critics of colonisation as well as globalisation argue that dominant cultures tend to cannibalise only those less powerful than themselves. But as Banerjee's work points out, cross-fertilisation and cannibalisation co-exist, or perhaps they are the same thing, and like a spreading infection, no one is immune.