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# Nirmal Raja's Interdisciplinary Practice Maps South Asian Memory Across Materials

In her debut solo show in Boston, “Grace and Grit,” the interdisciplinary artist explores the weight of migration, memory, and loss through deeply considered materials—and collective acts of feminist solidarity.

Interview by [Swagato Chakravorty](#)

Nirmal Raja in her workspace. Photo by Sammy Reed. Courtesy of John Michael Kohler Art Center and Kohler Company.



Nirmal Raja's work is conceptually focused in its exploration of systems and structures that govern how we move through social, cultural, and international contexts. Yet her creative practice, moving across photography, performance, and time-based media as well as sculpture and drawing, is marked by profound care for materials and materiality. It is through this sustained attention to material culture—as witness, as residue, as memory, and as belonging and community—that Raja gives form to lived experience. A fixture of the Midwestern cultural community for over two decades, Raja recently moved to Cambridge. “Grace and Grit,” her debut solo show in Boston, featuring iron and brass works developed during a 2023 Arts/Industry residency at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center (JMKAC) in Wisconsin, has just closed at Boston Sculptors Gallery. Raja's work is in numerous private and public collections, including the Warehouse Art Museum and the JMKAC.

*The following conversation is excerpted from a longer conversation as part of a visit to her studio.*



Installation view, Nirmal Raja, “Grace and Grit,” Boston Sculptors Gallery, 2025. Photo by Cesar Ziegler. Courtesy of the artist and Boston Sculptors Gallery.

**Swagato Chakravorty:** Nirmal, it’s a pleasure to be in conversation with you. Could you tell us about your practice?

**Nirmal Raja:** I am an interdisciplinary artist who’s recently moved to Cambridge after living and working in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, for twenty-four years. I’m very interested in material culture, how they serve as receptacles for stories, and how repurposing these materials can be a way of connecting with audiences. I let intuition guide my selection of materials and processes, acknowledging their distinct strengths and limitations through labor-intensive experimentation. I’m also fascinated by places and people, and let my curiosity guide what I work with and where my inquiries lead. Lately, I’ve been interested in the burdens that women carry with them—whether it’s cultural or familial or social. That’s what my current show is about. Following my recent move, I’m also thinking about the weight of what we produce as artists and bring into the world, and how I can continue making an impact while leaving a lighter footprint. Recently, I held a residency in Providence, Rhode Island, at the Wedding Cake House, which has opened up another area of research around histories of silver in Boston and New England more broadly.

**SC:** You have lived and worked across India, South Korea, Hong Kong, and the US. How has living and working across these different contexts shaped your practice?

**NR:** Growing up in different parts of India, I learned the value of adaptability early on. I’ve always been a listener and grew up not in a family of artists, but a family of nurturers—strong women who cared for rituals as an art form. In South Korea, I was exposed to natural beauty like

never before, and I continue to engage with the natural world in my practice. In Hong Kong, I picked up Chinese brush painting. And then when I moved to this country, my first home was in Chicago. I still think of the Art Institute of Chicago as my first art school because I used to wander the galleries, listen to the docent talks, and attend as many events as possible. And then I went to school for a BFA at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design and an MFA at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee while raising kids. Motherhood also taught me a lot. Sixteen years intervened between starting my BFA and completing my MFA. I have a slow determination, where I found ways to fit my art practice into family life. Now that my kids are adults, I have been able to fully invest in my art practice over the past decade.



Nirmal Raja, *The Reckoning*, 2025. Enamel paint and thread on a deconstructed found silver-plated dish and lid. Photo courtesy of Cesar Ziegler. Courtesy of the artist.

SC: You are also active in the Paglees, a feminist collective of women artists of South Asian origin living and working across the US. You and I are familiar with the specific cultural connotations of the word “paglee” in South Asian contexts—can you unpack this for broader audiences?

NR: “Paglee” is a humorous or demeaning slur to describe nonconforming girls and women. Anyone who deviates from traditional conservative narratives around girlhood and womanhood is called a “paglee,” usually in teasing contexts. But it is certainly a label and one that is hard to shake off when you’re trying to figure out your own self. Some of us in the Paglees have been friends for a long time, and we started doing virtual studio visits during lockdown, sharing critical feedback and support during a time of unprecedented isolation. Eventually, we became a more formal collective, although even within this group there is great diversity—some are more fiercely vocal than others.

SC: You have experienced momentous changes within the last couple of years, working through the loss of your father in your work while also navigating the move from Milwaukee to Boston. During our studio visit, it became clear that you continue to think through these changes in material terms but are also departing somewhat from past work, particularly in your current emphasis on found objects. You're currently in a period of well-earned rest and rejuvenation, but what's on the horizon? What are you most excited about?

NR: I'm really excited about a current research project that I call *Amanat*. It is a complex concept that in Urdu, Arabic, Hindi, and other languages relates to inheritance, heritage, trust, and safekeeping. Through the use of digital interventions within South Asian collections at prominent museums and cultural institutions, I'm interested in staging dialogues between South Asian Americans and the objects—from their own ancestral heritage—presently held in these collections. I think such objects carry tremendous potential and weight but are also precarious objects. The stories and cultural histories associated with these objects fade over time and with distance. I'm interested in exploring the use of digital and time-based media to consider the powers of material culture to communicate and narrate histories of migration, memory, and loss. At the same time, I hope to activate museum collections in a gesture of symbolic repatriation.



Nirmal Raja, *Unruly Uniformity*, 2023. Cast iron and brass 15 x 8 x 5 inches. Courtesy of the artist.





Nirmal Raja, *The Baggage*, 2023. Cast brass. 26 x 17 ½ x 2 ½ inches. Courtesy of the artist.

SC: You and I both have experience with being Brown and living in the Midwest. We're also in a broader moment right now in which entrenched narratives around "Asian America" are being contested in order to reject the flattening force of that descriptor. The show "Willful Dialects," which just closed at The Distillery Gallery and No Call No Show in Boston, is an example close at hand. The Paglees seem to occupy an interesting position anticipating this moment: It is a collective with a shared interest in transgressing boundaries and breaking expectations around being Asian American, yet the work of individual artists within the collective is not explicitly about "being" South Asian. In a sense, the work of the collective—like that of its member artists—tends to refuse easy categorization...

NR: Right, as members of the Paglees we share overlapping or intersecting histories and lived experiences that drew us together. But we also don't want to be defined by expectations around what work by South Asian women artists should be or look like. That refusal to be defined by the expectations of others—at individual or institutional scales—is part of what drew me to become part of the Paglees. We do see our work as a form of activism: It's important to highlight issues we've faced—and that women from our backgrounds continue to face. And I believe the collective allows us to be stronger together, to lean into each other's strengths, to speak with a more forceful voice. Personally, I don't think of myself as making exclusively feminist art—my practice embraces other spiritual and political aspects. Ultimately, as an artist I

want to be able to comment on anything and everything without being defined, or contained, in any particular way, and that is implicitly feminist.

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*“Grace and Grit” was on view through June 8, 2025, at Boston Sculptors Gallery, 486 Harrison Avenue.*

**Swagato Chakravorty**

Contributor

Boston Art Review (BAR) is an independent online and print publication committed to facilitating active discourse around contemporary art in Boston.