

Rina BANERJEE

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How Rina Banerjee Re-Routes Art History Through The Lens of Colonialism

The artist's first US survey intervenes in the architecture and collection of Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia

BY [BEA HUFF HUNTER](#) IN [REVIEWS](#) | 19 FEB 19



In a 2018 interview with writer Allie Biswas, Rina Banerjee described early influences, artists Santa Barazza and David C. Driskell, as ‘people who were trying to re-route art history,’ to include ‘the kind of art you were making.’ This process drives Banerjee’s first US survey exhibition, ‘Make Me a Summary of the World’ at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA), in which three decades of mixed-media drawing, sculpture and video intervene in PAFA’s architecture and collection of American art.

In the museum’s lobby – whose decor integrates motifs from the Middle East, Victorian Europe and Mughal India – intricate sculptures and drawings introduce the theme of globalization through the lenses of colonialism and environmentalism. In *If lotion and potion could heal* (2006), long-fingered deep green figures that resemble both Marc Chagall’s ethereal subjects and vaguely Hindu-looking goddesses are encrusted with imported sequins and glitter, and appear to exhale leaves cut from dollar bills. In *She is An Uncertain* (2007),

hung opposite, a similar figure spews green and white bodily fluids onto detailed engineering schematics, printed on Mylar, for the Columbia Center for Disease Control in New York. These works invoke cultural and bodily concepts of circulation and contagion.



Rina Banerjee, *A World Lost...*, 2013, installation view at Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels; photograph: Barbara Katus

At the top of PAFA's grand staircase, the sculpture *Viola from New Orleans-ah* (2017), a woman-like creature assembled from found objects, hunches under the weight of the wares of a late-nineteenth-century immigrant peddler: glass beads and horns, shawls, a toy Ferris wheel. Long, taut threads, like rays of light, connect her to a solar ring of metal spokes suspended from the vivid blue vaulted ceiling. In the nearby monumental painting *Death on the Pale Horse* (1817) by Benjamin West, similar beams of celestial light preside over a violent scene of Christian supremacy. Furthering this revisionist art history, another of PAFA's galleries has been entirely rehung in conversation with Banerjee's large scale installation *A World Lost* (2013), an imaginary island of sand, sparkling mica

and the coins of several countries, on which lines of cowrie shells map rivers essential to trade, and piles of plastic cups signal water shortages from climate change. On the gallery's walls, American master paintings of ports and shipwrecks; native animals hunted and trussed; and a white woman attempting Indian dance are reframed as artefacts of colonisation.



Rina Banerjee, *Her captivity...*, 2011, installation view at Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, 2018. Courtesy: Cornell Fine Arts Museum; photograph: Barbara Katus

Fragments from diverse periods and cultures collide in Banerjee's art as they do in vernacular language, and in more deliberate ways in works by contemporary poets of diaspora such as Bhanu Kapil or Divya Victor. The latter wryly notes in *W is for Walt Whitman's Soul* (2017) that 'loot' was among the first Indian words adopted by English colonizers. Banerjee's short videos *Coconut Oil* (2003) and *When scenes travel ... bubble bubble* (2004) feature her own poems scrolling across vignettes of her travels or self-care rituals. Many of Banerjee's works' titles (abbreviated in this review) are arguably poems in their own right, comprising stanza-length meditations that refuse to elucidate – and instead dialogue with and complicate – her works' visual vocabulary. A 2017 sculpture, in which Pyrex laboratory filtration equipment, amber vials, shells, beads and silk are arranged around a replica turtle shell and Polynesian wood

mask, bears the following full-length title, which returns the reader once again to the work's and the world's challenges:

*When signs of origin fade, fall out, if washed away, trickle into separations,
precipitate when boiled or filtered to reveal all doubleness as wickedness.
Vanishing act that migration, mixation like mothers who hid paternity who could
name move me slowly reveal me only when my maker stands straight.*

Rina Banerjee, 'Make Me a Summary of the World' runs at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, until 31 March 2019. It will be on view at San José Museum of Art from 16 May 2019 until 6 October 2019.

Main image: Rina Banerjee, Excessive flower... ; Women did do this...(left to right), all works 2017, installation view. Courtesy: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia; photograph: Barbara Katus