

Rina BANERJEE

Artforum,

Rina Banerjee: The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts

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Rina Banerjee, *A World Lost: after the original island appears, a single land mass is fractured, after population migrated, after pollution revealed itself and as cultural locations once separated did merged, after the splitting of Adam and Eve, shiva and shakti of race black and white, of culture East and West, after animals diminished, after the seas' corals did exterminate, after this and at last imagine water evaporated ... this after Columbus found it we lost it, imagine this.*, 2013, mixed media. Installation view, 2018. Photo: Barbara Katus.

Rina Banerjee

THE PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS MUSEUM

HERE IS A SAMPLING of the materials in one sculpture by the artist Rina Banerjee: an Anglo-Indian pedestal, a Victorian birdcage, feathers, gourds, and fractured Frozen Charlotte doll heads. The title of this work is even more intricate than its constituent parts: *Her captivity was once someone's treasure and even pleasure but she blew and flew away took root which grew, we knew this was like no other feather, a third kind of bird*

that perched on a vine intertwined was neither native nor her queens daughters, a peculiar other., 2011.

Banerjee is a poet of products, a psychic medium of manufactures, and she uses such lengthy, lyrical descriptors to give feeling and narrative to organic and inorganic matter. In this ensemble, she imagines exoticized Indian wares made for the nineteenth-century English market to be a strange species: “a third kind of bird” fated to fly the world but never alight on a single home. Born in Calcutta in 1963 and raised primarily in New York City, where she currently lives, Banerjee takes a personal interest in global migration and trade, and her magnificent sculptures display special empathy for commodities suspended in transnational flows.



Rina Banerjee, *Her captivity was once someone's treasure and even pleasure but she blew and flew away took root which grew, we knew this was like no other feather, a third kind of bird that perched on a vine intertwined was neither native nor her queens daughters, a peculiar other. (detail)*, 2011, Anglo-Indian pedestal 1860, Victorian birdcage, shells, feathers, gourds, grapevines, coral, fractured Charlotte doll heads, steel knitted mesh with glass beads, Kenyan tourist sculptures, apple gourds, 84 × 84 × 72".

The material effects of imperialism and capitalism—that is, the environmental traces they leave and the hybrid objects they generate—are the subject of “Make Me a Summary of the World,” her first US museum show, curated by Jodi Throckmorton and Lauren Schell Dickens. The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where the exhibition kicks off, is a perfect fit: The 1876 landmark structure is an aesthetic mutt—an archetype of American architectural eclecticism that incorporates Gothic windows, Neoclassical pillars, and arabesque flourishes. Both the building and the collection it houses are indebted to the processes of colonization and appropriation Banerjee illuminates, and the curators seize on this fact in their arrangement, weaving the artist’s sculptures into the museum’s permanent galleries. *Her captivity . . .*, for example, appears next to Benjamin West’s painting *Penn’s Treaty with the Indians*, 1771–72, which portrays an apocryphal meeting between William Penn and the Lenape people and suggests that Penn’s exploitative land purchase was a peaceful, equitable affair. Similarly, a sculpture in a soaring throne shape titled *The promise of self rule, played on her mind’s paradise, paralysed her curiosity and then only had she the will to erect her sitting beauty from sleep*, 2008, is placed alongside heroic Early Republic portraits as a reminder that American self-rule came at the expense of indigenous peoples. As the wall label puts it, “The end of one empire is the beginning of another.”

By paying homage to items caught between cultures, Banerjee seems less concerned with social and cultural transparency than with interdependence.

If these works had eyes, no doubt they would look at their PAFA companions askance—as, indeed, a couple of figurative sculptures appear to—and the exhibition is strongest when it generates confrontations. (Unfortunately, the rooms that show only Banerjee pieces, primarily her works on paper, fall flat.) The most polemical setup comes at the show’s midpoint, where nineteenth-century Orientalist paintings of fantastical Eastern palaces and ports are paired with *A World Lost . . .*, 2013, a floor map traced in sand, shells, figurines, and threads, interrupted by nests of plastic cups. Inspired by a visit to rural Bangladesh, where potable water is scarce, the installation comments on how Western consumption continues to degrade the Global South’s resources—invading its waterways with floating refuse rather than sputtering steamship. Plastic plays a sweeter role in *Take me, take me, take me . . . to the*

Palace of love, 2003, a replica of the Taj Mahal, the mausoleum built for the emperor Shah Jahan's wife in an Indo-Muslim style, here realized from layers of pink-hued Saran Wrap. It offers a rosier picture of cultural exchange, highlighting an East-East encounter staged in the service of romantic love and serving up a corny, American, TV-dinnerized twist on its already multiethnic, hyphenate referent.

Transparency has been regarded as a virtue since at least the Enlightenment. But as this piece demonstrates, the idea may be impracticable or even undesirable—especially so in today's hyperconnected world, where oppositions like original and copy, authentic and inauthentic, become ever more coterminous. In its sheeny, plasticky translucency, *Take me, take me . . .* provides something like an artist's manifesto. By paying homage to items caught between cultures, Banerjee seems less concerned with social and cultural transparency than with interdependence. Does something need to be clear—simple, straightforward—to be legible? After all, who among us is not, to some extent, a messy product of global networks: a third kind of bird, a semiopaque blend?

“Rina Banerjee: Make Me a Summary of the World” is on view through March 31; travels to Fowler Museum at University of California, Los Angeles, December 8, 2019–May 31, 2020; and other venues.

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