

Rina Banerjee

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY YSABELLE CHEUNG

In an artist's Manhattan studio, we find bodies that like to move



Rina Banerjee in her studio in Manhattan, New York.

Along a corridor of tightly sealed doors in a midtown Manhattan building, only one was slightly ajar. Poking my head around the doorframe into the studio of Rina Banerjee, past a kitchenette and makeshift storage, I saw an ensemble of paintings lying on work-stations, with pieces cut away from the works' flat surfaces, as if enlivened by the spirits and creatures depicted in them. Pinned to the walls were more paintings, brushes, small sketches; an onyx-black carved lion figurine rested on an ornate wall pedestal. Embroidered and patterned fabrics,

an integral element of Banerjee's sculptural work, were bundled on the floor or draped from the ceiling. As I entered, an assortment of objects—a cluster of metal-cast branches, dolls' legs, small raw blocks of wood—was being inspected by the artist herself.

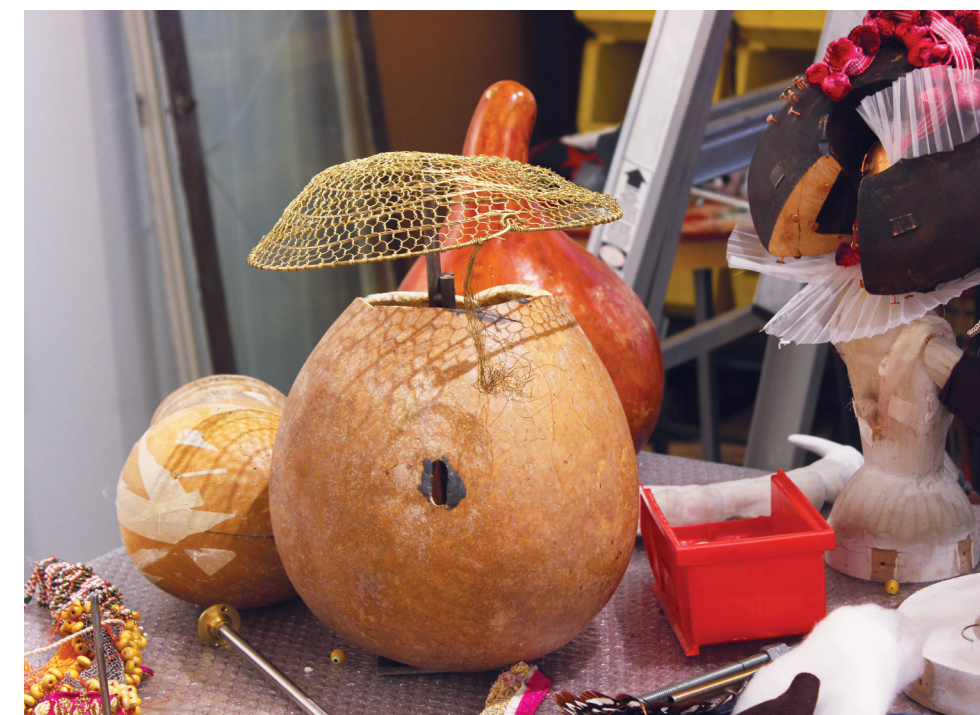
Amiable and expressive, Banerjee inhabits a world constructed of metaphors and symbols. An apple is an apple, until it is not—some days it represents a location, a cold place where the fruit grows; other days, it is the tale of sin, of Adam and Eve. Her sculptural assemblages of found and sourced objects that she has been making since the mid-1990s and which have been shown in institutions and festivals worldwide, act as translation vessels for these historical-social symbols. Several of these were settled on tabletops, or hung from armatures affixed to the walls in varying states of completion. As she talked to me, she sometimes picked up a scrap of fabric, her hands working at the texture with a needle and thread in a reflexive habit.

There are two concurrent journeys that Banerjee embarks on when she begins to create a sculpture: the first is a physical one, in which she scavenges for material in big-box hardware stores, in the shops of the surrounding Garment District, or on eBay and Etsy; and the second requires her to sift through her own memories, sort out elements in her own visual or cultural language that she can use in her work. The creation process for these sculptures, Banerjee hinted, can be slow and unpredictable. When she first arrives at her studio in the morning, she will often pick one up and dialogue with it, wondering how to tease more out of a work that, the previous day, just “wouldn't co-operate.”

At the time of my visit in February—the apex of a Nor'easter tearing through the city—Banerjee was preparing for a touring midcareer retrospective that debuts at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in October, with around 20 sculptures and multiple works on paper, as well as her upcoming solo exhibition in Paris at Galerie Nathalie Obadia in September, where she will investigate the phenomenon of, in her words, “mail-order brides, arranged marriages, online dating, dating as commerce,” framed in the context of her long-standing examinations of cultural migration and global trade from the colonial era to today.

These topics are foundational to Banerjee's perspective on her own artwork. Born in Kolkata and raised in England and the United States, she related how her parents had traded a palatial ancestral family estate in India for a rental in their new, alienating homes in London, Philadelphia and then New York, at a time when, as she described it, “being Indian had no value in the world. You hid that you would eat with your hand, you hid that you have an accent—actually, you still hide that you have a South Asian accent—you deny your culture in order to have values like a human being of the world.”

Despite this cultural whitewashing and her family's estrangement from its heritage, it was during her childhood that tangential webs of cross-cultural dialogue began to form for the artist. Banerjee's mother would take her, from the age of seven or eight, to different markets around New York that sold imported goods; from the Spanish market, they purchased fruits; from the Korean market, plump, silvery anchovies. From these experiences, bags bulging with produce on the subway, Banerjee developed



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Works-in-progress, including a monkey sculpture adorned with red thread and cowrie shells, an item which appears frequently in Banerjee's work and which carries its own convoluted history: once used as a currency in Africa and Asia, the etymology of contemporary words and characters, such as the Chinese radical for money, and porcelain, is related to this mollusk shell.

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Often, Banerjee will poke holes in our tendencies to label objects as “foreign” and “familiar”—these items, when alchemized into sculptures, become fluid in their symbolism and meaning to the viewer, as seen with these sculptures in various stages of completion.

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A collection of objects sourced from hardware stores, Etsy and eBay strewn across tabletops in Banerjee's studio, including an assortment of vintage doll parts.



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A work-in-progress, one of the many that the artist creates as hanging sculptures suspended from the wall, featuring a *guan yin*—the Chinese goddess of mercy—sculpture.



an understanding of true global exchange and dissolution of the “other,” simply by understanding that centers and boundaries are not fixed, and that one can and should travel, adjust and absorb different cultures. She continued, “I think as artists we become familiar with that kind of plasticity, when we invite things in; in time, those things that are foreign become not so foreign.”

Banerjee's own “invitations” to viewers, made through her work, are cherry-picked cultural references, often metaphors buried in metaphors or histories woven in fabrics or objects she collects. For example, in her studio, there was a work-in-progress that conveys individual independence and growth. She had taken a wooden monkey sculpture, and attached a cluster of pink-and-white barnacles on its back, threading its tail with ivory cowrie shells and red string. A small circle of bird feathers adorned its side, while adjoined to the head was a red, bulb-like object—a new “brain.” Banerjee mentioned that the work's reference to the tribe of flying monkeys in L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* acknowledges global contemporary culture without relinquishing her

own childhood memories of seeing monkeys roaming in temples and scampering across tin rooftops. “I felt I wanted to give this monkey a brain because the monkeys in that story are followers, and to acknowledge your brain is to know that you are no longer an extension of another body, that you are your own body,” she explained. Additionally, in recognizing our own human form in the figure, we are reminded of our agency in the world, or lack thereof.

The figures in her acrylic, ink or watercolor paintings reveal mirrored selves too. Resembling faeries or goblins, these quasi-human figures float or fly, their nests of hair curled around leaves or abstract growths interspersed with droplets of violet, pink, olive, lavender or dark splotches resembling fruit. “It's almost like the figures are in some sort of motion, and then you entered their world and they look back at you,” Banerjee mused, glancing upon the eyes surrounding us in the studio. “So, I like that in my works sometimes, it's a way of feeling like you are participating. Certainly, there is a process of identification that we all go through when you

see something that looks like a body. As human beings, we feel empathy, and in our brains we are able to enjoy life more than if we didn't have that bridge. So, that recognition of the figure in the watercolor—of yourself—allows that bridge to happen, for you to feel.”

Another moment of identification between viewers and the figures in Banerjee's works potentially occurs when reading the titles, which are often sets of words that dissociate from, as well as elongate, the visual imagery, such as *Heavens no place for girls, no sand, no flowers no count of curls no irons to flatten nor straighten or curl your coiled corns, your hair would not leave you naked as girls when all but one could leave open my calls to trumpet her thoughts, stainless steel bikini and sanding wheels for girls who will not open* (2016). In some instances, these titles are just series of words: elusive, seemingly random but engaging. In others, the titles will often subtly further heighten one's awareness of present anxieties, as is the case with *Infectious Migrations* (1999), an installation rendering the female body out of a messy network of

materials such as incense sticks, fake eyelashes and Indian blouse gauze, which was shown at the Whitney Biennial in 2000. In one reading, the work addresses the HIV panic proliferating in India at the time; in another, global society's warped views on woman as contaminant, in particular the figure of a diaspora Asian woman who might be seen as polluting predominantly white communities.

At one point in our conversations, Banerjee revealed of her practice: “You get braver about what you really want to do in your work, and this allows you to really enjoy it more without worrying about it.” Her upcoming survey will allow her to reconnect with pieces she hasn't seen for decades. “That's an important reunion to have with your language,” she said. “I always find myself going back and forth with the work to better understand what I want to say.” The title of the show is, fittingly, “Make Me a Summary of the World”—an invitation and an appeal that one imagines the curious Banerjee asks of herself, and that her work asks of her.

*Visit our Digital Library at library.artasiapacific.com for more articles on Rina Banerjee.



(Top)
A lion sculpture fixed atop a wall pedestal, an homage to the animals that Banerjee saw growing up in India.

(Bottom)
A detail from a mixed-media painting, which Banerjee mentioned depicts forms and creatures that might resemble humans in their configurations, yet are merely abstractions.

