

JAISHRI ABICHANDANI



Portrait of Jaishri Abichandani. Photo by Ysabelle Cheung for ArtAsiaPacific.

JAISHRI ABICHANDANI, *Holy Family*, 2017. Foam, epoxy, resin, paint, 50.8 x 38.1 x 33 cm. Photo by Anders Jones. Courtesy the artist.

Wonder Kali

BY YSABELLE CHEUNG

During a panel discussion at the Sharjah Art Foundation’s March Meeting 2018, artist Naeem Mohaiemen unveiled a diagram connecting artists, curators, organizations, publications and even nightclubs that been part of the South Asian arts scene in New York since the 1990s. By far the densest cluster of names was around the South Asian Women’s Creative Collective (SAWCC), with arrows shooting off to artists including Chitra Ganesh, Rina Banerjee and Mohaiemen himself. All these paths eventually also led to artist, curator and writer Jaishri Abichandani, who founded SAWCC in 1997.

As an activist and curator, Abichandani has been an architect of discussions around intersectional rights and visibility for over two decades. Along with running SAWCC, from 2003 to 2006 she was founding director of public events and projects at the Queens Museum. There, she co-curated the 2005 group exhibition “Fatal Love: South Asian American Art Now,” the first to represent the plurality of South Asian voices in America, in order to, as she wrote in the catalog, “[reconnect] aesthetics and artistic traditions that were historically entangled until the violent rupture of the Partition, instead of isolating and losing them once again.”

In her own practice, Abichandani utilizes motifs and symbols of feminism to imagine radical, alternative existences. The first object one encounters in her Brooklyn studio is *Abortion Goddess* (2017)—an armless, geometric-shaped, pearlescent sculpture with her legs bent in a plié—created after undergoing three procedures. “It’s a beautiful way to think about [abortion] because in this reality, I couldn’t handle a girl child,” Abichandani said. “Not with the fear of what the planet is going to bring, and the patriarchy. So with this work, I was thinking about all the other infinite possibilities, all the other eggs that you don’t use or don’t have.”

Abichandani was born in Mumbai in 1969, and immigrated to the United States in 1984. In the early 2000s, she photographed South Asian communities, using long exposures to capture the movements of her subjects, which included queer nightclub dancers. She also took self-portraits with double or triple exposure, layered over with spectral, veil-like illustrations of Hindu deities. However, it wasn’t until her studies in London’s Goldsmiths University—where she completed her postgraduate diploma and then an MFA, from 2002 to 2005—that she was moved to navigate beyond the

single-image format into other media, and where she was provided the context with which to criticize the racial injustice around her, and articulate her discomfort as an Indian artist in the US. Her mentor, British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare, had been the first prominent voice to converse with her about rejecting the white gaze. Abichandani recalled: “He described this European attraction to rationalization and intellectualizing, and the idea of stepping back from emotion as a response to that—it was something that no one had quite explained to me with such clarity before.”

In the years after Goldsmiths, and throughout various transitional periods—moving back to the US, marrying fellow artist Richard Oliver Wilson, and becoming a mother herself—Abichandani began to explore the body and the image as a site of agency and transformation. For example, in her sculptures featuring leather whips, dildos and BDSM paraphernalia, she reifies the history of bodily violence and pleasure through objects laden with heavy symbolism—the whip, for example, signifies the traumas of slavery in the US, as well as being a tool for religious self-flagellation, and sexual domination. In a divergence from her earlier self-portraiture, the light-box work *Klingon as Self* (2012), one of several that she created in these years, depicts her own facial features and long hair merged onto the profile of the male extraterrestrial, whose species is characterized in the *Star Trek* franchise as violently carnal, exhibiting biting behavior as a way to indicate heat. The work renders Abichandani both hypersexual and sexless, reflecting her conflicted thoughts about being a mother at the time

More recently, she has moved away from such overt tensions, instead reconciling the lost or unseen lives of women. Her sculpture of an alternate *Holy Family* (2017) features a nude lesbian couple with gold nose rings, jewelry and roses braided around their calves and feet, one carrying a human baby, and the other carrying a lotus-headed baby: a symbol of creative fertility. The work is part of “Before Kali” (2013–), a 108-sculpture series that references clay statues of women found in Indus Valley dating to 3,500 BCE. Ranging from 15 centimeters to almost one meter in height, the objects take these classical forms and convey contemporary narratives and myths around resistance, depicting women protesting or embracing their bodies, some of which have fish bellies or lizard heads.

Abichandani’s activist work and artistic practice often fuel one another. In 2017, on a public radio program, she broke her silence about her sexual assault by the late photographer Raghuraj Singh. In response to this trauma, she organized a performance-protest outside the Met Breuer in December, which featured a solo presentation of Singh’s work at the time. Her intent, she explained, was not to exile him from art history, but to publicly affix his record of abuse to his photography, as well as to acknowledge others who had suffered his misconduct.

She further exorcised her demons by creating a sculpture of Singh—lying on his back with his groin exposed, a camera by his side—and titled it *Weapon of My Predator* (2017). From a loose collection of other sculptures and relief portraits based on people she has met or interacted with in her life, the work, as she mentioned, “was the darkest one made.” Abichandani has also created sculpted tributes to Malkia Cyril, a black activist advocating for net neutrality and Kiran Gandhi, who made headlines when she ran the 2015 London marathon without a tampon during her period. Recently, the Asian Arts Initiative (AAI) commissioned Abichandani to create a set of relief portraits, *Jasmine Blooms at Night* (2017–18), featuring key AAI members such as Raya Sarkar, a 25-year-old law student who created a list of abusive men in academia in India, and Bhairavi Desai, founder of the New York Taxi Workers Alliance.

With an upcoming retrospective in 2020 at the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles and other curatorial projects in the pipeline, Abichandani continues pushing for social change through cultural activities. However, making time for herself and grounding her identity, as a woman beyond being an artist, curator, mother or wife, is also fundamental. She recounted how, after a particularly busy period in 2017—when she had co-organized a three-day symposium as a follow-up to 2005’s “Fatal Love,” at the Queens Museum and Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center—she booked herself a vacation for one. She created a relief sculpture of that time, titled *Mum’s Holiday*, which features herself, nude, with the splendid vista of the ocean through a window. She recalled the trip with relish: “It’s exactly what a woman would want to do when she’s alone—reading a book, having a fag, eating ice cream, drinking coffee: the joy of solitude in your own company.”