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Renluka Maharaj Interview

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Interviewer: Steven Zych
Artist: Renluka Maharaj
Location: In person - Chicago, IL, East Loop
Date: February 2nd, 2017



Photo courtesy of the artist.

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Asian American Arts and Culture during the 2017 Winter Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor of Art, Media & Design.

Bio: Renluka Maharaj grew up in the country of Trinidad and Tobago and moved to New York as a child where spent most of her life. Her Eastern and Western background wrapped with modern sensibilities is evident in her bodies of work. Her interests are centered on gender roles, sexuality, colonialism, mythology, iconography and fetishism. Some of the artists that have influenced her work are Yinka Shonibare and Yasumasa Morimura.

Ms. Maharaj completed her BFA at the University of Colorado Boulder and is currently completing her MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where she received the Barbara De Genevieve scholarship. Her works are in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, Joan Flasch book collection and special collections at the University of Colorado Boulder. <https://www.renluka.com/>

Interview Transcript:

Steven Zych: Hello, this is February 2nd. Steven Zych and Renluka Maharaj? Is that correct? And then is it okay if I record this?

Renluka Maharaj: Yes it's okay if you record this.

SZ: Thank you. Cool. So, I don't think anything in particular, I don't know why this stuck out me as much, I think it's because a lot of my academic stuff right now is very, like I just took my first gender studies course last quarter and so that's hot on my mind, that's why it stood out.¹

RM: So what did you think about the gender studies class though? Why would, um, you saw the photograph. Was there something that hit home? Or something that you identified with as far as, or is it just because they're striking? I mean, for me when I made *Epicene* (2012) it was a very performative body of work for because I grew up the youngest in a very big family of seven brothers; Classic Hindu background. Very sheltered kid. And so I always identified more with my dad than I did with my mom

SZ: Okay, and was that because you had so many brothers?

RM: I think it was because I had so many brothers but also because I felt that the male's place was the more powerful in the family and so I wanted to be more like my dad and my brothers. And so I remember smoking when I was five years old, and drinking and being like a boy, whatever that means. I was never allowed to wear pants in my family. So yeah, and then those are the kinds of things that came to mind when I was creating that body of work. But I didn't want to leave out the female aspect because that was also-- I didn't want to be a boy. I was happy being a girl, but I felt that the power dynamic was interesting in the male side of the family. And when I was about twelve, I discovered this god [Ardhanarishvara] that was both male and female

¹ This is the continuation of a previous conversation. Renluka and I were speaking about her series *Epicene* previous to the start of this recording. It is now being discussed.

and I thought well that was really interesting. What does that mean? So I used that image, that iconography, as reference in making the *Epicene* body of work.

SZ: Do you think that you chose that deity specifically because you had a Hindu upbringing?

RM: Well I was brought up very religiously. Hinduism is a huge part of my work. My religion, my culture, and my family are a very big part of my work. Yes, absolutely.

SZ: So, you said that-- It sounds like, in these self- portraits, the masculine aspects that are presented are in some way a re-appropriation of power. Is that a correct reading?

RM: A *re*-appropriation of power?

SZ: Yeah, well you said it's like the man had the status, and there was a sort of desire for that perhaps.

RM: Well there's a desire for it but it's not all about-- I wouldn't call it the *re*-appropriation of power. I would say presenting power in a different way. I wouldn't-- I'm not trying to pick sides, that's why it's both male and female. I think that both sides have something to give to the other, and there's a constant give-and-take with the male and female. It's similar to how the Chinese think about yin and yang, and like power balance and nature balance. And that's how I was thinking of these pieces, the idea of balance, of one side kind of helping each other along. There's no division at all. There's no binary. There's this sort of fluidity that happens.

SZ: See that is something that I picked up on when I was looking at it but I didn't want to put words in your mouth, so I'm happy that that came out. Is it cool if I just read some of the questions? The first one says: Tell me a bit about yourself. What has it been like living and studying in different parts of the United States?

RM: Okay. I was born in the West Indies in Trinidad. I moved to New York when I was a kid and I lived there for about thirty years and so most of my life is in New York. Studying in New York was ... it was different because I was a painter when I was in New York and I studied with an African-American painter named William Williams. He was my mentor and it was a very rich relationship; he also reminded me of my dad. Then, I moved out to Colorado where I live now;, back-and-forth between Colorado and Chicago. Colorado is a very interesting place because it is extremely privileged. And I live in Boulder, which is a very white, business, wealthy-- it's like y'know, it's almost like a bubble in the United States. And then coming to Chicago the diversity was really important for me, to be around people where I felt like I was running into people who actually looked like me. There are a lot of Indians in Chicago. I felt a little more comfortable here. I feel like my work has changed since I've been here, since I've been at SAIC [School of the Art Institute of Chicago] and that's not because of the school per se, but it's definitely because of the people I've met being in Chicago. The reason that I decided to come to grad school was because I needed to have more dialogue around the issues of colonialism, race, identity, all of these things because I felt like I was-- I definitely wasn't having that in Colorado. I did not have that opportunity at all. It's a very-- I felt very insulated and I didn't like it at all so I thought "Okay let me go to grad school, meet some people, further the education." At the time I

was thinking, “Oh, it’d be great to teach eventually.” I’m not sure if that’s what I wanna do anymore, but that’s like a good overall picture of my...

SZ: Cool. When did you stop painting? When you left New York?

RM: No, I stopped painting about maybe-- yeah probably, about five years ago. I mean, I do paint now and again but not with that sort of passion as I did before.

SZ: What changed?

RM: Well nothing has changed really. Because the way I look at my paintings-- my photos. I look at them as paintings because I build them from scratch. I shoot in studio. I create the scenery around the subject. Sometimes the scenery is the subject. I build the same way I would build a painting on a canvas. Choosing everything, controlling every element of it. So for me, I’ve strayed physically from applying the paint. But metaphorically, how I create the photograph [has remained the same]. And I think another thing too, perhaps when I was painting, because painting took a long time for me. I take a long time to make work, but when I start I create an entire portfolio in a month, y’know. I take a while to process and learn and research and I found that with painting I wasn’t getting it immediately. I felt I needed to do something outside of it to get the results quicker. And I started doing film photography, and then I found out I was allergic to the chemicals in the darkroom and so I picked up digital photography and it was just like “Wow, this is amazing. I can produce more”. I need to have images in front of me; everything has to be visual. And so I’m the kind of person where if I need a sample of paint color in my house, I’ll paint an entire room. I’m not gonna paint the little patch like most people. So I need to see things. I may not use all the photographs I create, but I need to make them.

SZ: Okay, what do you shoot with? Like what’s your standard workflow like?

RM: I have, as far as my equipment, a Canon Mark D3 that I have now, with a 24-105mm lens. I also have telephoto lenses. I have wide-angle lenses. That’s primarily what I shoot with.

SZ: Okay. How would you, if you had to, how would you define and/or categorize your art?

RM: Categorize? I try not to do that, but I’ve been put into categories. Like when you asked me about the gender work, that’s been put into categories. My work is really, I feel, it’s definitely shifting from the time I came here. I feel I’ve actually grown with my work as far as growing and knowing about me. It’s changing along with how I’m beginning to see myself and now what’s important to me and what’s always been important, but even more accented now, is wanting to talk about being a brown person in the United States. And I was making this work before [Donald] Trump was elected and so this doesn’t have anything to do with Trump per se, but Trump definitely exaggerates the situation. So that’s really where my focus is now and trying to do the research and read the right people. I don’t know who that is half the time. I’m looking-- right now I just started reading Homi Bhabha, who is an Indian writer and philosopher but he’s very dense and difficult so it’s taking awhile to get through his work. I don’t want to categorize my work. I think, like most I artists, I would-- y’know I have discussions about this a lot. “Who is my audience? Where is my work going to be seen? Where do I want to show my work?” And I

feel that I want my work to have a large audience. I don't want it to be-- of course as artists we all want our work in some famous museum or gallery. I'm not gonna deny that because I feel that the more people see the work the better. Wherever I can get it I want to put it. But I really want to have a wider audience of people who can have conversations around things I'm talking about. Hopefully they understand and get what I'm talking about.

SZ: Are there any particular art movements that you're associated with it? Collectives, organizations, things like that.

RM: That I'm *associated* with?

SZ: Yeah.

RM: Directly as far as my work or just personally? Or anything?

SZ: Personally is fine as well.

RM: No.

Both: [Laughing]

RM: When I lived-- well I live in Colorado but there is a photo show they do every year called the Month of Photography in Denver and it's a pretty widespread thing now and each year it keeps getting bigger and bigger. And I'm a member there. I am also a member of Parlor Room which is a visiting artist program within the Photo Department here at SAIC [School of the Art Institute of Chicago].. Any collectives? Nooo. I mean I want to become more collaborative for sure. I am looking for collaborations right now because I have some pieces that are high-production and so I'm looking for people and opportunities where I can shoot. So I am now, I think out of practicality, seeking collaboration. I mean I'm definitely a loner, in that way, even though I spend a lot of time photographing people. In the beginning I was really only photographing myself; Just all me, because it was just easier and I couldn't find a brown body in Colorado to shoot. So, for me now it's like I'm kind of reaching out, being in a more diverse state. Or at least city and finding other bodies that I can include in my work. Yeah.

SZ: Cool. So... The questions I've written down are about the older pieces but now I don't want to ask you about that because I realize now that they're dated. I *was* going to ask you about the meaning of a piece called *Just the Tip* (2012), but that-- cause that one was quite striking.

RM: Was that online?

SZ: Yeah, it was very hard to find. I did a lot of Googling.

RM: [Laughing] How did you find that! Oh my god!

RM: So *Just the Tip* was about talking about women's relationship-- well, women's roles in relationships. The idea of how men respond to certain things, sexually. I mean it's a hyper-sexual

photo, obviously.² The idea of domination, submission, and had also-- y'know that piece scares everyone. Especially men, because-- I think the series scares a lot of men and the feedback I've gotten is that-- and like I've said I haven't forgotten about it. I will go back to that series; to pick up this or incorporate this stuff in my work now, I just have to find the way to do that. So it's dated insofar as it's four years old but it's not dated in that I'm now starting to look at it again-- there's one piece from that series that's actually now reappearing in my new work. And so, they will look at the face, they know that it's a woman. It's an attractive face. But then they look down and they see that there's a giant penis there and then they're not sure how to feel about it and if they're attracted to it it's like "Well, am I gay? No. Am I-- I don't know, what am I? Where do I stand sexually?" And so I did those pieces and when I started hearing these reactions I thought it was perfect because that's exactly the kind of feedback I wanted and that I was hoping to get, people just questioning. What is their own sexuality when they're faced with something that might turn them on in some way? Or they might start to question why they're feeling this way about this image?

SZ: How, technically speaking, did you go about taking this series of photos? And then why also do you, at least for those and the older stuff, why do you choose to shoot on black?³

RM: Yeah, um I like the black background because what black does for me is that it gives you no sense of centeredness, like for the viewer. You can't really grasp onto anything. And so it makes you feel unsafe, it makes you-- well I'm assuming-- that it makes you feel kind of unsteady, unstable. So that's why I like to shoot on black. It presents itself in like a fantastic kind of way but there's still that right amount of realism that allows one to question. How did I shoot it? Well, every character is me. I just do makeup. I apply makeup. The only Photoshop that is done on those is attaching the penis to my body. In some shows that I've been in I've had people question my sexuality like "Are you trans? Do you have a penis?" I've had some people ask me "Can we *see* your penis?"

SZ: Well that seems in poor taste.

RM: Yeah I know, but it got even worse when I would offer to lift my skirt.

Both: [Laughing]

RJ: Like "Yeah, wanna see my penis?" and some people would be like "Yeah! Let's see the penis!" and then some people when I would start lifting my skirt they would say "Oh no no no no no no no no! We believe you, we believe you." I'm like "Well what do you believe?" So yeah, I think I can present very masculine, if I get dressed up. Y'know for the longest time I've been labeled like "dyke, lesbian, trans." I mean I found out that when I got selected for SAIC the panel had no idea what my sexuality was and I was shocked that it was even a consideration in that conversation.

² And it is. In the photo, Renluka is laying on a black background with her legs open. A very large, realistic penis has been Photoshopped onto her crotch.

³ Much of Renluka's work is shot against an absolutely black background. No shadow, no highlight.

SZ: That would be so weird that would be part of the ... admissions panel?

RM: Well I don't think it was part of the admissions panel. I think it might have been curiosity of a couple of members of the panel.

SZ: So then the next question I'd written down was about *Ardhanarishvara* and how that complicates notions of gender a bit.⁴ But I was wondering if you wanted to talk anymore about like how this has played out in a personal narrative sense, if at all?

RM: Um ... Well I guess it's always-- it's how I exist. In a world where you have these defined socially-constructed notions of what male and female are. Y'know I do fulfill a lot of the male and female [attributes] in a lot of ways, like in how I dress. It's the stereotypical thing I'm talking about, not how I see myself, but how others see me. I am identifying as bisexual. I think that has a lot to do with how I see myself as both male and female. And I do have very-- a lot of men will say to me "[You're] very male in a lot of ways, how [you] talk about things" which I find really disturbing but this is how they've defined me in some strange ways. And yeah I think I'm-- I'm also a mom so I'm very motherly and connected to the feminine and very protective y'know. So I think it does have-- it plays a huge narrative.

SZ: Do you identify with any particular, conscripted gender label?

RM: No.

SZ: No?

RM: No. I mean, no. Not really. Even saying bisexual is even weird to say but it's the closest I can-- it's the closest I guess, if I *wanted* to label myself. Yeah.

SZ: Assuming, for some reason, you did want to yeah.

RM: Yeah, yeah.

SZ: Um, so do you consider yourself Asian-American? Or like?

RM: That is SUCH a big topic for me, y'know when I-- growing up in Trinidad, coming to the [United] States I spent all the years in New York with people saying to me "So, where are you from?" "I'm from Trinidad."

SZ: The old "What are you?" type question?

RM: Yeah, and it's like "Oh, I thought you were Indian." I'm like "Well y'know there are a lot of Indians in Trinidad" and how the Indians got in Trinidad by the way: in the mid-1800's when the British started colonizing the islands, my grandparents came over as indentured servants on the boat from Calcutta to Trinidad. So there are a lot of Indians in the islands. They're everywhere. But yes I do identify as Asian-American. Absolutely. I feel like a lot of the times

⁴ Ardhanarishvara is a Hindu deity who is half male and half female.

Asian in America doesn't mean South Asian. It means other Asians. So sometimes it's hard for me to say "Yes I'm Asian-American" but whenever I fill out a form, whenever I take a survey, whenever, I always label myself as Asian-American. Yes.

SZ: Do you ever directly speak to Asian-American identity in your work?

RM: I think a lot of it [does] especially the second body of work ... *Remembrance of Things to Come*. So, that series I made this year-- well no, 2016 in March, in the spring of 2016. What happened with that body of work: I was frustrated and beside myself. Second semester. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to take a break from the *Epicene* series. And my sister fell ill, and so I was spending more time with my family and travelling back to New York a lot. I realized how much I missed my family and how much I missed the expression of our religion and our culture and I just started spending more time and having all of these memories of my childhood back home and how amazing and lovely and nurturing it was to be brought up like that, to be brought up a very y'know devout Hindu and finding comfort and solace-- especially when you go through a hard time, right? Religion is the opiate. But still, religion for me is extremely important. All religion is. I have a thing with religion and um, fetishism and iconography and darkness and sadomasochism. I mean all these things I try to bring into my work because they're all part of who I am y'know. But yes, absolutely. It plays a huge part.

SZ: Have you ever been in an exhibition that was somehow marked as an Asian-American exhibition?

RM: No.

SZ: No?

RM: No.

SZ: How would you feel if that did happen?

RM: Y'know I'm not sure it's a good question because one of my chips on my shoulder right now, I should say, is that when people look at my work or they come into my studio, especially with *Remembrance of Things to Come*, I think there's a-- depending on who's looking at it-- there is... The white artists, students, professors, most of them-- not all-- have a harder time entering the work because they feel like there is nothing for them that they can identify with, that they can talk about because there's nothing that is familiar to them. So therefore, because it's not familiar to them, perhaps it's not good work or maybe it's work that needs to be changed somehow. A lot of them-- or a few of them-- were saying that it's "ethnic" or "Indian" or... using words that for me are trigger words. If I were to be invited to be in a [Asian American exhibition] I would jump at it. There's one part of me that's a little upset because I feel like I can't climb out of this label that I am continually being put me in. But I can't create work that I don't identify with. I'm not going to make work that isn't about me and isn't about what I know, which is Eastern *and* Western, y'know?

SZ: Yeah.

RM: And the other part is: I want to support the other artists that are like me making work and forming alliances and forming relationships and forming collaborations and strengthening that pool of artists, absolutely, yeah.

SZ: So, what types, and this is now getting a bit more broad, what types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

RM: Well since I've been at SAIC [School of the Art Institute of Chicago] I haven't been chasing any exhibitions. I haven't been entering any kind of contests, I haven't been-- I've sort of taken a break because I really wanna focus on what I want to say. And with the MFA show fast approaching, I have no idea what I'm doing.

SZ: When is it?

RM: I think April 28th is the opening.⁵ Um, I don't know yet. I can't really answer that question yet. Of course I was invited a couple times to shows when I was in India, but I couldn't attend. I couldn't send work or do anything because I was in India. Um, for me I really hope to be more international. I've been trying to make-- actually I have been making, not just trying to, connections in Spain and when I was India-- unfortunately I'm not sure if that's the market for my work, it could be, I'm gonna try to see if I can get some... But I wanna have more of a presence internationally, for sure.

SZ: Why is India not the market for your work?

RM: Because India's art market is not a big market. But like I said, I'm not sure yet. I think if I were to contact maybe a few galleries-- because there's not really a big Indian art scene. I think that it's burgeoning and that they're starting to, as they are in Denver where I show my work in sometimes. But it could be. I would like to test it, and see if it is. But for now I'm more trying to stay quiet. Like I said I'm not seeking exhibitions, I'm just taking this time to really, to really spend time with myself and with my work. Yeah.

SZ: And what specifically is that work right now?

RM: Well like I was saying earlier it's about my role as a woman, specifically as a brown woman, in this Western landscape (see figure 1 and 2 – *Finding My Place* series 2016). Physically and figuratively, especially being in Colorado, where you can't escape the fact that you're in the American West and this visual of this brown person in the American West and what this means and how that impacts a culture and my body within that space.. So that's really what I'm focusing on now. All of that. How do I navigate now? Y'know I was in New York when 9/11 happened, and I was terrified. I was-- I always wore my traditional Indian clothes, and then when 9/11 happened I stopped wearing them. I stopped wearing it and then I put a flag on my front porch. And someone stole the flag. I had a neighbor that would tell to go back to my country.

⁵ April 28, 2017. Two-and-a-half months from recording this interview.

SZ: Wow, yeah.

RM: So for now, it's terrifying. I mean, it's like immigration stuff bothers me because I like to travel. And I fear that even though I may not be coming from one of those seven countries, you don't know what's gonna happen at the airport anymore.

SZ: Do you fear that if you were to go back to India for a bit, for example, that you may not be able to return to the [United States]?

RM: Well I wasn't born in India. I was born in Trinidad.

SZ: I know but you said that you were travelling there. So if you were to travel there or—

RM: Yeah actually I came back two days before that executive order was established and I actually feared not being able to come back to the country. And it's an ongoing fear that I have. It's almost like "walking brown" is a crime. That's what it is, it's a crime. And so, in America, there doesn't seem to be this differentiation like "Are you Muslim? Are you Hindu? Are you Sikh?" No. It's like "If you're brown, you're a terrorist." And I discovered so many things on this trip to India because I was in a group with predominantly white or other Asian Americans. More Korean and Chinese. I remember we went to this really fancy women's studio. She made all this fancy clothes, like Indian-inspired clothes. She was white. Everyone was buying! And I wasn't buying and so they were like "Well, how come you're not buying anything?" And I said "Well, unlike you, I can't wear these clothes in America. You can. But if I do, I'm a fucking terrorist. So I can't." And that is true, that is absolutely true. And there was a lot of these things that happened on this trip... [laughing] I'm actually gonna write a big paper on this trip to India with a group that was predominantly not-Indian. It was [more of] an eye-opening experience of the group [being] in India than actually [me] being in India. Because when I was in India, I felt like I was home. Things felt familiar to me: worshipping, the iconography, the people all look like me. It was wonderful. People would approach me and they were speaking to me in Hindi, which I don't understand cause it was hardly spoken in my house. But I felt accepted and like no one was second-guessing my identity. For me, that was the best part about being in India, unlike places in the states.

SZ: Just out of curiosity, do you speak other languages aside from English?

RM: Um, I speak a little Spanish, but nothing aside from that. I used to speak Hindi when I was a child, but when I left my country and I came here it just disappeared. I was reading and writing. And have I tried to teach myself several times? I've tried to, but I don't have patience.

SZ: You said that your parents didn't teach you. Correct?

RM: They would speak more English to us. My older siblings knew some Hindi, but by the time I came around it wasn't only my parent taking care of me, it was also my siblings taking care of me, and everybody spoke English. And people at my school spoke English. So I used to have to go to temple to learn to read and write Hindi. And because I was a child when I came to the States and it wasn't something that people followed up on, I just never bothered and I started only using English.

SZ: Do you wish could?

RM: Yes, I do. I feel the language will open up other opportunities for me within... I don't know, somewhere, I'm hoping. But for me I think it would add to my identity as an Indian person. It would strengthen that identity. I would feel-- I think I would feel stronger, y'know, if I spoke my own language. I would feel like I am celebrating that and so I met someone in India that does teach over Skype and he's super cheap—

Both: [Laughing]

RM: --as opposed to people in the States. He's like seven bucks an hour.

SZ: That's really good.

RM: I know! Like, oh my god! So I have to contact him and start my lessons. So that's one of the things I want to do this year.

SZ: Um, sorry. You did say your *siblings* learned Hindi, but then you were more raised by your siblings than your parents. Do *they* still speak Hindi though?

RM: My parents are both gone.

SZ: I meant your older siblings. Do they still?

RM: No, they don't really use it. It's funny because most of my-- I have ten siblings; I have four siblings that speak Spanish which they learned while living in Saint Croix; we all speak English.

SZ: Mhm, do you think there was any fear of like-- I know that I've heard other Asian American parents expressing a fear that their children won't grow up speaking English well enough and so they won't teach them their home language... No fear of that?

RM: That was never an issue. No, not at all. I mean, coming from Trinidad, each island in the Indies has its own language, so in fact there is another language that I speak. It's a Patois that's spoken on the island, but it's not Hindi, no. But it is another language, which is a mesh of all the people that have gone to the island: African, Spanish, French, and off course, the British. So it's a combination of all these languages.

SZ: Cool, I think I'm good for the questions I have.

RM: Oh wow!

SZ: Is there any last thing you'd like to put on record?

RM: Nope, I think this is pretty good. You made talk a lot, this was fantastic.

SZ: Thank you so much.

RM: Yeah!

END

Figure 1.
Renluka Maharaj from the *Finding My Place* series
“Girls who read make bad wives, 2016, 40x60 digital archival photograph



Figure 2.
Renluka Maharaj from the *Finding My Place* series
“Finding My Place,” 2016, 40x60, digital archival photograph

