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Sabba Syal Elahi Interview (1 of 2)

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Interviewer: Simi Mathew  
Artist: Sabba Syal Elahi  
Phone Interview Chicago  
Date: May 16, 2013

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Asian American Arts and Culture during the 2013 Spring Quarter as part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, Media, & Design. The interview was edited by the artist and published in 2016, along with a follow up interview conducted by Derek Hamilton.

Bio and image courtesy of the artist.

Bio: Sabba Syal Elahi received her M.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and her art has been featured nationally at ArtWallah, internationally in Spain and Pakistan, and in the Chicagoland area. Sabba’s artwork is rooted in her bicultural experience and explores issues of cultural and historical representation, identity, and gender through personal, family, and community narratives. From 2011-2009 Sabba curated the visual art for an annual Chicago event called Voices of Resistance, which showcased the work of Chicago and Midwest based South Asian artists. Sabba has served four years as Coordinator of College and Career Programs at Marwen, a position which complements her psychology and visual arts background and professional experience serving youth, families, and communities of color. Recently, Sabba participated in a Teaching Artist Residency at Ragdale and will begin the Bolt Artist Residency program in July of 2013.
Interview Transcript:

Simi Mathew: Okay, so my first question for you is if you can tell me a little about your past or your background?

SSE: Sure. So I was raised in a pretty traditional Pakistani household in the Midwest. I grew up in Ohio, and then came to Chicago to attend DePaul for my undergraduate degree. I didn’t know immediately that I wanted to pursue art, but I’d always been a creative person. My high school had very limited offerings in the visual arts, and I didn’t have a lot of exposure to the arts, no one else in my family is an artist or was in a creative field at the time. It was definitely new for me and new for my family too. I came to the visual arts actually through the community work and volunteering I was doing. At DePaul, I started to use art as a tool to work with children, I was working with a child with autism, and I later became involved with an organization called Apna Ghar, which means “our home”, a domestic violence organization serving primarily South Asian women. At Apna Ghar, I led a weekly art making group for the children, which focused on art for self-expression. And then around the same time I started taking art history courses at DePaul, and I was engaged with contemporary art and how artists were exploring identity, culture, political issues, and learning about how art is a powerful tool of communication. That really hooked me to study visual art. I started to take more studio arts courses and at the time I was still a psychology major. I began to feel that I seriously wanted to pursue making art. I ended up majoring in both psychology and studio art, focusing on painting and drawing. It was interesting that the more I became involved at Apna Ghar’s shelter, simultaneously, my work grew more culturally significant. And then at the start of my senior year, September 11th had happened. I knew I didn’t necessarily want to create work that was responding to the event, but I was definitely concerned with how women from the Middle East, Afghanistan, and South Asia were being portrayed. I started a series of work looking at women who take the hijab, the Islamic veil. I began the process by interviewing women who I knew whom take the hijab, friends, extended family, acquaintances, asking them what were their reasons to veil. The series of work I created were drawings and paintings of myself taking the hijab, in my everyday---getting dressed, with my family, everyday moments that we weren’t seeing in the media particularly at that time. Women who took the hijab were presented very black and white as oppressed or as violent/militant---and I don’t think that’s radically changed but there have been more positive images out there since. I developed this series and related work post undergrad for graduate school. I ended up receiving my Master’s in Fine Arts at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago because I was attracted to the interdisciplinary nature of their program.

SM: How was the response from your family when you changed to wanting to pursue art further?

SSE: At first I think they felt uncertain and anxious about this step because I was a psychology and studio art major who was thinking at the time to become an art therapist. My parents were advocating for this route as opposed to an M.F.A. When I started making my own work, I felt
empowered and I was open to new possibilities. A couple of years after undergrad, I applied to graduate school, mostly M.F.A. programs, and it was then, that my family and I had very open discussions about an art education. My parents wanted to support my decision; when it’s something I’m really passionate about, they’ll also look for my best interest. Ultimately, they had the typical concerns of any parent across culture whose child is receiving an art education “how are you going to survive,” “what can you do with an art degree?” and so on. My parents really wanted to hear what my long-term plan was, so I was learning a lot along the way too about an art education!

SM: Okay so my next question, how would you define yourself as a person and as an artist?

SSE: I would say I am a cultural maker, educator, and artist foremost. I identify more with the label of a South Asian American, but it is a more recent shift, as less of my extended family now lives in Pakistan. Growing up, I always identified as Pakistani, and later South Asian, when I learned what that term meant and more about my own family history! I don’t feel so disconnected from my roots, which is why I felt that South Asian American or Pakistani American implied a distance. Maybe that is because I grew up regularly visiting Pakistan, I also speak Urdu, and any family whom immigrated here in the late 90s and 2000s always stayed with my family as a home base. Incorporating what it means to be American has been more complex for me. I grew up hearing, “we are different,” “not American,” and I also have deep issues with America’s foreign policy. So I have had to negotiate what it means for me to travel in Pakistan and be seen as an American and vice versa here. I identify more as a South Asian than American, but am more American than Pakistani, if that makes sense.

SM: Can you tell me a little bit about Marwen and your involvement?

SSE: I returned to Chicago in early 2009, after living in San Francisco for a couple of years where I was mostly involved with fundraising and grant writing work. I wanted to work in the visual arts, and Chicago made sense because my connections from both undergrad and grad school are here. I was attending tons of networking events in the arts, and I found out about Marwen from alumnus Akeelah Williams at an arts education conference. I had Marwen on my radar and saw the opening for my position a couple months later on Chicago Artist Resource and I applied. I was fortunate to be selected for my position, especially at an organization that has a strong sense of local community and so forward thinking with their arts mission. What Marwen does is provide free visual arts courses and college & career programming to Chicago youth, grades 6-12, who come from communities where access to an art education is often limited and are economically disadvantaged. I’m working with young people in Chicago, building their leadership skills through the work I do, empowering them to go on to higher education and higher education in the arts. It’s been a really great fit because it brings both elements of my education background and my work experience with communities of color, and has brought me closer to my art practice as well. The community of students and teaching artists is really special. I haven’t found anything like it in this city, Marwen really is a gem.
SM: What is the meaning behind the Voices of Resistance event?

SSE: Voices of Resistance (VOR) comes out of this volunteer collective called South Asian Progressive Action Collective (SAPAC) formed by a group of politically engaged South Asian Americans in their 20s living in Chicago. They began focusing on the issue of communalism in India. The Gujarat massacre had just happened at the time, and there was interest in bridging the gap between what’s going on in the Indian subcontinent and what’s happening within the Chicago/Midwest community. SAPAC started in 2001 and the first Voices of Resistance was birthed shortly after that and it ended up being a very much grassroots event at a coffee shop. It was received really well. It was an opportunity of artists of South Asian descent to come and share their work around a curated theme. Since then, it’s been continuing and the artists that have been a part of it have been musicians, dancers, visual artists, performance artists, spoken word artists. The idea for VOR was really that there’s not a lot of space for artists of South Asian descent to voice community and personal issues in the Midwest. There’s more representation of South Asian artists on both the coasts and more structures and ways for them to gather. We felt it was something unique that was happening in the Midwest and in Chicago.

I first became involved with SAPAC as a VOR artist in 2005 when the event was held at Insight Arts located then in Rogers Park. When I returned to Chicago in 2009, I had been on the list serve for SAPAC, and I wanted to get more involved, so I became a core member. The last 3 VORs, 2009-2011, I’ve curated the visual artwork and participated as an exhibiting artist too. I was very deeply involved in the programming for the last VOR, VOR10 Revision, celebrating 10 years of SAPAC and also critically looking at 10 years since 9/11. Myself and three other women from SAPAC really changed how VOR was being produced. We created a space for participating artists to share their work and for community critique, by hosting three summer workshops. The work produced for VOR10 was a result of these artists workshops, and also reflective of a more inclusive dialogue between visual and performing artists. The performance event and art exhibition was held at Marwen, which was really a dynamic venue for this work. It was also the first time in VOR’s history that visual artists exhibited work in a gallery space for nearly a month, not just a one night event.

SM: Okay, so my next question is can you talk a little bit about your piece “homecoming”?

SSE: Yes! So that is one of my recent works, which came out of ideas I worked with in VOR10. One of the pieces I exhibited at VOR10 was an installation “undeclared” about the drone attacks which have been happening in Pakistan. A lot of my work is inspired from family conversations and things that are going on within the South Asian Diaspora and this work also came out of personal conversations. Since Obama has taken office, the drone attacks have had a dramatic increase in Pakistan and also their use as surveillance devices in the U.S, such as along the U.S. Mexico border. I am very interested in the fact that it wasn’t just happening over there, but also here in a different way. I created the piece “homecoming” from a desire to want to humanize this issue. I started to think about what if I was being watched in my everyday mundane activities. I
took photographs of myself, and I was intrigued by the ones that were really mundane and didn’t tell a story. When I printed the pictures I really liked the images taken with a fish eyes lens because the effect was kind of like a telescope and it distorted the image as well. I have been mostly working with textiles and embroidery, so I thought it would be interesting to translate these images which are not personal to me into something that is personal to me, hand embroidery. I liked that contrast. The image in homecoming is of me in the bathroom and with a predator drone plane, the same ones used in combat along the Afghanistan & Pakistan border, looming in the background. I envision this developing into a series of hand embroideries. To me it is a commentary on drone warfare; I’m kind of nameless just like the victims of the drone attacks and the drivers that are controlling the drones. Using embroidery also lends a strange intimacy to the images too.

SM: I know you said you self identify as South Asian as an artist. Is identifying as a South Asian American artist something that is important to you in general or in exhibitions?

SSE: I mean I’m proud of my identity, but I think about your question too because the shows I’ve been in lately have been so tied with that theme of the South Asian diaspora. I don’t want to be just labeled as a South Asian/South Asian American artist or an artist focused on identity politics. For me it’s been necessary to exhibit my work in both spaces, South Asian themed and beyond. However what’s also important to me is a dialogue with the local South Asian Diaspora community, and I hope to exhibit my work in other cities where there is a large South Asian Diaspora population like Toronto, South African cities… I would still love to exhibit my work within Pakistan within the Indian subcontinent too, as I am sure it will be received differently there too!

SM: I know you said you self identify as South Asian as an artist. Is identifying as a South Asian American artist something that is important to you in general or in exhibitions?

SSE: I think there’s been a trend throughout because I have found it to be a valuable experience, but more so the last couple of years, particularly since I’ve been involved with VOR my participation has grown. Last August I had the opportunity to participate in a Teaching Artist Residency at Ragdale in Lake Forest, IL. It was a great interdisciplinary artistic environment of writers, visual artists, musicians from different backgrounds focused on very different mediums in their work. A couple months later an exhibition and musical evening was held at Spudnik Press, a community print making studio in Chicago. That was my last exhibition.

SM: Lastly, what are you currently working on?

SSE: I am currently working on expanding the drone series of embroideries, I am moved to because of our current climate of drones. I also have an ongoing series of work focused on the Partition of India at the juncture of my own family history, which I’d also like to keep developing. My work is going to expand in the mediums of embroidery, the use of text and
image, and the way I choose to present it. I hope for more community centered platforms to share my work and future artistic collaborations.

END.