

1-1-2016

Sabba Syal Elahi Interview (2 of 2)

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Recommended Citation

Hamilton, Derek, "Sabba Syal Elahi Interview (2 of 2)" (2016). *Asian American Art Oral History Project*. 79.
https://via.library.depaul.edu/oral_his_series/79

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Interviewer: Derek Hamilton
Artist: Sabba Syal Elahi
In Person Interview in Evanston
Date: February 21, 2016

Note: the following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200: Art & Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2016 Winter Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, and Media & Design. Please also see her previous May 2013 interview conducted by Simi Mathew (edited and published in 2016).



Bio and image courtesy of the artist.

Bio: Sabba Syal Elahi is an interdisciplinary artist, educator, and cultural worker and focuses her art practice in fibers and drawing/painting. She grew up in a traditional Pakistani household in the Midwest. Her art explores political violence, historical representation, memory, and its impact on the South Asian Diaspora and Muslim American communities. Recently, Sabba was a 2013-2014 Resident Artist in Chicago Artist Coalition's Bolt Program and exhibited her work at Woman Made Gallery. For the past 6 years Sabba has provided college and career counseling and portfolio development with an emphasis on the visual arts for high school students at Marwen in Chicago. Sabba received her M.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Interview Transcript:

Derek Hamilton: So tell me about yourself, where are you born?

Sabba Syal Elahi: I was born in Milwaukee. Actually I grew up mainly in the Midwest. My family moved around a little bit and I did my primary and secondary schooling in Ohio and came here to Chicago for my undergrad at DePaul University.

DH: Oh?

SE: Yah, I'm an alum.

[Both laugh]

SE: Since then I've stayed mostly in Chicago. I left and went to the Bay Area and then I came back. I've been in Chicago since 2009, so probably all together 14 years.

DH: Did you get into art during school or after school?

SE: Well, I'm the first visual artist in the last couple generations of my family. I didn't have a lot of exposure to art making growing up and then I got more into art in college really when I was taking contemporary art history; I just really loved how art could be a tool for artists to talk about social issues and a form of activism so I really saw myself in that world and that got me excited about creating artwork. I went onto study art at The Art Institute of Chicago where I completed my M.F.A.

DH: Nice. So you said you went to school in Ohio, so would you say it started there or in college?

SE: I would say I always was drawn to the creative arts. I was more involved in creative writing and theatre in high school, but visual art in college. My art became more culturally relevant when I was volunteering in the South Asian community, particularly at a women's shelter called Apna Ghar. I was leading a children's arts group there and using my art as a tool for community engagement.

DH: How has art impacted your life other than work?

SE: That is a loaded question [laughs] Art...it's interesting, people will say college made them a critical thinker and I feel like art has made me critical thinker and allowed me space to question and challenge assumptions about my community, about myself, so it really is a way of me knowing myself better, knowing my place in the world better as well as understanding and comprehending the world around me. It is very much part of my everyday experience.

DH: Were there any major influences or inspirations in your life?

SE: Yes, I would say the work of several artists of color influence my work, really enjoy the work of Yinka Shonibare, William Kentridge, and Kim Sooja, as well as some Middle Eastern artists like Ghada Amer, Mona Hatoum, Shirin Neshat. Yep, those are a few influences that stand out and feminist writers too, like Audre Lord, Bell Hooks, and Fatima Mernissi a Middle Eastern feminist writer that's influenced my thought, as well as education writers and education theorists like Paulo Freire, so it continues to be a range of influence.

DH: So I was on your website and I've seen your art, how would you describe your art, would you put it under a medium?¹

SE: Right now I'm focused on textile art and embroidery. My background is in painting and drawing but my work is mixed-media; embroidery, printmaking, drawing are the mediums I tend to use in my work.

DH: Speaking of your work, or drone work pieces you used some embroidery for what was going through your mind when you created *drones*, what inspired you to make them?

SE: I've actually been thinking about drones for quite some time and I think that they fascinated me as their dual role both being these objects of surveillance here in the US and these weapons of war in abroad. I wanted to comment on that dual role as well as it was a way to comment on our proximity and distance from these drone wars, from the war on terror. Even for those fighting, war has become digitized and virtual; you know a lot of the drone plots are located in remote deserts in Nevada, Arizona and they are watching everyday details of someone's life and deciding who to target, when to target, where to target. There's more emphasis on place and a kind of dehumanization of the person who is being targeted. I am responding to these issues by taking imageries of myself from an aerial view point, like the view point of the drones themselves, and translate that through embroidery in a way to bring more humanization and out the contradictions of the issues too. When you see the images they are mundane and may mirror everyday details of someone's life. I hope my use of embroidery can speak to the intimate nature of warfare that's visually psychological, though geographically displaced.

DH: How did you learn embroidery?

SE: Well I was always more drawn to the decorative arts, crafts and I didn't do a ton of sewing growing up but I had my hand in a little bit of sewing. Embroidery just attracted me as something I enjoy with my hands and I think that ... the fact that the image is so digitized now that I felt I wanted to continue to be hands on with the issues I am exploring ... embroidery fits my patient nature, I was drawn to responding in this labor-intensive art.

DH: Would you say your Asian American heritage affect your art in any way?

SE: Yah, I would say it definitely shapes and frames the context that I'm working in. I think it took me a while to locate myself in Asia America. Because growing up I saw myself as Pakistani, Muslim, and I became more politicalized in college and thought of my identity as South Asian American, and later Asian American. Just the term "Asian American" felt so broad and growing up I always heard that we are not like Americans, we're different. So I think it took some time for me to just locate myself personally in the Asian American context, and now I find power and solidarity with identifying with the Asian American experience. When I really began to see a shift in my art work was around the time that I mentioned I was working at Apna Ghar with the South Asian community.² 9/11 had also happened, so it felt that ... it felt really important to respond to issues that were important to the South Asian community because those voices were not being heard, you know. We are always telling our stories from someone else's platform. I wanted to challenge the mainstream narrative of South Asians and Muslims as

terrorists, as a oppressed people, so I thought it was important to respond particularly at that moment of time, and I still feel that it is really important to complicate the mainstream narratives that are out there.

DH: The piece or pieces from the “Self Portraits with Hijab,” those where craft paintings?

SE: Yes. So those are paintings and drawings onto actual fabrics of the hijab, that was work I promptly did after September 11th. I interviewed friends and family members who take the hijab, you know, to portray the issue in a different light then mainstream media was portraying it. My images were from domestic spaces, everyday environments and... yes, so those are portraits that I had hand drawn and painted on fabrics of the hijab, the Islamic veil.

DH: So they were a direct response to discrimination and 9/11 or was it something you felt strongly about and then it all fell together when 9/11 happened? I don't know if I'm making sense.

SE: Oh, I see what you're saying...if it triggered that work or was I thinking about that work prior to 9/11? Okay, yah, I would say it was a trigger. As an artist, I always want my art to be relevant to the time and because I'm an artist, I use my art to relate to the conversation. That's a way I respond to, move forward...so yah, it was, to answer your question, I thought it was important to bring out positive narratives of the Muslim experience, particularly for women.

DH: Would you say it's important to incorporate your culture into your art?

SE: Yes, I do. I think especially now in such a climate where Islamaphobia and xenophobia are strong, I mean it's absurd what is happening in our national politics, I mean Donald Trump won South Carolina last night and he is the front-runner for the Republican nomination. What scares me most are his supporters and that the hate rhetoric is a real reflection of our current culture. So I am feeling more now than ever that I'd like to be more direct with my artwork.

DH: So in Apna Ghar you said you helped women and children. Did you ever create art with them?

SE: Oh yah, we never did a collaborative piece but ... I used my art more as a reflection with the women and with the children more as a tool of play and communication. So they individually and collectively created missed-media art, and I created space for intergenerational artistic collaboration too.

DH: So would you say you were an inspiration to them towards communicating through art about themselves and social subjects?

SE: I think that's how I see my work that I'm doing now with high school youth in Chicago. I work at Marwen.³ I'm in a program where I provide both college counseling and I'm an educator there. I provide a lot of one on one advising, career and portfolio development to students interested in art. My teaching practice at Marwen involves helping students create personal work

to make a strong art portfolio for whatever their next steps will be after high school, so I feel like I'm seen more in a mentorship role with the young people here.

DH: So, last question. Are there any pieces or projects you are currently working on?

SE: Yes, I am continuing with the "Everyday Suspects" embroideries. Also, recently I purchased a digital embroidery machine. Surveillance is really hi-tech now and it would add an interesting dimension to my work to use digital embroidery, so I want to play around with mixing in hand and digital embroidered imagery, that's something I'm very excited about. I also created a piece for the last exhibition where I used names of drone casualties in Pakistan from a list published by the Bureau of Investigative Journalists. With ink I layered and layered those names over each other to the point that the artwork almost becomes this blurred black hole. I want to translate those names into a large scale embroidery now. Other than that I'm hopeful for more collaboration. I think it's important to show this work within my community and outside connecting to, you know ... larger issues like how black and brown bodies are being traumatized by the state today. I've met some artists that are working with similar issues and they contributed to a zine I put together, "*Martha Stewart has a Drone.*" We could continue to collaborate on a show or put something else together.

DH: So that's it, thank you.

SE: Thank you.

END.

¹ <http://sabbaelahi.wix.com/elahiarts2#!about/c24vq>

² "Apna Ghar provides holistic services and conducts advocacy across immigrant communities to end gender violence." <http://www.apnaghar.org/>

³ "Marwen educates and inspires under-served young people through the visual arts." <https://marwen.org/>