
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Nirmal Raja Interview

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Interviewer: Dalton Campbell
Artist: Nirmal Raja
Email Correspondence, Milwaukee/Chicago
Date: May 4, 2018

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200: Asian American Art & Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2018 Spring Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor of Art, Media & Design.



Photo and bio courtesy of the artist's website (<http://nirmalraja.com>)

Artist Bio:

“Nirmal Raja is an interdisciplinary artist living and working in Milwaukee, WI. Born in India, she has lived and traveled in several countries. Raja received a Bachelor’s of Arts in English Literature in India, a Bachelor’s of Fine Arts in Painting at the Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design and a Master’s of Fine Arts at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Her work deals with concepts of displacement, cultural negotiation and memory.”

Interview Transcript:

Dalton Campbell: Could you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Nirmal Raja: I was born on the 16th of December, 1968 in a town called Nellore in Southern India. I grew up in various places in India due to my father's job, which required us to move every 2-3 years. We also spent a few years in South Korea and Hong Kong. Due to my many moves, I went to at least 8 different schools before I came to the US. I grew up in a traditional household, and going to art school was not an option. I studied English literature in college, and after coming to this country, studied art between raising two children and many moves. I taught at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee's art department for three years, and eventually quit in order to spend more time in the studio. I started exhibiting locally in small group shows and eventually working my way outwards—reaching across the nation and forming connections internationally through friends and mentors. My professional path has been interrupted and has evolved many times due to life changes and will continue to do so... I have learned to embrace this and yet not waver in my practice as art-making gives me purpose.

DC: When and how did you begin to identify yourself as an artist? And do you have any inclination toward a preferred medium? It seems as though you experiment with many different materials in your work.

NR: I've always been attracted to "making" as a child; even if I didn't understand till later that this would become what I now call "art." I appreciated beauty in all its forms, and there was plenty that surrounded me visually.... I grew up making "Rangoli" designs outside my home, crocheting and embroidering with my grandmother, decorating food and sewing garments. These acts of creation still remain part of my art practice. I began to feel acutely the power of time and change as I was experiencing them in my life. I found it hard to represent these abstract notions the way I wanted to in two-dimensional art. Graduate school gave me freedom to think about art beyond a particular discipline. My work became more idea-driven, and anything and everything became my material as long as it served the idea. That was my foray into video and sculpture. My approach to materials has always been- "If the idea calls for it, use it." The information technology that is at our fingertips right now makes it possible to teach ourselves many things, in addition to collaborating with experts and fellow artists when my knowledge falls short.

DC: How would you define or categorize your art or yourself as an artist?

NR: I define myself as an interdisciplinary artist and a seeker.

DC: Have you ever been included in an exhibition that was contextualized as Asian or Asian American or have you ever been labeled as an "Asian" or "Asian American artist"?

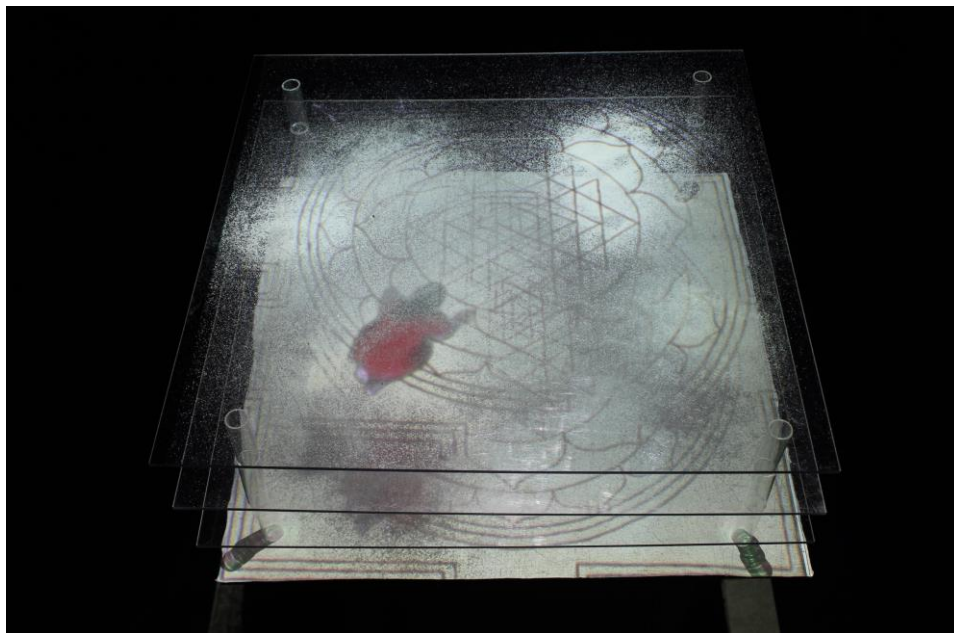
NR: Yes, I have been labeled as a South Asian American artist by inclusion into shows that are decidedly South Asian American. But I also exhibit outside of that category in various shows.

DC: Was identifying as Asian or Asian American something that was important to you personally?

NR: I think identifying as South Asian American gives one room to embrace both sides of your identity but it also has the danger of being pigeonholed into that identity. It is a fine balance. My cultural background is part of my work as it informs and influences my work but it becomes problematic when that is the only defining identity.

DC: Do you ever address themes or histories related to this Asian American identity in your artwork?

NR: Migration is a major factor that influences my work. Change is most drastic and abrupt when your surroundings become memories over and over again. I grew up moving every two to three years due to my father's job and continued to do so even after I came to America, for one reason or the other. Identity became hyphenated and ever-evolving. I have been compelled to think about change both in me and around me ever since art school. The fragmentation and partiality of my experience as a transplanted individual with multiple identities is expressed through incorporating many layers, methods and materials. A break through work that addresses the situation of living between two cultures is my work "Negotiate." This work includes a drawing animation of an ancient diagram (Shri Yantra) and a video performance. Many centuries ago, this diagram was designed as a problem solving tool- the problem being, aiding the mind to focus on meditation. My figure is choreographed and recorded to make it seem like it is interacting with this diagram, changing it and struggling with it. Coupled with the looping installation, it becomes a never-ending repetition of transformation - of becoming and then disintegrating over and over again. The erased diagram never fully disappears much like the embodied cultural memory of childhood that leaves indelible traces despite the passage of time. This work gave me a vocabulary to express the nuanced struggles of navigating life between two cultures- adaptations, struggles, erasures and memories.



Negotiate

Drawing animation and video performance projected on plexiglass and sand
Photo Credit: Nirmal Raja

DC: When, how and why did you first get involved with your curatorial practice? What are some considerations you take into account when selecting works and artists to feature?

NR: I started curating seriously just two years ago in 2016. My curatorial practice emerges from a need to provide visibility to under-represented issues and artists and also facilitate a global understanding. I feel like we are cocooned in our “Americanness” and rarely step out of our comfort zone to connect with people different from us. Our politics reflects this in so many ways... these self imposed blinders do us a disservice. We have become homogenous in our visions and aesthetics. Every time I travel to the coasts or abroad, I am filled with a deep urge to bring that work to Milwaukee to share with the larger community. I like to cross-pollinate, so we can see what others see. As in my art practice, thematic ideas drive my curatorial selection of works and artists. Themes that I choose have a socio-political focus and my goal is to give a platform to artists who are not often seen in the Midwest and who have diverse backgrounds.

DC: What types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

NR: I’ve never been comfortable with the commercial art market and galleries. Most often, I gravitate towards non-profit galleries and museums and this is where I have found most success. I have a conflicted relationship with “value.” On the one hand, I resist the notion of putting a monetary value on investigative and emotive work such as art is and on the other hand, I resent that the work is not valued with a gesture of monetary support towards the making of art as a means of expression and not restricted to an “object” that can be bought.

DC: What are you currently working on?

NR: I usually have several projects going on at the same time. I have a daily studio ritual- making small quick works each and every day in the studio. Meant as warm up exercises, as a collection, they make a whole distinctive body of work together. I conclude each series at a 101- an Indian practice that suggests growth and continuity. Currently, I am working on small collage and graphite drawings- one or two every day. I am close to the end of two photography and video collaborative projects with Lois Bielefeld. One project examines the role of costume and our visual understanding of race, the other questions the veracity of recorded history and our attempts to contend with it. In the studio I am experimenting with fabric and plaster as materials. I enjoy the duality of these two materials together- white against color, hard against soft etc. This work is still in its beginning stages. In the community, I am getting ready for an installation this summer that involves archival images of South Asia in conversation and juxtaposed with a list of hate crimes and racial profiling towards South Asian Americans in order to reveal unconscious biases and preconceived notions of the “other.”

END.