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## Indira Freitas Johnson Interview

Michelle Burke  
*DePaul University*

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Interviewer: Michelle Burke

Interviewee: Indira Freitas Johnson, sculptor

In-person: Artist's home Evanston, IL

Date: 02/19/10 12:00pm

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during Winter quarter 2010 as part of the **Asian American Art Oral History** research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies.*

### **Brief Bio: Indira Freitas Johnson**



Indira Freitas Johnson was born in Mumbai, India. She has received undergraduate degrees from Sir J.J. Institute of Applied Art and the University of Bombay. She also received a masters degree in fine arts from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1967. Her father was an artist and her mother was a social activist, both of whom she was influenced by. She strongly believes that art and activism are a powerful combination for social change. Indira founded the Shanti Foundation for Peace in 1993 in response to the rise of ethnic violence. This foundation helps people understand that their individual action can go a long way to build lasting peace by using the process of art. Her actions and a lot of her work focus on spiritual growth and peace.

**Q1: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?**

**A:** I grew up in Mumbai...I was born there. My father was an artist and a follower of Gandhi and my mom was a social worker, so for me this combination of art and activism has been a very strong influence through my childhood years, and has continued as I've grown older.

**Q2: How do you identify yourself, especially in the context of your Indian descent?**

**A:** First and foremost, I define myself as an artist. And then it goes into the various categories...I don't particularly like shows where I'm identified as an Indian, where there are only Indian artists, because I feel that art is about life as a whole. Yes, my experiences of growing up colors what I do, but I have lived in the U.S. for longer than I have lived in India.

**Q3: Can you tell me about the Shanti Foundation for Peace that you founded in 1993?**

**A:** This is actually the Shanti office right here and behind us is my studio. Shanti Foundation was founded in 1993. Growing up, we learned non-violence decision-making skills, and how to brainstorm different solutions and respect the other point of view. In 1993, there was a combination of different things...one, there was a lot of violence with a number of wars taking place in different parts of the world. I would be weeping when I would hear about the Bosnian women being raped and then you'd hear about other atrocities in Africa. And in India, the Hindu/Muslim riots were going on and it just seemed like the level of violence had escalated. It's one thing with war, which we're all aware of, but here it seemed like neighbors who had lived together for years and years, were now all of the sudden turning on each other. The Shanti Foundation was started with the idea of building community and teaching non-violence through the arts. In its original form, we were going to support local community organizations by the sale of greeting cards that used quotes from very different cultures. For example, we combined a quote from Gandhi and a quote from an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, or a quote from John Lennon and James Baldwin. The idea was to demonstrate that we all want the same things for our families and ourselves. But my strength is not in marketing, so after the first 3 years we realized that however beautiful the product, unless you market it, it's not going to go anywhere. In the meantime, Shanti became more interested in direct interaction with students and communities. Shanti's first project was the *Getting Along Peace Bus* where we collaborated with the Chicago Children's Museum and the CTA. And we developed an Art and Nonviolence Concept Handbook in scope and sequence for grades 1-8. Since then we have worked in more than 50 schools in Evanston

and Chicago and conducted projects in numerous neighborhood communities. We continue to grow and expand our reach with professional development workshops for teachers, artists and community workers.

**Q4: Can you tell me a little about the meaning of *Satyagraha I, II, III, etc.*? And how did you make this? Your technique, materials, procedures, intent, context?**

**A:** The word *Satyagraha*, is a Sanskrit word which roughly translated means holding firmly to truth. *Satyagraha* was the name Gandhi chose to describe his concept of nonviolent action. This idea of truth had been in my mind for quite some time. The word “truth” comes up so often in religion and politics. They keep talking about how there is one truth but actually, to me it seems like we each have our own truth which is colored by our experience. For instance, there are so many people who are Christian and yet have completely different ideas of what is right or wrong, good and bad, and the same can be said for the other religions.

Hands and feet have been symbols that I’ve used, pretty much since the first time I started making art. They were very small in the beginning and have gradually become much larger, more iconic. For me the feet are a literal symbol of the path we take to achieve spirituality. Writing the word *Satyagraha*, on these large ceramic feet...which are hollow, is for me a sort of commitment and meditation, repeating this word again and again and carving it. The process is meditative and a commitment to the path of truth however you see it.

**Q5: Your “*Om*” project was also very interesting...what was the meaning behind that? \*meaning of the leaves?**

**A:** The OM project, like a lot of my works, was rooted in some of the rituals that take place in South Asia. One of the rituals involves making an offering at sun down to various gods and ancestors and to either thank them for blessings that have occurred in your life or as a prayer for something that you want. These offerings are usually made out of flowers or leaves. For instance, people in Bali make these very elaborate, beautiful offerings made out of palm leaves which they float in the surrounding ocean. I felt that it would be wonderful to make an offering for peace in the Chicago River. The Sanskrit syllable *Om*, is a symbol of a universal spiritual presence. *Om* is not a word but rather a timeless vibration that reverberates through space, a

mantra or prayer in itself. In addition, the whole ritual was part of the cycle of life. I'd grow the canna plants, harvest the leaves, and in the fall take the bulbs and store them for the winter. I'd plant them again in the spring and that whole cycle of life and death rebirth would be repeated once again. Incising the syllable OM on over 600 leaves was very time consuming, (laughs) but floating them was beautiful. The title of this project was "Where Sky Meets Water"...the reflection of the sky in the negative space of the incised OM syllable was beautiful as the leaves floated down the river. The underpinning of many South Asian rituals, is that the works do not need to be permanent, there is "sadhana," or grace, in the making of it, the creation, not the keeping, and like all life it goes through that cycle of death to be recreated.

**Q6: I know you said that you don't particularly like shows where you are strictly identified as an Indian or Asian American; have you ever been in an exhibition that was contextualized as Asian American or have you ever been labeled as an "Asian American Artist"?**

**A:** Yes I have, and I have to say I'm really happy to exhibit so if I'm invited to be in an Asian American show, I'm happy to be there and feel honored to be part of the exhibit. I guess I just don't want to be in one little box to be categorized. We are more and more citizens of the world and as such our work needs to be broader and deeper. So that would be the only thing, but I've been in a number of shows. I'm very pleased to be represented by a gallery that mostly represents Asian artists, but their scope and aesthetic is very wide.

**Q7: Do you ever address your identity in any of your artwork?**

**A:** My name is a definite giveaway, but if someone didn't know my name and just saw the pieces, I don't think many of them would automatically think that this was the work of an Indian woman. Of course, some pieces might be associated with an Indian or Asian background...like Satyagraha with the hands and feet.

**Q8: What types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?**

**A:** It's more and more difficult, I feel, to find exhibition opportunities. But what I have realized that is that I like doing work that involves the public, especially interactive work. And I

have a piece right now at the Illinois State Museum at the Thompson Center which is all about water, and it invites people to come and actually participate in this ritual with water. At the opening, we saw how people just gravitated towards this piece because I don't think that people have many opportunities to participate in this way. What I've realized is that I haven't reached a level where someone is going to always invite me to be in shows, so if I want to do something I just need to figure it out, just like the Om project, and do it. There I just went to the city with my proposal and said, "This is what I want to do, will you support me?" That self-reliance and ability to take on a project myself and garner support for it was a lesson that I've learned much later in life (what I should have learned before). (laughs).

**Q9: Are you currently working on anything right now? And if so, what is it?**

**A:** Yes, I'm doing work on a large project and it's still in the formative stages, a public art project, it's too early to know...I just completed a public art project for the city of Evanston that involved community input. This is a permanent piece made out of bronze. I've been receiving a lot of nice feedback from people who keep experiencing the sculpture in different ways. I have started to do a number of pieces with found objects and deer skeletons, or bones, not the whole skeleton. Maybe as I'm getting older, my attraction to bones has grown. (laughs). I am using bones and bits and pieces that I've collected. I'm a collector. And the whole idea of how the spiritual is present in everything, and that things that have been discarded can be reintroduced into society and made into something new...I think I like that idea. This is a different way for me to work, compared to many of my pieces, where I need to have the whole concept and picture in my head before I start. With the found objects, I just throw them on my table and just see what goes together, so it's a different way of getting to what I want to do. I plan to make a proposal to various galleries, to see if I can get a show using those found objects.

**END**

## Artwork by Indira Freitas Johnson



“The funnel symbolizes your mind being open...and the mirrors so you can see yourself.”





\*created with vacuum hose

