
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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5-24-2011

Mukul Roy Interview

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Ellert, Emily. (2011) Mukul Roy Interview.

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Interviewer: Emily Ellert

Artist: Mukul Roy

Location: Artist's home/studio Chicago, IL

Dates: May 6, 2011 and May 24, 2011

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during the 2011 Spring quarter as part of the **Asian American Oral History Research Project** conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media & Design.*

Bio: [by Emily Ellert] Mukul Roy was born in Udipi, India where she was raised by her mother and father [*the artist declined to specify what year she was born*]. She began college there and finished her first two years, called intermediary. Then she moved to Calcutta with her family and continued studying literature there. During her time in Calcutta, there were various sociopolitical movements occurring and it resulted in a lot of violence and bombings. She met her husband in Calcutta, and in 1966 they moved to England where he was continuing his studies to be a physician. During this time, Mukul quit her studies and focused on being a stay at home mom. After various moves around the U.K., for her husband's studies, her husband got a job opportunity in Chicago. The couple moved to the South side of Chicago and stayed in an apartment provided by the hospital her husband was studying at.

In America, she felt lonely. Her husband was always busy, and she was rather bored as she had a hard time communicating in English. She decided that she wanted to get a camera and that it would be a way for her to communicate without words.

After receiving a Nikon camera from her husband, she realized she didn't know what to do with it. She started to take classes at the Institute of Art (she believes this was the name of the college) that closed down a few semesters after she started. She decided to continue her studies at Columbia College, dabbling in some other media but ultimately sticking with photography. She received her Master's degree and got her own exhibition at Columbia's gallery.

At first, she was mostly taking pictures of the Chicago Indian community and was documenting various small Indian events in Chicago. She soon began to be recognized and published, with publications such as the Indian Tribune and the Chicago Tribune posting her work. More and more organizations were asking her to take pictures for them, and she began to make money off of her work.

Mukul also traveled back to India where she was hit by a huge realization: a lot had changed since she had been gone. She, herself, had changed a lot. Her old friends didn't consider her part of the community anymore and it had a profound effect on her. She began to take pictures with a new purpose: to document anything and everything worth documenting. She didn't want anything to be lost and have nothing she can look back on, and she wanted people to have a documented history of their community, so she pursued her art with a new passion.

After returning to Chicago, she was still working mostly in the Indian community, but branching out for certain events. She had little interest in documenting large events because they were already documented by others, but she recognizes that each person has a different perception of events. Many of her works were inspired by Indian women and the lives of Indian families in America.

She has since been exhibited at the University of Chicago, the Chicago Historical Society, and the Chicago Cultural Center, as well as being published in many, many, newspapers, magazines, and other various publications. She now lives on the North side of Chicago right on Lake Shore Drive, where she continues to work on projects for her own personal collection.

***Transcription Note:** During the process of interview, my audio recorder failed a couple times. I did two rounds of interviews with Mukul Roy to finalize this transcription and to confirm that all information below is correct. What follows is an edited interview that compiles both of my visits with Mukul Roy. For passages where my recorder failed, I have summarized her narrative.*

Emily Ellert: When did you move to Chicago?

Mukul Roy: 1970, I think.

EE: 1970? Where did you move here from?

MR: I was in India. Before that, I was in India, England, Scotland, and the U.K.

EE: Were you born there?

MR: No, I was born in India, and I was educated in Udupi, which is not the place that my mother was born. In Udupi I was born and brought up and I finished my intermediary. You know in those days, those first two years of college you used to call intermediary. And I finished there and I moved to Calcutta because [muffled] had a house in Calcutta, so that was why most of the people wanted to go to that land. It is a [muffled]. And then... after moving there, it takes time for the formalities to transfer from one university to the other, which is not like here where it goes straight to the university and works. It takes two years, so I got admitted in Calcutta...

[During this portion, Mukul describes marrying her husband and moving with him to England and Edinburgh, Scotland where he continued his studies to be a physician. She moved right before her final exam for college so she never got her degree in Calcutta (she was studying literature). While living in the U.K., her husband received a call from an American organization and offered him placement in the United States to continue studying cardiology. They moved to the south side of Chicago where they lived in an

apartment provided by the hospital her husband was studying at. She did not like the area, it was a bad area.]

MR: They started telling me, “You cannot go out, you don’t go out.” They said, “Oh, you live there? You are lucky you didn’t get killed.”

EE: When you were living on the South side?

MR: When I came, North, South, I knew no difference. So I came there and lived in that residence, organizing things. Like when my husband would come home for lunch, I was cooking, so I didn’t have time to do much. Only thing is that you cannot get out.

EE: You mean you can’t leave the house?

MR: You can leave the house, but you will get killed. That was clear. And that was the first time I learned how the country was divided area wise.

EE: So it wasn’t like that when you were in India? It was just kind of...

MR: Well compared to India, India was very protected. Things have changed now, but when I grew up, girls were protected very much actually. Starting, I never paid anything for my studies. My father and mother paid everything for my education. I didn’t even expect it to do anything. Really, if I got good grades and everything, everybody would get happy. That was our deal. It was a better deal. And then you get married, and my parents never thought that I belonged to them. I belonged to somebody else’s house. That’s what the goal was, in those days. Now things are different. They always prepare daughters to be well adjusted in another family and be well educated.

[During her early months in Chicago, she was bored and told her husband that she wanted him to buy her a nice camera so she could start taking pictures. She wanted to take pictures because she could not communicate very well in the United States and photography was a way for her to speak a universal language. After receiving her first camera, she realized that she didn’t know what to do with it, so she began taking classes at a college that closed down after a few semesters of her studying there.]

MR: It was not a university; it was just a simple college. I don’t know. It was just a part of something else. It was in the Frank Lloyd Wright building, the black building on Michigan Avenue. Inside there, there used to be art classes and photography classes, design classes, things like that. I did not think about college like that.

EE: You were just trying to learn how to use your camera?

MR: Camera, and to learn other things. So I got confident, going there, and my teacher said “Oh, you have good eyes. Don’t give up, don’t give up,” so I got encouraged. When I studied my photography, Photo 1, Photo 2, and you had to do art. To do Photo 2, you have to do art, painting, it was hard. I don’t have the painting, but I would show. People liked it; they said “Oh, it’s really good!” But that was the only painting. It was in a photo I took.

EE: Takes a lot longer than taking a picture!

MR: It is longer, but I don’t know how to explain it. You have to make it in a certain way. Like if you have to make a body structure, people say you have to do it like this. They say that you can make lots of money doing that, anatomy. And it was fearful for me, she said no. So I picked one, it was a light and shadowy picture. It was easy to paint, and I painted it as a poster painting. So she liked my picture, but she said “Oh, why are you so stiff?” Because I’m stiff when I am doing anatomy because you have to be very precise, and it was hard for me. But I passed the class anyway. And then, they were closing down the building because they wanted it for some other reason, so they told me that Columbia College would take me and they asked, “Do you want to go?” So that way, I went to Columbia, and they took me.

EE: What inspired you to keep on with your art education?

MR: It was social, part of that, and I got very much excited about seeing people doing things differently than I was used to doing them. I thought, “I could do much better,” doing the hands and the eyes. Our studies were very hard in India, you had to memorize lots of things and do lots of reading. Especially for your Master’s, there are so many monologues you have to finish. Here, you didn’t have to do those things. I had to learn art history, at Columbia you have to do art history.

[She completed her Masters at Columbia for photography and began taking pictures in the Chicago Indian community. She would frequently go to the Devon Avenue area in West Roger’s Park (West Ridge) because they had a large sari store there, but the area was still mostly Jewish. Soon people began to know her and would ask her to take pictures for them, for the opening of a store or for a party.]

MR: There was not much on Devon in those days, only sari places. So I used to go there, because you couldn’t buy saris anywhere else, and I always wear saris, day and night. Most other people now only wear them when they go out or on fancy occasions, but I wear it every day. So I used to go there many times. By then, I had bought a camera and a car, also. I frequently used to

go there and used to take some friends. Many people didn't drive in those days. It was my past time.

MR: They were calling me to come and take their pictures; I didn't have to make that much effort. Sometimes it was hard because they told me not to go and take pictures, but still I pleased them.

EE: Do you remember the names of these communities?

MR: Indian communities.

EE: They were just random Indian communities?

MR: I will tell you that Devon has many Assyrians. There were a few Muslim communities in that area, not Pakistani Muslim, Middle Eastern Muslim. They have different shops. I took some pictures there of a bakery, but they are all gone now. I used to ask, "Can I come in and take a picture?" They would say, "Oh, sure," they opened the door. Many people wanted a picture and I would photograph them. So there were no problems. I have done some pictures for black families, too. Those were used for some purpose, I don't know, but those pictures that I took, I didn't charge them any money. They were very poor and disabled people. I heard later on that they used them for some lawsuit or something for disability. I didn't know at that time, but I didn't charge any money, I just gave them the pictures. I used to do that for some. Pictures, I will take of anybody and everybody, but you have to ask them. The person has to be comfortable. That is kind of my nature. I took pictures in the White House, too. I did because I worked for a newspaper and Mrs. Gandhi visited, so I photographed. I also did when she died, I took pictures of her sons. I used to go and photograph Ambassadors when they would come. They used to call, and I used to go and do that. Then I realized, sitting down there for a while, that there are so many people fighting to get one glimpse for a picture, but what does it mean? They next day, it goes to the garbage. But there is so much work that has to be done and exposed that so many people don't go, there are some inhibitions and restrictions. I think those will be more challenging than journalism, which I used to do before. But not anymore, because newspapers are run by advertisements, they are almost bought out by advertisements, so they don't publish many good stories. Things for cable television I would do, but not serious work.

[The Indian Tribune would frequently publish her pictures during this time. Soon the Chicago Tribune was asking to publish her pictures. She became well-known around Chicago, specifically in the Indian community. She describes other projects she has done in India.]

MR: You see, in the 80's, Mrs. Gandhi became Prime Minister of India. Before that, there was one woman Prime Minister in Israel, but it's such a small country, and at that time Israel was not that recognized, also. Being the Prime Minister of the country, she's the head of the State, like the President here. Our President is the nominal head, but our Prime Minister is the main executer. It was unheard of, and she became very powerful in the world. She stayed much longer, and we started using foreign languages with her. But with my encounter with her, she was very confident and I thought she was very honest.

EE: So you liked her?

MR: I liked her very much. Few things I heard before meeting her, and I met her a few times. First she came to visit when President Regan was here and from the crowd, she waved at me. She didn't know me. Then I went there and I tried to take her photograph. Those in my family who were bureaucrats said, "Don't bother with her," and I was all sweaty. They said, "Why do you want to take her picture? She is a useless lady." Anyway, I tried one time. I asked for permission, and she gave me permission, but the bureaucrats would not let me in. So I went twice, just walked in there, because you could walk in. I received a letter from the person who gave me permission, and they told me, "You go and meet her, I didn't give you permission." So I went to the other photographer, her photographer, and I told him, "I was there, but can you help me out?" He actually extended me the help and he came out, because in those places you cannot get in. They think you are soliciting. At that time, it was not that bad. I said to the photographer, "I want to take her picture," and he told me "Why didn't you ask her?" I said, "How do I ask her? They will not let me in." He told me to come early in the morning because she meets everybody, you don't need permission. Just come early in the morning and stand in the line and she will meet you, and then you tell her. So I came, and I asked her, and she said "Oh, why didn't you tell me before? How long are you going to stay here?" and I said, "Tonight is my flight. I have permission, I've been going back and forth, but they did not let me in." So she said, "Listen, come back today," and I said, "I want to take your picture in your work place, also." So she said, "There is a parliament meeting and it is a very busy time," those kind of serious law making and things happen at that time. She said, "Okay, you come to my office around 12 or 1." So I was right there and she was having meetings with the MP. You know, our country's structure is a little different. MP's are lawmakers in her party, and people were coming and soliciting there. She was talking and she allowed me, so I took one photograph. The room was so simple, if you see a picture you will know. The room was very simple, and there were two phones there, old fashioned phones. One was red and one was green. And she asked me, "What do you want me to do?" and I said "I don't want you doing anything, I just want you to do whatever you are doing," and she did that. But since I was taking pictures from that side, the MP wanted a picture with her. He called, before he got out he called, and that number was not supposed to be given out, it was my private number. Before I reached home, I got a phone number there. In those days, cell phone weren't around. So I did it, and that evening I said, "I will be late." I used to leave for flights at

11:30, but she said, "I will not be home before 7," so I said, "I will come." So in the morning, she saw me in the same sari, the same outfit. She used to get up in the morning around 4 or 5 and do yoga and then she would meet people, local people. After meeting local people, she would have a little breakfast then go to her office. Her office, when I went there, I went to the 7 o'clock appointment, but she actually came at 7:30. Traffic and everything. Then, when she was in the room, she said, "What do you want me to do?" I said, "I want you to sit down." At first I saw her father's picture there in her room, and although she was standing, I took that picture. In that situation, I was not very familiar with celebrities. I got a little nervous when asked, "What do you want me to do? What do you want me to do?" I said, "Do nothing!" I took that picture of her standing, and when she sat down, she said "Where do you want me to sit?" and I said, "Where ever you want," so she sat down and I got a little more confident for saying that and her following my order. She didn't question. I realized she was very tired so I didn't take too long. My flight preparation was to go from her place to home and from home to the airport and I figured that I would be late. And you know what? The door where I met her, that door stayed in my mind for a long time, I took some pictures of that door. And that's the door where she was killed. So it was and is very sad, and if she had lived I would have taken better pictures. But it was the best that I could do, but I had her picture, and I knew her personally, so I then talked to her photographer at length when I finished my pictures and I said, "Why are they sweating it?" It's hard that way. This is the art, people are like that and you can't do anything. She's very nice, actually." They said that she shouted at one person once, because she had a clean carpet and very nice things, and one guy came in with mud on his shoes. He didn't know anything, and he walked on her carpet. She was upset. She sent him home and said that he was not civilized.

[After about 20 years, Mukul went back to India to visit friends and family and to see the changes in her country. She heard about groups of women who were beginning to gain power and wanted to check it out.]

MR: I did one community, and then I found out that all three communities were matrilineal. And I did all three of them. These people are, and as soon as they heard of the houses, because there used to be land laws and their houses used to be built with a certain specificity. They had huge houses, because generation after generation they lived in the same house. And since then, the education system and transportation ability changed. So these people moved out, especially men. And all women are left apart, but younger women would go with their men. So this is a very sad situation. And I went back, I took a couple of trips and I photographed some of the old houses. And then I found out some Muslim people are matrilineal too. And I went. Travelling, you don't just buy a ticket and fly and go, it is much harder to go. Certain areas, you need permission, you need to wait a few years and then they give you these dates and these dates only. So that way I also did the Muslim community. So I have all three communities and that book will probably be the second. Certain things I cannot publish. I have done some work where I was not supposed to

photograph those areas because they have some restrictions in India about where you are supposed to travel. And so, matrilineal communities I did and then, you know, certain things in Calcutta are not the same as what they used to be. So, my initial intentions were that I was going home and I could not find the same things. I missed that. I wanted to see it. That hurt my feelings and everything and started to push me to do some work like that. Many people are interested in doing this and everybody is interested in getting published or something else, but it is not that. Doing that feeling, sometimes I feel that I am getting lonely, because other people don't know what I am doing. And then someone calls me some time and place. I photographed a lady who had hair down to here [*points to ankles*], and she was quite younger compared to me. She was about in her 30's or 40's, and I heard about her and I said "Can you help me? She is my friend and I will ask her", so I photographed her and then she said "Mrs. Roy, she's no more. You were right as you told me," said one of the people from that community in India. And people said, "You came all the way from here to take pictures of us for what? We are the same people like you." And I said, "No."

[During this portion, Mukul discusses how her old friends from India saw how she had changed and didn't consider her one of the community anymore. She saw how old buildings were torn down, and how people had died. It made her very sad. So she starting to do her photography with a purpose: to document anything and everything that seems worthy of documentation. This includes buildings, people, landscapes, etc. That way there would always be something remaining of whatever had disappeared.]

MR: I tried then to do things that will not be there tomorrow, which I like now. I look for that in children, grandchildren, although children will probably not have that much interest. They will think they saw. But grandchildren will like to know how it was. That is very important. That pushed me to do more documentary work of things that I think might just go away that is worth preserving, and I had access to that place and I tried to do it.

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MR: Seeing all of these things, it didn't interest me to go when the President was coming or a star was coming. So many people are taking pictures that you don't need that. But other types of pictures, you have to take those, because otherwise people will not know what is there or how people are dealing. Not to say that it is good or bad, but this is a way to learn how people survive. That's my goal in doing things like that, things which will not be there. Lately I've been doing some projects like this. But if I tell them I am an anthropological journalist, then people will be scared of me.

EE: I don't think anyone would be scared of you!

MR: They are scared of me! Indian communities are very close communities sometimes. New generations are different; they don't have an interest in India. But I grew up there, I know certain

things, I heard stories from mother and father. So I am more interested. I can make better communication there than people coming from here. But you need lots of patience and the governmental way, it would never work. I would go through different channels that I will not reveal, and I got some pictures. This time I didn't go because of the way they made it, people were nervous of me.

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MR: If people are taking pictures of their communities, then my picture will not be shown. And the competition will be there, but the thing about competition is that two people never see the same thing the same way.

EE: Very true.

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MR: This is the ideal field. I don't mind if somebody is competing with me, if ten people are competing with me. Most other people don't realize that. Indian officers are in unique situations. They bought a camera and are taking pictures, so they are recording the community. But this is stupidity. Being in the newspaper, some people want that. Other people don't want to be in the newspaper. I went to Hawaii earlier, I visit Hawaii very frequently, but I used to more often. Much earlier, Hawaii was very different in those days. Chinese shops were there and shopkeepers didn't want us to come in. One, I talked to a son, and I said, "Call your dad, I want to take his picture, the shop belongs to him," and he said, "No, he is very shy. He thinks he is not worthy for you to take his picture." Very true also in India. In my time, people used to be like that. Shy, or didn't think they were worthy. They hadn't done anything good. They thought they were criminals. Now days, when a person says "No, no, I don't want a picture," it means that they think the photograph will be used in some bad way in the newspaper. That's why they don't want me to photograph them. And there are many different ways. I will show you ones from a few trips, I will show you ones of the matrilineal and I will show you pictures of women of India. When this class is finished, I will show you and I will ask your opinion.

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MR: Everybody sees things very differently. And so what else did you want to know? Well, I am working, but you don't only work on one project that way. I am working on two or three projects. And I am working on, right now, in Chicago particularly, those who came in the 70's and 80's. They are professionals, a few are working and not working, a few are retired, and I want to photograph inside their houses. Many people are changing their houses, so it is difficult now, people know me, so they think my pictures will be in the newspaper. And I said "No, don't worry about it; these are for me, or maybe for your grandchildren. We'll see." So then they don't mind.

EE: So you do a lot of your work without the idea of getting it published? Just kind of for personal reasons?

MR: I don't do that because then publishers want money to publish. And whenever they get advertisements, they'll do it. Somebody who will be sponsoring and doing something, but other people, what about other people? Who will do that? So, you can see some of my work. Do you want to see it?

EE: Yeah, I would love to see some of it.

MR: What do you want to see?

EE: Anything, really.

MR: The Historical Society, I didn't work with them. I will tell you how it happened. When I was doing a project on my recent [*muffled*], I tried to find out what has been done. Because Indians have been living here much earlier, and their documentation I didn't see. The Chicago Tribune didn't have any pictures. The Historical Society had one piece, I had seen one Japanese person's picture. There were no pictures of any Asians in the Chicago Historical Society. So there was a gentleman that was there at the time and I told him "Why?" and he said "Nobody gave us any. So give me some pictures and we'll do that." Then I went to say "Yeah, I'll give you some pictures." And at that time, I used to work in a lab and at any time I could do it. I didn't mind that. So I brought it [photo paper], and he said "Give me one which will not damage." The paper was expensive. I bought the paper, and printed it, and gave them 20-25 pictures, and all of them were in black and white.

EE: So then they put them up in the Chicago Historical Society?

MR: They have, they have it in their collection.

EE: So are they still there?

MR: They are there, but I don't know what they are doing. You can go and find out. And I heard somebody that when they published a book, you know, that they have published in the Indo-American Center book about Indian history¹. Have you read that?

EE: No, I haven't.

MR: Lots of my pictures are in there. You don't have that? I'll try to find out if I copied it. You can borrow it from me. And so that one did it, and they have my pictures, but I told them to get other people's pictures first. And if you don't find other pictures, then I will give you pictures, because otherwise it is a kind of monopoly and people will not like that. So I gave them pictures, and they had many pictures of mine. And you will see that for newspaper work. And exhibits,

¹ *Asian Indians of Chicago* (Acadia Publishing/Indo American Center, 2003)

quite a few. In the University of Chicago, I did two or three time. The Artesia [*Artemisia?*] Gallery was here in Chicago and I exhibited there. And I exhibited in the Cultural Center a long time ago, in the 80's. About 55 photographs.

EE: Oh, wow. That's a lot!

MR: And in India, I exhibited at two places. One in Calcutta in an Academia, and another at the Academy of Fine Arts there was one.

EE: Were any of the exhibits considered to have an Asian American theme, or was it just specifically your exhibition?

MR: It was my exhibition. Asian American themes, I can't remember. At the Columbia gallery I exhibited at the Thesis Gallery they do. Those who do Masters, at the end they get an exhibition. So they do that, I exhibited there whatever they chose from my thesis.

EE: Well, that was pretty much all my questions.

MR: So do you want to see pictures?

EE: Yeah, definitely!

END

Mukul Roy Work Samples

Note: these are snap shots that Emily Ellert took of Mukul Roy's photographs during a visit to her studio on May 6, 2011.



