
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Kaveri Raina Interview

Eva Swiecki

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Interviewer: Eva Swiecki

Artist: Kaveri Raina

Location: In Person, Chicago Artists Coalition, Chicago, IL

Date: February 17, 2017



Photo and bio courtesy of the artist.

Note: the following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200: Art & Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2017 Winter Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor of Art, Media, & Design.

Kaveri Raina is an artist working in Chicago, IL. She was born and raised in New Delhi, India and moved to the States at the age of eleven. In 2011 she received her BFA in Painting and Photography from the Maryland Institute College of Art, and in 2016 her MFA in Painting and Drawing from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Raina was a 2016 recipient of the James Nelson Raymond Fellowship, Fred and Joanna Lazarus Scholarship, amongst others. In fall 2016 she completed a five-week residency at Ox-Bow, in Saugatuck, MI. Raina has exhibited in Chicago, New York, Ohio, among others. She has upcoming exhibitions at Chicago Artists Coalition, Devening Projects, Comfort Station, and Demo Project Space. She is represented by Hammond Harkins Gallery in Columbus, OH. <http://www.kaveriraina.com/>

Interview Transcript:

Eva Swiecki: How would you define your art/yourself as an artist?

Kaveri Raina: I was born and raised in Delhi, India and I moved at the age of 11. I was lucky enough that both my parents were very helpful in me pursuing the arts so that was really nice. I consider myself Indian-American...American because I've lived here for more than 11 years

now. I've lived here 17 years. It's a hard question, still something I'm trying to figure out. I was in India recently, a month ago for a few months, and seeing how I interact with people there now and family is really different and you think two months is a long time to adjust to the environment, but I was constantly finding myself wanting to get out of there or come back to the U.S. Not that I was uncomfortable there it's just tough being with family you haven't seen for so long and finally going back just for two months. It's kind of superficial, upper-level talk. It doesn't feel like I know them even though we chat on phone, e-mail, text. I do keep in touch with them because they are my closest relatives but I've still been away in a different country for so long. I consider me more than half Indian...there's a better term, but I constantly try to capture the Indianness when I'm here--not so much in my work because I've done that before and it becomes too much of a burden to have the work be so personal. It becomes too precious and I'm trying for the past year to make work that's still personal, but you can't look at it and pinpoint that it's made by an Indian artist.. I'm kind of trying to step away from that because when I was doing that I was working with different spices like turmeric or chili powder in installation-based work and I was being stereotyped and put in this bubble as an Indian artist trying to reflect on her views of when she was in India. It became a conversation only about that and nothing else. And I realized I had this passion for painting.

With painting, there are things that are specific but it's nice but they can be multiple things, not one thing. Whereas with installation work, I felt like I was so specific, it had to be that one thing and I was struggling with that -- everyone wanted to know what that one thing was. Whereas with painting I feel like there's this fluidity going different ways and people try to get different interpretations out of it which I like more than it being just one specific thing. Of course, for me it is one specific thing, I have a memory or something I'm starting the painting with, but I'm not holding anything against someone who doesn't get it. Whereas with installation work, it was just too much of a burden for me to translate that to the artist completely. Now that this is an easier route and I've had that question asked, it feels more challenging because it is something I'm hiding and something that isn't always there -- which is sometimes troublesome when it comes to how many layers there are to a painting or to a story. I like that ambiguity and having worked with the material burlap, it screams third world because of the history of burlap: used in rice sacks, seen in Indian/Asian stores, used in coffee beans. I feel like there's this hint that it's other-worldly. I consider my Indianness to be present, and it's embedded in the work, but it's not hitting anyone blankly, and I think that's how I perceive my life, too. That it's there, I don't need to go crazy about it, but it's a personal struggle constantly: either Indian or American.

ES: It seems as if that hybrid Indian/American identity is a large umbrella that your work focuses on. Do individual paintings all encompass that theme or do they have their own specific meanings?

KR: I think when I was working with the spices it was strictly a reflection of the first 11 years of my life. Probably more so the ages of 9-11. I was old enough to be in the kitchen with my mom while she was cooking and I would see her making food, which is something she always loved to do. And on top of being a full-time professor, she would have the time to come and devote time in the kitchen to make at least 2-3 dishes every night for the family. Cooking was such a strong thing for me to witness her do. One thing that I picked was working with turmeric -- the specific spice she would use in everything. I would notice her pinch it and then notice it stained her fingers. I began dyeing a lot of my fabrics with turmeric and did a lot of performance and

installation based art while obsessing over this spice. My entire studio would be yellow. I was kind of investigating this one material and trying to make art pieces with this one material, turmeric. I feel like that specific memory of witnessing my mom using turmeric was pretty important, like a remembrance of that moment. The reason I started using burlap was because I would see burlap sacks in my home all of the time -- these piles and piles of empty burlap sacks after we would use the rice or put them in other containers. I realized "Why not paint on burlap?" The process started out as very significant. I would stretch the paintings, stretch the burlap, and paint from both sides of the canvas. The paint would seep through, I realized, and the process of going back and forth was really important for me. In the beginning, I didn't really care what the painting looked like. For me it was more so painting from the back and the surprise element from turning the painting around and realizing how the paint seeped through. The surprise or the aspect of not knowing what it would look like was really nice. As I started moving forward, I realized there was imagery coming through. It wasn't on purpose, but when I would be painting from the back, things would be coming to my mind, and then I would turn the painting around and there was imagery. I would then respond from the front and do the same thing. This back and forth became this metaphor for going between cultures and always being confused as to the first question of being Indian or American. It's not a literal translation, but I think this process of turning the canvas back and forth is very much like my own personal life.

The process is still important but now I feel the paintings have become more image-based. The recent ones have a sense of recognizable imagery and I never thought I would go in this direction because I've always been a non-objective painter and an abstract painter where the imagery has been shapes, but you still can't tell if it's like a face, or a hammer, or a key. There weren't specific labels to them but now I'm looking at painting as myth-making and I've been looking at a lot of Hindu mythology and books. My dad is an Indian history professor so he's constantly sending me images and helping me compile imagery catalogues which I can take from and compose my own collages. The paintings are still ambiguous because I work with an idea like how I mentioned before about pinpointing that it's an animal or key or hammer, but it doesn't have to be one type of animal...It can be an elephant, a horse, a goat, so I kind of like this variation. There was this one painting that was the start of something perhaps that I could build on. I was looking at baby photos of myself when I was in Delhi and I found a photo of myself when I was six or seven wearing this hat, which this Hindu God, which Hanuman wears. It's called Mukut in Hindi, which means hat, and I was wearing that hat so I did a self-portrait based on me wearing this hat while I was in our house in Delhi. These snippets of memories where no one needs to know it's a self-portrait and I'm really comfortable with people not knowing that unless they question me about what the painting is about. That is something I feel that needs to be for me because I need to continue to have the motivation to make a painting. I need to have these stories or these little snippets of memories which I can portray. So the work now has become more figurative. It's not this one particular thing. I think through this back and forth process, I'm trying to depict these memories either from the past or now and sometimes I'm even confused but I think that's okay. It's more so a response to that confusion.

ES: Some publications have been quoted saying your painting are influenced by the push and pull of western modernism. Can you expand on that idea?

KR: Yeah, I went to MICA, this school in Baltimore. I majored in painting. The full name is Maryland Institute College of Art and the painting history there was that we were taught a lot

about color and to look at a lot of New York school artists so I was constantly looking at Jean DuBuffet, Mark Rothko, Robert Rauschenberg, and Hans Hofmann is the artist who talks about this push and pull. A lot of these master painters/artists I refer to a lot in my paintings. Eva Hesse is another one. I feel like it's pretty evident in my work with me being the Eastern person with these artists who are American or Western. So kind of being influenced by their work. Either if it's taking upon their color or their imagery...this push and pull is what Hans Hoffman talked about and I feel as though the burlap lets me do it really well. Painting from the front and painting from the back has this spacial depth and that's what I refer to as the push and pull.

ES: Has teaching influenced your work? If so, how?

KR: I taught middle schoolers after undergrad. I taught middle schoolers and summer classes in Ohio. It was more so figurative painting classes but was significant help or influence in my own work was when I was a graduate teaching assistant in one of the figure painting classes and just seeing 16-17-year-olds paint and seeing the love just for the act of painting was really nice. This one specific example I use in my paintings now. This one student was painting a huge painting with this teeny brush and me and the instructor both went up to him, separately, and asked him why he was painting with a really small brush for such a big painting. He said, "I just love the texture that the painting gets when I paint with the small brush. I don't care about time I just really like this texture." I really liked that honesty and that same day I went into my studio and started painting with a small brush and since then, to be honest, I still use that small brush to paint. His paintings were much bigger than mine but I totally agree with him about the texture. I think that learning these small things can sometimes be really helpful. You would think with a sixteen-year-old, "What do they know?" but I thought that it was a really helpful idea and I still use it. He was right.

ES: 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 before?

KR: I'm still a part of this collective in Brooklyn called "South Asian Women Creative Collective, for short it's known as SAWCC.¹ So it's just South Asian women and we have shows in different galleries and spaces. I'm actually the only one not living in New York. Everyone lives in Brooklyn and they meet pretty regularly. We had a show at the Queens Museum of art and that show traveled to this museum in Virginia. I had another opportunity which I couldn't partake in at a Milwaukee museum, I can't recall the name...so I've been associated with them for a while now and in the future as well will probably show work. But what I tend to show in those shows, which I'm not sure if I'll continue doing or if I'm comfortable with is more the turmeric-based work. It just fits in with everyone else's work and when you look at it, it is more Indian. I feel like I might have two practices going. There's likes and dislikes of the turmeric work, but I feel like there's so many challenges with the paintings itself that I don't know if I want to have to do work just for that and then have this separate body of work. I'll have to see if there's a way to combine them perhaps or just have this dual work system going. But yeah, I've worked with them and that again makes it fall under this one umbrella and I think the work that I'm doing now branches out from that more so. I was kind of tired of the conversation always

¹ <http://www.sawcc.org/>

being about me being Asian and the diasporic conversations, but I'm still very much in touch with them and want to work with them.

ES: You say you want to get away from being categorized under the umbrella of "Asian America Artist" specifically. Can you say a little more about that?

KR: I say that now but there's also this constant struggle as being part of that as well. I think I just need to make one stance about it. Sometimes I'm fine with having my work being categorized under Indian American/Asian American but I want to have a diverse audience-- I don't want to limit people to come to a show where they know it's going to be work about that particular theme. I'm just trying to open up the conversation to different topics, I think, and I feel like painting has really allowed me to do that. I don't want to be categorized as being an artist who works just with turmeric and I think that's what was happening before. Perhaps now I can delve into different materials as well, but I think I had a problem before being referred to as a "turmeric artist" or this artist who is Indian and using turmeric. There's always this back and forth if I would go back to it. I just want to start having a different conversation--one with more openness, and I think that was hard to have when the work was so singular.

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

KR: When I was doing the turmeric work, there were a lot of groups coming to me like the SAWCC group and wanting me to create the turmeric work and I did this specific installation in my studio at SAIC when I was doing my masters and they had approached me to do a similar installation at a different space and I wasn't interested in doing that installation again. I feel like those particular exhibitions titled under Asian American, I think we're really concerned how aesthetically the work had to relate to this conversation of diaspora or this East and West. Whereas with the paintings it wasn't as evident. I was being approached for that but apart from that I had shown at Fulton Street Collective Gallery space and it was an Indian show. I had these paintings and there were people who were talking how they still fit into the theme regardless of them looking more Western or Contemporary now, and not really Indian. So that was really nice to hear. I have a show coming up now at the Chicago Artists Coalition at the end of March and some two-person shows in May. I also try to collaborate with some friends of mine. I have an artist friend who does ceramic work so I'll have a show with her where she'll show her ceramic work and I'll show some of my paintings. They go really well together. Then I'm also working with a sound-installation artist who I've worked for a while now but this will be our first show and it'll be a gallery in Chicago. So, there's forthcoming projects coming up. I like to work not when the deadline is due--so I'd rather have things ready beforehand and have more than less so that I can pick and choose later on. Of course, there are instances where I have to rush and be under pressure but I know there's no way I can produce a painting under pressure. It's nice to have a lot of work to choose from--that's ideal so I can pick and choose for different themes for shows, so I've been trying to do that.

ES: Can you tell me about some of those things you're working on currently?

KR: Sure. For the show that's going to be at Chicago Artists Coalition, there's this artist teacher at SAIC, [Michelle Grabner], who is going to be writing the essay for the show. She was also my

advisor/mentor through SAIC and she knows my work pretty well. I'm working towards that right now and I've also been doing screen prints. I don't know if I'll incorporate them at all in the show, but I was at this residency, Ox Bow, in Saugatuck, Michigan and that's where I did some of the screen prints. They have a really nice facility there. I've been working on screen prints but the problem with the space is that it's a bit narrow so I don't know if I'll be able to show them. I would want to make a pedestal for them to be on while the paintings are hung on the wall. If I can't have the pedestal, though, I'll just have the paintings on the wall. The paintings are definitely becoming more figurative and there is definitely more imagery in them. People are seeing that they're becoming more vivid. There's definitely a sense of ambiguity, though, but people can pick up on things that are happening in the paintings. I think it's more so a storytelling and I've been really enjoying it. I'm even thinking about doing a still life for this new painting. I took a lot of photos when I was India, too, this past month and I'm seeing if there's something that's interesting in them that I can depict as a beginning point in my art.

ES: You were in India for two months, correct?

KR: Yeah, and it was strictly family related. I didn't want to see any art or do anything related to it just because before I had a lot of two-solo shows which I had to prepare for. So it was really nice to just go and visit family. My sister had a baby so it was great to see her and my niece. It was a nice visit.

ES: That's great. Well, thank you so much for letting me interview you. I look forward to seeing your art and I hope your upcoming shows go well.

KR: Yeah, thank you so much. Good luck with your work as well.

END