







# Shape-Shifter

A Conversation with

## Rina Banerjee

BY JOSHUA REIMAN

*When signs of origin fade, fall out, if washed away, trickle into separations, precipitate when boiled or filtered to reveal all doubleness as wickedness. Vanishing act that migration, mixation like mothers who hid paternity who could name move me slowly reveal me only when my maker stands straight (detail), 2016. Turtle replica in resin, vintage shell lampshades, steel armature, Polynesian wood mask, Pyrex filtration lab glassware, feathers, thread, linen, silk, amber vials, cowry shells, seed beads, and pearls, 323 x 473 x 90 cm.*

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ANDREA AVEZZU





Our world is more connected now than ever before. Yet most of our experiences of art take place through virtual means, accompanied by broad strokes of information. As we try to classify objects without meaningful spatial interactions, our perspectives are irrevocably shifting. It is possible that in art today, we are trying too hard to find meaning in a barrage of imagery.

How are traditions passed on? How are crafts disseminated? What does it mean to be handmade? In sculpture, are there still histories and narratives held within materials? The work of Rina Banerjee begins to answer these questions through lush materiality and written form, directing them toward readings of specificity. Her perspective on human diaspora relies on vivid means of storytelling and fractured histories. The purposeful scatterings of her visually arresting forms are accompanied by deeply poetic titles that reinforce the transformational mythologies that cycle through her work. Banerjee's multi-faceted objects challenge us to look at them and understand how they function. Thoughtfully shape-shifting our contemporary perspective, they give us agency to learn more about disparate topographies by reflecting maps of diverse materials from cultures that use visual queues to describe and define their place in history.

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**Joshua Reiman:** *I am curious about how you understand the relationship between an object made by your hand and a found object.*

**Rina Banerjee:** When I make something by hand, it may already be something that I am dismantling or altering in some way. I believe that materials are also objects in themselves. If I am using cotton, then I am aware of what the plant looks like, the fiber that comes from it, and that presence is in my mind. It does not become neutral or without meaning because you see cotton fabric. I am very connected to what that object was before it became a material—it has a lineage. Everything that comes from the earth is made into some-

thing, and that includes synthetics. In essence, every object is a material—every material is an object. It is a fluid connection.

**JR:** *In The Artificial Kingdom: On the Kitsch Experience, Celeste Olalquiaga writes, "Selection and organization allow collectors to establish a particular relation with their objects: no matter how common, an object can always be rescued from its apparent banality by the investment in it of personal meaning..." How do kitsch and sentimentality work in your creative process?*

**RB:** I think that kitsch developed around class awareness. Class divisions and reconnections through kitsch in popular culture and in art



Left: *I ask my mother what will I be? Will I be strong, will I have courage, will I be happy? My mother she answers with this—The future is yours to make*, 2016. Plastic net cloth, resin replica American buffalo horn, copper dirty eyes in enamel, cowry shell, brass and copper wire, copper armature, light bulbs, pigeon feather fans, steel chain in white enamel, and steel armature, 8 x 5 ft. Right: *Wild and Monstrous, enhanced and induced, artificially mutated, genetically mimicked—this was her human garden, persistently disloyal to everything living, inert and or even plastic. She was too curious to rest flung herself into a infinite cosmic dance severed herself from home and internal bone*, 2012. Vintage Banarasi sari, copper wire, steel structure wire, African cowrie shell, Indian cow horn, Indian brass beads, shearing, feather fans, 500-watt bulbs with ceramic and gold color brass base, burned-out bulbs, plastic foliage, quilting pins, and Indian cotton quilt, 48 x 32 x 41 in.

allowed people to see their own culture as pervasive and going beyond their class reach. Kitsch has been around for a long time, and in some sense, we refer to it in the context of popular culture and media, and perhaps even in globalization, though I don't know that I recognize it as a separate thing. When I think of kitsch, I think of tourist items that have been so overly commercialized they have nothing to do with the original cultural representation. I am very interested in kitsch; but at the same time, I don't recognize it as distinct from other objects anymore. My journey is about making connections and maybe even dismantling the categories that we have become accustomed to in art theory and critical visual language.

**JR:** Your work has a global identity, intrinsic in the materials. These are very intimate works that speak to hybridity.

**RB:** Given my age, I was not really making work with the idea of globalization in mind. I am very familiar with immigrant life as a dominant language, and certain issues that have been very close to me are relevant now

in the current landscape, with all of the information available to us and our awareness that we are communicating with the rest of the world. I am always suspicious of words like "globalization" because they are so forceful. There are many places in the world that are excluded from this conversation that we are having, which is important and meaningful to us. One of the harms that I see in exhibitions that present themselves as global or international is that we forget these shows include a very few people representing a small proportion of the world at large. I became aware of this when I started doing "India shows" and heritage exhibitions—it was clear that they were looking at the same age group and a certain class of people, and they definitely did not include the diaspora that is present in the world. It becomes a very colonial perspective. In essence, I believe it's false advertising when we reach for large titles like globalization. I think there is a great amount of optimism invested in these words, and desire, and definitely there is intimacy and nostalgia that comes out of it.

**JR:** But in your work you are using materials from all over the globe. Your materials have borders that you are crossing, and you are shifting them into new objects that contain a worldly perspective.

**RB:** Yes, that is pretty accurate. I feel like there is so much policing of identity and investment in heritage that we are often excluded from various communities. If you are searching for something, people are more than their cultures,





Above: Installation view with (left) *Excessive flower, hour by hour, banal and decorative, banished and vanished of power, reckless and greased she steals like jeweled thieves, fierce, always in theater as no-actor, often captured in oils, thrown in air, robbed of vitality as death appears for all who have more color see her as unequal in sting to sun and processions of pomp if in marriage and funeral bearing in mind possessions of inheritance acquired*, 2017; and (right) *Women did do this in shining when her spare rib and vines crimped, wrinkled in lines could force a clear high shimmer of Bud, blue black flower all bones and new, will upon, will come with whispers of new*, 2017. Left: *Women did do this...* (detail).

In a lot of text, strength comes from the visual. In my work, the text is where I share a little bit more than what is seen. I can say more. I don't think artists have much opportunity to do that easily. Titles give me a lot of freedom because there are no restrictions. A lot of artists see the title as a burden, but I see it as a big freedom. I also enjoy when people slow down to read a title and enter the work that way.

**JR:** *Shrine-like figures and forms seem to break the fragility of your work and empower it, assisted by the titles. These sculptures are much like relics, with eggs, alligator heads, shells, feathers, horn, and bone speaking to death and remembrance. Could you talk about this fragility and the sense of loss?*

**RB:** I don't think the most important point in making the work is that it be archival. Most everything will end up being landfill some day. Our time here is very short. The most important thing is that it speaks to somebody.

**JR:** *I read that your work is often framed as being a feminist action. Do you agree with that assessment? Does your work criticize a gendered ideology?*

**RB:** For most of my career, there has been little interest in categorizing my work as feminist. Only in the past

more than their bodies, more than all the things that the world gives you to see and experience. To explore who you are means to go somewhere else. You have to get lost in other things before you can see yourself. That is really what I am interested in when I reach for objects that come from all over the world.

**JR:** *You have a totally different approach to titling your work. The language is part of the form.*

**RB:** The materials in my studio are objects that I am attracted to. The titles that I use are injected with that attraction. There is a trance that I like to enjoy, both meditative and intoxicating, related to materials and things in the world that attract us and bringing them together into a diverse connection. The titles enhance this bringing together of un-like things. It is confusing, as a journey would be, and there is a feeling of being absorbed by it. I don't see much division between language and the physical world. I think if you are working with objects, then you must embrace what the thing is called. Therefore you are already invested in text. The text informs what the object is and vice versa.





Above: *Make me a summary of the world, she was his guide and had travelled on camel, rhino, elephant and kangaroo, dedicated to dried plants, glass houses—for medical study, vegetable sexuality, self-pollination, fertilization her reach pierced the woods country by country*, 2014. Wooden pedestal with two umbrellas, six horns, grapevine, and rhino, 7 x 4 ft. Right: *From the oyster's shell it fell with a neck of dangling bells a flirtatious alligator who put upon us a bodily spell*, 2006. Metal bells, steel, heater fan, apple seed necklace, preserved alligator head, and loofa, 275 x 125 x 70 cm.

five years has it been that way. Of course, I am interested in human rights. What your body looks like has everything to do with your experience. This is very important to my work because everything is a body. Whether a teacup or a mountain, I do not think things are gendered; it depends on how a society pushes these roles. Cultures are isolated. Genders are isolated. I am interested in freedom and mobility. I am interested in playing with this, to see if it can become something else. When you get older, I think you feel closer to the world—maybe that is when you begin to shed your gender.

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*Rina Banerjee's exhibition "Make Me a Summary of the World" is on view at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, from October 27, 2018 through March 31, 2019.*

