

Perspectives: Rina Banerjee

The Arthur M. Sackler and Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C., USA, 13 July 2013–8 June 2014

Rina Banerjee notes that her experience living through Hurricane Sandy—the 2012 storm that caused widespread damage to parts of lower Manhattan, where she lives—was a partial impetus for her sprawling site-specific installation at the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery (fig. 1). She further explains, "We could see the sea coming in towards the high-rises that I was living in and in that moment it was very clear, the connections we have to the rest of the world, which is this water that surrounds every place in the world."¹ The full, poetic title of Banerjee's work both alludes to her long-term interest in exploring the movement of people—forced and otherwise—and goods across nations and this work's more specific preoccupation with the effects of such migration on the world's aquatic ecosystem: *a world Lost: after the original island, single land mass fractured, after populations migrated, after pollution revealed itself and as cultural locations once separated merged, after the splitting of Adam and Eve, of race black and white, of culture East and West, after animals diminished, after the seas' corals did exterminate, after this and at last imagine water evaporated...this after Columbus found it we lost it imagine this.*

When first approaching the installation, one is taken aback by the low-hanging structure dangling from the gallery ceiling, especially the two rings of black, plastic buffalo horns which encircle it. Solid and powerful at first glance, its spare frame also evokes lightness and fragility. The lower ring of horns is festooned with a medley of materials including textiles, seashells, feathers, and opaque and transparent light bulbs. The textures of these materials—soft and smooth and rough and sharp—both beckon and hold the viewer at bay. Finally, hanging from the bottom of the dome is an antique scale of justice, on which are precariously balanced ostrich eggs, feathers, fish vertebrae, and greenery.

Equally important is what is on the ground, which effectively acts as a foil for what is above. Crimson-coloured threads fall from the scales and the structure above to the ground near small groupings of pebbles and coral, intermingled with glass birds and miniature plastic human and animal figurines. Meandering "streams" snake out from the latter: one is composed of meticulously arranged coral, fish vertebrae, and shells, and the other of plastic cups attached to a rope with a loosely flowing fringe of crimson thread.

1 Rina Banerjee, interview by Carol Huh, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C., podcast audio, 13 July 2013, <http://www.asia.si.edu/exhibitions/current/rina-banerjee.asp>.



FIGURE 1 *Rina Banerjee, a small world..., 2013, mixed media, dimensions variable.*
PHOTOGRAPH BY HUTOMO WICAKSONO.

It is tempting to consider the plastic cups in particular as a commentary on human hubris, but for the Kolkata-born Banerjee they also signify a poignant encounter in India she had with a young girl who hospitably brought her a plastic cup of water, even though it was clear she did not have access to much of it herself. In this way, Banerjee's work is not didactic or moralizing. The inclusion of the plastic cups is as much a nod to the capacity for human generosity as it is a symbol of our profligate ways.² This conflicting, irreconcilable theme is intensified by the sublimity engendered by the artwork, which both attracts and repels. Given Banerjee's evocation of Hurricane Sandy, it is interesting to note that Immanuel Kant writes that the awe and fear one might experience in the face of the "boundless ocean rising with rebellious force" exemplifies the dualistic feelings of pleasure and displeasure associated with the sublime.³

Though perhaps just coincidence, the sublime is a useful frame through which to explore Banerjee's work. Kant notes the sublime as an aesthetic "may be compared with vibration, i.e., with a rapidly alternating repulsion and attraction by one and the same object."⁴ However, his theorization of the sublime is ultimately resolved by the stabilization of the "vibration" as "restful contemplation," ensuring disinterestedness—a requisite for reflective aesthetic judgment.⁵ Freud also notes in his sublimation theory that one of the ways in which instinctual desires can be resolved, or quelled, is through art-making.⁶ I argue instead that Banerjee's artwork structures the viewing experience so that the frisson between the attraction and repulsion, which both Kant and Freud attempt to resolve in their theories of the sublime and sublimation, is kept in play. That is, while Kant and Freud insist on the dynamic push and pull of the sublime to be contained, Banerjee's work embraces the messiness of contradictory meanings embedded in something as mundane as the aforementioned plastic cup. Indeed, her artwork enables and enriches, rather than forecloses and deflates, complex understandings of everything from water

2 Hetty Lipscomb, "On Rina Banerjee's 'A World Lost,'" *Smithsonian's Freer and Sackler Blog*, 19 July 2013, <http://bento.si.edu/from-the-collections/contemporary-art/on-rina-banerjees-a-world-lost/>.

3 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement (Part One)*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952 [1790]), 62.

4 *Ibid.*, 60–61.

5 *Ibid.*

6 According to Freud, sublimation never can eliminate "crude and primary instinctual impulses" and is "accessible only to a few people. It presupposes the possession of special dispossession and gifts." He does not elaborate on who these special people are, but one can assume that they are men and white. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton Company, Inc., 2005 [1930]), 58.

ecology and tourism to migration and material consumption presented in the artwork as felt.

Jean-François Lyotard would define these unresolvable, discursively produced differences as the “differend,” which he specifically links to Kant’s sublime. Lyotard describes Kant’s sublime as the “differend of feeling” and “feeling of differend.”⁷ Similarly, Banerjee’s artwork surfaces the sublimity of the differend as constantly felt, rather than coolly resolved. In her interview with curator Carol Huh, Banerjee suggests that one can participate in a globalized world “if we’re not in control of it” and do not see it “as a cohesive, singular space.”⁸ In contradistinction to Kant’s sublime that veers towards control of nature, Banerjee embraces never being able to do so as perhaps the only way to begin to tackle the weighty issues she usefully brings up rather than solves.

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7 Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenbeg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), x. Lyotard’s writings on artworks figure prominently in his discussions of postmodernism, but he largely focuses on formal issues or institutional critique and artists who are white and male.

8 Banerjee, interview by Carol Huh, podcast audio, 13 July 2013.

- Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgement (Part One)*. Trans. James Creed Meredith. Oxford: Clarendon, 1952 [1790].
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