

# Mequitta Ahuja

*Mequitta Ahuja: Identity in the Plural*  
by Rina Banerjee

At a time when reputations are being made and sewn into place in the international art arena—when artists, and their representative countries, cultures and diasporas are being pressed into transparent clarity—it is refreshing to see that Mequitta Ahuja's drawings and paintings promise to create vastly different grounds for modes of cultural interaction. In her work, notions of feminism, human rights and encroaching nationalism feud and cohabit with restless ease. Ahuja's work is the fabric of a global consciousness that speaks to identity in the plural and the complicated flows particular to cross-cultural exchange and global migration, as well as racial and social awareness.

The American-born, New York-based artist moved a year ago to Harlem from Houston, where she had participated in the Museum of Fine Arts Houston's Core Program. Some of her earlier works, including *Flowback* (2008) and *Loop* (2008), explore racial consciousness and metaphors of entanglement and expansion, mashing up abstracted landscapes with skylines of black hair that ping-pong between two heads. Ahuja's recent paintings present a figure

clothed in South Asian dress (salwar kameez or saris) and topped with black hair. The power of these paintings resides in the power of personal invention. In her full-length self-portraits, which the artist begins by photographing herself, Ahuja appears posed, self-possessed and ensnared all at once. The active figure in her painting is caught in the process of documenting herself getting ready for the painting. This means of self-invention (like the popular and narcissistic Photo Booth application on Mac computers) has an endless and vast quality about it: reality is revealed through disguise, mimicry and the deployment of fantastical narratives. As if miming the photographic process of self-portraiture, Ahuja depicts the forced and sudden nature of taking one's own photograph as a metonym for a more complex mode of self-fashioning and self-making.

Ahuja's acrobatic figurative paintings foreground the gaps of cultural difference. In paintings such as *Generator* (2010), the artist's body is enveloped in the landscape. Fractal and cut-up, her body is both within and beyond the ground, enveloped and regurgitated in an entropic state that finds itself both lost and found in nature. The female body she chooses is herself, troubling any clear distinction between subject and object. In Ahuja's drawings, which depict her head and

hair fanning out in weightless volumes, the curls appear as foliage, wilderness, air and cloud, and allows viewers to wander through these most private of landscapes.

Ahuja makes reference to a range of aesthetic histories through her sartorial emphasis on the body and dress-making, alluding to art historical figures, Marxist murals, religious iconography and deity paintings in Hindu calendar art. Taken together, these references leave the question of whether these are new paths to a familiar cultural "center" or bypass the center altogether.<sup>1</sup> In the center, the artist is a cultural product authenticated by her geography, birth and parentage. As an artist of South Asian descent raised in the United States, Ahuja's elusive genealogy points to the shortcomings of any attempt to graft biography onto art-making practices. Instead, we must attempt to understand her iconographic woman/girl figure as at once of the center—literally grounding the composition of the canvas—and at the same time on the brink of vanishing into the edge of her landscape environment. Ahuja's large, almost mural-size pieces, worked over with impasto, expressive brushwork, carving, embossing and engraved motifs, make visible the many possible escapes for the figure from the land. The density of paint—and sometimes its palette in the dark end of the spectrum—gives the appearance of netting that embraces the figure and wants to fold her a thousand times over in lines of a blackened blue and purple.

When place and identity are uncoupled—when identity separates from the place named as the source of its making—each finds a new partner. Mequitta gains from eschewing an exclusive cultural intimacy by placing herself in the width of world, albeit a world drafted someplace between agency and contingency. Her painted world presses hard questions on our easy viewing practices. Where do contradictions between color and discolor, clothed and unclothed, ethnic and plain garb, groomed and ungroomable hair find themselves and unravel? Like incantations and chants, Ahuja's paintings elicit a discontinuous response that extends in and against an insurmountable world. In these large and voluminous paintings, the landscape retracts, reaches, collapses and folds to make room for Ahuja's presence. The purpose of her lone figure is not to convey its separation into the general, but rather its absorption into multiple genres. The body represents growth—thus, the conscious body is not solitary, but is depicted as infinitely in the world, taking leave of real time to observe the inaudible interaction between cultures and the natural universe.

1 Culture is intimately driven—made visible and valuable—by the powers that wait in the "center." This center is a normative space: a location that exhibits certain value. When we talk of the "culture" surrounding a work of art or an artist, we should also remind ourselves that the art or artist may not be speaking simply to or from the center. While artists who invoke positions away from this center are always thought of through some relationship with the mainstream, we must pay special attention to emphasize the reverse, that "faraway" cultures also affect what lies inside the frame, even if the effect can only be registered through the center's pull and tightening. Central to this difference is a history of empire, colonization and the flow of labor facilitating the invention of the West.

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*Rina Banerjee is an artist who was born in Kolkata, India, and currently lives and works in New York. She received a BS in Polymer Engineering from Case Western Reserve University and an MFA in painting and printmaking from the Yale University School of Art. Her work in sculpture, painting, drawing and video express an affinity for materials, heritage textiles, fashion, colonial objects and historical architecture, exploring ideas of colonialism, place, identity and complex diasporic experiences. Her work has been exhibited widely in both national and international exhibitions.*