

ARTISTS TO WATCH

The Key to Her Locks

The tangled strands in **Mequitta Ahuja's** elaborate self-portraits are at once large-scale abstractions and symbols of a multiethnic mix

BY RACHEL WOLFF



ABOVE Mequitta Ahuja's *Off the Edge*, 2008.

LEFT The artist with *Perch*, 2009.

OPPOSITE *Parade*, 2007, was recently acquired by the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas.



TOP: COURTESY THE ARTIST/MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON; BOTTOM: COURTESY THE ARTIST



COURTESY THE ARTIST/BLANTON MUSEUM OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

MEQUITTA AHUJA IS PETITE AND ANIMATED—a far cry from the powerful warrior women she has been painting as an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem. But there are similarities between her and her subjects, and these are precisely what Ahuja wants to show. The artist, who turns 34 this month, calls her approach “automythography”—a kind of self-portraiture that explores her historical and cultural identities, as well as others she created or adopted along the way. The word was adapted from “biomythography,” a term coined by writer Audre Lorde.

“Autobiography is the standard telling of one’s own life,” says Ahuja, who earned a B.A. from Hampshire College and an M.F.A. from the University of Illinois at Chicago, where she was mentored by Kerry James Marshall. “But what interests me is this idea that the truth is actually arrived at through a combination of our fantasies, our dreams, the facts of our lives, and the cultural environment that we’re growing up in.”

With this in mind, Ahuja has long focused on depictions of her hair. In paintings and waxy chalk-on-paper drawings, strands come to life as tangled masses, folding in colors and shapes suggestive of the artist’s African American and Indian heritage. It’s a powerful symbol and, for Ahuja, a way to work through her personal issues of race.

“At some point, I kind of confronted my parents about the fact that they never really addressed our having this multiethnic background, and our living in a mostly white town,” Ahuja says, referring to Weston, Connecticut. Her father was born in New Delhi, and her mother came from Cincinnati. “It was

pretty confusing. Each group—white, Indian, black—had certain expectations of me that I never really fit. Through my work, I get to be involved with these different communities on my own terms.”

Ahuja’s layered musings on race and identity have made their way into museums around the country. She had a solo show at Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art in 2005, and her work was included in the Brooklyn Museum’s “Global Feminisms” show in 2007. Recently the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Houston’s Museum of Fine Arts acquired some of her pieces, which range in price from \$5,000 to \$20,000. (Chelsea’s BravinLee programs currently represents her works on paper.) She moved from Houston to New York last fall to start her residency at the Studio Museum, and she is considering staying in the city for a few years once her residency is finished.

Her latest works—mainly self-portraits, as well as some large paintings that hover between landscape and abstraction—will be exhibited at the Studio Museum in July. In one, a nude with just the slightest hint of facial features wields a sword, hacking her way through crosshatched brushstrokes resembling branches on a dark forest floor. In another, a figure dressed in a bright orange ensemble that evokes the artist’s Indian roots strikes a strong stance atop a tree. Some densely textured patches create a ripple across a few canvases—a pleasant by-product of the artist’s tendency to paint over her work. “It allows for the sort of things you wouldn’t plan for,” she explains. “I’ve started seeing a failed painting as an opportunity.” ■

Rachel Wolff is a New York-based writer and editor.