

Madi Acharya-Baskerville

I Dream a Palace



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'I Dream a Palace'

The Lightbox, Woking

Supported by



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The 20/20 project is led by the UAL Decolonising Arts Institute and supported by funding from Arts Council England, the Freeland Foundation and University of the Arts London (UAL).

The programme brings together 20 emerging or mid-career ethnically diverse artists who may identify as black, brown, or as people of colour, with 20 public art collections - leading to 20 new permanent acquisitions in museums and galleries across the UK.

20/20 is a national commissioning and network project catalysing artists' careers and change in collections. The work responds to urgent calls for action within arts and culture, to tackle social inequities and racial injustices amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, and in the wake of Black Lives Matter.

The programme supports ethnically diverse artists to take up residencies with public art collections across the country; leading to the collections' permanent acquisition of new commissioned works, a series of commissioned texts; and a public programme bringing artists, curators and writers into conversation.

20/20 is building stronger relationships between artists and UK collections. It supports inclusive engagement between artists, collections and the communities they serve, to generate richer understanding of collections' histories and the contributions of under-represented or overlooked artists in their midst.

The Decolonising Arts Institute is working with each collection partner to support the artists' development and wellbeing through peer and institutional networks, engaging in

curatorial and practice/research dialogues. 20/20 is also encouraging mutual critical exchange across collections, artists and communities, to continue beyond the project.

I Dream a Palace

13 January - 14 April 2024

Madi Acharya-Baskerville presents a solo exhibition at The Lightbox, having undertaken an artist residency as part of the 20/20 project. Madi's work responds to the site and grounds of Woking Palace, a former Tudor Palace on the edge of the River Wey, in Old Woking. This exhibition, Madi's first in a public institution, combines ceramics, textiles, and found objects along with artworks made by community groups and finds from Woking Palace itself.

Madi Acharya-Baskerville is an Asian born diaspora artist, living and working in the UK. Broadly speaking, the themes explored in her work range from environmental concerns, migration and exile and gender issues. What unites them is the found element, matter that already exists around us, an enduring reflection of the human condition. Her practice involves the synthesis of unlikely elements which she sources from different locations, the coastline, woodlands and vintage markets. Using objects, textiles, song, conversation and magazine cuttings which resonate with her on some level, she creates works which move fluidly between different media. Some of the materials have had a past life such as wooden panels previously part of furniture or embroidered textiles which have seen better occasions. Through joyous transformative processes these objects and materials are reborn as part of something new.

Madi Acharya-Baskerville graduated with an MA in Fine Art at University of Wales Institute, Cardiff. Madi lives and works in London, often travelling to nearby water courses to go mud-larking to find objects from rivers such as the

Thames in London. As well as her recent selection for the UAL Decolonising Art Institute 20/20 project, the artist recently won the First Plinth Award 2023, Royal Society of Sculptors and was awarded The Primary Residency Prize following selection for the New Art Exchange Open 2023. Her sculpture 'Here to stay' was recently acquired as part of the Art Fund New Collecting Award, selected by Uthra Rajgopal (Independent Curator) and is now part of the permanent collection at the Whitworth, University of Manchester. Madi is a recipient of a National Lottery Project Grant, 2023.

Thinking Aloud in Pattern

Sarah Shin

Like water, Madi Acharya-Baskerville receives and moves with the world around her. Living by the coast in Wales, the sea opened her imagination to how the water has touched many different shores and the journeys made across it. The experience, she says, 'ignited something, a fire for the search of materials from the coast, which has continued in my practice ever since.'

The primordial shape-shifter, long associated with the unconscious, brings objects and stories to the surface from its depths. When she is scavenging along waterways, she is also walking this shoreline between the unconscious and conscious. The artist, who works primarily with found objects and materials, is guided by intuition to meet what she needs in synchronistic ways. Sometimes she will imagine something, and later, come across the pieces with which to realise her vision. 'When you've been collecting for long enough, things match up - they find me,' she tells me. Over the last few years, she has been visiting the Dorset coast regularly, going for long walks along Chesil Beach: 'under the expanse of the sky and the seemingly infinite shoreline of pebbles, I come across large chunks of twisted wood and, sadly, many pieces of plastic, fishing net debris and sometimes dead birds. There are huge storms on Chesil, which bring all of this matter, almost presenting it to me. This is where my work begins.'

The transformative, weathering qualities of water inform and mirror Acharya-Baskerville's practice, which has at its core an interest in the aesthetics of erosion - the fading by elements, the imprints of time. And, like the artist, who is

in constant exchange with her environment, water is itself changed by its conditions, cycling through solid, liquid, vapour, plasma and the quantum state of Bose-Einstein condensate. 'Water is the medium of transformation before I get there,' she says.

At Woking Palace, fragments of Tudor artefacts found their way to Acharya-Baskerville to be renewed and their histories woven with contemporary meanings. The former palace was built on higher ground near the banks of the River Wey in old Woking. The first house on the site was likely erected in 1217, with a manor house first recorded on the property in 1272. More buildings were built over several centuries to form a substantial palace complex that became a favourite of Henry VII, the first Tudor, who acquired the Manor of Woking in 1485.

During her residency at Woking's The Lightbox, for UAL Decolonising Arts Institute's 20/20 commission, Acharya-Baskerville explored the museum's collections to make work from objects that have been excavated from the palace. Broken pieces - of Valencian tiles, metalware, oyster shells and toys - provide the prima materia for the artist to create narratives of hybridity through a lens informed by her South Asian heritage and ideas of exile and migration.

'We are confronted by fragments of our lives, whether we like it or not,' she offers. Fragments imply an absent past and an originary whole, while, at the same time, are complete in themselves. Decontextualised, they offer possible new identities, future stories or parallel universes. Acharya-Baskerville takes this potential of the fragment

and turns it towards opening up history to a multiplicity of memories that have been lost or never made.

In her creations, Acharya-Baskerville recasts found fragments and 'decommissioned objects' into new forms that seem as if they were there all along. She often plays with scale and brings together disparate elements to introduce the sense of the uncanny, at once familiar and unfamiliar. A key she made from black clay, for example, is inexplicably large, amplifying the questions raised for her by the original metal key, from Woking Palace, that it is based upon. What was that key for? What did it open? Carved and painted with a white pattern from Indian carpentry, Acharya-Baskerville's key unlocks a door - a connection - that brings a pattern language from one domain, textiles - silks and embroidered materials that have been handed down through her family - into another, ceramics. The doorway is to a place within the artist's creative memory: 'I build new narratives from various existing sources, my own drawings and photographs, found imagery, memory of places and conversations. I start with the surface which, being found, has unique lines and blemishes. For me these pre-existing marks conjure up different memories and experiences. Quite often the imagery is from far away but significant places juxtaposed with patterns and images from the everyday, the idea that nothing is too far away and that this incongruity is part of our existence.'

As with patterns and motifs, Acharya-Baskerville combines materials, for example, fusing acrylic with wood or textiles with clay, and

sometimes using horsehair and bones with South Asian textiles. Inspired by the fallen leaves along the Basingstoke Canal (which runs parallel to the Lightbox), she has been making leaves in different kinds of clay. One, in porcelain fired with green stoneware glaze, wears a coral and turquoise embroidered braid, similar to the embroidery on saris, like a sash in the way that a sari drapes diagonally across its wearer's body. Acharya-Baskerville leverages contrast to bring out the latent qualities of an object as she makes it: the leaf's personhood is accentuated by a pair of green glass fragments, which have been embedded into the clay and melted with subsequent firings to look like weeping eyes. As she worked with the aquamarine leaf, it also became more oceanic, accumulating parts of fishing nets and fishing lines, whose colours - green and pink - complement the existing palette of the leaf.

Motifs and forms recur across Acharya-Baskerville's pieces, like spore prints of the artist's imagination, undoing the separation of species-beings. Leaves and foliage climb up the legs of a ceramic horse, while ocular shapes reappear on a mask-like sculpture inspired by oyster shells: two small holes look back from a lustre-finish shell, painted with autumnal, organic patterns drawn from Valencian tiles in the Lightbox's reserve collection.

Receptacles and containers are natural forms of interest for Acharya-Baskerville, whose practice is one of 'carrying together' for journeys of various kinds. As well as the mask form, the oysters favoured at Tudor feasts become porcelain bowls, which echo the abundance and

pleasure at Woking Palace, once used as a royal weekend retreat. Further, in her hands, the palace's 14th-century Valencian floor tiles take on another dimension to become pouches or bottles that feature shapes and patterns from the tiles on both sides.

A Bartmann ('bearded man') jug found in the heritage Collection inspired Acharya-Baskerville's versions of the salt-glazed stoneware. Produced throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, mostly in western Germany, the jugs frequently featured a bearded face motif that referred to the mythical 'wild man' popular in northern European folklore of the period. The jugs were thus connected with the masculine, embodied by the wild man, but they had another gendered usage. During the early modern witch hunts, the Bartmann jugs - which usually carried food or drink - were sometimes used as witch bottles to protect against malevolent spirits: items to harm witches, such as hair and nail clippings, menstrual blood, bent pins, needles and urine, were placed into the bottles, before they were sealed with a cork and hidden or buried.

Acharya-Baskerville constructs an alternative narrative to the story of the exalted wild man and the demonic, monstrous woman. One of her jugs bears a blue pattern engraved into the ceramic as if it were shaped into sand. On the lower half is a curved shape that evokes Ana Mendieta's earth-body art and the ancient goddess paintings that influenced her syncretic work. Here,

Acharya-Baskerville remakes the Bartmann jug into a carrier of this feminist tradition that recuperates the intimacy between the feminine, the earth and the body so demonised by the witch hunts.

She realigns or inverts conventional, modern hierarchies or centres to tell different stories about the relationships among humans and non-humans, and upends usual notions of value conferred upon finery or fragments, flotsam and jetsam. Nothing is either-or for Acharya-Baskerville; her own consciousness and agency emerges as only one part of a polymorphous flow of directionalities and desires. When she looks at objects and fragments, they look back at her, and tell her if they want to be a part of her world, or not, as collaborators in a gentle practice sensitive to what they do or don't want to become.

Her storytelling is entwined with her process of 'thinking aloud in pattern' - making meaning from organisation and disorganisation, finding correspondences and differences - to reflect and re-pattern the world around her. When she walks around, she says: 'there is a commentary going on in my head. It's something that is beyond consciousness - there's a magical aspect of something going on that's broader than me. The broad process is pattern recognition: what informs us, how we do things and why should it make sense. I feel very in tune with everything - I'll take it in and it might become a part of my work.'

She is constantly scanning her environment for pieces - for textures, forms and surfaces - and

analysing them to investigate their innate qualities in a partly scientific, partly artistic process. Placing one next to another creates a scale of association - similarity and difference, like metaphor - which enables greater understanding of each, which piece might be able to merge with another, and to withstand the process of merging. When Acharya-Baskerville works with objects in this way, she glimpses what has happened in their world - the trials, journeys and weathering they have been through, and considers collecting 'an act of rescue.' She spends a lot of time categorising and storing the found fragments in her studio, 'sheltering them from the elements, preserving them from further harm.'

The collection in Acharya-Baskerville's studio museum is underpinned by deep care for the fragments that we are left with, once the past erodes away. Here, objects have their own path that she facilitates in a form of homeopathy: 'I do think it is a form of love for the materials. Once they have a physical place in my studio, I feel I am caring and nurturing for them... I care a lot about these fragments and objects: how something that has been damaged and broken heals. And, in human terms, how we heal has parallels with working with materials in a way that doesn't force things, but work out as hybrids that seem like they always existed.'

An affiliation with rituals and offerings that tend to the spirits of the past imbues Acharya-Baskerville's work, which seeks to remake relationships between all beings in the phenomenal world for change in the longer term. Through this quietly radical encounter, bridging time, places,

materials and symbols, she is herself changed, becoming more reflective, more relaxed. Like water that finds its own way, she becomes more herself.

Rediscovering the Palace

Richard and Rosemary Christophers

Near Old Woking, on the banks of the River Wey, lie the scanty remains of Woking Palace. The site served as inspiration for Madi Acharya-Baskerville's works during her residency at The Lightbox. Madi worked with The Lightbox's Heritage Advisory Committee on the artefacts and building materials from the Palace uncovered from the river and during the six years of excavations from 2009 to 2016 now preserved in The Lightbox's collection.

Woking Palace began as a modest manor house by 1200 whose ownership passed between Crown and nobility according to the politics of the day. By 1466 it was owned by Henry Stafford, the husband of Lady Margaret Beaufort, who had become the mother of the future King Henry VII when aged only 13, and her driving ambition in those turbulent times was for Henry to become king. Losing her estates for plotting against Richard III, she was reinstated, as a tenant, by Henry VII after his victory at Bosworth Field in 1485. Henry Stafford, Henry VII and Henry VIII made extensive additions to the house, by 1490 named a palace, and Elizabeth I, though seldom visiting, also made considerable modifications. Over the years Valencian tiles covered the floors, and new glass was fitted by the king's glazier. But it was not to last: Elizabeth's successor, James I, short of cash, granted it to Sir Edward Zouch who had it dismantled.

Apart from two buildings given agricultural use, most of the fabric found its way to local

buildings or abandonment in the fields where the labours of the team from the Surrey Archaeological Unit with community involvement from the Friends of Woking Palace among others found the artefacts which have been an inspiration for Madi's work. For more information about Woking Palace please visit Woking's Story.

Text kindly contributed by Richard and Rosemary Christophers. Madi is very grateful to Richard and Rosemary Christophers for sharing their knowledge and expertise throughout the residency. Their contribution has been invaluable and much appreciated.

Catalogue



1
Cardinal Celadon
Ceramic Sculpture
H16 W16 D16



2
Wiseman Bart
Ceramic Sculpture
H22.5 W19 D18



3
Goodbye Bartman, it's been a blast!
Ceramic Sculpture
W13 H19 D14



4
On Being Purple
Mixed media sculpture (fishing net
debris, vintage textiles)
H110 W35 D30



5
Tongue Tied
Mixed media sculpture (glazed porcelain, fishing net, vintage textiles, found glass, fired)
H22.5 W19 D18



6
Nipple Caught
Mixed media sculpture (porcelain, fishing net, vintage textiles, found brick, fired)
H22.5 W19 D18



7
Valencian Tile Bottle 1
Ceramic Sculpture



8
Valencian Tile Bottle 2
Ceramic Sculpture



9
Valencian Tile Bottle Study 1
Watercolour
15x10cm



10
Oyster Experiment
Ceramic Sculpture
H11 W8 D3



11
The Chertsea Oyster
Ceramic Sculpture
W35 H31 D4



12
Oyster Bowls, a Pair
Porcelain
H5 W14 D8



13
Lustre Pattern 1
Ceramic Sculpture
W35 H29 D4



13
Palace Key
Ceramic Sculpture
H4 W22 D4



14
On the way to Woking Palace
Ceramic Sculpture
W33 H20 D14



15
Chertsey Palace Tile Study
Watercolour
15x10cm

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