

Samena Rana

Samena Rana was a photographer and disability activist. Born in 1955 in Lahore, Pakistan, she moved to England at the age of 9 to receive hospital treatment after being injured in a car accident. She studied at the Florence Treolar School and the College of Further Education at Coventry and worked in Saudi Arabia as a translator after her A-levels. During her travels in Pakistan in 1982, she became interested in photography and returned to London to pursue a part-time photography course at the Sir John Cass School of Arts. It was here that she experienced the problems facing many disabled photographers - the lack of accessible darkrooms. Because the class was on the second floor, she was told that her presence was a fire hazard and she eventually left the course.

Her pursuit to find an accessible darkroom led her to SHAPE, a photographer's studio in the Battersea Arts Centre, where she began developing and printing her own black and white photographs. She fought to improve accessibility for other disabled photographers and her advocacy led to changes in policies both at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) and Camerawork's darkroom in East London. Some of her professional commitments included working as a freelance Disability Awareness Trainer with Interchange and the London Disability Resource Team and she was also a Trustee of London Artsline in Camden.

Samena Rana tackled disability issues on both a personal and public realm by reflecting artistically the ways in which she questioned and referenced her disability and by questioning the restrictions placed on people with disabilities by an able-bodied public. She accomplished this in many ways. One example is the way she referred to the term 'disability'. As artist Shaheen Merali explains, Samena Rana marked the prefix '(dis)ability' to challenge not only the way society perceives impairment but also to emphasise and reclaim the term, 'ability'. In addition, she documented various aspects of the disability movement such as anti-telethon rallies and workshops with support from artists such as Allan De Souza and Shaheen Merali. From 1989 onward, she shifted her focus from disability activism to concentrate on photography.

Most of her artworks are constructed as series with interconnecting themes and focus primarily on the self. She created probing representations of themes as diverse as identity, childhood, memory, sexuality, migration, beauty and disability, and family. Some of her compositions evoke a strong sense of pleasure and danger and pose complex questions about personal histories and self-identity as explained in the 'Out of India: Contemporary Art of the South Asian Diaspora' exhibition catalogue. Using an adjusted camera with a triggering mechanism that could be placed in her mouth, she took photographs which were often constructed on the bed, in a bathtub, or on the floor, with materials such as dyes, water, jewellery, knives and textiles.

Her works have been exhibited both nationally in shows such as 'Darshan' at the Camerawork Gallery in 1986 and 'Disrupted Borders' at the City Gallery in Leicester in 1994 and internationally, at the Queens Museum of Art in 'Out of India: Contemporary Art of the South Asian Diaspora', in 1997-1998 and 'Crown Jewels: Contemporary British Asian Artists' in Germany. Her appreciation and knowledge of Pakistani culture also influenced her works and she incorporated a variety of material culture in her compositions.

Samena Rana died on Monday, 14 September, 1992 in Stoke Mandeville Hospital in Buckinghamshire. Her works are held at the Panchayat Archive, University of Westminster.