

Transcript of Bhajan Hunjan interview

Shyama: I'm Shyama Perera, talking to the artist Bhajan Hunjan, who came to the UK from Kenya in 1975 to study Fine Art at Reading University. Today she is an established artist in both the public and private realm. You can read an academic proposal of Bhajan's work and see examples of it in the SADAA archive.

Bhajan, what inspired you to become an artist?

Bhajan: I think as a child I was always very creative coming from a family of creatives. My mother was always making things at home, you know, like our clothes and everything really, and my father was a maker too. My grandfather actually was a carpenter so there was always things being talked about with materials. We were quite a self-sufficient family, in those days, remember you couldn't just go out and buy clothes and sweaters and crochets and embroidery, my mother did all of that at home. Generally, what I did with my spare time, holidays, I used to...started drawing and painting and then I had wonderful teachers in my secondary school. My father noticed that that was something which I really liked, remember we were in colonial Kenya at the time. My father he was a plumber and he used to go to lots of different colonial English houses and he used to meet people, mostly English women who painted and there was one Mrs Barkus that he was very fond of and she used to call him Father actually, and she was a flower painter. So when I was in secondary school, I remember in my holidays, he would, sort of, fix an appointment with her and say, I'm going to bring my daughter to tea today, and he would drop me at her house in his pick-up and say come back at 4 or 5 o'clock to pick me up and she would have a trolley wheeled in with lovely cakes and tea and we used to talk painting and her husband, who I didn't know, had died at the time, was also a painter, he used to paint seaside scapes and she painted wonderful, wonderful, as I said, flower paintings so we talked a lot about work and I think that was, sort of, very close connection with a real artist.

Shyama: Was it because your father had spotted that you were particularly good at painting that he introduced you to her?

Bhajan: Yes, yes, he did. You know I'm really very grateful for that.

Shyama: And then, what happened as you were going through school, you continued this friendship with Mrs Barkus, your parents were obviously fantastically supportive as well as being themselves creative.

Bhajan: Yes, and so in secondary school, I was in a girls' secondary school and we had some two wonderful art teachers, Miss Chana and Mrs Gupta, and one was really very, very creative very inspiring so I remember also spending a lot of my spare time in the art room. I then went to high school, it was a co-ed school and my subjects at the time were maths, economics and geography. It was a very good school, but it didn't have any art, it didn't offer any art A-level. I think at that age, I knew what I wanted so I actually went to see the headteacher and asked him that if I decided to come to this particular school in Nairobi called Jamhuri High School, will he let me sit for A-level art exams? He said, yes, we'll do that which was absolutely fantastic. I think I was actually headstrong at that age so in those two years on some Saturdays, I attended what, there was like a creative art school in Nairobi, run by a Mrs Nadiadi, so I would brush up my skills there. She would set me up especially, I was like her only student on Saturday morning and I would paint away, so I feel very fortunate that I had these adults, creative adults that basically encouraged me and then came the time as to what I was going to do, you know, after school, so in the school holidays

when I was actually applying or thinking about how to pursue my career, I was still quite focused on art, whereas I think my father at the time felt that I should go for economics or ...

Shyama: Did you actually continue geography, economics and maths while you were also doing the art?

Bhajan: I did, yes, so I did four A-level subjects and then the art teacher made me... she set up a whole thing for me so I could appear for the A-level exams alongside my other three subjects. And also you might recall that most of, at that time, there were lots of South Asian teachers...some of the names I had mentioned, apart from my headteacher, who was Mr Mwangi, Kenyan African. Around that time, a lot of Asians were then coming to England because of the, what we call, the Africanisation policy in Kenya where the British citizens had to decide whether they were going to stay in Kenya or come to Britain. Britain had offered certain amount of immigration numbers that it could take. So we're talking about late 60s, either you had to take Kenyan citizenship to operate in Kenya or you had to leave and a lot of people left at the time, including my sister, who by then, was married with her family and my older two brothers were already in England, they had come for further studies. Still the plan was that they would go back to Kenya, but because of this whole change in the political policies, they decided to stay. So in a way I, at that time, had a choice because we all still held what we called the British Overseas passports and we couldn't really study at Nairobi University if we were British unless we then took up Kenyan citizenship so in my family, my father and my brothers, we had a business, we had a hardware shop, and a quarry where we mined stone, they decided they would take up Kenyan citizenship so we were, as young adults, make up our own minds, so I decided that I would stick with my British citizenship, overseas citizenship, and then apply through UCCA to universities in Britain so that's what I did. So, in that particular time, the holidays, I also did an apprenticeship with a wonderful artist called Hamid Mogul who was an illustrator and ran a studio in Nairobi and for three months I worked with him and I got to know a lot about people like... he had these magazines there, Picasso and all the kinds of Western European artists.

Shyama: So, where was your artistic focus at that point, you're in Africa, your South Asian in heritage, you are about to come to Britain and you mention Mrs Barkus and you've mentioned Mrs Chana and Gupta who was teaching you and now Hamid Mogul so you were getting South Asian influence, you were getting British influence, was there any African influences as you thought about heading into Britain for the rest of your life, really?

Bhajan: Well, some of the work I was doing at the time was looking at a lot of wildlife paintings...because a lot of work was...the white European settlers who were doing that kind of painting and one of my first paintings that I sold was of an elephant for 50 shillings. I think the African influence was there in terms of what we saw around us, with textiles, with cloth, with bead work, but the syllabus or the work that I did was mostly western European curriculum because, remember, we also were a British colony up till 1963 and the curriculum after that still carried on which was very much British in its material, in its content.

Shyama: So, when you came to Reading and you would later go to Slade and Central St Martins, how would you describe your artistic sensibility at that time?

Bhajan: When I first came, I had this vision of landscape painting or portraiture or that kind of work and, but when I came to Reading, it completely blew my mind away because it was very much influenced by abstract work. There was hardly any life drawing and mostly, well, 100% were male, white teachers and they were very influential people like Terry Frost and Alan Davies who was well-known. I think for me what was amazing that I was open to do

anything and those formative years for me was very much about taking in a lot of stuff, it was more about taking in than an output. Then there were different studios, there was a printmaking studio, painting, experimental and a sculpture studio. So, I was...in the first year, we were moving around different studios and then, of course, after the university exam, became committed students, because quite a many dropped out after the first year, if you didn't get through your first year. So, yeah, it was very much about taking things in and it was very much about experimenting, it was very much about reading on lots of artists and visiting lots of exhibitions. Mostly, we came to London to see what was happening in the galleries. Reading was a four year course, it was only at the third or fourth year that I started actually started coming up with my own language of how I could express myself.

Shyama: And what was it that you were wanting to express at that point?

Bhajan: At that point a lot of my work...I think that was a very African influence, I was looking at nature for influence, I was looking at very earthy beings, I had started making paintings in sawdust, dried sawdust and I would build them up as tactile pieces, but I also spent a lot of time in print studio, and I think one reason I did that was my tutor whose name was Harry Redman, a wonderful man, who actually had spent some time in India during the war...and we would have long conversations about India and his time there, so printmaking studio for me was a place where I could hide away from the rest of the art school in like the other studios and I could just work on using some, in a very communal way, because in print studios, you had lots of students who worked in one particular space, but also it was very technical and I think I somehow needed that kind of technique to guide me. I couldn't deal with just painting all the time, or just drawing all the time, somehow, I just needed to try lots of different things and so, in the print room I was making etchings using metal plates and acids and dry points so it was very physical and when you made a print, if you have any kind of knowledge about etchings especially, you work on zinc or copper plates and then you covered them with a chemical, and then you work through them so the bits that are exposed, then you put them on acid trays...and it's all quite...there's a lot of chemistry to print making, but they're almost 2D materials and then you, sort of, damp your paper and you pass them through the presses. So, there's a whole element of surprise there as well and that was something wonderful, I really liked that kind of tactile quality of making a print.

Shyama: As you were developing and as you were discovering what you loved, discovering new techniques, did you see yourself at that point of being peculiarly or particularly South Asian or were you just one of a load of students who were bringing something different to their work?

Bhajan: I think I was very conscious of being South Asian because there was one other girl who was of mixed heritage with black and English parents, otherwise, you know, it was all very white, European environment really. Around that time, I was also living with my brother and my sister-in-law so my weekends were spent a lot in the kind of community sharing...going to the Sikh temple, the Gurdwara on a Sunday, so I was still very much in touch with my communities, so I didn't completely feel isolated as such. When I was at university during the weekdays, I was very much in that space and then during the weekend, I would be with my brother and sister-in-law and we did those family things with other South Asian families so, yes, I always felt that I was between cultures, you know, I always felt that that was something where I was but it didn't, kind of, feel odd, it just felt that, you just slotted into that space when you were in it and vice-versa.

Shyama: Do you think that was recognised within the communities you were part of at that point or did you feel that you really needed to strike out? So, for example, in my head, I've

got the fact that you curated an exhibition called 'Four Indian Women Artists' in 1981, was that because you felt that that kind of hybrid art or those different cultures that you were bringing in, the different ways of looking at art that you were bringing in were not being seen as clearly as native art, for want of a better way of putting it?

Bhajan: Well, I think being at the Slade was an amazing take-off point for me, because I met lots of other artists from other countries and that's when I actually met some of these male, first generation Indian artists who were trying to set up an art gallery in South Audley street which was part of the Indian High Commission and, again, there were many women artists, there were hardly any South Asian artists, so, apart from Chila Burman who was junior to me at the Slade, I had not met anybody sort of, that I could continually have a relationship with and really discuss those issues. At the Slade, we were also looking at, you know, getting more women tutors, because there were hardly any women tutors there at all. There were lots and lots of different struggles going on at that time. So having met those people, like Amal Ghosh, people like Ibrahim Wagh, people like Mali, people like Suresh Vedak, Balraj Khanna, some of them who were first generation, who were trying to set up a group, I got to know them and that was when IA(UK) centre came up and we decided that one of the first exhibitions should be about Indian artists...Indian women artists and that how, that's when I somehow came to this position where I was able to organise this exhibition which was so brilliant and that's how 'Four Indian Women Artists' came about.

Shyama: Well, you were a minority within a minority and that's something that I find quite interesting when we look at the Indian women artists, writers, you know, all sorts of practitioners who part of the SADAA archive is that they seem far more likely to look for other women like them and try and create hubs of excellence.

Bhajan: Yes absolutely, because it was through that exhibition that other things came about. Numaish came about, what was happening at the GLC. I think there was much more activity going on in the voluntary sector. Through Chila, I met up with other Asian women, like Ravi Randhava, who was part of an Asian women's group that were...there were writers, and they were getting together... yes, and after that, I think much more activity started happening even amongst South Asian artists. And through 'Jagrati' was an amazing exhibition which was put together by Symrath Patti because she was working in Greenwich at the time, Greenwich Council, and she had this idea for an exhibition at the Citizen's Art Gallery so, you know, these are all before, Thatcherite days.

Shyama: What you're describing there, Bhajan, is a kind of huge hunger for the work of this new generation, or first generation of artists of a South Asian heritage to be seen and to be appreciated, and to be authenticated, alongside mainstream work. Was there, this sort of incredible drive that, sort of, set you apart at that point?

Bhajan: Yes, I think there was a huge big rift between what we saw in galleries and what we were all doing, so somehow, we felt that we had to organise ourselves, and make exhibitions happen, so there were opportunities, there were community halls, there were, you know, there were galleries up north, like, I remember, with Panchayat, the exhibition went to City Art Gallery, went to Cartwright Hall and a few other venues, so there were, especially, public spaces that were open to us, but very few, mainstream, public galleries. I think those opportunities were pounced upon.

Shayma: Well, the wonderful irony, or the wonderful joy, of course, is now that the work of the Panchayat collective, of which you were one of the founding members, which was made up of South Asian artists, is now held by the Tate gallery and there must have come a point,

and I don't know if you can, identify it when these two narratives, the mainstream art and this first generation South Asian arts narrative cross and you both start having the conversation.

Bhajan: I still feel, maybe, conversations are happening, but very few. I still feel that there are huge gaps where those opportunities don't come in the way of South Asian artists as could have been possible. I mean, we're talking about, now, 40 years later, but along the way, I must say, there were collections, at Cartwright Hall, which were put together by Nima Poovaya-Smith. There were...Arts Council has, kind of, in its tokenistic way, collected work of very few South Asian artists, those arguments, that if we've got Anish Kapoor and then once in a while, we have Zarina Bhimji, we don't really need to look at anyone else. I'm sorry, I'm still very sceptical at the whole thing and feel that those conversations have been very tokenistic and don't think that they've happened wholeheartedly.

Shyama: That's really interesting because, you know, you are now very established as an artist, and very active within the sphere of public art, we can see your work on pavements, and in public buildings and so one would think, you know, you are playing the same game, if you like. What is it do you think that is missing?

Bhajan: I think that the art world is very elite anyway. I don't think that there's discrimination against South Asian artists or generally as black art but also I think even amongst white artists, it's very much about who knows whom, and what gallery promotes you, where and how they promote the work of the galleries to those very well-known big players in the art world. So, I think that it was that connection with other artists I think that kept us going, because there had been lots of artists who have dropped along the way. I can name people who've given up halfway, always say that, if at a certain point in your career, you are not encouraged, you are not...your work is not looked at, you don't have those opportunities, then, you slowly dry up, droop and you kind of go into another world, because you still have to live, you have to make ends meet and in a way, I think in Britain, lots of artists used to go into teaching, lots of artists used to survive that way. I don't think many artists were taken up by the gallery system, then you had this whole change in the art school system. There've been huge hurdles along the way and I think it's become a marathon just to survive within the system and to keep on going...I don't know who that sounds but that's the way I feel sometimes and I feel if it wasn't for those connections, with other artists, that kept our heartbeat going, I think that...because at one point, you don't even think about the content of your work, you just think about what is it out there that you can still...how you can still be creative, how you can still inspire younger people, how you can still keep connecting with others, but I think what was really also very important, was the music scene, the whole theatre scene, and other creative practitioners within the South Asian community.

Shyama: So if you had to say what the legacy for your generation is, I mean I can see an awful lot to learn about collaboration, collectivism, providing support within communities and I guess that also happens within the wider art community because you're part of a group of artists from Bow who are working together and living together and generally creating hubs of excellence. What is the legacy for South Asian artists or of South Asian heritage?

Bhajan: I think that in our way we have actually influenced the wider culture. I think if you think about generally with the arts or any arts, you're talking particularly about visual art, but I think that if we look at all the different scenes within the arts, I think they have penetrated now into the mainstream culture and I think now we can reap the rewards of those struggles along the way and I think that's the legacy. The wonderful thing is that we are now we have become part of the mainstream, at least within people's psyche. We have been part of the system...I don't know does that answer the question?

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Shyama: Yes, I think it does in a way because it's what we do at SADAA which is we're trying to capture your footprint, trying to capture you and all of your generation who came to the UK created and pushed through for us coming up behind and it brings me to my final question, inevitably, of course, why have you agreed to have your work in the SADAA archive?

Bhajan: Oh, I think it's so important, Shyama, for the work to be in a place that...where other people are passionate about arts can access the work and that's why I think a resource like SADAA is so, so very important.

Shyama: Thank you Bhajan.