

Indian-American artist **Swati Khurana** in conversation with editor *Shilpa Kameswaran*.

Swati Khurana has been an Artist-in-Residence at the Atlantic Center for the Arts, New Smyrna Beach, Pace University's Dyson College of Art, Henry Street Settlement, Rotunda Gallery/BCAT Joint Multimedia Studio, David, Julia White Colony and the Bronx Museum. She is a founding member of the South Asian Women's Creative Collective (SAWCC), a NYC-based organization dedicated to the advancement, visibility, and development of emerging and established South Asian women artists.



Talk to us about New York City, its boroughs - where you were raised, where you were educated, where you've lived and worked - How does the city influence your art and your immigrant perceptions?

To answer any question about my relationship to NYC, I am drawn to E.B.White and what he writes in 'Here Is New York': "There are roughly three New Yorks. There is, first, the New York of the man or woman who was born here, who takes the city for granted and accepts its size and its turbulence as natural and inevitable. Second, there is the New York of the commuter — the city that is devoured by locusts each day and spat out each night. Third, there is the New York of the person who was born somewhere else and came to New York in quest of something....Commuters give the city its tidal restlessness; natives give it solidity and continuity; but the settlers give it passion."

I'm a New Yorker, but I am a settler. I was born in India, moved with my family to the Bronx when I was two. Most of my childhood was spent in areas within a two-hour radius of NYC, specifically Bergen County,

NJ and the Hudson Valley, NY. As soon as I could, I was taking the train into New York on weekends with friends to go to museums, cinemas, the theater, and even just to walk around downtown. When I was 17, I began college at Columbia University, and lived uptown for about 5 years, and then moved to the East Village, when I started graduate work at New York University. I then lived in Prospect Heights Brooklyn for 11 years, and recently moved near Riverdale, in the Bronx. I have lived in NYC for my entire adult life, and more than half of my whole life.

Because settlers choose to make NYC our home, I think we bring our energy to the city, but also are very attracted to and excited by the energy of the city. The city's energy is a critical component of my own artistic practice, as I infuse my collages, drawings, embroideries, and videos with many layers and juxtapositions of images, texts, patterns and motifs, many of which are found or inspired by living in New York City. And the vibrant immigrant communities play a huge role in the city's landscape and life.

As artists, we pay attention. As immigrants, we seek to understand. As an immigrant artist, I seek to decon-

struct and recreate narratives, rituals, and landscapes—all of which are often fragmentary and shifting.

In your Embroidery, Collages, Drawings, Objects the traditional themes of the South-Asian bride and the South-Asian family seem central. Talk to us about your constant preoccupation with these themes.

One has often said art imitates life. In my case, art critiques and explores life.

The traditional themes of the South-Asian bride and the South-Asian family have been central to my life, especially my own experience of getting married at the age of 22. I felt very disconnected from the rituals surrounding my wedding, and very disembodied when I saw photographs or video footage of my marriage ceremony. At the same time, I became interested in feminist experimental film and video, and the role of the body and performance in feminist art. It finally clicked when I realized that my wedding was inherently a performative act, and being a bride was a role. It took me years before I watched my wedding video in full, and the first time I watched the video, I turned on my own camera and watched the video on a monitor through the lens. I enjoyed the distortions and feedback, and felt that the more layers and mediation were



'Love letters as necessary fictions' from 'Ten years later' 2008
paper, ink, string, found miniature display box 24 x 18 x 2"

placed, the more verisimilitude there was to the actual disembodies act of being married. That is where the video "Bridal Guide" emerged.

The bride operates as a launching point to look at South Asian female subjectivity in the contemporary, urban, globalized world. She becomes the lens, site for projection of desire, a symbol of objectification. At this point, the drawings of the bride have become such an integral part of my lexicon as an artist, specifically drawings I made of my own photographs, and use them in my embroideries, collages, and drawings. From the bride, I began to incorporate other figures (human, animal, deity) that I collected in books, magazines, and newspapers, and created environments with different elements, including architectural spaces, domestic items, and design motifs. By viewing weddings as inherently performative acts, I began to get explore others environments and vignettes as artifice, and the role of artifice in longing, nostalgia, commodification, and identification.

What kind of articles/objects/elements do you employ to make your art? How 'urban' are these physical inputs with which you make your art?

Vitality and juxtaposition are integral to living in urban space. The very notion of juxtaposition as collage permeates every aspect of my practice, from digital collages, works on paper, and embroideries. Even in a small embroidery, diameter 5 cm, I treat the circle as an urban space, literally and symbolically. Many of the plants, animals, and architecture which enter the space of my work evoke spectacle and abundance and the uncanny, bridging the gaps between public/private,



miniscule/grandiose, permanent/ephemeral.

What I love about walking around NYC is the energy of millions of people, with private lives, often performing private acts in public spaces. Most recently, with my scrolling texts projects, the city and its dwellers have been my muse. I collect text messages that people save on their phones. Partly that emerges from watching people move in space, as they walk, text, and read their cell phones. I wondered about these messages and what they reveal about those who keep those messages.

You were a founding member of the South Asian Women's Creative Collective back in 1997, an outfit focused on bringing together South Asian women artists and authors and advancing their works in NYC. Tell us how this initiative came about and over the past 15 years what backward and forward linkages SAWCC has built with the city and it's immigrant women?

SAWCC, as we pronounced it "saucy", the South Asian Women's Creative Collective is very dear to my artistic practice, and even more so, to my heart. I was invited to attend one of the first few meetings by SAWCC founder Jaishri Abichandani in 1997, and became involved ever since.

SAWCC, as a creative and professional network, was the perfect segue for me, as a beginning artist and as a young adult. As I was deciding what do to do after college, I knew I wanted to be close to a South Asian artistic community, and originally, I thought I would have to move to India, or perhaps London, for a while. SAWCC made NYC a true artistic center for South Asian women artists, where we created our own readings, performances, exhibitions, parties, salons, and protests. It truly was a creative laboratory for feminist practice and activist politics. I was lucky enough to be involved early on, and that deeply inspired me to stay and really make NYC my home.

SAWCC was founded at a time when there was very limited representation of South Asian American artists in galleries, bookshelves, film, television, radio. The landscape has changed greatly since 1997. SAWCC has built coalitions, from the very beginning, with women of color groups, queer groups, immigrant organizations, and progressive initiatives, and continues these partnerships.

Going forward, SAWCC remains a robust community, which serves to meet the needs of both emerging and

established artists, and continues to provide platforms for showcasing their work. Recently, SAWCC has been involved with having more panels and talks, professional workshops, and studio critique groups, all which hope to move the creative dialogue forward, as more artists are in different stages of their careers. SAWCC also has a chapter in London, and there has been some transatlantic dialogue, programs and presentations. The space that SAWCC creates is simultaneously social, political, physical, and virtual, all while placing the creative work of South Asian women at its core. For the artists, SAWCC really has become a tribe.

What is the role of collaboration in your work? How has working with other artists impacted your practice?

Much of my original artistic exposure was watching my mother, aunts, and grandmothers sew, knit, crochet and embroider. About five years ago, I became especially interested in the trope of embroidery because it offered so many formal possibilities to explore what I was doing with the drawings and collages on paper. And it gave me the opportunity to engage with my grandmothers, and have them engage with each other. Without instruction, my grandmothers (one who lives in NY, the other in Pune, India) were asked to interpret my line drawings on fabric, working in sections through thread, bead and sequins, and then exchanging them. I would be the final collaborator on these works. In my work, I was very interested in the specific tension of inside/outside regarding South Asian



female subjectivity and how that tension waltzes with shame, desire, commodification, personal and global politics. In this collaboration, I invite my grandmothers, who typically do ‘women’s work’ in their private domestic sphere, to collaborate with me, through embroidery and crochet, in the public space of exhibitions and performances.

Many of my collaborations begin very organically, from admiring an artist’s work for about a decade and matching that interest with a particular project or theme that I have been exploring in my own work. For example, I attended many of dancer Parijat Desai’s performances, and I was thrilled to have worked with Parijat and VJ Lotus Visual on projections for the dance work “Songs to Live For”, which has been shown in NYC and throughout India, as part of the New Festival tour, from 2010-2011.

In the case of the “Unsuitable Girls” collaboration with Anjali Bhargava, originally the project began with my designing trophies with self-deprecatory titles (such as “Least Dutiful Wife, Most Apprehensive Housekeeper”), which I viewed as a self-portrait. After showing that work as part of a solo exhibition that I had in Miami, I began to see how universal that project was and how many women identified with these titles. On

the occasion of SAWCC’s 10th anniversary, the exhibition “Sultana’s Dream” featured collaborative works among SAWCC artists. For that exhibition, I worked with Anjali, a photographer whom I had admired for a long time, and we posted an open call on the SAWCC listserv for women to self-nominate themselves for the trophies. Anjali shot the portraits, and we have been working for on this collaboration since 2007, taking breaks to do our own work and coming back to the project. Together, we are working toward a print calendar, and we’re thrilled that the project will be featured in the Smithsonian Museum’s “Indians in America” exhibition next year.

Currently, I spend about half my studio time working alone, and half working on collaborative or participatory projects, such as the “Texting Scrolls.” I have found that working as an artist can sometimes be very isolating, and the dialogue among collaborators and participants enriches my own internal singular dialogue. That has probably been the greatest benefit to be working in NYC and in a community like SAWCC, as both afford opportunities to meet other artists and engage with each other’s practices.



‘Most apprehensive fiance’ Digital C-print 30 x 20” 2007 with custom engraved trophy
Part of ‘UnSuitable Girls’ series with photographer Anjali Bhargava