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CHANDRIKA MARLA BIO

Born in New Delhi in 1968, Chandrika Marla worked as a fashion designer for several years before she began a career in art. She moved to the United States in 1998 and is currently a resident artist at Cubberley Studios in Palo Alto, California. Her work has been exhibited at e de Young Museum (California), Queens Museum of Art (New York), Museum of the Shenandoah Valley (Virginia), and the Rockford Art Museum (Illinois). At a performance in Chicago in 2011, her paintings were interpreted by Rama Vaidyanathan – a leading exponent of Bharatanatyam dance.

Marla is best known for her use of saturated color to create paintings of simplistic forms that straddle the line between realism and abstraction. Her work explores identity and is inspired by women, their relationships with others, and with their own selves.

RUMINATIONS

What is Asian America in 2020's?

While I have an optimistic view of what America will be in the 2020's, I don't have an opinion about what an Asian America might be. What I would like to see are continued conversations between Asian Americans and Americans of all other races and religions; the goal is simple – to be seen as who we are, and not from where we came from.

My paintings depict the borders within our society that push us into our boxes and keep us restrained. From a distance these lines look divisive, but as we look closer we see that this is where all the colors thrive as they mingle together and that same divisive line becomes the most beautiful feature of the painting. This too is my dream for America – that all our communities coalesce into a country filled with beautiful relationships.

What is Asian American art? Does such a thing exist?

There is an increasing amount of art created by Asians that no longer can be traced to the creators' cultural identity. Unless, of course, it is the artist's intent to direct the viewer's interpretation with the use of cultural motifs, symbols, or scripts.

Most artists work with universal concepts. We produce art based on our emotions, thoughts, and we channel influences from our environments. My female Asian take on the micro aggressions I have encountered might be depicted like the struggles of a male Hispanic artist who is a cancer survivor. What the viewer senses is the emotion, and not the source that it springs from. Asian American art is now simply art.

Q&A

Does a racialization and racial formation of the US affect your work as an artist?

In the past few years my work has included nuances of conversations, polarities, separation, and most importantly, a search for beauty. In all the ugliness that surrounds us I find myself desperate to create objects of beauty and calm. This is what I can offer as respite to people.

Are you responding or adapting to the political landscape, social landscape? Is this directly or subconsciously expressed in your art?

Sometimes. I made a painting when George Floyd was murdered ('Make Me Wanna Holler', 2020). I used the shape of a blouse and I had started working on this piece before the murder took place. When I heard about the incident, and Floyd's last words, the neckline of the blouse became a space for violence and claustrophobia. The colors too are a deep blue and a flesh tone, speaking of divisiveness and boundaries.

My paintings are based on my emotions and thoughts, and towards the end of 2020 I created blooms, a completely new shape for me. This was a search for beauty and sprang from the solace I found in nature.

What in your work comes from your own culture? Heritage?

My vibrant palette is the background of each and every memory that I have of India. Also, some people have compared the so-stippled line that divides my forms to an aura. Spirituality is deep-rooted in India, and I would like to believe that my work leans towards it.

Is your work affected by the contemporary moment: i.e. such as hate crimes, legacy of systems of oppression, attack on the capital?

Yes, similar to my previous answer about social landscape.

Is your work immune to social political context like hate crimes or demonization of Asian Americans?

No. My mood sinks when I see inhumanity, and the mood of my painting shifts with my heart.

How does your work reflect the current realities of COVID, and the social climate of life in America today?

I have painted flowers recently, a tribute to nature and the solace we have found this past year. I also created a boat-like shape, while grappling with not being able to travel to meet my family in India.

Do you have thoughts on the rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans?

I have feelings of sadness and helplessness. I feel sick to my stomach, but then detached and unable to process the news. These brutalities remind me of Sandy Hook. This country cannot take care of its own. Just having to think about this question makes my head spin.

Do ideas about the model minority myth perpetuate and influence your life and/or artwork?

No.

Do perceptions of silencing or amplifying play a role in your identity and voice as a contemporary artist?

Unsure.

Most importantly - all please answer how are artists (you personally) going to respond to these occurrences and communicate with viewers with optimism, or as a path forward with resilience and vision?

I choose to present the world with beauty, the only respite that I can offer. I personally have always chosen to look at art as a way of recharging and reconnecting with my own soul. And this is what I can share with people. e feelings that emerge as you view my work and a connection to something simple, a respite from the noise that bombards us each and every day.