



Hosfelt Gallery photos

Rina Banerjee, "Ugly boy..." (2014). Banerjee's exhibition "Human Likeness" is at Hosfelt Gallery through March 4.

Reshaping reality into an alternative

By Charles Desmarais

Rina Banerjee makes paintings that seem escaped from her dreams and nightmares; they scramble onto the surface with frantic recklessness. Fearsome sculptures, engineered of steel and found materials reeking decadence, reach out from walls or dance alone. Their expressionless baby-doll heads and pincered clutches repel and attract with equal intensity.

Banerjee's exhibition "Human Likeness," at Hosfelt Gallery through March 4, seems at first a little sparse in the huge space. But each work is a self-contained universe, whether of airless be-dazzlement or enchanting menace.

A 5½-foot tall personage floats through a work at the gallery entrance. A work on paper, like all seven paintings in the show,

Banerjee continues on E2



Rina Banerjee, "Preternatural passage..." (2011).

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the piece is heavily embellished: Ink and acrylic paints are overlaid with blue silver leaf, aluminum leaf, applied fabric flowers.

Clad in a metallic bikini, her wild blue hair streaming behind, the figure — a claw-toed demon — swims through a fiery red field. A tiny woman dangles by the neck from the hand of the swimmer, a lifeless bauble. Yet, for all the monstrous imagery, flowers blossom all around.

Don't look for a caption to explain the fantastic scene. Banerjee is generous to a fault, appending poetic descriptions to the realms she conjures. Her titles don't limit the view, however; they expand it.

The one ascribed to this picture, in full, is, "Heavens no place for girls, no sand, no flowers no count of curls no irons to flatten nor straighten or curl your coiled corns, your hair would not leave you naked as girls when all but one could leave open my calls to trumpet her thoughts, stainless steel bikini and sanding wheels for girls who will not open" (2016).

Other paintings glory in excess, too, combining in various degrees the artist's repeated visits to favored pictorial territories: flowers, umbrellas, flowers as umbrellas, digestive and excretory processes, fluids in streams and droplets. The show is a hallucinatory journey that stayed with me for weeks, and brought me back a second time.

Banerjee was born in India and raised in England and the United States. She now lives in New York. Trained as a polymer engineer, she left that career to study painting and printmaking at Yale University, where she received a master's degree in 1995 at age 32.

Nods to her Indian heritage abound throughout her work, both in the colors and fabrics she chooses and as direct reference. A horrid little roly poly in pink silk and gold-studded armor has a title that starts, "Jack Fruit Johnny she was a diasporic Devi..." (2016). Johnny's fore-

limbs are giant porcupine quills, splayed like Edward Scissorhands appendages.

It has taken me some time to come around to Banerjee's sculpture. Surrealism is more convincing on paper than in three dimensions. Where a skillful painter can elide rough edges and jarring conjunctions to create something that looks holistically convincing, sculpture

too easily falls into cliché. Dolls' heads, unblinking glass eyes, animal hoofs and horns, feathers and fibers heavy with insinuation — these are symbols too potent to be used without great caution. The colors and textures of found materials are, more or less, a given, less receptive to subtle handling than shades of pigment.

Banerjee's sculpture hits the mark when it does not appear to strain. One large work in the exhibition, "The sap of earth n' blood..." (2017), is a kind of steel mesh balloon more than 12 feet high, anchored by a baby's crib. I overheard a gallery worker tell a visitor that the long black glass tusk in the cradle was a comment on white fear of black male sexual potency. If the piece is really that flat-footed, well, ugh.

"Hanuman's flight is evolution's climb" (2012) is more balanced in color (a deep dried-blood maroon), more humble in its retelling of a traditional story. The Hindu monkey demigod crouches on the gallery wall, ready to leap across the earth, represented by a flattened paper parasol. It is the piece that had me returning to the other three-dimensional works in the exhibition, looking for the same knowing approach to a topic, an equal richness of allusion.

The timing of this imaginative exhibition interrupts and informs my thoughts about the inescapable current discussion of "alternative facts." There was a time when the 14th century word "fiction" seemed perfectly adequate, but no more. Banerjee starts with the concrete, reshaping it into a credible alternative to mere reality. A truth reliant on, but independent of, fact.

A fact, in the hand of the artist, is a tool with which to shape a world that does not exist. Even a documentary work is never tailored out of whole cloth; it is quilted from bits and pieces. Facts are the tesserae of the mosaic, not the final image; they are bricks, not buildings.

So, what is the difference between the constructed truth of the artist and the ersatz verity of the deceiver? Only spirit and intention: The first is offered, the latter imposed.

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Works by Rina Banerjee, top: "Hanuman's flight is evolution's climb" (2012).

Above: "Jack Fruit Johnny..." (2016).

Left: "Heavens no place for girls..." (2016).

Rina Banerjee, "Human Likeness": 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays; 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Thursdays. Through March 4. Free. Hosfelt Gallery, 269 Utah St., S.F. (415) 495-5454. <http://hosfeltgallery.com>

📺 To see a video of Rina Banerjee talking about the work she is preparing for the 2017 Venice Biennale: <https://youtu.be/hnQg5d2c8IY>