Annu Palakunnathu Matthew

About the Artwork

As an immigrant, Annu Palakunnathu Matthew is often questioned about where she is "really from." When Matthew says that she is Indian, she often has to clarify that she is an Indian from India. Not an American-Indian, but rather an Indian-American, South-Asian Indian, or even an Indian-Indian. It seems strange that all this confusion started because over 500 years ago Christopher Columbus thought he had found India, and in turn, called the native people of America collectively Indians.

In this portfolio, Matthew looks at the other "Indian". She finds similarities in how 19th century photographers of Indigenous Americans looked at what they called the "primitive natives", similar to the colonial "white gaze" of the 19th century British photographers working in India. In every culture, there is what we call the "other".

Matthew plays on her own "otherness", using photographs of Native Americans from the late 1800s through the early 1900s, which perpetuate and reinforce stereotypes. The images highlight assimilation, use labels, and make many assumptions. She pairs these, with current day self-portraits of the artist herself, in clothing, by posturing, and creating environments that mimic these archival, older images. The clothes, or costuming, are also "made up" or appropriated. Matthew's fictionalized history is similar to how Edward Curtis —one of America's 19th century premier photographers and ethnologists— did with the intervention in his subjects' posing, and the "dressing-up", of some of his native indigenous subjects in "native garb" in his photographs, that may, or may not, have been accurate representations of the peoples photographed.

Matthew' performative work —by inserting herself as the subject— is not a new concept in art. Not unsimilar to how Cindy Sherman's well-known 1990s photographic series —depicting herself in many different contexts and as various imagined characters from art history, or the Golden Age of Hollywood— were initiated. By juxtaposing many famous Western photo-archives like Curtis' from the Library of Congress, and other institutional special collections, with self-performative work like Sherman, Matthew challenges the viewers' literal assumptions of "then and now", "us and them", "exotic and local"— time, people, place.

As Holland Cotter of the New York Times wrote about her 2016 solo exhibition at sepiaEYE in New York, "…the mostly album-size photographs in this compact but far-ranging gallery survey are about the intensities and confusions of a cultural mixing that makes the artist, psychologically, both a global citizen and an outsider, at home and in transit, wherever she is. And it's about photography as document and fiction: souvenir, re-enactment, and imaginative projection."

About the Artist

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew's photo-based artwork is often a striking blend of still and moving imagery. Her work draws on archival

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photographs as a source of inspiration to re-examine historical narratives and colonization's legacies.

Matthew's recent solo exhibitions include the Royal Ontario Museum, Canada, Nuit Blanche Toronto, and sepiaEYE, New York. Matthew has also exhibited her work at the RISD Museum, Newark Art Museum, Museum of Fine Art, Boston, San Jose Museum of Art, Museum of Fine Arts in Texas, Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the 2018 Kochi-Muziris Biennale, 2018 Fotofest Biennial, 2009 Guangzhou Photo Biennial, as well as at the Smithsonian Institution in 2016.

Grants and fellowships that have supported her work include a MacColl Johnson, John Guttman, two Fulbright Fellowships, and grants from the Rhode Island State Council of the Arts. In addition, she has been an artist in residence at Yaddo and MacDowell.

Matthew is a Professor of Art at the University of Rhode Island and was the Director of the Center for the Humanities from 2013-2019, and the 2015-17 Silvia-Chandley Professor of Nonviolence and Peace Studies and is represented by sepiaEYE, New York City.