

# Talking to Annu P. Matthew



**Annu Palakunnathu Matthew's** work is firmly grounded in cross-cultural experience. Professor of Photography at the University of Rhode Island, she appropriates images from diverse sources and juxtaposes them to make incisive comments about displacement, family, social inequities, and cultural memory. **Sunanda K. Sanyal** met at her Providence home to chat about her background, artistic strategies, and her life between cultures.

**SKS:** Where were you trained in the US?

**AM:** I completed my MFA at the University of Delaware. The most useful feedback I received was from photographers in the community, especially Nancy Brokaw, who ended up writing eloquently about my work, and David H. Wells, who is now my husband!

**SKS:** You have said in other interviews that you consider yourself a photo-based artist, but not a traditional photographer. Is that because you manipulate images a lot?

**AM:** If I say I'm a photographer, people think that the final image is the image I photographed. But for most of my work, that is just the starting point. Only one of my portfolios uses un-manipulated images.

**SKS:** That's the *Memories of India* series, right?

**AM:** Yes.

**SKS:** You were born in England, went to India when you were 10, and finished high school and college there. Then you came to the US to study photography?

**AM:** Yes. I also worked in India for 6 years in information technology, which ironically has been useful for my work now.

**SKS:** In your *Re-Generation* and other series, the family emerges as a dominant theme. Is that because of the dislocated nature of your cultural identity?

**AM:** Not always. I think it's more about those who are important to me. A photo of my stepdaughter and me, compared to that of a Native American mother and daughter, reflects the changing face of families in the US, as there are more marriages between cultures.

**SKS:** *Memories of India* seems to me less digitally manipulated than the others. Why did you make a different decision for this project?



**AM:** The portfolio started at the end of graduate school, and I've continued doing it over the last twelve years. When I started out as a photographer, I thought I wanted to be a photojournalist and go back to India and fight for women's rights. But I don't have the personality for that. So I found another way to explore women's issues in a way that I was comfortable with. A good example of this is *Bollywood Satirized*, where I manipulate and satirize Bollywood posters. *Memories of India* started during this "photojournalism" phase. None of the different approaches that I experimented with worked. Out of desperation, I started using a Holga, which is a twenty-dollar camera that has very few controls. But it does have plastic lens, which makes the edges blurry and distorts the image slightly, like a memory.

**SKS:** It seems to me that you wanted this project to be more directly about nostalgia. Despite all your dislocations, there is a sense of longing, for a home, so to speak.

**AM:** (Laughs) Yes, despite my misgivings, there is a longing for home. But it's also...I see the way I work as a left brain-right brain way of thinking, where the *Memories of India* images are created more intuitively. The work is about the gestures, smells and sounds that I miss from my cultural homeland. My undergraduate is in Mathematics and I didn't want to get bogged down with the technical aspect of photography. But it does allow me to understand the science part of photography to use this simple tool (Holga) effectively. It is wonderful that I can just enjoy the sensory aspect when I am photographing, especially as all my other work is more conceptual. To me, my *Re-Generation* series is a combination of *Memories of India* and my other work.

**SKS:** Have you ever thought about experimenting with other media?

**AM:** I have primarily been interested in photography and how it is expanding into new media. I choose my technique based on the idea that I am working on, which usually starts from a photograph. Recently, I have shifted to the moving image that is created from several photographs. I use I-pads to display the *Re-Generation* series, because this particular device is small enough to be embedded in a frame.



*Memories of India* images are created more intuitively. The work is about the gestures, smells and sounds that I miss from my cultural homeland.

Above: *Haveli*, from *Memories of India*, 2005

**SKS:** Does contemporary theory inform your work?

**AM:** It has to. I feel now my work is less about being from India and more about living between cultures. So I'm becoming more and more interested in theories that relate more to that. It's something that I want to explore further.

**SKS:** Do you think art is capable any more of raising social awareness in today's media saturated visual culture, especially if you're operating in the mainstream art world?

**AM:** I have made some conscious choices about my career and life, part of which is teaching at a research university, so that I don't have to depend on the sales of my work, or my work doesn't necessarily have to be saleable to collectors. Because of that, I'm able to make the work I want to make. There are certain bodies of work that I have done that are more saleable than others, but I feel at least they're coming from what I want to say. Also, looking back at my work, I usually start with imagery that is part of the popular media, familiar to people outside the art world. That makes it a hopefully a little more universal, inviting an audience from outside the art world, from the larger public.

**SKS:** Do you think the way your images on the hate crimes after 9/11 were received had the potency to raise social awareness?

**AM:** It already has, at least for those who attended my presentations, especially in the USA. It does make them aware of other people who look different, and a little more empathetic about them. In this context, let me also tell about you a different experience. For *Re-Generations*, I went to Vietnam and Israel to broaden the body of work outside of India. I met people who agreed to be part of the project, primarily through trust. When I went to their houses, one of the first things I did was take out my I-pad and show them an example of what I was going to do. Seeing their faces transform, as they immediately understood the project, was a thrilling experience.

**SKS:** Why particularly Vietnam and Israel?

**AM:** I went to Vietnam primarily because of its history

with the United States; and the fact that there are people who have been displaced through trauma. One of the few things you think of taking in such a situation is your family photographs. I chose to go to Israel as a large number of people living there have originally come from other countries.

**SKS:** Do you think it is necessary for an artist to have a political cause behind their work?

**AM:** No, I don't think it's necessary. I love work that's just about the aesthetic. But it's not what I want to do, or maybe it's not what I can do.

**SKS:** Particularly because your work deals with family and personal memories, are you comfortable with diverse interpretations of your work by your audience, or do you insist on the question of intention?

**AM:** Well, personally I hope that there are certain things they get. But if they read other things into the work, that's fine too. My work deals with my experiences, which obviously reflect family, culture and dislocation.

**SKS:** No, not always directly about family. But your work, in contrast to that of many others, often has a personal touch to it. This is especially because you work with small-scale photographs, which have an intimacy attached to them...

**AM:** And a sense of reality. I have always been interested in the old, historical photograph and the stories it can tell, but also hide.

**SKS:** Exactly. So artists who work in that mode often are very emotional about the audience getting "it". Do you feel there is any "it" to "get" in your work?

**AM:** [Laughs] Of course, it's very satisfying when the families involved in *Re-Generations* "got" my work. But also, when I put my work up on the gallery wall, I kind of divorce myself from it. It doesn't feel like my work any more.

**SKS:** How do you feel about the reception of your work so far in your career?

**AM:** [Chuckles] I don't think I'm ever satisfied!

**SKS:** How has your work been received in India?

**AM:** Tasveer represents my work in India. I was surprised how positively the *Indian from India* series was received there. Also, Peter Nagy gave me my first Indian exhibition of the *Bollywood Satirized* series in Delhi. It was shown at the Press Club of India, so that journalists could see it; and at the Habitat Center. I especially try to show the *Bollywood Satirized* work in non-traditional spaces. The *Bollywood* work was not as positively received.

**SKS:** Meaning what?

**AM:** This was in early 2000. First of all, it wasn't really considered "art". And also because it says things that one isn't supposed to air in public.

**SKS:** And this was coming from the "insiders" of the art world, or from "outsiders"?

**AM:** I'd say both.

**SKS:** In India, manipulation of Bollywood posters can have really negative reactions.

**AM:** Yes. I also had negative reactions to the Bollywood work here in the US.

**SKS:** In what sense?

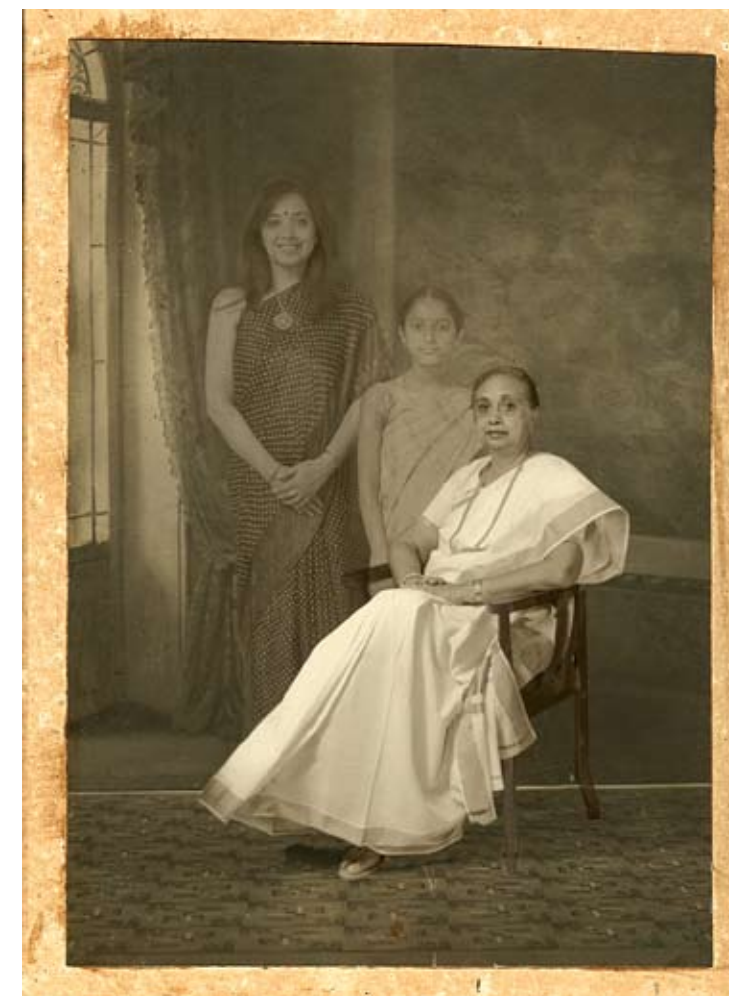
**AM:** I showed the work at my University, and some Indian graduate students — who didn't know that I am a Professor there — protested and wanted the show taken down.

**SKS:** Why?

**AM:** Because they said it showed a very negative side to India.

**SKS:** How do you respond to that?

**AM:** [Chuckles] Well, first, it isn't a positive image, and second, the work wasn't made to be liked. The work is based on my experience and perspective of growing up as a woman in India. I don't expect everyone to agree with it. It is meant to create a dialogue, which the students refused to do despite requests to meet.



I have always been interested in the old, historical photograph and the stories it can tell, but also hide.

**SKS:** Okay, let's be the devil's advocate for a second. Don't you find that despite its serious message, it partly reinforces the negative stereotypes about India that Americans already have?

**AM:** I can see what you're saying, but one can't deny that there is some truth to the work as well. I think the problem is if people think that the whole of India is reflected in one body of work. Whenever I present my work, I start by paraphrasing the narrator of *The Great Indian Novel* by Shashi Tharoor where he writes, "This is MY story of the India I know, with its biases, selections, omissions, distortions - all mine". *Memories of India*, for example, portrays another aspect of India. India is so multi-dimensional. It is also interesting that since these students are recent immigrants from India, they are a little less likely to have an honest perspective of their homeland. The generation of Indians born here, on the other hand, loves it. They may not agree with every aspect of it, but they're willing to talk about it.

**SKS:** I think that's because first of all, they are brought up in this culture, with openness to debate; secondly, they are less invested in its positive/negative dichotomy. On a separate note, what do you think of the contemporary Indian art world?

**AM:** It has really exploded in the last 10 years. I think it would be really exciting to be living there as an artist right now. It is thrilling to see a lot of interesting work coming out of India. But at the same time, there seems to also be more commoditization and less introspection. This is just my view from going back to India 2-3 times a year and visiting the Art Summit for the last 2 years.

**SKS:** What do you think about such efforts as the Art Summit?

**AM:** There seems to be the same people on the panels for the last two years. This year, though, it does look different. There doesn't seem to be a variety of curators who have the background/training. This is perhaps changing, albeit slowly ■