



Above: *Sole*, 2019, digital photographic print, 50" x 39"

Cover Panel: *Indian Style*, 2019, (detail), decollaged Instagram ads, vinyl, party light, clip from Bollywood film, *Kal Ho Naa Ho*, dimensions vary

ROOTS AND RECLAMATION

Preetika Rajgariah's experience as an Indian-American critical of yoga practice in the West is vividly conveyed in her exhibition, *Wild Wild Country*. With levity and irreverence, Rajgariah disarms viewers with absurdity and humor and encourages them to consider their own relationship to the yoga-industrial complex. In this, her third solo show in 2019, she emphasizes through playful engagement, the intersection of immigration, consumerism, tradition, and spirituality.

The show borrows its title from the popular documentary series on controversial new-age figure, Rajneesh, later rebranded as Osho, and the spiritual community he fostered in Oregon in the 1980s. At the time, the desire among young Americans for an alternative form of spirituality, one that liberated them from the traditions of their elders, was strong enough that Osho amassed a following of 7,000 dedicated disciples. Osho's practices were unorthodox, yet he was regarded as an authentic Eastern messiah by his Western devotees. Taking advantage of their longing for an exotic and sensually fulfilling experience, he exploited the settler-colonial archetype, a *modus operandi* where anyone with the right amount of cultural, military or economic capital can create their own society. Invoking this legacy, Rajgariah points to an asymmetrical model of cultural exploitation between so-called Gurus and Western consumers. Osho's spiritual experience was marketed towards a majority white American audience of spiritual seekers while exalting an exceptional few Indian practitioners as gods, and alienating Desi people at large.

Similarly, it is abundantly clear to many South Asian people living and practicing yoga in America that mainstream yoga is not for them. From the Instagram posts

of practicing yogis to the fitness-focused class schedules found at the vast majority of yoga studios in urban centers, American Yoga culture is hyper capitalist and competitive, focused more on unlocking levels than connecting body, mind and breath. Yoga magazines, websites and advertising campaigns are inundated with images of primarily thin white women. Often studio drop-in rates are prohibitively expensive, and many classes fail to include contemplative meditation exercises or do so in prescriptive and culturally insensitive ways. Rajgariah offers a tongue-in-cheek salute to this reality in her works *Indian Style* and *Posers*.

Indian Style is a kitschy parody of an Instagram feed featuring advertising for all things yoga: classes, clothes, jobs, spiritual ceremonies, yoga mats, private sessions, and more. The ads hang from a vinyl cloth with an intriguing omission from each frame. Each body has been removed, its negative space glowing on the translucent vinyl screen underneath, punctuated by the occasional burst of color from a disco ball. Visible through the cut-outs in the screen, a song and dance scene from the 2003 Bollywood hit *Kal Ho Naa Ho* loops in the background. The song "Time to Disco" features a climactic scene in the story of a Desi trio's escapades in New York City. Their antics reach dizzying heights as they discover their fondness for a quintessentially American dance style: disco. The clip plays coyly, nearly hidden from plain sight. Rajgariah winks to the audience here, signaling back to her theme of asymmetrical cultural exchange. Bollywood appreciates disco while American capitalism appropriates yoga. Would it be possible for the roles to be reversed? Could Bollywood successfully rebrand Disco as Brown in the same way that America has branded Yoga as White? Ten feet away,

we find *Posers* a glass bowl seated atop a white pillar, filled with the cut-out white bodies that grace the Instagram marketplace. They sit eerie and precarious, a smorgasbord of white women with sharp musculature, eyes closed and arms akimbo.

This industry that caters to the Western yearning for an authentic cultural experience ironically provides a service that is a far cry from what most Desi people recognize as yoga. Yoga simply means *union* in Sanskrit, and the physical aspect of this practice, the *asana*, is but one of the eight limbed path which prioritizes ethical considerations and contemplative practices over the cultivation of physical strength. Meditation, be it through breathing, chanting or visualization, is also yoga. Rajgariah recalls learning yoga from her uncle in New Delhi, going to the neighborhood park early in the morning, sitting cross-legged while everyone in the group took turns leading various *asana* (postures) and *pranayama* (breathing techniques). The role of teacher as expert is not necessary in this context and is in many ways, counter-productive to the goal of self-actualization through yogic practice. In her three-channel video, *Core Values*, we see Rajgariah practicing *salamba sirsasana* (headstand) in a private space. This clarion call to self-reliance speaks to how yoga can be used to cultivate inner strength, integrity and independence. The body parts featured in this triptych—head, legs and midsection—are those the artist repetitively removed from Instagram ads in *Posers*, rendering a poignant reinsertion of a brown body in an otherwise whitewashed space.

If Americans were practicing yoga beyond the physical postures, Rajgariah asks, what would it look like? What would it be like for Desi people to feel at home in mainstream yoga spaces? Rajgariah points to the pitfalls South Asians confront in western yoga



Posers, 2019, decollaged Instagram ads, glass, 6"x6"

studios; either they swallow their discomfort around the commodification of their heritage, or voice their concerns and risk being targeted as potential threats to the status quo. Sometimes they can be seen as experts simply by virtue of being Indian and can face judgment for not being "Indian enough" when they struggle with poses. Such challenges inspired Rajgariah's performance *Waiting to Exhale*, a meditation on discomfort, endurance and resilience. As she lay in *balasana* (child's pose) atop

yoga mats arranged in the shape of a Hindu Swastika, a symbol of wellness, she invited audience members to drape her with yoga mats. Each participant's contribution was timed with the chime of a meditation bell, and the performance took on a repetitive rhythm, occasionally disrupted by the idiosyncratic nature of an individual participant's approach. As the mats accumulated, the artist moved to accommodate her breath, imbuing the makeshift structure with a womb-like, chrysalis quality. Forty minutes

later, she emerged triumphant from the weight of eighty yoga mats. This gesture of transformation and revelation provides hope for resolution to yoga's crisis of spirituality in the West. As misunderstandings and cultural politics infiltrate the contemporary economy of this ancient practice, its roots remain strong, ripe for reclamation.

-Aditi Ohri is an Art Historian, writer and yogi. She holds an MA from Concordia University Montreal and a Yoga Teacher Certification from the Sacred Roots Yoga School in Austin.

Preetika Rajgariah

EDUCATION

- 2018 MFA, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, IL
2008 BFA, Trinity University, San Antonio, TX

RESIDENCIES

- 2018 Ox-Bow, Saugatuck, MI
2018 ACRE, Steuben, WI
2014 Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, VT
2010 School of Visual Arts, New York, NY

SOLO OR TWO PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- 2019 *Wild, Wild Country, Women & Their Work*, Austin, TX
Entangled, Art League Houston, Houston, TX
I Ain't Sari, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX
2018 *An Undoing*, Roots & Culture, Chicago, IL
2017 *Star Spangled*, Women's Resource Center, Champaign, IL
2016 *So Exotic*, Lightbox Gallery, Champaign, IL
Intersections, Figure One Gallery, Champaign, IL
2015 *Migrating Identities*, Art League Houston, Houston, TX

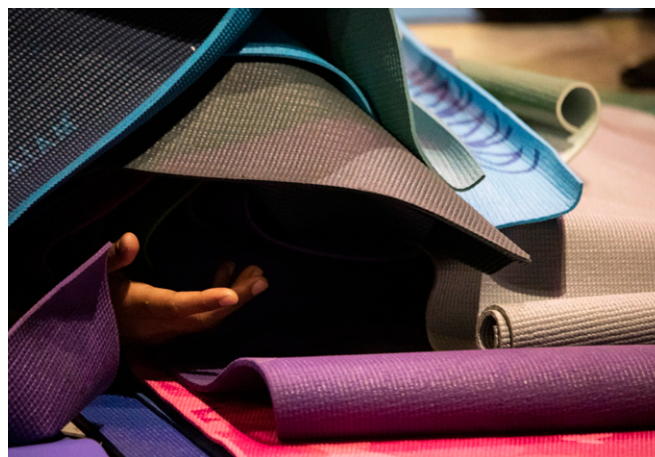
GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2019 *Jagah//Jadoo*, Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts, San Francisco, CA
Threshing Whispers, Neidorff Art Gallery, San Antonio, TX
2018 *Let the Fancy*, UIS Visual Art Gallery, Springfield, IL
Sari Not Sorry, Krannert Art Museum, Champaign, IL
MaMA: Women in the Arts, The Union, Houston, TX

- 2017 *A Sag, Harbored*, Western Exhibitions, Chicago, IL
20th International Open, Woman Made Gallery, Chicago, IL
Between the Sky and the Earth, Roots & Culture, Chicago, IL
2016 *Pattern Recognition*, Fort Gondo, St. Louis, MO
Temporary Proportions, CV Lloyd Gallery, Champaign, IL
Space & Weight, South Studios, Champaign, IL
2013 *American Painting Today: Physical & Visceral*, Krasl Art Center, St. Joseph, MI
Disturbance of Distance, Box 13, Houston, TX
2012 *The Power of Paint*, Avis Frank Gallery, Houston, TX
4th Annual Juried Exhibition, Archway Gallery, Houston, TX
2011 *Gambol*, Finalist, The Art League, Houston, TX
The Sketchbook Project, Art House, Brooklyn, NY
2008 *Thought for Food*, Trinity University Art Gallery, San Antonio, TX

PUBLICATIONS

- 2018 Hynds, Emily. "Texas Studio: Preetika Rajgariah." *Arts and Culture Texas*. November 2018.
Hazel, Tempestt. "Home to Self: An Interview with Preetika Rajgariah." *Sixty Inches From Center*. June 2018
Yeapanis, Stacia. "OPP Interviews Preetika Rajgariah." *OtherPeoplesPixels*. August 2018
2012 *New American Paintings*, No. 102, West Issue, November 2012.



Performance documentation of *Waiting to Exhale* with Preetika Rajgariah on October 5, 2019 at Women & Their Work.



Foreground: *Waiting to Exhale*, 2019, (gallery view), yoga mats, ceramic hands, audio, dimensions vary

Background: *Core Values*, 2019, 3 channel video projection, dimensions vary

Women & Their Work

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Women & Their Work is a visual and performing arts organization located in Austin that serves as a catalyst for new ideas in contemporary art. For over 40 years, Women & Their Work has brought groundbreaking art created by women to Austin with exhibitions, performances and education workshops. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented over 1,900 artists in 324 visual art exhibitions, 155 music, dance and theater events, 16 film festivals, 30 literary readings and spoken word performances, and 700 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in *Art in America*, *The New York Times*, *ArtForum*, and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a

grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 750 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



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