

TRANSCRIPT

Hear, Now
Episode Six

Can You
Hear Me?

A Podcast from Whitechapel Gallery

CONTENT WARNING: This episode features a reference to rape and sexual violence.

JS: Hello, and welcome to Hear, Now, a Whitechapel Gallery podcast that delves into the stories behind the exhibitions on view at the gallery here in the heart of east London. Each episode invites a curator to be in conversation with artists, collaborators and other thinkers, about the works and themes explored in the displays, giving you special access to the ideas that shape the artworks. My name is Jane Scarth, curator of public programmes, introducing you to today's episode featuring artist, Nalini Malani, in conversation with Whitechapel Gallery curator, Emily Butler, about her latest commission, Can You Hear Me? Here they discuss Nalini's work and career to date as well as the themes of the new nine channel video installation which explores global issues of social injustice where the voiceless share centre stage with mythic characters, intellectuals and poets. The exhibition is free to view in Gallery 2, and is on display from the 23rd of September 2020, until the 6th of June 2021.

EB: My name is Emily Butler, I'm delighted to be in conversation today with Indian artist, Nalini Malani, who we are speaking to from her temporary studio in Amsterdam during the COVID 19 pandemic. We're really delighted that Nalini's exhibiting is part of our prestigious commissions programme that invites major international artists to create site-specific installations in our Gallery 2 space. The exhibition aims to respond to the architecture of that space and to the history of Whitechapel. It's an exhibition that unfolds over the course of several months.

Nalini is a major international figure, having exhibited in important biennials and exhibitions across the globe. She is a pioneering artist whose socio-political interests, her championing feminists concerns and social equality are still as urgent today as they were

when she graduated from art school in the late 1960s. We will come on to discuss her 50 year practice and how she works in many different media, but I first wanted to explore the details of this very special video installation for Whitechapel Gallery.

Nalini, it is a little bit like walking into an animation chamber, as you call it, when you enter your installation, in this dark space, there is colourful figures that dance, there is text that flash up, and images and writing progress across the bare Victorian brick walls almost like moving graffiti. There is a babble of sound and voices that completely fills the space, and there is a mixture of very fluid drawings often using your signature black, white and red lines, and we see figures moving, talking, shouting, and lots of different texts. You've said that the triggers for your work are often drawn from three broad areas, so they might be personal thoughts, quotes from inspirational authors, or images from influential artists and also news stories.

Throughout the installation we see 88 animations that are projected at different angles from nine projectors, and as the space is dark, the images really bounce off the walls and it almost feels like walking around in a magic lantern. The installation I feel is really relatable as a viewer as the animations are very human in scale, and sometimes when you walk around the space the shadows of the viewers dance in tandem with the images.

My five year old son described it neatly as walking in a dream, or walking around in someone's mind, as you experience the installation, and I know you quite liked how the audience is able to appreciate different layers of the work as there is something in there for everyone. I wondered, could you tell us a little bit more about how

you make your animations and how you came to exhibit them together through multi-channel video installations?

NM: That's a lovely introduction and it describes the work extremely well. From the point of view of how I actually make the works, it all started by drawing on my animation app, because there were things that I had read and things that were happening around me that I wanted to react to. I have been making books for a long time, painted books, artists books, on various subjects and this seemed to be the moment when I felt that I could make drawing animations that were like notepad, notebooks. As I started to make them, you know, they were just thoughts from my head or a poem that I read which registered with that moment that I was experiencing back home, it sort of resonated with what I was experiencing, and therefore if I have nothing twice from Wislawa or for that matter a sense of despair and cynicism, and then what comes up is things like I'm exhausted or feel better from Beckett, and so, you know, I also read a lot, and all the thoughts that come from different books sort of come together in a kind of a collage in my mind, but I had to lay them out in notebook fashion on my iPad.

Now the iPad itself is simply a screen, but the fact of using my fingers to draw has a sensuous quality to it, it's like messing with paint, as I love to do anyway with physical paint, and so that's how it started. It was later when I once projected these animations with a good quality projector and found that it worked pretty well as a projection, and that's when the idea of making a kind of notebook, more like an accordion notebook that you walked into, and it was like walking into all the buzz that was happening in my head, and the fantasy world that I had sort of collaged into my head with all the writings

that I had read and all the poems and so on. That's how it all started.

EB: I really love this image that you have just said about this kind of accordion notebook that folds around the space, and you're talking about kind of an artist notebook that you started, I think when you're travelling a lot away from your normal studio, so there is kind of your personal thoughts that you're writing into it. But you said also that you were very excited when we first approached you to make a commission in what was the former central reading room of the Whitechapel Gallery, because in your animations you transcribed quotes by seminal writers such as Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, George Orwell or Wislawa Szymborska, who you just mentioned. You described inserting the animations and quotes back into the space of this former reading room, almost like filling the walls again with books. Can you tell us a bit more about what interests you in quoting these authors and their books?

NM: First of all, the Whitechapel, the former library seemed just the right place, and in one sense what I was doing segued really well into the project and that was very exciting to actually realise something in a former library. Now the reason about...I mean the quotes and the writings that I have been reading, as you notice it is a range, it is not particularly logical in one sense, it's as I said, you know, its things that I find as I go along, and if there is a thought that finds a piece of writing or a poem that fits that thought. The writer has written it better than I could ever have, so that is a kind of a homage as well to the writer, so that quote takes on a meaning other than what it meant in the very writing that the author herself might have decided, but for me it gets transposed into my own fantasy world and my living experiences. So, these quotes are actually alive for

me, you know, they are very much part of my fantasy world now that I have them in my notebooks.

EB: So, these quotes in a way kind of track your reading path and your line of thought.

NM: Right.

EB: What I find really interesting is that, you know, you bring together references from the very distant past so, for example, to goddesses from Hindu mythology, but also females from Greek tragedy and you juxtapose these with more recent news stories. Can you tell us a bit more about this kind of juxtaposing of different time spans and types of, types of text?

NM: Well, I'm interested in the contemporary, what we are living in today, and if people have written about similar things in the past this can be brought up into the present, and I think that they still have a very strong resonance today whether I...when I speak about Cassandra or Medea or in fact Sita, they still have a resonance...I mean, I want to bring in that resonance into the contemporary.

I mean, for example, to give a very different example, when we went into lockdown with the COVID, I just instinctively picked up Proust again, because somehow the way time got expanded in Proust and the in depth of one moment became ever so important to hold on to time, and the very moment of that time became ever so rich that it sort of soothed me when I was reading Proust, and I started from the very beginning, Swans Way, you know, and I worked my way through. But this is what Proust did for me.

But the other thing about having mythical figures and especially female protagonists like Cassandra, is a lot to do with what I believe is female thought. Cassandra had an instinctive knowledge, she had a prognosis of the future, but what she could instinctively feel is a keen sense of hearing in every sense of the word, and I really say that this is a feminine torch, and this is the feminine side of human nature that can really think about the future, and I think that's what has constantly been a thread for me in my work, female thought, and how it can really heal and help progress happen for us in this world.

EB: Yes, absolutely and I think it is interesting that you're talking about Proust and notions of time that struck you during the COVID outbreak, and this reference to Proust as part of these new animations are made specifically for the Whitechapel in between the time when we were planning the show and when we installed it in September 2020.

I want to move on now to the title of the exhibition which is, Can You Hear Me? Which is also a reference to a specific and horrific news story from India of the rape of a young girl that triggered, I believe, some of the animations early on. But I also think it's a title that really is a wider call to the audience's attention, alerting them to the dangers of fascism, totalitarianism, violence, that you have been looking at throughout your career, and in a way it's kind of asking the audience if they're listening to the messages that you're trying to transmit to them. Can you tell us a little bit about the significance of the title, Can You Hear Me?

NM: Yes, Can You Hear Me, started with this little girl, eight year old child from a nomadic community in Kashmir, and is one we had discussed earlier, that it was almost

as if the idea of nation, or the idea of community and group is marked on the bodies of women, and this was also such an incident.

Lately in September also, there was an incident where, well it was a tragic incident of another child, well a 19 year old girl who came from the lowest cast in the Hindu hierarchy, and she was out cutting grass for her animals and she was raped by four people, strangled, and her back was broken, and they cut her tongue, and I made an animation which I put on Instagram about this case. This resonates with the story from Ovid actually where actually there is such a young person who is raped in the fourth century in the Christian era and her tongue is cut off, and she is not able to say who was her rapist.

So, the thing is that it has a global consequence also in a metaphorical sense as well, because we are not only talking about...rape of course is the extreme form of violence, but we also have, you know, racism continues, you know, in the western world, as we know very well of what is happening in the United States. The resonances of post-colonial racism still continues, and I think it is one thing that we need to really keep on stressing and talking about in the historical sense, even at the school level, because I think these ideas need to be living ideas in the contemporary scenario that we have today, because people don't realise how people have suffered in the past due to the colonised scenarios that we've had in our past and then it does resonate even till today.

So, I think this is where I feel very strongly that the marginalised of course are the ones I want to speak about, but also in the post-colonial scenario we still have incidences of racism and violence against the

marginalised, this still continues. In the 21st century we should be thinking about how we have to work towards improving the situation and understanding it rather than perpetuating this violent history.

EB: As you mentioned giving voice to the marginalised, I feel a lot of the times, yes, you're giving voice to people who don't have a voice, so the lower cast in India, victims of abuse.

NM: Yes.

EB: The installation at first appears quite overwhelming, I suppose a little bit like the problems in the world that surround us. But as you spend more time with it you come to understand it a little bit better, you start seeing the cycles of animations on the different channels so they repeat. There's a quote from Beckett that I love that is, try again, fail again, fail better, that we can hear you whispering over and over again. In both our text for the catalogue we explore the importance of language and communication in your work, and in your work you use many different types of language, so visual, sonic, written words, can you describe the process of making a work, which types of languages, or visual languages, you might choose to focus on and why?

NM: Well, you know it all depends, you know that this quote from Samuel Beckett is, it happens. I feel like this when there are things of this nature that happen around us as well, the scenario with what is happening with women. You know, finally you have to keep on saying to yourself, no matter what, it's like the Myth of Sisyphus, you know, you have to go on even though you feel you are going to fail, you still have to go on. I think there is some sense of despair as well, because

there is also one animation that ends up saying, I'm exhausted.

So, I think that it's also states of mind and my own psyche that starts to speak, and there may be different pieces of writing that respond or correspond to that state, and then that seems the appropriate thing to make an animation about, because recently I was reading Alice, once again, and there's a beautiful line that again corresponds to what we are going through, so when she is asked...I forget the question that she is asked, and she says, I think I wasn't the same person I am today as I was yesterday, so I don't know how to answer the question about yesterday, because I'm not the same any more today. So, it's, you know, things of that...that quote for me has a very strong resonance today.

So, what I'm trying to say that, you know, my work really has to do with how, it's about how can one make the viewer think about things in a socio-political manner? It's to activate that part of the viewer that could start to think about what he or she is living in. What are the meanings over there and perhaps with some of the quotes those ideas would get triggered in the minds of people who come to visit the show?

EB: Absolutely, and I think you do this in a very nimble way using different quotes and using different registers and different moods, so I like how on one moment you might be dealing with, you know, saying something like I'm exhausted, you know, dealing with a horrific incident the next. But then you also use a lot of satire and humour. I love your reference, for example, to Noam Chomsky, who says at one point, you know, he is amazed that humanity has managed to survive this long.

NM: Yes.

EB: Nalini, I wanted to move on now to talk a little bit more broadly about your practice. So, your practice has often been described as being pioneering, and the more we have worked together on this project the more I totally agree in all sense of the words, you are a leading international female figure, and you've been working in new media since the 1970s. As you've said earlier you have always had a kind of social activist role and you address important political questions in your work. You also mentioned your interest in feminism and this idea of feminine and masculine regions of the mind, and there is recurring feminine figures that you've mentioned, so you mentioned Cassandra, but in the animation we also see Medea that comes up repeatedly almost like a punctuation mark at the end of each animation.

NM: Yes.

EB: And, you've also mentioned Alice, can you tell us a bit more about this interest in these recurring female figures?

NM: First of all the reason why I started to work with film and animation from very early on is because, you know, I think every artist, at least from my part of the world, wishes to have contact with the public, otherwise it becomes a kind of an ivory tower way of working if you're only going to be showing in a white cube space, you're only going to be catering to an elite or the bourgeoisie, and with the moving image in India, you do attract people from all stratus of society. I tried even from those early years to show in spaces where there would be access to people who could just walk in from

the street, whether it was the man who sold peanuts around the corner or just the workers going home from work.

The reason for picking up mythical figures and even stories of characters who a lot of people would know about, for example, Alice, because Alice has also been translated into many Indian languages. People knew the stories, so whatever else I wanted to say about what I was experiencing could be told through the personage of that particular mythical figure, and then that would become a link language. So, the myth is the link language that I like to use as a device to be able to connect with an audience. So, that is the reason why I feel close to a personage like Medea, Seta as well as Cassandra, because there are resonances in Indian myths as well of these characters. So, that's how it all started, and I've continued to have these personages in the work that I do in the animations and also in my video shadow plays.

EB: And, Nalini, you have mentioned Alice a couple of times, and you mentioned this quote earlier about not being the same person yesterday as she is today. Is Alice in a way a bit like your alter ego that is kind of developing through your various works?

NM: Well, you know, I wish I could say, yes, but I'm not very sure frankly, because I see her, I mean I see the language that Lewis Carroll used as very intriguing, you know, even the line from Humpty Dumpty when she says, how can you make a word mean whatever you want? Now, you know, and he says, yes, I can make a word mean, it's not the exact quote, I'm just paraphrasing, but that's exactly what is happening today, a word doesn't any more have the meaning it should be having, you know, with old news and fake

news and what have you. I mean we are in that situation again with Humpty Dumpty and Alice. So, there are so many things which are very insightful on the part of the writer which one feels rings so true today. So, I wish I could say, yes, Alice is in our alter ego, but she is also this personality that has popped out of my head, and also she continues to have the language that Lewis Carroll gave her.

EB: So, you've mentioned that she has popped up in different media, so she has appeared in your paintings, and I wanted to talk a bit more broadly about all the different media that you work with. So, you've worked in paintings, in theatre sets, in wall drawing, oratorio performances and in video shadow plays. For me it seems as though you are almost equally at ease in any genre of media, there doesn't seem to be a kind of hierarchy in your work. What seems to happen is that you adapt and use the possibilities of each medium to express the particular subject matter that you're exploring, and at other times are really stretching the possibilities of their visual language in that kind of pioneering sense that I mentioned earlier. Would you say this is correct and this is something that you're trying to achieve?

NM: Well, you know, drawing and painting for me is like a keyboard, it's like, you know, a composer might use the keyboard to compose a concerto or an orchestra, a symphony, and for me it is through painting and drawing that I can think, because I don't think I'm very good with words. So, it is thinking through visuals that is the drawing and the painting and then also artists books, these are the items or the forms that I find that give me the possibility of moving into, the moving image, let's say, into animation or the video shadow plays which are really quite huge in scale and which

have many elements as well. There's elements of different types of shadows in the video shadow plays which need to be planned out in great detail from the painted image to the video and then the combination of the two, the collaging of the images on the cylinders that throw shadows over the video images, and the sense of the palimpsest because it keeps moving, so you're always seeing something else, something that you raise and something else comes in, all of this needs much more of a structure in time. Whereas with drawing and painting it is the stillness of the image which needs to be animated in different ways.

EB: I wanted to ask one final question, Nalini, which is, what do you hope the visitors will take away from your installation?

NM: There are a few things, I think what I...when I read a book, for example, which is not from my culture, and I give the example of reading Doctor Faustus by Thomas Mann, for me the book, since I didn't live through that war, I wasn't there, I found that for me the annotations were of great importance, and I actually went through all the annotations in Doctor Faustus to really understand the entire meaning of the book.

Just as much as another book which for me was very important was, The Heart of Darkness, and this book begins with this journey that a few business people are having on the Thames, with the person who writes in the first person singular in the entire book and he is addressing these business people who have a stake in the Far East, and I tried to figure out, now what would that be about? Then of course one goes into colonial history and so on.

So, these are things that I take away from the readings I do of books from cultures which are not mine. I hope that with this animation chamber the same might happen to people who may have read Beckett a long time ago, or Brecht, would go back and say, well what did he really say, and what did it all mean? What did it mean in that period? I hope that that's what happens, one of the things.

The other thing is that if I have been able to irritate a mind into thinking about what is happening in the world today, and whether some of these things that I do small little drawings about, that would start to activate people's minds about the social political situation and think about how we can progress on this good art into a real progress, into a real progress where, you know, we've been able to work our way through not denigrating the other, and that is the big problem. The other can be women and can be somebody who is black who comes from a different cast, as in India. All of this is something that I worry about, especially for the future of our children.

EB: Well, I hope that the exhibition will excite and irritate and inspire people to listen to the messages that you have to tell them. I do hope all our visitors are going to catch the exhibition that is both engrossing and inspiring. It's on until the 6th of June 2021. Thank you so much Nalini for this really fascinating conversation, which tracks your endless experimentation with the moving image, and thank you everyone for listening.

JS: Thanks for listening to this episode of, Hear Now. You can find all of our other episodes online at www.whitechapelgallery.org. Don't forget to visit the exhibition, Nalini Malani, Can You Hear Me? From

23rd of September 2020 until the 6th of June 2021.
Bye for now.

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