Perspectives: Rina Banerjee

The Arthur M. Sackler and Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C., USA, 13 July 2013–8 June 2014

Rina Banerjee notes that her experience living through Hurricane Sandy—the 2012 storm that caused widespread damage to parts of lower Manhattan, where she lives—was a partial impetus for her sprawling site-specific installation at the Smithsonian’s Arthur M. Sackler Gallery (fig. 1). She further explains, “We could see the sea coming in towards the high-rises that I was living in and in that moment it was very clear, the connections we have to the rest of the world, which is this water that surrounds every place in the world.”1 The full, poetic title of Banerjee’s work both alludes to her long-term interest in exploring the movement of people—forced and otherwise—and goods across nations and this work’s more specific preoccupation with the effects of such migration on the world’s aquatic ecosystem: *a world Lost: after the original island, single land mass fractured, after populations migrated, after pollution revealed itself and as cultural locations once separated merged, after the splitting of Adam and Eve, of race black and white, of culture East and West, after animals diminished, after the seas’ corals did exterminate, after this and at last imagine water evaporated...this after Columbus found it we lost it imagine this.*

When first approaching the installation, one is taken aback by the low-hanging structure dangling from the gallery ceiling, especially the two rings of black, plastic buffalo horns which encircle it. Solid and powerful at first glance, its spare frame also evokes lightness and fragility. The lower ring of horns is festooned with a medley of materials including textiles, seashells, feathers, and opaque and transparent light bulbs. The textures of these materials—soft and smooth and rough and sharp—both beckon and hold the viewer at bay. Finally, hanging from the bottom of the dome is an antique scale of justice, on which are precariously balanced ostrich eggs, feathers, fish vertebrae, and greenery.

Equally important is what is on the ground, which effectively acts as a foil for what is above. Crimson-coloured threads fall from the scales and the structure above to the ground near small groupings of pebbles and coral, intermingled with glass birds and miniature plastic human and animal figurines. Meandering “streams” snake out from the latter: one is composed of meticulously arranged coral, fish vertebrae, and shells, and the other of plastic cups attached to a rope with a loosely flowing fringe of crimson thread.

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Figure 1  Rina Banerjee, a small world..., 2013, mixed media, dimensions variable. Photograph by Hutomo Wicaksono.