

VIEW to the U transcribed
Season 2: Women in Academia; Episode #10
Professor Kajri Jain
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[Opening music fades in and out]

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KJ: I'm Kajri Jain, Associate Professor of Indian Visual Culture and Contemporary Art.

KJ: And then what we do as art historians, we're just scrambling behind them to kind of figure out what they just did. I mean even they might not know what they did because it's in the doing. It's not in the thinking. If you could just think it and say it, then you wouldn't need to make the work. But because the work is part of these material processes, that's what makes it this strange thing that makes the world otherwise.

And that's what we want. We need that work of imagination more than ever.

[Theme music fades in and plays]

Carla Demarco (CD): Art, religion, business and the work of the imagination.

On today's episode of the podcast, we are talking Art, Art History and the importance of Art and imagination in research, but also in today's world, with Professor Kajri Jain from UTM's Department of Visual Studies. She is an expert in contemporary religious culture and its imagery. Her current work focuses on the monumental religious Buddhist and Hindu icons and statues, some upwards of 80 feet high that have materialized in India and South Asia since the 1990s. And the blend of art, religion, politics and commerce, these iconic figures connote.

With this season of the podcast focused on women in academia, Kajri also talks about the importance of women contributing to the broader academic discussion and recognizing that maintaining authenticity in our own way of doing things is key.

Carla Demarco: Hello. And welcome to *VIEW to the U: an eye on UTM Research*. I'm Carla DeMarco at U of T Mississauga. *VIEW to the U* is a monthly podcast that will feature UTM faculty members from a range of disciplines who will illuminate

some of the inner workings of the science labs, and enlighten the social sciences and humanities hubs at UTM.

[Theme music fades out]

CD: Kajri Jain is an Associate Professor of Indian Visual Culture and Contemporary Art in the Department of Visual Studies at U of T Mississauga and in the Department of Art at U of T St. George, with a cross appointment at the Institute for Cinema Studies and in the Center for South Asian Studies.

She is also interested in how the values associated with images arise not only from what you see in the visual representation, but also from the production, circulation and deployments of images as material objects. She initially trained as a graphic designer at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, India, but has been on faculty at UofT since 2007.

CD: I was wondering if you could please provide an overview of your work, perhaps being mindful of terms that some listeners might not be familiar with, and explain any esoteric visual studies terminology that might come up. But also if you could talk about current research projects that you are working on.

KJ: I work broadly in the area of visual culture. And what that means is that I work on images that are part of everyday life, not necessarily in the gallery or the museum, which is what Art Historians do. So I actually think of Art History as a subset of visual culture. I work in that area too, but my main focus is on visual culture, but visual culture in India. And that's interesting because it has typically been a very kind of North American and European discipline. It came out of cultural studies, sort of French Marxist thought when they started to look at everyday images and consumer culture, really.

I've had to retool the discipline a little bit for my purposes in looking at India, and one of the things that's very different is that India is full of religious images, that's a big part of the culture there. Which is not really the case here. Here it's much more sort of commodity driven. That's a contribution I would say to the field of visual culture studies from taking this other view from this other site is thinking about the contemporaneity of religion and the visual culture of religion.

My first book was about printed images, which in India is called Calendar Art or Bizarre Art. And these are often pictures of gods and goddesses or beautiful women or chubby babies, that kind of thing, what we might call kitsch, but ubiquitous. Every home, every restaurant, [inaudible 00:05:24] they all had up until recently. But nobody had really studied who makes them? What's the history?

CD: Even then like commercial sort of different ads and billboards, like do they factor into all of the imagery around an India?

KJ: Well, I mean there's one could say that there is a realm of secular advertising which doesn't necessarily strain to that stuff, but there are ways in which rituals and religion kind of creep into all of that as well. This particular form, the reason why it's called Calendar Art is because again, up until about the 2000s almost every business of whatever scale would give out calendars to its customers and business associates and these were illustrated very often with gods and goddesses. And that's kind of interesting phenomenon because we don't think of religion and business as necessarily hand in glove. We think of them as a kind of these two separate, the material and the spiritual is separate.

KJ: But what I found was that this form really showed us how these two things are completely intertwined and entangled in India, in the business culture. And this is not a transnational corporate, cosmopolitan business culture. This is very much what British colonial authorities used to call the bazaar, the so called native business ethos, which depended very much on informal networks of credit, of trust really in the absence of legal institutions like banks. It was very important to show to the world that you are a respectable God fearing person, and in fact, giving the calendar renewed the relationships that you had with people. The fact that what it's depicted was religious or auspicious in some way brought good luck. That was part of it, but also the actual giving of the objects was important. And this is where my work has kind of strayed from visual culture, and that's when I started to think, well is it really just about visuality or is it about the materiality of the object and the way it circulates, so that the efficacy of the image comes from both from both its material circulation and the way it looks and what it represents. I think visual cultures are kind of a misnomer.

CD: What would you call it then?

KJ: I'm not sure. I think of it as image culture and that's why I'm still an Art Historian. I do visual culture because I'm interested in images. Lots of people mistake me for an anthropologist because I strayed to that area of the kind of social circulation of images, and I don't really work within the arena of art. But because I think the image is a very interesting type of object, it deserves its own field. So that was the first project.

The second book, it's again very much situated at the intersection of business and religion because I discovered that there is a new form that has emerged since about the 1990s which is when India opened up its economy to the global market after decades of socialist style protectionism, that was immediately after independence, and then in the 1990s it started to become globalized. And I realized that around the same time we see the emergence of these enormous statues of gods and goddesses, very much in public space, and these are huge 80, 90, 100 feet often visible from highways, and so I just got fascinated. Then my next project was trying to answer the question of why does this form emerge at this moment?

CD: And who paid for these large statues?

KJ: That's what I kind of started to investigate is 'who's behind them'? It's really two types of patrons. Either a kind of new spiritual organization, so not necessarily a temple, but it might be a cult of some kind. That's why I say new spiritual. A religious organization that doesn't draw its power and authority from a very old tradition. Something that needs a new spectacular form to attract people. That's one, and the other ... And in fact, there's a political dimension to this too because there's been a kind of resurgence of Hindu nationalist politics in India. And so some of these new spiritual organizations have been very much key players in the Hindu nationalist politics.

That's one set of people. And the other kind of patron is the entrepreneur, like a business person who ... which is probably true elsewhere as well. But in relation to art, if you make a lot of money that isn't going to automatically translate to social power and status. What do people here do? They buy art or they get on the board of a gallery, so art becomes part of that performance of elite status. It allows you to circulate in a different milieu or to gain social mobility.

In India, this same function has been performed by religious patronage. So the first thing you do when you make money is you make a big donation to the temple or you build a temple or you'd donate an image or whatever it might be. This new form has become a means of social mobility, but one which typically temple donations were anonymous. Here, everyone knows ... oh, well not necessarily. There is a key donor who prefers to remain anonymous and that's because they are very linked with politics.

It's quite interesting that this form has emerged at this moment when people are making a lot of money as a way for, I would say nontraditional players to gain social mobility. And this goes back to the other kind of hierarchy that pervades Indian society, which has cast not just class, right? So the cast is something you're born into. And even though it is supposedly illegal to reinforce cast hierarchy, it's still very much part of Indian society. What this form does, it's quite interesting is it brings the gods out of the temple, which means that the gods are no longer controlled by the priests of the temple who are the highest cast, and traditionally the outcasts so called the untouchables, who now identify as Dalit or oppressed. They were often banned from entering the temple. The fact that the gods have come out of the temple means that there's some kind of fundamental upheaval going on in the ways in which cast was inscribed into society, and how it was performed.

CD: I'm wondering if there is similar religious rituals that are associated with some of these statutes? Like do people go to them as they would to a temple and sort of give an offering, or ...

KJ: No. That's a really interesting question because this is such a new form. I think people are still figuring it out. I've been doing this work for nearly 10 years now

and the book is imminently about to be published, so I've visited certain sites a few times over these years. And so I've seen in a couple of cases, there was first just a statute and then people weren't quite sure how to approach them. For example, they're outdoors, typically in a temple, you take off your shoes before you enter the temple. Here you used to be able to go up to the statue with your shoes on, but now they've started to make you take them off at the gate. Or they used to be like a Shiva statue is usually accompanied by a Lingam, which is like this other type of shrine that goes with a Shiva statue. One of these Shiva statues didn't have one of those, now it does. It's almost as though the statue form is inviting more and more temple style worship.

KJ: This is a work in progress. It's quite interesting. People kind of know what to do before an image and they try and do the same kinds of things. They bring offerings of flowers and milk and fruit and they wave incense, they say prayers. So they are, they're worshiped in the same way, but often because they're in public space, it's a combination. You'd go there for ritual, but then you'd also have a picnic, so it's a hybrid space in a sense.

One of the biggest harbinger of economic liberalization in India was the growth of the automobile industry and in the rise in car ownership. Now, you might ask what do cars have to do with statues? The big statues have everything to do with the visual regime of the automobile and the space that gets opened up along highways. That's where they tend to appear on the outskirts of cities, where there's space, where people can now get to because they have cars or on the highways between cities. I call it drive by devotion because also there's a kind of risk involved in automobile travel. It's like this form is co-constituted with the highway and the automobiles.

CD: And what are the statutes made out of?

KJ: Concrete mostly. Most of them are made out of concrete. And this is the other piece is that in thinking about 'why at this moment'? One of the things that's happening is that there's a lot of construction going on suddenly with the liberalization of the economy, so lots of concrete around ... The price of concrete has relatively fallen. And there's lots of people who know how to work with it. And in fact, some of the biggest patrons, one of them is a construction baron and one of them is a politician who used to be a construction baron, so there is again a very material aspect to this story.

There's that aspect. There's the aspect of cast and a reconfiguration of cast, privilege and power and how it gets played out. There are many pieces to this story.

CD: And the people that they're commissioning do actually make these statutes, are they well known artists or it commercial artist? Who is actually making ...

KJ: This is the way I work is to follow artists. For the first book it was mostly, if you will, an ethnography of calendar artists. I talked to them about their practice and how they felt about it and paid attention to the words they used. What were they seeing in English and what were they saying in Hindi. And so in this case I'm working with sculptors who tend to be father and son teams, where the father is a traditional artisan or artist and the son is trained with a professional degree, architecture or actually sculpture. One of them went to a very well reputed fine arts college in Baroda, studied sculpture, or engineering because of course these things are required engineering. And there's one group in the North and one in the South who do most of the commissions.

And then another team right up in the very North in this state called Sikkim, who's chief minister is the premiere of that province. He's like a big statue in impresario, so a mixture of politics and this art form.

CD: And so you said that your book is forthcoming on that area. Are you still working on that same area?

KJ: No. In fact, I am now starting on a new project. I just got to SSHRC grant for it. Although it is a kind of a spinoff from the statue project because ... The big statues are often in these kinds of theme parks, almost religious theme parks. But what I noticed was that these parks often have statues of animals, and fake animals, bears and deer. This eco park, it has animals, but these animals are made of bronze and they're one and a half times life size arranged in this very formal way, in these sort of beds in rings and they're interspersed with trees made of steel. You really think well what kind of eco park is this? It has very little to do with nature.

CD: I was thinking, it's very *unnatural*.

KJ: It's very unnatural. Exactly. On the other hand you could argue that it's actually much more environmentally friendly and kinder to animals than having like a zoo, which is very hard to maintain in the heat of North India, and you know all the resources it would take the water. So in a way it's kind of more eco friendly than having real animals there would be. But that got me to thinking, well, how does this become an eco park? And what is eco mean in this context? It's not confined to this place. There are theme parks where there are fiberglass mountains and fiberglass animals and indigenous people. There's a very peculiar formation of what counts as nature in this simulated way.

What all of that made me realize is that there's probably very different imaginaries at work. Very different genealogy to be looked at with regard to ideas of nature that doesn't come from the same roots as the Western post romantic imaginary, right? There's something that happens with romanticism when the world is no longer sacred in quite the same way. And art actually becomes the place where art and nature become in a sense where the sacred is sublimated, and of course, art and romanticism and so on come to India with

- KJ: the colonial regime. But of course there are many other traditions that treat animals and what we call nature in a different way. So I want to look at what's happening, especially in popular culture with respect to nature. How are animals used? How's the landscape used? I want to look at film. These theme parks will be a big piece of it and go back a little bit to traditions like the miniatures, partly because they're so beautiful. And it's pertinent because everyone nowadays is talking about the Anthropocene and the environment and animal studies is huge. I just think we need to slow down a little bit to go to a different site and a different culture. Look at what's going on there in order to understand our common sense and question it.
- CD: And I understand that you started out your professional life as a graphic designer at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, India, and you also went on to do your PhD in Art History, but I'm just wondering how did your graphic-design life lead you into this area?
- KJ: Oh, it was directly connected. I went to design school in India. I wanted to be a graphic designer, but it was always a source of frustration to me that what we were being taught at school was so Western. And in fact, the school had been set up by, in fact, an Indian business family, but in conjunction with the American designers, Charles and Ray Eames, they had been brought in as consultants. Then the first batch of professors were all sent off to Europe to learn design and there were no histories of Indian designs. So it seemed ridiculous to me that we did not understand the milieu that we were working in. None of the images I write about, the pictures of gods and goddesses didn't figure in our education. It was all about clean, modernist, minimalist design, form follows function, all that kind of stuff.
- You step outside the gates of the design school and you're in a completely different world. I wanted to do work that belonged in that world and spoke to the people who love pictures of gods and goddesses, but I didn't understand it. Nobody had written the history, so I thought I'd better do it. You know?
- CD: Oh, that's interesting. So it sounds like there wasn't the Art History informing the more contemporary work then?
- KJ: No, not at all. Neither Art History nor design history. This was a popular form and no one had taken it seriously. Our training was all about how do you do things in a tasteful way or about developing the masses. Very patronizing, very top down. For me it was the other way. We had to learn the actual visual language that circulates and is effective and which the current Hindu nationalist parties do very well. They work with all of this kind of imagery. And that was the other thing that was happening when I was a young design professional. I just saw that politicians were using this imagery in far more effective ways than we ever could dream of. I felt like if one wants to combat some of those ideas, you have to understand how they're working.

CD: What do you think is the biggest impact of your work?

KJ: Well, one of the things actually, because the work came out of wanting to understand my milieu as a designer, I knew that a lot of artists and designers are interested in my work because it is helping them process what's happening around them and engage it. Well maybe it's not the greatest impact, but it's the one that gives me the greatest pleasure is to see people running with it and actually making work that speaks back to some of the political developments that have been happening in India.

But no, in terms of Art History and visual culture, I think one of the biggest contributions has been thinking about the contemporaneity your religion and that crosses a few fields. I think Art History and especially modern and contemporary Art History has been predicated on what's called the secularization thesis, the fact that modernity has secular. Whereas that's disproved everyday on the news and in critical discourse to everyone's talking about the post secular moment because religion is part of public life everywhere, not just in places like India, but in the West as well, so that is slowly sinking into various disciplines, into Art History. It's part of what I'm doing is to challenge that preconception of secularity of the image and think more about religious power and efficacy and think about the modernity of religion.

If you think about it in India, every new medium that came along from oil painting to cinema to animatronics and IMAX, the first place it's been taken up is religion. Before the artists, before the advertising it's been religion. The first cinema was mythological and saint films and that's something media studies doesn't acknowledge. Media studies, Art History, religious studies, which has tended to ... Well, the very notion of religion is now being unpacked as something when we try and specify what religion is, it tends to be very much a kind of Judeo Christian formulation, where for example, the sacred and the material are separated. Whereas what I've described and in my work, it's all about them being completely entangled.

Religious studies needs to take on board these other modalities of religion, also needs to take on board the work of the image. Religious studies has been very text based and I think people more and more are realizing that the image, and the modern image, the modern media image is very much part of the way religion works today and again is looking for tools to think about that. I think if there's been an impact of my work, it's been in helping think through that, the contemporaneity of religion.

I think the other thing would be my use of ethnographic methods in Art History. And again, it has to do with thinking about the contemporary outside the gallery space and thinking about these other images. You kind of have to work outside the narrow frame of the image. Think about the artist, who are they? How does this work circulate? Who are the patrons? And that necessarily strays into anthropology or ethnography.

CD: That's actually spending time with the people or the place where these images where they are, right?

KJ: Yeah. Where they are. Where they're made. And then where they are received. Which might not be an art gallery. It might be a religious theme park.

CD: Right. Because I know that whenever I think of ethnography, I think it is very much a part of either sociology or anthropology where you're spending time with the people. It's not just about surveys or-

KJ: That's right. Like I could not have written my book just looking at an archive of calendar images. I had to actually go to India. Travel. Meet the artists. Hear them speak. Think about how they're speaking not just as information, but as a worldview. What does art mean to them? Art making. It was things like that. When a calendar artist who's just made a painting of a goddess codes it realist, what does that mean? What does it mean when somebody calls a fake bronze animal eco? Thinking about all these complexities and contradictions in a generative way.

CD: Interesting. This is a really hard question, but I'm going to ask you because I think the last time we spoke, which is a long time ago now, we talked about humanities and the Arts and Arts with a capital A. I think sometimes humanities research, some people don't value it as much as, let's say as some of the sciences, so I wondered why is humanities and Arts with a capital A of research important as a field of study?

KJ: There's one thing I'd want to say before answering that. And I mean of course, I think obviously the humanities and the Arts are absolutely crucial. But one thing I would want to say is I don't want to pit the humanities against the sciences. What I do and want to insist on is the work of the university in asking open-ended questions that do not have necessarily a known kind of instrumentalist application. I want to support the pure sciences as much as the humanities. That I think is really important to keep on the table because I think that has dropped out. It's all about vocational training. Like how do you apply this? How do you get a job that's very different from the idea of the university that I went into because I think the university is about asking these open-ended questions.

It is knowledge that may have an application in the future, but we don't know for sure. But it's worth asking the question. Otherwise everything we do is just dictated by where we are and how we think today. And that's where it feels like the humanities and Arts are so important to develop our imaginations and to be critical. To not take for granted that the world is the way it is and we should therefore ask questions that answer questions that exist today. There are questions, we don't even know what they are. We don't even know what to ask, so it's that doing the work of the imagination. I think that's what the humanities do for us. And thinking about how we think and why, and where did that come

from? You know those historical questions that illuminate our present, but also make it strange in order to change it.

KJ: I think the humanities help us develop vision. And, again, I wouldn't say that the sciences don't, but they help us do it in a different way; in a very expansive way, in a non-instrumental way. I mean, I think that's what it is with the humanities and why they're so precious because it's even harder to instrumentalize them than the sciences. And Art History I would say is like one of the least instrument...Although, I have to say, with all of this creative cities stuff, we do know that art making is a big piece of gentrification and urban development and so that is also quite easily in a way instrumentalizable, but it still needs the art, which I think always exceeds any value of the wrong sort that you might want to put on it. Even if it's in the gallery. Even if it's part of an urban renewal project that is displacing homeless people. I think that's the wonderful thing about art.

CD: I love what you just said about developing the imagination and I think that the other important part of it is, you're talking about asking questions but those questions then leading to other questions, that as you mentioned, we haven't even formulated yet because we didn't know that they were there.

KJ: Right. And that's where things like philosophy is so important, and art. And this, I really believe that Art Historians are always way behind the artists themselves because the artists are working with material. They're working in a very embodied way, but also an intellectual way. But they have, I mean this might sound romantic, but I think that because it's as much about craft as it is about thought, they can get to certain things in a way that thought hasn't caught up with. And then what we do as artists, we're just scrambling behind them to kind of figure out what they just did. I mean, even they might not know what they did because it's in the doing. If you could just think it and say it, then you wouldn't need to make the work. But because the work is part of these material processes, that's what makes it this strange thing that makes the world otherwise. And that's what we want because I don't particularly like this world the way it is, so we really, we need that work in imagination more than ever right now.

CD: I agree. The years make me think there's this other faculty member on campus [at UTM] who is in Psychology, but she very much studies sort of prosocial emotions but also how that sense of awe ignites something in us that actually physically helps our wellbeing. So if you walk into a museum and you see something that sort of takes your breath away, what that does to us sort of physiologically that, again, it hearkens back to what the arts do for us. There's a lot more going on there that we just don't even think about. It's like triggering these things in your brain that are making you feel happy and with a healthier wellbeing.

KJ: That's good to know.

CD: I know [laughing]. See – you're in the right area!

[Interlude music fades in]

CD: Coming up: Women in academia.

Kajri talks about the importance of women contributing to the broader academic discussion in recognizing that maintaining authenticity and her own way of doing things is key.

[Interlude music fades out]

CD: This is my last question. But so this year for the podcast, the focus has been women in academia and so I've been asking people, I think I started out on kind of a negative, "Have you faced challenges being a female academic?" And I don't really want to focus on the negative. I would just want to say, if you have words of wisdom to impart for young academics who are just starting out on their career path or if you have a mentor that you want to give a shout out to. I want to sort of direct this as a more positive being a female academic.

KJ: That's nice. I mean one of the things I would say is I get the feeling in my classes that a lot of young women feel that feminism isn't necessary anymore because we're equal and we have opportunities and obviously we've come along way, but I kind of feel like ... well, I do want to say it to them, but the fact is that as you climb the ladder, you start to realize that things are not as equal as they might be in your experience of high school or even university. The more you climb, the more that weight starts to be felt, the more hurdles you face, or it's not overt. This is the other thing that you realize ... This has been my experience is that you realize there's so much that is unconscious still, that all of us carry men, women, both. We ourselves hold ourselves back.

And that's one thing that this wonderful senior academic Tanya Barlow who's, I'm not sure where she is now, but I just happened to be at a conference with her when I was giving my very first paper as a graduate student. And I was saying how nervous I was, and ... I mean, she was very sweet. She was actually listening to me and talking to me about this and she just said, "You know, if you don't get up there and do it, then we only have ourselves to blame if the world is dominated by men, so we kind of owe it to ourselves, not to hold ourselves back." That's something I've never forgotten. But at the same time, I would say, of course we have to get out there, but that doesn't mean doing everything the same way that the guys did it, and that's where I have to thank my mentor, my PhD Supervisor [inaudible 00:36:45] a woman of color in the academy, but very much doing things her own way.

If we're in charge as women or if we have some say, I think it's worth thinking about how we might do things differently. It's again, that being otherwise reinventing things. Reimagining.

CD: Still being authentic though.

KJ: Yeah, exactly. Keeping it real. But keeping it real to our experience. More bringing our experience and our knowledge into these spaces that have been dominated by men rather than just becoming men entering that patriarchal frame or that way of being in order to occupy that space.

CD: It's a good way of thinking about it. Thank you so much for telling me about your work today.

KJ: Oh, it's been a great pleasure. Thank you.

CD: Thank you.

[Theme music fades in]

Carla Demarco: I would like to thank everyone for listening to today's show.
I would like to thank my guest, Kajri Jain, for coming in to speak about her work in the Department of Visual Studies at UTM.

Thank you to the Office of the Vice-Principal, Research, for their support and for everyone who has expressed interest in this podcast.

Please feel free to get in touch with me. My contact information is on our SoundCloud page [car.demarco@utoronto.ca]. If you have feedback or if there's someone you would like to see featured on *VIEW to the U*.

Lastly, and as always, thank you to Tim Lane for his tunes and support.

Thank you!

[Theme music fades out]