

PRESS

Rajkamal Kahlon

1/12 2022 – 9/4 2023

PRESS CONFERENCE: Thu 1/12 2022, 10 am

OPENING: Thu 1/12 2022, 7 pm

CURATORS: What, How & for Whom / WHW (Ivet Ćurlin, Nataša Ilić and Sabina Sabolović)

EXHIBITION VENUE: **kunsthalle wien** museumsquartier

Which Side Are You On? brings together a selection of works from over twenty years of **Rajkamal Kahlon's** practice, as well as several new commissions created for the exhibition at **kunsthalle wien**.

In her work, **Kahlon** explores the interrelatedness of power and visual regimes by looking into narratives that are seen as scientific and objective, and at the same time are deeply influential in forming the collective imagination and the way we see and interpret things around us.

There is a story within each of her works—whether from a book, a series of documents, or archival research. The books that **Kahlon** uses are not beloved, nor does she feel attached to the documents used—on the contrary, the books are often from the heyday of colonialism, with titles such as *Cassell's Illustrated History of India* or *People of the Earth*, full of patronizing clichés, using the dubious scientific methods of nineteenth-century anthropology and ethnology to create an image of inferiority and otherness, justifying colonial and imperialistic expansion.

Kahlon radically alters the colonial images so that her subjects, made into curios by the books' photographers and authors, reassert their individuality and dignity. Painting is central to this process and, in opposition to the history of Western painting, she sees it, in her own words, as "a form of care work—done in the service and from a sense of responsibility and care toward others."

Her practice aims at complicating and resisting the ways in which painting is often reduced to a luxury good. Instead, she opens a space of potentiality and offers a form of radical care for the protagonists of her works. Drawing and painting become sites of political and

aesthetic resistance, and the violence inherent in colonial and ethnographic images is confronted with beauty, humor, sensuality, and seduction.

As the title of the show, the phrase *Which Side Are You On?* invites visitors to examine their consent to, even reiteration of, the violent process of "Othering", through which the superiority of an imagined "we" is created by attributing traits of inferiority to people constructed as "others". Through the defiant gaze of their protagonists, **Kahlon's** paintings address the viewer directly: how are you implicated in this violence and injustice surrounding you?

There is no easy catharsis in **Kahlon's** works; in fact, there is a certain building of unease. At first sight, her works are simply beautiful and seductive, radiating color—but as one comes closer, the violence hidden in them seeps out. The artist deliberately weaves dark humor and discomfort into her works in order to accentuate the layering of voices and perspectives, challenge the voyeuristic approach of original imagery, and create its antidote.

At the same time, while the hierarchy between ethnographers or anthropologists and their "passive" subjects is subverted through appropriation and transformation of colonial imagery, our relationship to this history is put into question as well. **Kahlon's** paintings draw parallels between earlier scientific research serving colonial purposes and its contemporary counterparts, demonstrating how colonial legacies continue to the present day.

By altering and reconfiguring the visual regimes that remain as an afterimage of centuries of systematic oppression, **Rajkamal Kahlon** invites us to imagine the names and life stories of the protagonists of her works and to shift the conversation away from the false dichotomies of underdevelopment and progress, inferiority and superiority, and towards mutuality, respect, and solidarity.

Biography

Rajkamal Kahlon (b. 1974, Auburn, California, USA) is a Berlin-based American artist, whose multimedia practice recuperates drawing and painting as sites of aesthetic and political resistance.

Kahlon received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of California, Davis, and a Master of Fine Arts in Painting and Drawing from the California College of the Arts. She is an alumna of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture and the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York. In 2021, **Kahlon** became a professor of painting at the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg, Germany.

Kahlon's work has been exhibited internationally in the 2012 Taipei Biennial; Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp; the Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw; and the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City. Her recent solo exhibitions include *Rajkamal Kahlon: The Peoples of the Earth* at MEWO Kunsthalle, Memmingen, in 2019 and *Rajkamal Kahlon: And Still I Rise* at Sacramento State University Galleries, California, in 2021. **Kahlon** will also be included in upcoming group exhibitions at Tabakalera International Center for Contemporary Culture, Donostia-San Sebastián; apexart, New York City; and the Chicago Cultural Center. She is the recipient of numerous grants, awards, and residencies, including the 2019 Villa Romana Prize, the Joan Mitchell Painting and Sculpture Award, the Pollock-Krasner Award, and the 2021 Hans and Lea Grundig Prize. **Kahlon's** second solo exhibition with PPOW, New York City, will open in May 2023.