WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?

1/12 2022
–9/4 2023

Rajkamal Kahlon

kunst
Halle
wien

Rajkamal Kahlon, *Prada*, from the series *We've Come a Long Way to Be Together*, 2022. Photo: Katrin Hammer

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Playlist

compiled by
Rajkamal Kahlon

Music plays a strong role in the making of my work and in this exhibition. Music is always present when I paint. Many of the titles of my individual projects are based on lyrics found in this playlist. Even the title of this exhibition is based on a famous American labor and protest song, “Which Side Are You On?” written by Florence Reece in 1931. I wanted to add this sonic layer to the exhibition and share the music that gives me strength and inspiration.

1

“Which Side Are You On?”, Florence Reece and The Almanac Singers, *Classic Labor Songs from Smithsonian Folkways*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2006, 2:39.

2

“If You Had Lived”, Sweet Honey in the Rock, *Breaths*, Rounder Records, 1988, 3:38.

3

“Nanak Naam Charhdi Kala (Wahe Guru Simran)”, Bhai Harjinder Singh, *Nanak Naam Charhdi Kala Tere Bhaane Sarbat Da Bhala*, Super Cassettes Industries, 2012, 44:59.

4

“We’ve Come a Long Way to Be Together”, Bernice Johnson Reagon, *Give Your Hands to Struggle*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1997, 3:49.

5

“Ya Hayyu Ya Qayyum”, Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, *Best Islamic and Sufi Music*, Oriental Star Agencies, 2018, 17:33.

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Introduction

What, How & For Whom / WHW

Artistic Directors
Kunsthalle Wien

Rajkamal 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 *Völker der Erde* [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 takes the books apart—symbolically and physically—challenging their "objective" role. She transfers them to the canvas as a sort of primer to paint upon and overlays them with drawings and paintings of people otherwise subjected to the colonial gaze. She radically alters the colonial images so that her subjects, made into curios by the books' photographers and authors, reassert their individuality and dignity. In *You've Come a Long Way, Baby!*, a new work produced for this exhibition, Kahlon dresses a woman from an engraving originally entitled *The Native Way of Climbing Cocoa Palms in Ceylon* in a red business suit, white shirt, and black heels. Through this new attire, the larger-than-life figure is an ironic commentary on the myth of social mobility in US-American society, but she also becomes a reminder of the resilience and insubordination of the local population when faced with an objectifying gaze.

Kahlon aims to build a visual repository that counteracts what Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes characterizes as Western ideological stereotypification: "A strategic artistic process achieved through an efficient, recurrent and prolonged production and dissemination of particular sets of visual records and discourses."[1] Painting is central to this process and, in opposition to the history of Western painting, she sees it as "work done in the service of others from a

1
Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes, "The Ascent of (Wo) Man: Visual Priming in Early Photographs and Films of Ceylon, 1880s–1930s", in *Imagining the Isle Across: Vintage Photography from Ceylon* (New Delhi: Alkazi Foundation for the Arts, 2015), 90.

2
Rajkamal Kahlon in conversation with What, How & for Whom / WHW, May 2022
(see page 51).

sense of responsibility and care."[2] 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.

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. The exhibition takes its title from a song written by Florence Reece during a series of strikes, executions, and bombings that took place in Kentucky during the 1930s, known as the Harlan County War. Reece was the wife of a coal miner and union organizer, who was terrorized by police in her home due to her husband's union activities. The song she wrote has been adapted and sung by countless singers in contexts of protest, including the Civil Rights Movement in the US in the 1960s. 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 through attributing traits of inferiority to people constructed as "Others". Through the defiant gaze of their protagonists, Kahlon's paintings address the viewer directly, asking the question from the exhibition's title: 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—be it a knife hidden behind the back of the pretty doll-like figure in *Dear Yugoslavia, I Regret to Inform You …*, the hate crime whose victims are portrayed in *Enter My Burning House,* or the military prison autopsy reports embedded in radiating pink backgrounds of *Did You Kiss the Dead Body?* One of the important propositions of Kahlon's work—that what is considered beautiful often comes hand in hand with violence—challenges the collective imagination by bringing its contradictions to the fore and exposing the privileged position of an ordinary middle-class museum visitor. Kahlon 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. In one of the earliest works included in the show, *Cassell's Illustrated History of India,* created in the aftermath of 9/11 and the US-American invasion of Iraq, Kahlon overlays the eponymous book with images of tortured and grotesque bodies and pictures from the daily news related to

the war, creating nightmarish imagery that comments both on the legacy of colonialism and the imperialist war waged by the United States at the time.

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. In *American Counterinsurgency: Human Science and Human Terrain*, Roberto J. González gives a chilling account of an experimental program nightmarishly called "Human Terrain System", which ran from from 2005 to 2014 and involved social scientists embedded within the US military as "cultural analysts". These practitioners of wartime anthropology continued to use the righteous justifications of bringing "civilization" to the natives, while they were in fact part of a military counterinsurgency effort in occupied Iraq and Afghanistan, collecting intelligence, waging psychological warfare, and identifying points where culture has the potential to be weaponized.[3] In two new series of large-scale paintings produced for *Which Side Are You On?*, Kahlon challenges and reworks archival materials that bear testimony to colonial violence at various times. In *We've Come a Long Way to Be Together*, she superimposes portraits found at the photo archive at the Weltmuseum Wien onto pages cut from the travel memoir *The Marsh Arabs* by Wilfred Thesiger, and in a painting from the *Did You Kiss the Dead Body?* series, she juxtaposes autopsy reports that document torture and killing during the US military occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan with the portraits based on photographs made by American anthropologist Henry Field in 1930s and 1940s. 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. History becomes a basis for understanding the present.

Several of the works presented in the exhibition were made as a result of Kahlon's research in Vienna in 2016 as part of a residency at the Weltmuseum Wien, during which she discovered a copy of *Die Völker der Erde* [People of the Earth] by Kurt Lampert at an antique bookshop. Two works are based on the dissection and reinterpretation of the book, first published in 1902, a quarter century before the establishment of the museum in 1928, then known as the Museum of Ethnology.[4] At the entrance of the show, visitors are greeted by *Do You Know Our Names?*, a series of photographs of women from Lampert's book that are enlarged and radically transformed with painting, while the book itself has been cut apart and turned into more than 300 drawings that "talk back" to the book and to Western knowledge production. In the show, the women portrayed in *Do You Know Our Names?* look back at visitors,

3
Roberto J. González, *American Counterinsurgency: Human Science and Human Terrain* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2009), 3.

4
The Museum of Ethnology changed its name to Weltmuseum fairly recently, in 2013, in an attempt to address the recent reevaluations of its own core discipline and the implications of its collections in colonial and imperial expansions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Installation view *People of the Earth (Die Völker der Erde)* including approx. 340 drawings from the eponymous series (2017–2021), MEWO Kunsthalle Memmingen, 2019, photo: MEWO Kunsthalle Memmingen

but also at drawings of several male scientists and directors from the history of Weltmuseum Wien, turned into exoticized "natives" in *Dear Sirs, I Regret to Inform You …*

Describing how responding to racism means responding to anger, Audre Lorde wrote about its transformative potential: "Anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies."[5] *Which Side Are You On?* encourages scrutiny of our alliances and opens space for constructively dealing with one's anger in the face of structural racism. By altering and reconfiguring the visual regimes that remain as an afterimage of centuries of systematic oppression, 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.

5
Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism", in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017), 111.

Rajkamal Kahlon, *Three Graces*, 2007–2013, (detail)

Cutouts

Ain't I a Woman?
2012, painted wooden sculpture
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Besides painting and drawing, cutouts play an important role in Rajkamal Kahlon's oeuvre and are therefore also an integral part of this exhibition.

Cutouts are a form of seventeenth-century *trompe l'oeil* painting that originated in the Netherlands. They were fashionable among English and American elites and began to wane in popularity by the late 1800s. Also known as dummy boards, picture boards, or silent companions, these life-sized forms were cut out of flat pieces of wood and painted to look like animals, children, servants, and soldiers. They were used as elements of interior decor, to animate an otherwise lackluster room, as a home-security measure meant to scare off prospective thieves, as a fireplace accessory to keep the heat out during summers, and as quiet company for the lonesome. Kahlon's interest in dummy boards grew from a desire to push beyond the parameters of traditional painting formats and to produce more ambitious works that could physically confront viewers. Starting with photographs of colonial subjects, the artist began to create life-sized, photo-realistic cutouts as a way to make sense of the picture plane and to symbolically take apart history.

Kahlon has employed this mode of painting for over twenty years and refers to a subset of cutouts as *BLOWBACK*. The term "blowback" describes potentially dangerous and undesirable behaviors of explosions; it is also used by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) when referencing secret operations in foreign nations that go awry and attract unwanted political attention. Kahlon borrows the notion of blowback to explore the relationship between former colonial subjects exploited by early anthropologists and their modern-day descendants, often labeled as terrorists, who use violence as a way to gain attention and power.

Rajkamal Kahlon, *Ain't I a Woman?*, 2012

Ain't I a Woman?

2012,
painted wooden
sculpture

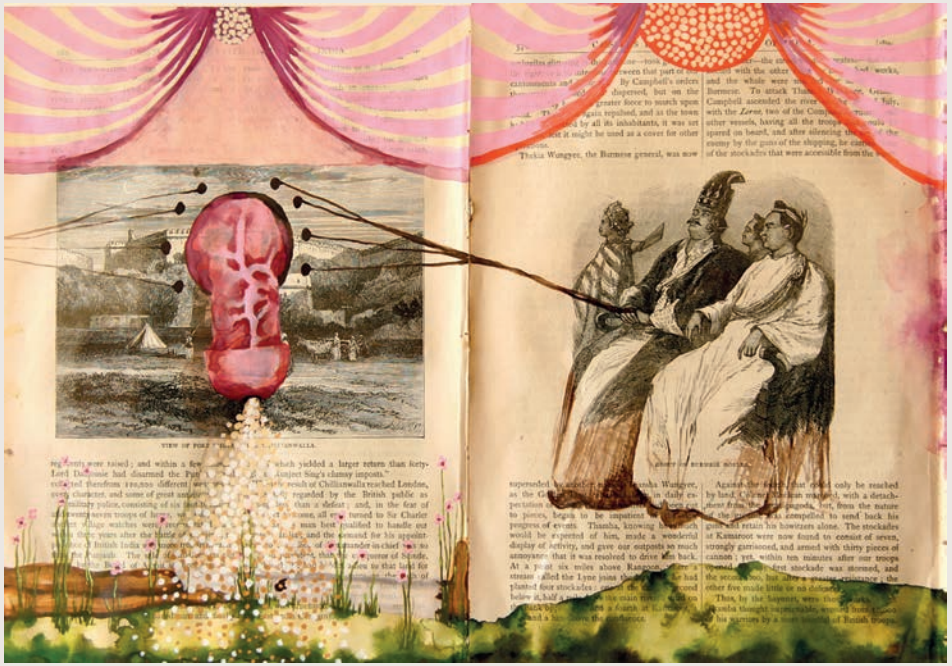
The title of this work, *Ain't I a Woman*, takes inspiration from two sources. The first is a version of American abolitionist Sojourner Truth's famous speech of the same name delivered at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio (USA). The second is the eponymously titled book by the late bell hooks, a celebrated Black American womanist author and activist. Truth was born into slavery, was the property of several white men, and endured decades of abuse before eventually claiming her own freedom by escaping with her infant daughter in 1826. In her address, Truth argues passionately for the end of slavery and for Black women's rights built on a claim that they should have the same humanity afforded to them as their white counterparts. In hooks *Ain't I a Woman* (1981), her first book, she reasserts and extends Truth's argument by challenging the view that race and gender are disparate forms of discrimination, insisting instead that the two are inextricably intertwined. In Kahlon's *Ain't I a Woman*, a female figure wearing a fashionable blue-and-gold hijab (a head covering worn in public by some Muslim women) and equally stylish, yet sturdy looking shooting gloves expertly holds a modern assault rifle. This potent image is juxtaposed against a hard-edge minimalist backdrop of red, black, and blue concentric squares with dramatic red, scalloped edges. A complex set of variables, this work underscores themes of race, gender, power, and violence.

Rajkamal Kahlon, *Boy with Basket Full of Heads*, 2007

Boy with Basket Full of Heads

2007,
acrylic on
wooden cutout

Who is this boy? That's one of the questions that the artist wants us to ask. Kahlon has looked at hundreds, perhaps thousands of images picturing those who were cast as objects of fascination, exoticism, and study through the Western colonial gaze. Completed in 2007, at a time when Kahlon was combing through British and French books on colonial photography, the artist was searching for ways to slow the act of looking, especially when reading an image of violence. In the original photograph, the boy's basket is filled with fish. Upon encountering this image, she saw her chance to replace the fish with heads of the British leisure class posing in recreational scenes throughout India. Through this substitution, the boy is transformed from victim to aggressor. Just as hunters mount animal trophies on their wall in a show of power and apex predator dominance, this boy may be showing off those whom he has vanquished. The longer we look, the more we see and the more questions arise—which is just what the artist intends.



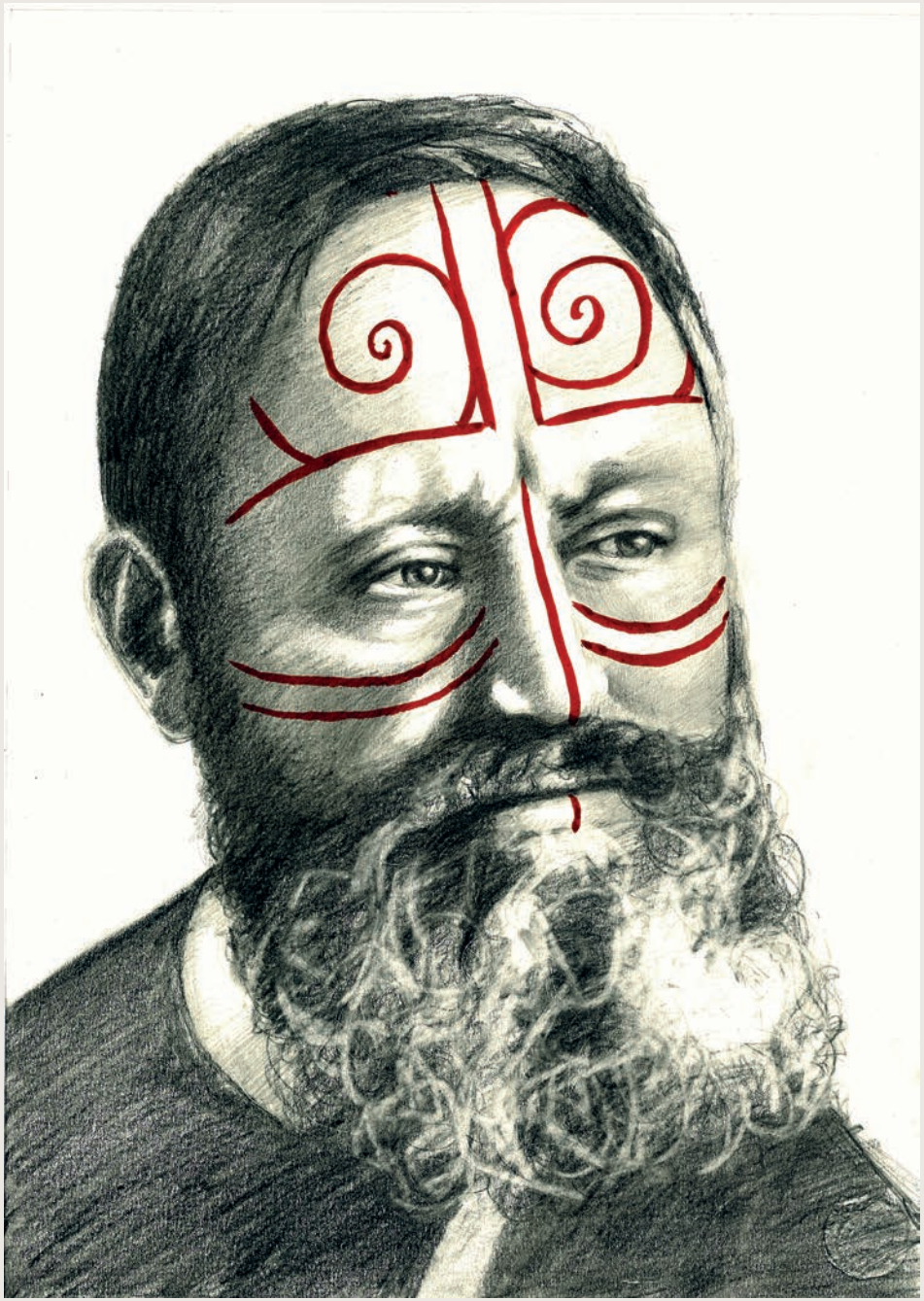
Rajkamal Kahlon, *Untitled*, from the series *Cassell's Illustrated History of India*, 2003–2005

Cassell's Illustrated History of India

2003–2005,
9 gouaches on book pages,
6 gouaches on wooden panels

The origin story of this artwork begins at an auction house. In the early-2000s, Kahlon placed a bid on a book—*Cassell's Illustrated History of India*, c. 1875—at Sotheby's. For $400, she won the lot, and two leather-bound volumes boasting a total of 1,200 pages and 600 illustrations went home with her. Once in her possession, Kahlon executed her plan to unbind the books and dissect them, thereby stripping the objects of their market value with the intention of responding to its contents through drawings and paintings made directly onto its disassembled parts. Using a predominantly Pepto-Bismol* pink palette, the artist painted over whole pages of text, obscuring the colonialist-centered narrative of India in favor of her own corrections, assertions, and imagination. Kahlon's illustrations stem from the concept of the grotesque body as a visual means for connecting to broader social and political issues. The body and all of its messy, wild, disorderly expressions—urination, defecation, lactation, swallowing, eating, and drinking—take center stage in Kahlon's version of this seminal text. Bodily entry and exit points—the mouth, breast, vagina, and anus—are used to process and make visible aspects of India's history that are absent or hidden in the original publication. Kahlon's imagery, which has a playful, even cartoonish quality, critiques and blatantly indicts the British for the violence and brutality endured by the peoples of India during its more than 200 years of British occupation and rule.

** Pepto-Bismol is a popular over-the-counter liquid medicine in the US, Canada, and the UK used to treat nausea, heartburn, upset stomach, indigestion, and diarrhea.*



Rajkamal Kahlon, *Fritz Röck*, from the series *Dear Sirs, I Regret to Inform You …*, 2017

Dear Sirs, I Regret to Inform You …

2017,
4 graphite and ink drawings

Steven Engelsman

Otto Finsch

Fritz Röck

Christian Schicklgruber

One of the most powerful and insidious mechanisms for establishing and maintaining social supremacy is the ability to "Other". Othering is a process through which a dominant social group ascribes the status of inferiority to those belonging to a marginalized community and establishes that status as inherent. This system of hierarchical social standings has led to such distinctions as "us" versus "them", "haves" and "have-nots", and who is "in" and who is "out". Othering has been used historically as a tool to oppress marginalized groups along lines of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Born out of Western colonialism and imperialism, Othering is readily recognized in ethnography and anthropology museums. The Weltmuseum Wien, according to its website, is an ethnographic museum, which "houses some of the most important collections of non-European cultures." During a residency at this institution, Kahlon sketched photorealistic portraits of white male scientists, ethnographers, and museum directors associated with the museum. By depicting each with facial tattoos that point to body inking traditions from places such as Aotearoa, Ethiopia, Brazil, and Polynesia—all represented in the Weltmuseum Wien's collections—the artist turns the colonialist's gaze back onto itself, essentially Othering the white man. This series of works aims to consider these Western producers of so-called knowledge as medically or psychologically aberrant, or, in other words, as Others.

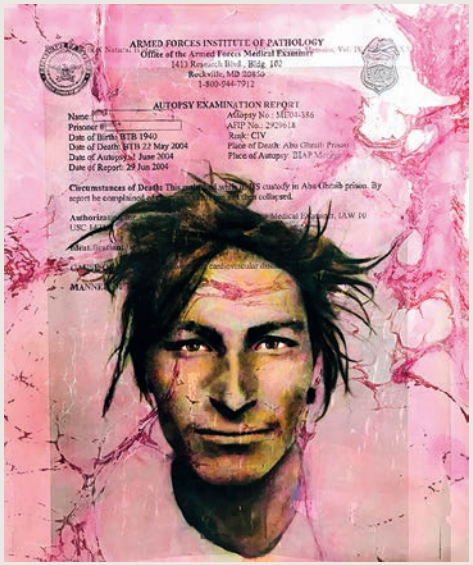
Rajkamal Kahlon, *Dear Yugoslavia, I Regret to Inform You …*, 2018

Dear Yugoslavia, I Regret to Inform You …

2018,
72 drawings and
1 wall painting

Dear Yugoslavia, I Regret to Inform You … consists of drawings from 2018, originally exhibited at SENSE Transitional Justice Center in Pula, Croatia—this institution is dedicated to documenting the work of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague. A newly commissioned mural has been added to this body of work, which reframes ethnic portraiture featured in the book series *Narodne nošnje Jugoslavije* [National Costumes of Yugoslavia]. Croatian illustrator Vladimir Kirin (1894–1963) produced a five-volume set of illustrations showcasing the different Yugoslavian ethnic groups dressed in their respective folkwear. Published in 1960, different ethnicities from all Yugoslav republics and autonomous regions are included: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia, and Vojvodina. In response to the series of conflicts and civil war in the former Yugoslavia that took place from 1991 to 2001, Kahlon undermines these romanticized depictions by introducing objects and symbols representing the atrocities and violence committed during these complex pursuits of autonomy and national independence. Scenes of mass graves, anatomical drawings, military uniforms, and weaponry are incorporated into the original compositions. Kahlon mixes different painting styles and icons of anthropology and warfare in an attempt to produce unexpected meanings and new ways of processing traumatic social and political histories.

To learn more about
this project, please visit
www.didyoukissthedeadbody.com



top: Rajkamal Kahlon, *Did You Kiss the Dead Body?*, 2022
bottom: Rajkamal Kahlon, *Did You Kiss the Dead Body?*, 2012

Did You Kiss the Dead Body?

2012, 19 (8+11) ink drawings on 2 marbled autopsy reports

2022, 8 mixed media paintings on canvas

"CLOTHING AND PERSONAL EFFECTS: Brown Shirt, Gray underpants, Gray T-shirt, White shirt ..." (Sisters)

"FINAL AUTOPSY DIAGNOSIS: g. No internal evidence of trauma ..." (Brothers)

"During his confinement he was hooded, sleep deprived, and subjected to hot and cold environmental conditions, including the use of cold water on his body and hood." (Uncle)

"The body is that of an unclad well-developed well-nourished male." (College Athlete)

"The decedent was also subjected to cold and wet conditions, and hypothermia may have contributed to his death. Therefore, the cause of death is best classified as undetermined ..." (The Thinker)

"The renal capsules are smooth and thin, semi-transparent and strip with ease from the underlying smooth, red-brown cortical surfaces." (Sons)

"There are fractures of the anterior left ribs 3-7 and the right 5th rib on the anterior aspect." (Poet)

"This male died while in US custody in Abu Ghraib prison. By report he complained to his son and then collapsed." (New Wave)

In 2004, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) posted on its website autopsy reports and death certificates authored by US military officials working on bases and in prisons in Afghanistan and Iraq. This formerly classified information was made public under the Freedom of Information Act of the United States. Kahlon uses these government documents as the foundation for this collection of artworks. For over ten years, the artist reflected on the contents of these records and how they might shape public perception—both consciously and unconsciously—of the dead, the people of these regions, and the US military's role in these deaths. The reports use clinical terms to describe and sort the causes of death—from "natural" to "undetermined" and "homicide". Copies of official documents are printed on paper marbled in hues of red, pink, and orange that bring to mind a cross section of a human body or blood cells under a microscope. Over the printed medical data, the artist layers graphic images, such as portraits of actual Afghans and Iraqis, and parts of the human body as the object of scientific study and torture. When viewed as a whole, the work underscores the power and abuse wielded by the US military in the treatment of Afghan and Iraqi boys and men who died in US custody. The title, *Did You Kiss the Dead Body?*, is the final line of the poem "Death" by British writer, director, and actor Harold Pinter. Pinter read this work aloud as part of the lecture he gave upon receipt of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005, a speech that was steeped in criticism of American foreign policy and centered around notions of art, truth, and politics.

Rajkamal Kahlon, *Untitled (White Polka Dots)*, from the series *Do You Know Our Names?*, 2017

Do You Know Our Names?

2017,
6 mixed media paintings on photo rag paper

Untitled (White Polka Dots)

Untitled (Blue Polka Dots)

Untitled (Green Stripes)

Untitled (Orange Polka Dots)

Untitled (Two Fingers)

Untitled (Bandage)

Photography has played a central role in the colonial project. Developed in the nineteenth century, it was a popular tool of the Western anthropologist, who used it to document and study foreign people and places.

Kahlon has been mining historical texts, archives, and collections for twenty years, searching them for images of non-Western subjects captured by anthropologists and stockpiled in these containers of colonial histories. In *Do You Know Our Names?*, Kahlon reproduces and enlarges photographs of unnamed women from the German anthropology book, *Die Völker der Erde* [People of the Earth]. Each image is hand-colored by the artist, a method used by nineteenth-century photographers in an attempt to make the picture appear more lifelike. The artist toggles between calling attention to the violence represented by the original image—where exploited individuals were coerced into sitting before the camera—and moving past it into a gesture of care and healing. Kahlon seeks to liberate the images of these individuals from the labor of performing an imagined ethnic identity that was projected onto them under colonial hegemony. The disempowered, nameless, marginalized objects of racist scientific study are transformed and rehabilitated by the artist's brush into luminous, decorated, and powerful beings. Through these portraits, Kahlon aims to restore humanity, individuality, and beauty to these women and for the photographed colonial subject at large.

Rajkamal Kahlon, left to right: *Ranjit Singh (April 4, 1963 – August 5, 2012)*, *Paramjit Kaur (April 25, 1971 – August 5, 2012)*, *Prakash Singh (November 1, 1972 – August 5, 2012)*, *Sita Singh (November 15, 1970 – August 5, 2012)*, from the series *Enter My Burning House*, 2021

Enter My Burning House

This project is in memory of my father, Avtar Singh Kahlon (1942–2017), who lived most of his adult life as an immigrant in the United States.

— Rajkamal Kahlon

2021,
7 acrylic ink drawings on book pages

Baba Punjab Singh (August 11, 1947–March 2, 2020)

Paramjit Kaur (April 25, 1971–August 5, 2012)

Prakash Singh (November 1, 1972–August 5, 2012)

Ranjit Singh (April 4, 1963–August 5, 2012)

Satwant Singh Kaleka (June 2, 1947–August 5, 2012)

Sita Singh (November 15, 1970–August 5, 2012)

Suveg Singh Khattra (June 6, 1928–August 5, 2012)

Enter My Burning House sets out to connect the dots between the history of US environmental conservation, immigration, eugenics, white supremacy, and fascism. On August 5, 2012, a white gunman carried out a premeditated massacre at a gurdwara (Sikh temple) in Oak Creek, Wisconsin (USA). This self-proclaimed white supremacist fatally shot six worshipers including the Sikh priest Prakash Singh and wounded four others. A seventh victim, Baba Punjab Singh, died from causes related to the shooting some eight years later. Kahlon has created portraits for each of the dead through the use of photography and painting applied directly on book pages cut out from a first edition copy of *The Passing of the Great Race: Or, The Racial Basis of European History* by Madison Grant (1916). Grant was a privileged Columbia University law school graduate, a Yale University alum, and a forerunner in the environmental conservation movement. He was also a contemporary of John Muir (the Scottish-American naturalist who helped establish America's National Park Service) and friend and political ally of Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th president of the United States. Grant is often lauded for founding the Bronx Zoo, saving the American bison from extinction, and preserving the redwoods of California. However, he also argued for Nordic superiority and for America to serve as a "civilization preserve", where only those of Anglo-Saxon and Northwestern-European origins would be admitted. US legislators looked to *The Passing of the Great Race* when authoring the Immigration Act of 1924, which prohibited immigration from Asia, and it was embraced by Adolf Hitler, who regarded it as his "bible". The portraits in this series are in part an homage to the South Asian immigrant lives taken by a neo-Nazi and an indictment of America's deep history of racism and anti-immigration policies built upon a foundation of white-supremacist doctrines and ideologies.

Rajkamal Kahlon, *Flagellation and the Flagellants*, 2007

Flagellation and the Flagellants

2007,
gouaches on
book pages

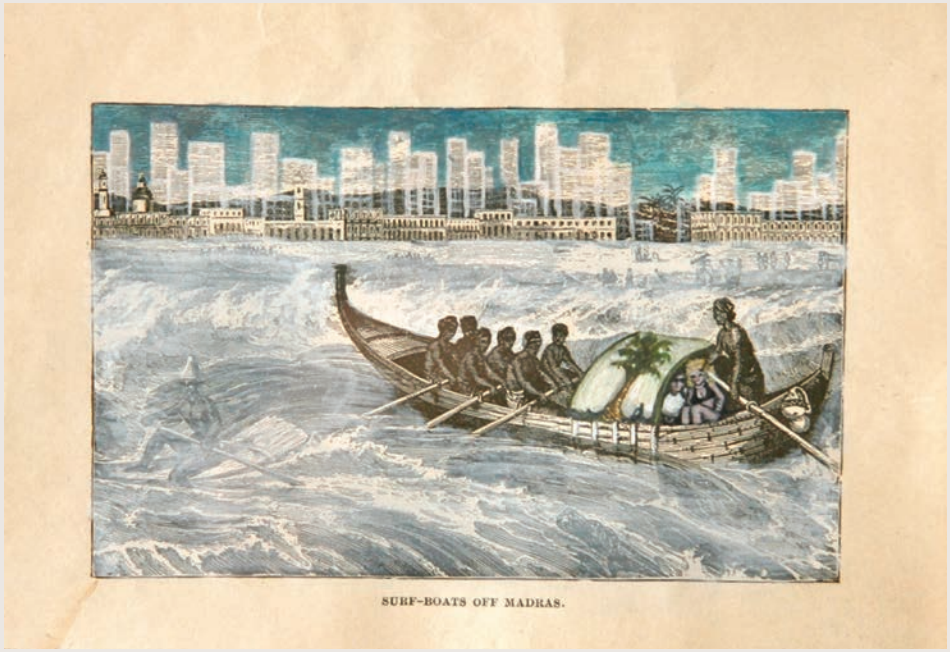
Flagellation and the Flagellants: A History of the Rod in All Countries, from the Earliest Period to the Present Time, by the Reverend William M. Cooper, was first published in 1870. The author offers a detailed look at this practice, from whipping in ancient Egypt and Rome to the flogging of slaves, soldiers, students, and nuns in America. Kahlon has excised the opening pages of this text and painted her commentary on its contents. On the left is a pale-skinned female figure in profile, with her head in what appears to be a sphere-shaped metal cage; a transparent, white gauze-like dotted veil with pink trim covers her face and a reddish-pink eyeletted ribbon is tied around her neck with a prominent bow on the backside. These sweet and girlish accessories appear in stark contrast to the figure itself, which boasts no arms. A pale-pink cartoon speech bubble is suspended in front of the figure's groin with an endless stream of "HEE HEE HEE ..." handwritten within. On the right is the title page where, in elegant typeface and all capital letters, we see "FLAGELLATION & THE FLAGELLANTS" spelled out. Superimposed over this text, the artist inserts two Brown arms, which poke through holes that resemble the stocks or pillory favored by the English for centuries to torture, humiliate, and punish alleged lawbreakers. Kahlon dresses the hands of this captive in delicate white gloves, complete with a decorative ruffle of lace at the wrist. Little red blooms made up of tiny dots appear in a circular shape behind the hands, which are primly placed one over the other; the red dots could easily double as blood droplets. Here again, Kahlon expertly composes scenes of terror and unspeakable violence through a visual language of beauty, delicacy, and genteelness.

Rajkamal Kahlon, *My Temple of Justice*, 2022

My Temple of Justice

2022,
acrylic on
wooden cutout

There was a convention in colonial photography whereby the photographer would dress the portrait subjects in identical ethnic outfits. These individuals, who often were not related, would be made to stand side by side as if they were twins. In doing this, the photographer could create an oddity or spectacle out of these otherwise ordinary individuals. The original photograph used in *My Temple of Justice* is such an image. In an act of revenge against the photographer and colonialism in general, the artist bandages the head of one figure and places a pulled grenade pin in the hand of the other. The moment one sees the green explosive on the floor just in front of the left figure is the moment that the grenade is activated. The viewer, in close proximity to the subjects, becomes part of the scene.



Rajkamal Kahlon, *Adventures in Nostalgia*, from the series *People and Places*, 2001–2002

Rajkamal Kahlon, *Pearl Divers*, from the series *People and Places*, 2001–2002

People and Places

2001–2002,
16 gouaches on
book pages

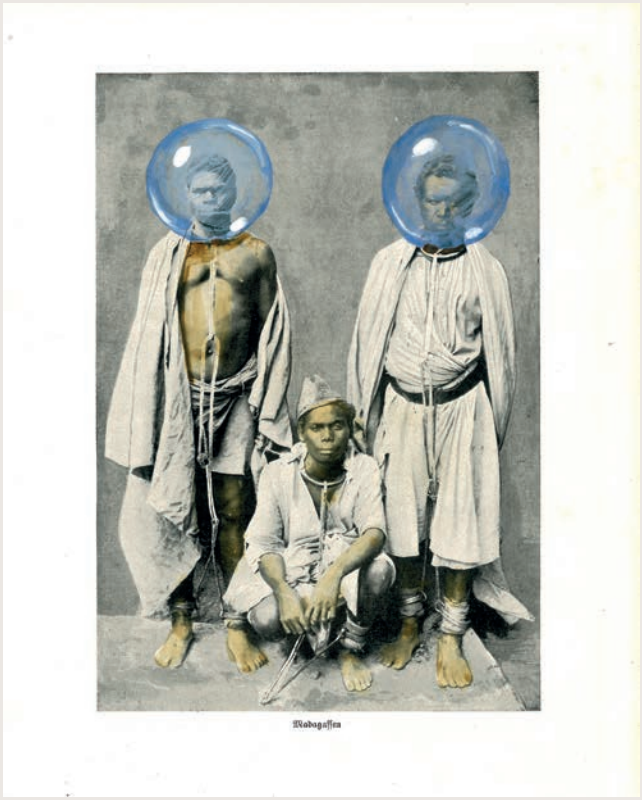
The 1892 book *People and Places, Here and There: Stories of India* by American educator, physician, and writer Mara L. Pratt, is a biased account of the South Asian country's history and the peoples of the region, written from a colonial American perspective in service of British imperialism. It includes chapters such as "How India came to belong to England" and excerpts like, "In describing these [wedding] customs of both Hindoos and Mohammedans, I am glad [...] to be able to tell you, that, due to the civilizing influence of European nations now in India, all these absurd restrictions [otherwise known as cultural protocols] are giving way." Kahlon superimposes gouache paintings on the pages of this nineteenth-century tome, using her signature dark humor and wit to illustrate alternate versions of Indians and India. One of the book's 200 pages features an etching of three young men squatting with their arms crossed, a water pipe resting before the central figure; the description below the trio reads, "LOW-CASTE HINDOOS". Kahlon paints earmuffs on the far left figure, a rag stuffed into the mouth of the central figure, and oversized sunglasses for the figure on the right. Each added accessory is decorated in the immediately recognizable red, white, and blue of the American flag, signaling the artist's critique of American settler colonialism and an interpretation of the proverbial saying: "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil." Elsewhere, an etching of Nana Saheb Peshwa II (a high-born prime minister of the Maratha Empire) appears, looking regal. On this page, the artist inserts a white man into the tight embrace of the Indian aristocratic leader. This figure, wearing a dark suit jacket and red polka-dotted tie, bears a striking resemblance to former US president George W. Bush. The expression on the white man's face is one of worry and concern, contrasted against the relaxed and aloof look reflected on the face of Nana Saheb Peshwa II.

Rajkamal Kahlon, *People of Afghanistan*, 2016

People of Afghanistan

2016,
video and slide
projection: 9'

The internet is crowded with anonymously published videos of airstrikes carried out by US military forces on foreign soil. One such video, featuring the AC-130 gunship, caught Kahlon's attention. This American aircraft relies on human-operated visual-targeting systems and flies at the relatively low altitude of 2,100 m. It is armed with a shocking array of weaponry, from multiple rapid-fire gun stations to 40 mm and 105 mm cannons. In *People of Afghanistan*, Kahlon samples a segment of infrared video imagery and accompanying audio captured during a US-led attack on an Afghan site in the early 2000s. The viewpoint is that of the airmen tasked with devastating the area, which includes a mosque. In this chilling scene, individuals reduced to tiny silhouettes can be seen scattering on the ground below and seeking shelter after the initial bomb is dropped. The audio is equally disturbing. With tensions running high, you can hear the adrenaline in the chorus of male voices shouting commands and strike confirmations. Layered over this projection of gun-camera footage are photographs of Afghan men compiled by G. F. Debets, a Russian anthropologist who surveyed the country in the 1960s. Debets measured 5,224 individuals from 58 distinct communities, collecting data on skin and hair color, skull size, and other physiological metrics. This practice of early anthropology was called anthropometry, and it was standard among European and Euro-American scientists; the data was used in academic papers and scholarship that established and reinforced hierarchies between Western and non-Western subjects. Debets released his findings in a series of texts titled *Physical Anthropology of Afghanistan*, which were published by Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in 1970. In this work, the artist seeks to connect and collapse the historical distance between the exploited Afghan subjects in Debets racist 1960s study and the Afghan targets seen through the crosshairs of the US Air Force's gunship in the early aughts.



Rajkamal Kahlon, *People of the Earth* (*Die Völker der Erde*), 2017–2021

People of the Earth (Die Völker der Erde)

2017–2021, approx. 340 acrylic ink drawings on book pages

During the SWICH artist residency at the Weltmuseum Wien in 2017, Kahlon came across a copy of the 1902 German anthropology publication *Die Völker der Erde* [People of the Earth] in the collection of an antique bookseller. The artist made the purchase and proceeded to cut out individual pages to use as her canvas. Each page offered Kahlon a new space for "talking back" to and critiquing its author, Kurt Lampert, the discipline of anthropology, European colonial violence, and Western knowledge production. The project now exceeds 300 drawings. In the pages of his book, Lampert offers up photographs of Black, Brown, and otherwise non-European beings as passive anthropological subjects available for study, ridicule, and consumption. In select works, Kahlon recuperates dignity and agency for these unnamed individuals by dressing them in fancy suits, chic prêt-à-porter garments, and trendy hairstyles. In other pieces, the artist arms the subjects with, for instance, a long sharp knife dotted with fresh blood or wraps the figure's head with bandages as if to protect their identity while giving them needed medical care. Kahlon also depicts figures in partial or complete bondage as a reminder that we are not yet free from the constraints of colonization, and that the burden of carrying and addressing this fraught history remains.

Rajkamal Kahlon, *Three Graces*, 2007–2013

Three Graces

2007–2013,
acrylic on wooden
cutout

Three Graces, the carved marble sculpture by Italian artist, Antonio Canova (1757–1822), is considered to be a masterpiece of the Neo-Classical period. The work depicts the daughters of the Greek god, Zeus, each of whom is said to bear a unique gift to humanity. On the left is Euphrosyne, who brings mirth; Aglaia, in the center, offers elegance; and Thalia, on the right, carries youth and beauty. Kahlon's iteration of this work features a trio of mostly nude dark-skinned female figures. Euphrosyne stands immodestly, with breasts exposed, wearing only a small piece of fabric that covers her groin. She embraces the central figure. Kahlon's version of Thalia is completely nude, mirroring Canova's depiction of this sister. The artist's illustration of Aglaia completes this rendition with a shocking and violent twist. The middle Grace wears a miniskirt and crop top, which is "decorated" with vibrant-red colored explosives, the type worn by suicide bombers.

left: Rajkamal Kahlon, *Prada*, from the series *We've Come a Long Way to Be Together*, 2022

right: Rajkamal Kahlon, *Swissair*, from the series *We've Come a Long Way to Be Together*, 2022

We've Come a Long Way to Be Together

2022,
5 mixed media paintings on canvas

Airplane

Escape

Prada

Swissair

Union Jack

The series *We've Come a Long Way to Be Together* consists of two groups of paintings. The works shown at Kunsthalle Wien refer to photos from the archive of Weltmuseum Wien and appear atop of pages of Wilfred Thesiger's book *The Marsh Arabs*. Rajkamal Kahlon started *We've Come a Long Way to Be Together* with paintings that highlight historic portraits of individuals from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East found by the artist in the photo archive at the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. The figures, either painted or phototransferred, appear atop a collage of pages cut from a first edition copy of the travel memoir *Arabian Sands* by Wilfred Thesiger.

Travel has long been a privilege afforded to those with means. The Grand Tour, for example, was a birthright for young European men from wealthy families as part of their education in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Advances in transportation allowed for increasing numbers of middle- and upper-class Europeans and Euro-Americans to move around the globe in the following centuries, giving rise to the travel memoir or travelogue as a form of writing. As the number of white travelers or "explorers" increased over time, so too did the number of colonial anthropologists who set out to study non-European peoples in the name of science. Thesiger was one such explorer and travel writer (1910–2003). He published *Arabian Sands,* considered to be a classic travel memoir, in 1959. In it, the author recounts his time in the Rub' al-Khali (Empty Quarter of Arabia) between 1945 and 1950. *The Marsh Arabs* followed in 1964 and revolves around Thesiger's time in Southern Iraq. In these publications and others like it, non-European subjects are portrayed in opposition to whiteness—if Europeans were civilized and refined, then non-Europeans were uncivilized and primitive. This racist mindset and approach to imaging people of color persists today. Travel by non-Europeans and non-Euro-Americans, by contrast, has historically been regarded in terms of migration and travelers often referred to as refugees. In this series, the artist depicts her subjects as contemporary globetrotters—bestowing them with tasteful accessories, outfits, and even hunting gear. These works aim to disrupt the conventional European and Euro-American gaze onto people of color and give pause to the ways in which travel and mobility are understood and discussed.

Rajkamal Kahlon, *Woman in Landscape*, 2007–2013

Woman in Landscape

2007–2013,
acrylic on wooden
cutout

Search results for the phrase "woman in landscape" return millions of examples. As a centuries-old trope, artists from Pierre-Auguste Renoir to Willem de Kooning have used this framework to depict the female body in various stages of undress, typically situated in the general splendor of nature. Kahlon has taken up this convention specifically to undermine the misogyny, sexism, and colonialism that it represents. The artist presents a cutout painting of a nude Brown female form, her head replaced with a reproduction of *Tahiti Revisited* (1776) by British artist William Hodges. This act of removing the figure's face and substituting it with Hodges's romanticized depiction of a tropical paradise featuring semi-nude exotic maidens addresses just the type of colonial fantasy that the artist consistently attempts to disrupt.

Rajkamal Kahlon, *Woman with Grenades*, 2007–2013

Woman with Grenades

2007–2013,
acrylic on wooden
cutout

Woman with Grenades depicts a female figure in festive attire, wearing a neutral expression and a floral garland encircling her head. With palms facing up and outward, in a gesture of peace and vulnerability, the artist disrupts this otherwise lovely image by placing a grenade into each of her hands. Radiating out from her crown of flowers are six open-palm hands that seem to communicate, "HANDS UP, DON'T SHOOT!"—a slogan and gesture often used in protests calling for an end to police brutality and gun violence in the US.

Rajkamal Kahlon, *Women with Hands*, 2007–2013

Women with Hands

2007–2013,
acrylic on wooden
cutout

"There is a constant 'atmospheric violence' in colonial society", writes the renowned Martinican psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon in his 1961 book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, "and the colonized seem to inherently know that their liberation can only be achieved through violent means." Kahlon has used Fanon throughout her career to frame her reading of colonial imagery; specifically to his theories on how the colonial subject's body metabolizes white supremacy and colonialism, and then passes it on through legacies of trauma and illness.

Around the time when the artist made this work, she was poring over books on colonial photography and encountered a photograph of twins who were catalogued as musicians from Côte d'Ivoire. The left-hand figure wears little more than a pastel-pink loincloth. Her companion is dressed in a stylish ensemble with a pink-and-blue striped short-sleeve top and a royal blue A-line miniskirt trimmed with shiny pink-satin ribbon and gold lace. With arms around each other, they stare at the viewer; behind and above their heads hovers a shape that evokes a comic book explosion filled with an intense swarm of color patches. Radiating from this blast are eleven pale limbs. If we read the scene within Fanon's anti-colonial framework, the partial halo of appendages represents the shared psychosis, trauma, and thoughts of revenge that colonial subjects carry with them. Whether these arms belong to the twins' victims, ancestors, or someone else, the artist encourages the viewer to look on with patience and care.

Rajkamal Kahlon, *Vitruvian Man or How I Learned to Love the Bomb*, 2013

Vitruvian Man or How I Learned to Love the Bomb

2013,
acrylic on
wooden cutout

In *Vitruvian Man or How I Learned to Love the Bomb*, Kahlon offers her take on Leonardo da Vinci's iconic circa 1490 drawing. Leonardo's nude white male form is substituted by a dark-skinned male figure whose appendages have been replaced with firearms. Whereas Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man* boasts a stern, somewhat intimidating visage, Kahlon's man appears in grayscale with bright pink pom-pom forms decorating the halo of hair about his face and a calm, distant look in his eyes, as if resigned to his fate as the nexus of complex histories and political forces.

Rajkamal Kahlon, *You've Come a Long Way, Baby!*, 2011

You've Come a Long Way, Baby!

2022,
acrylic on wooden cutout

When developing new works, Kahlon looks to multiple sources, eras, and visual languages for inspiration; *You've Come a Long Way, Baby!* is no exception. The title is borrowed from a 1968 advertising campaign for Virginia Slims: a new cigarette brand created by American tobacco giant Philip Morris that targeted women by evoking independence, style, femininity, and liberation. Here, the artist works with an engraving of a Sri Lankan woman titled *The Native Way of Climbing Cocoa Palms in Ceylon*, from a nineteenth century weekly London newspaper called *The Graphic*. In the original illustration, a woman is pictured scaling a palm tree wearing only a sari (a length of woven fabric used in various ways as clothing) around her waist, which barely covers her hips. Images like this one are exoticized and eroticized for the Western viewer, and because they generally depict colonial subjects performing plantation labor, they also reinforce colonial power dynamics. In a response that uses her established techniques of intervention, Kahlon paints over the woman's sari with a red power suit, complete with white dress shirt and polished black stilettos. Doing so not only restores a degree of dignity to the depicted, but also bestows the figure with contemporary symbols of power and agency. Kahlon's adaptation of this nineteenth-century colonialist depiction is a scaled-up version of an 84 x 62 cm work on paper from 2011. The figure is recast and magnified through the lens of Third World feminism, which suggests that women's activism in the Global South does not originate from the ideologies of the Global North and specifically centers women's radicalism in their local contexts and struggles.

Rajkamal Kahlon and WHW in Conversation

May 2022

Rajkamal, your work deals with the ongoing consequences of colonialism and imperialism. In your public talks and interviews, you often say that it is important that you clearly state your vantage point and that your interest in this subject very much relates to your personal and family history. Can you say a bit more on this?

For me, the subjects of colonial visual legacies, migration, and imperial wars are intimately connected to where and to whom I was born. I'm the American-born daughter of Punjabi Sikhs who migrated to California in 1974. My parents were unionized factory workers in Richmond, California. I can't talk about migration and colonialism without talking about trauma. And if we're going to talk about trauma, we have to talk about the body. The body in the archive, the body that is subject to political violence. It's a question of privileging embodied experience over theoretical knowledge. The personal is political. It's how I understand the world. Maybe that's why I work with beauty and humor. They allow for a type of embodied experience that is rooted in sensual pleasure. The overlapping and multiple forms of daily violence I navigate, endure, and resist create the necessity for spaces of beauty and humor—the ability to experience the pleasure and joy of being alive and a sensate creature is a form of resistance in and of itself.

Painting and drawing are very important in your practice. Although painting is often seen as a traditional medium, and the ultimate art commodity, you are very much trying to counteract both of these views through your painting itself, but also by insisting on the possibility of taking paintings out of the frame, handling them in different ways. You want to infuse the painting with contemporaneity and also move it away from the market entanglement.

My thinking about painting has been evolving in two directions. First, I've been thinking a lot about the radical and democratic potential of image-making within the disciplines of painting and drawing specifically. Can we transform these traditional mediums of embodiment into challenges for our age of algorithmic capitalism? I think of painting as a feminist space of freedom and joy, which resists both language and forms of coercive power through its insistence on another poetic register of truth.

The second evolution in my thinking has been in resisting the understanding of painting as a luxury good or object of financial speculation. Instead, I see painting and art more generally as sacred. Part of that sacral character means understanding painting as a form of care work. Care work is work performed without the promise of financial renumeration and it is also work done in the service of others from a sense of responsibility and care. In this context, painting becomes both a radical and sacred medium.

When I began painting, I had a love-hate relationship with it. The only way it made sense to me was if I could literally cut up the picture plane. This act of destruction becomes a very important performative gesture in much of my work. First, I cut apart the picture plane, or the book, then I use the constituent parts to remake a new image—one that is endowed with my mark, voice, and perspective. I can talk back to the form and to history. Painting is a generous space of embodiment that allows me to assert my subjectivity onto historical traces of texts and images.

In the late '90s, I started making cutouts as a student in California. At the time, I didn't know of Lubaina Himid's nor Dorothy Iannone's work with cutouts. So what I realized once I discovered their work is that this form is actually a feminist painting form that hasn't, in an art-historical context, been written about as such. Feminist knowledge gets lost, it's not written down, it doesn't get transcribed. All of these women—Dorothy Iannone, Lubaina Himid—are working in different time periods, and I think the works are not being connected as a challenge to painting's association with masculinity. So as a female artist, you're remaking the wheel every time, because this knowledge is not getting passed along in terms of building on each other's work.

Do you see that this passing on of what used to be "marginalized" knowledge is increasing and changing in recent years, and in what way?

What I see is a world on fire—exponentially increasing forms of violence, oppression, poverty, and dispossession

Rajkamal Kahlon, *Untitled (Blue Polka Dots)*, from the series *Do You Know Our Names?*, 2017

are flourishing, while a near-complete co-option of the representation of identity and diversity is taking place to distract us. There are many examples of this, from the US to the UK. The George and Condoleezza show, Joe and "Carceral" Kamala, or, in the UK, a right-wing Tory display of women and minorities with the Truss and Braverman hour … it's like a form of girl power from hell. Our hyper-acceleration of extinction is being facilitated by the aid of technological platforms of display and consumption. When Neil Postman wrote *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Entertainment* in 1985, it was before the internet and the first computers were just becoming widely available, before our moment of algorithmic capitalism. I think he predicted correctly. Our attention is bought and sold while the Earth and any communities of solidarity we manage to form are being undermined and destroyed. Sorry to be so dystopic, but as I see it, the situation is dire. As artists, we at least have to bear witness to what is happening with an unflinching gaze.

In most cases, painting starts from a blank canvas, but your process actually starts before the painting begins.

In traditional European painting, when you prime the canvas, you create a kind of white, pristine surface that is supposed to be a pure, blank place upon which the artist then makes their mark and begins the painting. What I do is to first cut apart a book I hate, then glue the book pages down to an unstretched canvas, then make a manual phototransfer on top of the disassembled book. Then on top of that, I start the painting, after two layers of text and image. My "priming" is not done with traditional materials that create a pure, blank and traditionally white surface. My paintings are "primed" with layered histories. So my painting starts from an embedded historical position and comes in contact and dialogue with these other suppressed histories. For me, the painting is never about an empty slate that I act upon, but rather I'm layering parts of the world; I'm putting different voices in front of me and then I'm acting upon those voices and interacting with them. It's more of a dialogic perspective towards history and painting. Painting then also acts as the medium of restitution and restoration, where I get to speak back to these histories. It's the place where the painting literally acts and functions as a medium of agency.

How do you look for the material to start from? How do you decide on the next project to embark on?

I work very intuitively: the material and I find each other. I use archives, antiquarian bookstores, and the internet. Books, photos, military archives. If I have a strong physical response to an image or book, I know I have to work with it. This isn't always immediate. Sometime it takes years to understand how I will work with what I've found. For example, with the project *Did You Kiss the Dead Body?*, I first became aware of what is known as the Torture FOIA (Freedom of Information Act)—Bush-era torture documents that included US military autopsy reports from Iraq and Afghanistan in 2004. It was only after five years that I arrived at a visual logic that could speak with enough poetic respect towards these documents of death. At first I was so struck with nausea, rage, and disorientation, I had to put them away until I was ready, until I found the right moral and visual logic. The questions I started with didn't just go away or get answered. More questions arise and are answered only by making more work related to embodiment, empathy, and portraiture. In part, this is why I have reengaged with this project.

You mentioned in one of our conversations that you are disrupting the view, created and upheld by men of a certain generation, that a type of privileged and romanticized traveler, mostly

anthropologists or sociologists, "discovered" the world. You also talked about how you contrast the image of this "traveler" to that of the "refugee", which is nowadays pathologized, and that you often make that refugee a protagonist of your paintings. There is a certain impertinence in your portraits, from these figures that are otherwise often seen as victims. They come off as very cheeky—you give these figures a kind of resistance, resilience, stubbornness, and insistence on standing their ground. Could you say a bit about the way your figures look back to the viewer?

So there are a few things that I'm considering. Who is looking at whom? How is power constructed in the relationship of the viewer and viewed? Can images look back at us? When I'm looking through old images or photographs—whether in a book, archive, or the internet—of images of non-Europeans taken by Europeans in an anthropological or scientific context, I often focus on images in which there is already something confrontational in the gaze. It's as if they were somehow not defeated by that moment. There is often a look of anger and animosity, some kind of resistance to this photographic encounter, and I'm looking for those images in particular. For me, that's proof of the agency of these subjects that were made into objects, and it's a very simple thing. The original photograph tries to render these people into the category of an object, while I'm trying to bring them into the space of being a subject, rather than an object. There is tension between what the original material constructs as a narrative and what I'm ultimately changing through my painted additions. I'm trying to make this person who was rendered into an object of study into a human being again.

And someone who returns the look.

Yes. I think this is something that's really important to me, like with the project *Enter My Burning House*, it's the gaze that everyone keeps commenting on. It's the feeling you get from those old paintings where the eyes follow you, this kind of intensity, and I do put a special effort or emphasis on the gaze, on the way the subject looks back at you. It's about getting implicated into a relationship with the subject.

Many of the images from which your works start are historical, even if they are more contemporary and relate to an event that happened fairly recently—several years ago—this can be considered a historical event or a rupture. But you are always connecting these historical events to the present moment.

Yes, it's true. The very first book I cut apart was in September 2001. It was *People and Places Here and There: Stories of India*, a children's book on India published in the US in the nineteenth century. I took it apart because of the way it mirrored the present moment. After September 11th, the writing in the mainstream media contained the same tropes of the barbaric East and the civilized West. The irrational, savage, and primitive Eastern body and landscape were compared to the rational and modern civilized West, and these portrayals were mirrored almost verbatim in this nineteenth-century children's book.

All my works start from the need to try to understand the present world. I began *Cassell's Illustrated History of India* the same month that the US invaded Iraq for the second time. Even though it's a book about British India, it's very much about the violence of the American invasion rendered through the grotesque body.

I'm interested in how an image that was produced in the nineteenth century continues to inform the images that we see today in the media and why those images can sometimes be identical. Like when I am in the archive and I see an image, but it could have been printed last week: Why does this continue to circulate? How does it affect how we see the world, not just how we see the world abstractly, but literally? How does it influence how I look at you or how you look at me and who is allowed to be human?

Maybe in the same way in which many of the social structures that were put in place in nineteenth century still inform the social structures that are actually governing society today.

Yes, very much so.

There is a retrograde and very conservative stance that tends to say, "But things have always been this way." And despite going back to history and looking into this circulation of images, your work is actually trying to transcend it. In your lecture in Sacramento, you were quoting Donna Haraway, asking what it means to work in an age of extinction. What does creating art in this particular moment mean for you?

This is a really important question. Artists have given up too much space to the logic of capitalism. We are not supposed to be neoliberal cheerleaders, instead we need to lead in reimagining a more just world based on collectivity and care. Art can provoke us to see the world differently and question our own values, what we think we know, and then to see it differently. This shift is, I think, somehow where the power of good art lies. If I can be confronted with an artwork that helps me see things

in a way that I didn't think possible or had not imagined, it is a very profound moment for me.

Is this what the title of the show, *Which Side Are You On?*, refers to? The need to be clear about one's own position and implication in both historical legacies and current political processes?

First, the title draws on my American roots. Beyond this, it draws on a left-wing labor movement in the US, one whose history has been much maligned, erased, distorted, and systematically targeted for destruction. This history has something in common with those formerly colonized, enslaved, or exterminated. The title of our exhibition is borrowed from a song written in 1931 by Florence Reece, the wife of a Kentucky coal miner whose family was terrorized by police in her home as her husband attempted to unionize his coworkers. The song she wrote became famous and has been sung by countless singers in contexts of protest, including the Civil Rights Movement in the US in the 1960s. My husband would sing this song to our son at bedtime. I have also been listening to many versions of it in the studio while making the work for this exhibition.

In 2005, Harold Pinter gave a Nobel Prize acceptance speech titled "Art, Truth and Politics". It begins, "There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false."

I believe that these assertions still make sense and do still subscribe to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer, I stand by them, but as a citizen, I cannot. As a citizen, I must ask: What is true? What is false?

As an artist, I am often working against a binary worldview that philosophically stems from Cartesian dualism. However, like Pinter, as a citizen, I cannot accept the ambiguity of the position that I insist on as an artist. For me, the question of which side you are on is about where we situate ourselves in the divide between the powerful and powerless, the oppressors and the oppressed. You can't sit on the fence and relativize your position when it comes to the systematic destruction of vast communities of poor people and the Earth.

Besides working on each project through a series of historical and pictorial layers, you are also sometimes returning to your old works, revisiting and reworking them. For this show, among others, you are preparing new works for the *Did You Kiss the Dead Body?* series, which reflects upon autopsy reports and death

Rajkamal Kahlon, *People of Afghanistan*, 2016

certificates emerging from US military bases and prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan. Why did you decide to work on this project again?

In 1941, American anthropologist and archeologist Henry Field headed a secret project for US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, called the M Project. Field scouted lands in North Africa as potential relocation sites for refugees and migrants.

In 1934, prior to his work on the M Project, Henry Field led an expedition to Iraq to conduct an anthropometric survey of tribes in the upper and lower Tigris-Euphrates River. The expedition lasted four months and included anthropologists, a linguist, an entomologist, and a taxidermist. The results of his survey were published in two books: *The Anthropology of Iraq: The Upper Euphrates* and *The Anthropology of Iraq: The Lower Euphrates-Tigris Region*.

During a research fellowship in 2016, I came across the measurement data and photographs produced by the Field expedition to Iraq in the archives of Harvard University's Peabody Museum. Since that initial encounter, I have been trying to think through a set of questions around the relationship between anthropology, the US empire, and war making. Specifically, how do these biological measurements and photographs connect to contemporary autopsy reports emerging from US military prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan? How does this form of knowledge-making create the possibility for increasingly violent mappings of the people and the region? How does this scientific work set up a contemporary regime of

death within Iraq and beyond? The new portraits in this series come from these questions.

Your projects usually deal with colonial imagery, but one of the works in the show, *Dear Yugoslavia, I Regret to Inform You …*, goes beyond of your usual geography. Why did you select that particular series of drawings to work on?

First, I have to push back a bit on your framing. I think of my work as dealing with visual regimes used by coercive power historically and in the present. How is violence organized in an image? Colonialism is only part of the answer. That said, I never imagined working on Yugoslavia. This project began when WHW invited me to create a new work for the Industrial Art Biennial in Labin, connected to the archive of the SENSE Transitional Justice Center in Pula, dealing with war crimes and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). As an outsider, I was flattered but scared to work on this history that is filled with pain. With little initial knowledge of the Balkans, the Non-Aligned Movement, or the US and EU roles in the violence that took place during the Yugoslavian civil wars, I tried to be a sponge and learn as much as I could about the region, its history and place in geopolitical policies. For months I read accounts of the war, watched documentaries, read mass-grave exhumation reports, and watched parts of the ICTY trials.

After several months of this, with no concrete plan, I shifted gears and thought about my work with anthropology and portraiture of non-European people. This made me think about the ways in which otherness might have been created for the people of the Balkans. By chance, I found Vladimir Kirin, a Croatian illustrator who popularized ethnic folk costumes in the former Yugoslavia. There was something important in the way nationhood is constructed through his images of ethnic folk costumes.

And the work was very much influenced by the fact that it would be shown for the first time in the SENSE archives and by the way their documents and reports on mass graves relate to the autopsy reports from Iraq, which are part of your *Did You Kiss the Dead Body?* series.

For me, the problem with this kind of archive, like the one at SENSE, is that it performs this function legally, which allows us to say this crime was committed, this happened, this many people were affected. It allows you to do that, but at the same time, something is erased in this quantification. I thought,

"Okay, what is this thing that's missing?" This is what I wanted to represent, and this is why I worked with Kirin's illustrations, because I thought they tell us something about this thing that the reports miss. I can rupture these spaces with my intuitive understanding of the violence that took place in the war, not just in the war, but before the war and after the war. Everybody was somehow both the perpetrator and the victim in these images. It also felt like I, as an American, had no right to say if one person was more guilty than another. There was so much violence everywhere and the violence didn't just appear, it was always there. For me, it was so easy to connect this to colonial histories of violence.

I could relate to it very deeply because of all of the work I have done with thinking about colonial violence; I saw what happened in Yugoslavia as a continuum. For me, it was important to include this work in the show in Vienna, because I feel like what happened in Yugoslavia does affect what happens in Iraq, just as what happens in Iraq affects what happens in the former Yugoslavia. There are these kinds of zones of destruction, national border-making, mythologies of fascism, and colonial histories. Ideas travel and connect.

In my work, I'm often trying to think about ways that things connect. When you read Indigenous perspectives or histories of the world, it's always also about this notion of how things connect, of the biosphere as one living, breathing organism of which we are only a small part. We're taught to compartmentalize knowledge, but when you compartmentalize, you're not able to hold onto complexity and contradiction, like beauty and violence.

One of the central works of this show is *People of the Earth*, which was created as a result of your residency and exhibition at the Weltmuseum Wien in 2018. Can you say a bit about that show and how *Which Side Are You On?* builds upon it?

I had an exhibition following a residency at the Weltmuseum. The residency was a two-month period during which I lived in Vienna and I researched the museum's archives and collections with the goal of making new work. The residency and exhibition was built around a set of questions posed in an early conference paper by Donna Haraway. In it, she asked her now-famous query: What does it mean to act and write in an age of extinction and extermination? What is the work of recuperation? Her reply to her own query was the book *Staying with the Trouble. Staying with Trouble* was the title of my exhibition at the Weltmuseum. It lasted 18 months and seemed

like a good way to help me think about what my role would be inside the ethnographic museum. I wrote an essay about this experience called “Love and Loss at the Weltmuseum”. I think ethnographic museums are actually holocaust museums that haven’t understood their purpose yet. In retrospect, I think my exhibition was an unrequited love letter to the museum and its collection.

That experience of working and exhibiting inside an ethnographic museum resulted in three projects that are included here: *People of the Earth (Die Völker der Erde)*, *Do You Know Our Names?* and *Dear Sirs, I Regret to Inform You ….*

One of the biggest challenges for me in thinking about *Which Side Are You On?* has been to conceptualize my work outside of the readymade context of an archive like SENSE or an ethnographic museum like the Weltmuseum but instead inside a supposedly neutral, but in some ways dead, modernist space—the contemporary art museum. How does art function in this context? What does it mean at the Kunsthalle Wien

Rajkamal Kahlon, *Untitled (Green Stripes)*, from the series *Do You Know Our Names?*, 2017

specifically? I’m not sure I have the answers, or rather the exhibition we made is perhaps one answer to this question.

You often speak of how you are trying to counteract the history of violence, or to complicate it, with beauty and humor. Can you say a bit more on how you see this violence and beauty going together? Violence and humor are easier to understand, like in dark humor, but beauty is more complicated.

Because when people hear beauty and violence together, their hackles go up. I’m not talking about making violence beautiful. I’m not romanticizing poverty or death. But if one is to leave a record of the world, it would have to be both of the violence and of the beauty. We are all entitled to joy, beauty, and grace. It’s not the preserve of those holding power. It’s also about dwelling inside contradictions.

I’m asking people to look at histories they would rather turn away from, and part of the way that I myself am able to is by also creating spaces of sensual pleasure and joy. For me, creating something of beauty in a world that is so filled with grotesque violence is an act of resistance.

This capacity to resist the ugliness of the world is, for me, so important. The Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin wrote on a type of medieval carnival laughter, which he called liberatory laughter. This form of laughter can be expressed towards death. A liberatory form of laughter that can laugh at death allows you to be free. Nothing can make you smaller or hold you back if you can laugh back at death. This moment of freedom is about radical agency, both laughter and beauty, because you’re not going to be constrained by the violence that is trying to constrain you. I think there is inherently resistance in that, and that’s where I also see painting and drawing enter. It is also because of their capacities for embodied pleasure. I chose painting when I was an art student, because it was the ’90s in California, and this is the moment when Silicon Valley was first asserting its influence. And even though painting has this macho male history and tradition, it offered embodiment, it resisted technological disembodiment that was being thrust at me from every direction. I chose the medium instinctively because of that. I think there is a seductive potential in painting to become a medium that is politically relevant today through its position of antagonism towards technology. So to work with your hands, to work with the body, and center that—it’s just very important right now. It becomes, in this context, radical. Maybe it couldn’t be a hundred years ago, but today it can change the terms of how we talk back.

Ain't I a Woman?, 2012,
painted wooden sculpture

Boy with Basket Full of Heads,
2007, acrylic on wooden cutout

Cassell's Illustrated History of India,
2003–2005, 9 gouaches on book pages, 6 gouaches on wooden panels, courtesy the artist and Françoise Ladisan (*Unbound*)

Dear Sirs, I Regret to Inform You …,
2017,
4 graphite and ink drawings

Steven Engelsman

Otto Finsch

Fritz Röck

Christian Schicklgruber

Dear Yugoslavia, I Regret to Inform You …,
2018, 72 drawings and
1 wall painting

Did You Kiss the Dead Body?, 2022,
8 mixed media paintings
on canvas

"CLOTHING AND PERSONAL EFFECTS: Brown Shirt, Gray underpants, Gray T-shirt, White shirt …" (Sisters)

"FINAL AUTOPSY DIAGNOSIS: g. No internal evidence of trauma …" (Brothers)

"During his confinement he was hooded, sleep deprived, and subjected to hot and cold environmental conditions, including the use of cold water on his body and hood." (Uncle)

"The body is that of an unclad well-developed well-nourished male." (College Athlete)

"The decedent was also subjected to cold and wet conditions, and hypothermia may have contributed to his death. Therefore, the cause of death is best classified as undetermined …" (The Thinker)

"The renal capsules are smooth and thin, semi-transparent and strip with ease from the underlying smooth, red-brown cortical surfaces." (Sons)

"There are fractures of the anterior left ribs 3–7 and the right 5th rib on the anterior aspect." (Poet)

"This male died while in US custody in Abu Ghraib prison. By report he complained to his son and then collapsed." (New Wave)

Did You Kiss the Dead Body?, 2012,
19 (8+11) ink drawings on
2 marbled autopsy reports

Do You Know Our Names?, 2017,
6 mixed media paintings on
photo rag paper

Untitled (White Polka Dots)

Untitled (Blue Polka Dots)

Untitled (Green Stripes)

Untitled (Orange Polka Dots)

Untitled (Two Fingers)

Untitled (Bandage)

Enter My Burning House, 2021,
7 acrylic ink drawings on
book pages

Baba Punjab Singh
(August 11, 1947–March 2, 2020)

Paramjit Kaur
(April 25, 1971–August 5, 2012)

Prakash Singh
(November 1, 1972–August 5, 2012)

Ranjit Singh
(April 4, 1963–August 5, 2012)

Satwant Singh Kaleka
(June 2, 1947–August 5, 2012)

Sita Singh
(November 15, 1970–August 5, 2012)

Suveg Singh Khattra
(June 6, 1928–August 5, 2012)

Flagellation and the Flagellants,
2007, 2 gouaches
on book pages

My Temple of Justice, 2022,
acrylic on wooden cutout

People and Places, 2001–2002,
16 gouaches on book pages

People of Afghanistan, 2016,
video and slide projection: 9'

People of the Earth (Die Völker der Erde), 2017–2021, approx.
340 acrylic ink drawings on
book pages

Three Graces, 2007–2013,
acrylic on wooden cutout

We've Come a Long Way to Be Together, 2022, 5 mixed media
paintings on canvas

Airplane

Escape

Prada

Swissair

Union Jack

Woman in Landscape, 2007–2013,
acrylic on wooden cutout

Woman with Grenades, 2007–2013,
acrylic on wooden cutout

Women with Hands, 2007–2013,
acrylic on wooden cutout

Vitruvian Man or How I Learned to Love the Bomb, 2013, acrylic on
wooden cutout

You've Come a Long Way, Baby!,
2022, acrylic on wooden cutout

Opening
Which Side Are You On?
Thu 1/12 2022 · 7 PM
Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier

With:
Rajkamal Kahlon, artist · What, How & for Whom/WHW, artistic directors of Kunsthalle Wien

Artist's Tour with Rajkamal Kahlon
Fri 2/12 · 5:30 PM · in English
Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier

Curator's Tours with What, How & for Whom / WHW
dates tba · In English
Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier

Salon Souterrain
Tue 14/2 · 6 pm
Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier

Salon Souterrain was created by the artist Elisabeth Bakambamba Tambwe as a response to the increasing exclusionary dynamics that have become the hallmark of our societies in Europe. The series of *Salon Souterrain* demonstrates the desire to create common spaces for mutual exchange and artistic production. The aim is to open up possibilities of debate and to offer thematic and nomadic encounters in order to discuss social issues within different artistic genres and media like visual art, performance and music.

My View

With:
Nada El-Azar, Tim Sharp,
Denize Van De Cruze et al.

My View is a program series in which experts, and interesting people are invited to present their personal view on the exhibition.

Sunday Tours
Sun 4/12 · 18/12 2022 and 15/1 · 5/2 · 19/2 · 5/3 · 12/3 · 19/3 · 2/4 2023 · 4 PM
Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier

Every first and third Sunday at 4 pm you can discover the exhibition *Which Side Are You On?* together with our art educators and discuss the context and background of the exhibited works.

With:
Wolfgang Brunner · Carola Fuchs · Andrea Hubin · Michaela Schmidlechner · Michael Simku

The guided tours are free with an exhibition ticket and will be held in German.

We kindly ask you to register via besucherservice@kunsthallewien.at or directly at the box office in Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier. The number of participants is limited.

You can find detailed info on the program here:
www.kunsthallewien.at

Rajkamal Kahlon

(b. 1974,
Auburn, California)

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 People 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. Kahlon 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 P·P·O·W, New York, will open in May 2023.

Rajkamal Kahlon, 2019, photo: Okno Studios

Rajkamal Kahlon, *Otto Finsch*, from the series *Dear Sirs, I Regret to Inform You …*, 2017,
photo: Kunst-Dokumentation.com/Manuel Carreon Lopez

Rajkamal Kahlon, *It All Starts with Someone's Lie*, from the series *Cassell's Illustrated History of India*, 2003–2005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Rajkamal Kahlon, *Untitled (Two Fingers)*, from the series *Do You Know Our Names?*, 2017

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(work descriptions)
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Rajkamal Kahlon, *Untitled (White Polka Dots)*, from the series *Do You Know Our Names?*, 2017

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