

**PRESS**

katharina schniebs  
+43 1 5 21 89 – 221  
presse@kunsthallewien.at  
www.kunsthallewien.at

## Rajkamal Kahlon. Which Side Are You On?

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 *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!* (2022), 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.

Painting is central to this process and, in opposition to the history of Western painting, **Kahlon** 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.

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 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—be it a knife hidden behind the back of the pretty doll-like figure in *Dear Yugoslavia, I Regret to Inform You ...* (2018), the hate crime whose victims are portrayed in *Enter My Burning House* (2021), or the military prison autopsy reports embedded in radiating pink backgrounds of *Did You Kiss the Dead Body?* (2012/2022). 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 exhibition visitor. 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.

*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, **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.

Detailed information on the works on display as well as an extensive interview with the artist can be found in the comprehensive exhibition guide.

## 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: Staying with Trouble* at Weltemuseum Vienna, in 2017/2018, *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 P·P·O·W, New York City, will open in May 2023.

## Public Program

### Exhibition opening

Thu 1/12 2022, 7 pm

Welcome and introduction: **What, How & for Whom / WHW**, artistic directors **kunsthalle wien** and curators of the exhibition  
The artist will be present.

### Artist's tour with Rajkamal Kahlon

Fri 2/12 2022, 5:30 pm, in English

### Curators' tours with What, How & for Whom / WHW

Dates tba, in English

### Salon Souterrain

Tue 14/2 2023, 6 pm

*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

Dates tba

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

With: **Nada El-Azar • Tim Sharp • Denize Van De Cruze • ...**

### 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

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.

## The exhibition at a glance

*Rajkamal Kahlon. Which Side Are You On?*

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

EXHIBITION VENUE: **kunsthalle wien** museumsquartier, Museumsplatz 1, 1070 Vienna

EXHIBITION DATES: 1/12 2022–9/4 2023

OPENING HOURS: Tue–Sun 11 am–7 pm, Thu 11 am–9 pm

## Press contact

Katharina Schniebs  
T +43 1 5 21 89 – 221  
M [presse@kunsthallewien.at](mailto:presse@kunsthallewien.at)