



November 4, 2016

‘ANILA QUAYYUM AGHA: COMING FULL CIRCLE’

By Amy Vandivort



CALLED TO ART BY THE ALHAMBRA

The Alhambra in Granada, Spain is a fortress and palace of rare and astounding beauty. It has been home to kings and vagabonds. Additionally, it is also home to an amazing conglomeration of patterns, colors, and mosaics. When Pakistani-American artist Anila Quayyum Agha visited the Alhambra, she was struck by the emotional expressions of its visitors. They had that Alice in Wonderland look on their faces as they stared at something extraordinary. Anila thought to herself, “I’d love to do that to people.”



This desire inspired her award-winning piece “Intersections.” The work is an intricately carved wood cube suspended from the ceiling. It’s 6.5 ft squared by dimension and painted black. The cube itself has wondrous patterns in itself. But those patterns are also cast in shadows across all the walls of the gallery space due to the single light placed in the cube. This transforms the gallery room into art. It even transforms the viewers into art. They are unknowingly participating in the beauty of this contemplative and meditative environment.

SPEAKING OUT WITH “INTERSECTIONS”

“Intersections” is not only a stunning art piece; it is also a political and cultural statement. The piece is full of oppositions: light and shadow, ethereal and heavy, masculine and feminine. Anila adds that it shows the “response to traditional cultures like Pakistani culture versus the US.” But like the unity of the single light bulb in the cube, the piece creates a common space. But why is this so important to Anila? Because disapproval and negativity “about being a Pakistani woman” surrounded her when she lived in Pakistan. As a woman in that society, she had to maneuver to be allowed in public space. She says she was “constantly groped and made to feel like a public space is something I shouldn’t be in.”

FEMINIST ROOTS IN DISAPPROVAL AND NEGATIVITY

Anila attributes her feminism to this time. “Traveling in public transportation was quite fraught with danger and tension because men always tried to grope you,” she recalls. “I think my feminism kind of originated from having experienced such a minimum amount of personal space that was available to women in Pakistan.” When she was growing up, Zia-ul-Haq came to power and passed many oppressive laws. Anila particularly cites the law that forbade reporting rape without four witnesses. The blasphemy laws were also put into effect in the late 80s. These caused undue horrors on minority people by prohibiting anyone to insult Islam, with the penalty often being death. “That was the time that I was coming into my own awareness and I realized what an unjust world it was. And, I think through my art I was able to speak about it.”

PURSUING ART EDUCATION DESPITE BARRIERS

Anila was able to study art at one of the only Pakistani art schools in the country at this time and, after school, she worked at a textile production company. Although in that society at the time, others would view this as a very fortunate career, a woman as an assistant manager of product development, she felt herself growing restless. She had hit a glass ceiling at work and felt the male-dominated environment stifling her. In fact, the company did not even provide her with a women-only bathroom, but insisted she use the male bathroom as she was the lone female.

COMING TO AMERICA

Her husband at the time suggested moving to America. She initially resisted, unwilling to abandon her life and her family. But, she changed her mind. Why? First, she was not challenged then. The political climate was growing more dangerous. Once in America, she was able to pursue a degree at the University of North Texas. Anila finally accepted a job at the Herron School of Art and Design at IUPUI in Indianapolis, where she currently teaches.

TEACHING IS HER WAY OF GIVING BACK

Although Anila has a time-consuming and demanding art career, she makes teaching at Herron a priority. “That’s my way of giving back,” she says. She speaks of how she had a crisis of identity in 2008. Why? Because she felt she was not helping people and contributing to society the way a scientist or doctor would. But she soon came to realize that, “even if I’m teaching art, which according to certain standards is not saving lives, it still helps students open up their minds to different cultures and entices them to travel.”

She also feels that because she is an immigrant in this country and a minority in Indianapolis, she is able to further open up her students’ minds. Anila remarks, “It makes it very clear that I’m not a narrow-minded fanatic or anything like that. And in fact, for a very long time, I haven’t practiced religion.” This gives her students perspective and broadens their horizons. Additionally, Anila realizes the value she brings to her environment.

APPRECIATIVE FOR BEING VERY BUSY

Anila just re-started teaching at Herron for the Fall 2016 semester after a one-year sabbatical. She was simultaneously gearing up for an exhibit of selected works at the Aicon Gallery in New York City. All but one of the pieces in the show “Walking with My Mother’s Shadows” are brand new. The show, running from October 20 through November 26, will display a conglomeration of sculptures and drawings. Although Anila has a lot on her plate, her attitude is nothing but humble and appreciative. “I think to myself, ‘I am so grateful that I do what I do.’ I have wonderful students who are doing what they want to do with their lives. I have a studio [and] I have a wonderful family. The circle has come together, finally.”