

# DIGITAL AGNES

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## Travelling in a Multiverse of Hybridity

*With Opened Mouths: The Podcast*

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### SPEAKERS

Qanita Lilla and Rajni Perera

### KEYWORDS

Futurisms, Science Fiction, Diaspora, Worldmaking

### TRANSCRIPT

[Music]

**Qanita Lilla:** Hello, you're listening to *With Opened Mouths*, I'm your host Qanita Lilla today we're delighted to be speaking to Rajni Perera who was born in Sri Lanka in 1985 and lives and works in Toronto. Her art explores issues of hybridity, futurity, immigration cultures, monsters and dream worlds. In her work she seeks to open and reveal the dynamism of the icons and objects she creates. Rajni creates a subversive aesthetic that counteracts antiquated, oppressive discourses, and acts as a restorative force through which people can move outdated, repressive modes of being towards reclaiming their power. Rajni was the 2022 Koerner artist in residence at Queen's University. In this episode, we talk about the joy of making new worlds, of staying grounded and of maintaining a rigorous artistic practice.

[Music fades into the sounds of Lake Ontario]

**Qanita Lilla:** Thank you, Rajni for being with me today. It's -- it's the first --

**Rajni Perera:** Thanks for having me.

**Qanita Lilla:** It's a pleasure. It's the first time I've actually seen your work in real life. I've seen it online, but it's totally different watching you.

**Rajni Perera:** Wow, that's funny, I think that my work translates pretty well to screen considering how poorly a lot of artwork does. It's not bad, but it's not the real thing either.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah. No, it's not, and especially just watching you work. So, it's been --

**Rajni Perera:** Oh, yeah. So, you came in --

**Qanita Lilla:** Oh, man. It's been --

**Rajni Perera:** --creeping. Thank you. It's an honour to be crept.

[Laughter]

**Qanita Lilla:** It's been a complete pleasure. And I wanted to talk about your expansive practice, the way that you move easily between mediums -- printing, painting, textiles, sculpture, and working with tradespeople.

**Rajni Perera:** Yes.

**Qanita Lilla:** What led you to the visual arts?

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah. So as far as making, I'll answer how I first came into the visual arts, and then I'll go into the rest. This is going to sound very funny -- I've been painting and drawing since I was a baby. In Sri Lanka when we're born, it's a Buddhist and a Hindu country. So, there's a Vedic-astrology chart that's read when kids are born. Since it's a Buddhist country, there will be a past life that's part of it -- that's Sri Lankan Vedic Astrology. It involves reincarnation. In my past life I was an artist as well. Because of the reading, my parents just supported that and gave me all the things I need. And I was just someone who went quiet -- drawing and painting since I was about two years old, something like that.

**Qanita Lilla:** So, it was kind of your pacifier.

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** You know.

**Rajni Perera:** Yes. Soothing.

**Qanita Lilla:** Soother.

**Rajni Perera:** Soothing. Also, my brain was developed, that's brain development time as a toddler. You're figuring out how to think about the world and operate inside it. And that's how I was operating -- just making things. I'm a painter first and foremost, so flat works, but I started sculpture probably around 2012 or 2013. So, in regard to your question, going from one meeting to the next, I started with craft store materials. When I began with sculpture, I was quite poor and didn't have any money to join the whole expensive ceramic studio Hullabaloo. You have to buy membership, need access to a kiln and instruction. It has this involvement with a hierarchy of materials that I don't like anyways, and I was angsty

against that too. Resorting to things from Michaels or The Dollar Store, putting sculpture together from polymer clay and aluminum foil. Also, following a lot of YouTube instruction on sculpture as well from nerdy old guys making the Incredible Hulk out of polymer clay. I thought that it was a fantastic and beautiful sculpture. I also come from a big-time sci-fi background, extra respect to them, even more than the artisanal skill. And yeah, I started sculpting that way. Going into three-dimensional work and collaborating with tradespeople or skilled workers is a huge joy in my life. It's actually a lot closer to the way that I work personally as an artist. So, I consider myself to be quite an artisanal crafts-based artist where the art is based on a certain skill level that you've honed over time putting something together. And I really love working with skilled tradespeople -- the attitude that they bring to the making, the regimen they follow, or the schedule they keep. Just the plain-old dedication to the craft that I really admire very much. I've worked with a woodworker named Yorgo Liapis who's just a mind-blowing incredible woodworker, who went to the main school of wood. I've worked with [inaudible] as well who works in metal work and been able to manifest these visions. I take these on as apprenticeships and try to learn something. A thing or two in my time working with them. Yeah, I prefer that approach rather than having things fabricated for me, it's working together in this process.

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**Qanita Lilla:** So, you have an idea?

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** And then you find a collaborator?

**Rajni Perera:** That's right.

**Qanita Lilla:** And then you collaborate on something?

**Rajni Perera:** Sometimes it will be someone who I've known for a while. It will be that -- start speaking about it and manifesting it in this way. And then this person shows up, I just get this feeling that, "Oh, the time is right now for me to work in x, y, z material." And then I'll --

**Qanita Lilla:** So, it has nothing to do with the material per se, just the thing that you wanted to --

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah, sometimes it'll be the person in the case of the woodwork, it was meeting Yorgo first, and then being like, "Yeah, okay, can we try something in wood together?" We made a piece for the Mocha, from the first show as it moved to Sterling Road. We built a pretty big poplar sculpture for that exhibition together, so that was great.

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**Qanita Lilla:** That's incredible because it's completely counterintuitive to what we learn in art school.

**Rajni Perera:** Yes.

**Qanita Lilla:** And as an art school dropout myself, I know that you --

[Laughter]

**Rajni Perera:** Almost, same.

**Qanita Lilla:** I know that you left art school. For me, it just didn't fit at all, nothing about it.

**Rajni Perera:** I get it.

**Qanita Lilla:** And I wanted to know, why? What made you break out and feel that those kinds of structures didn't fit. What is it that you needed to do?

**Rajni Perera:** I'll tell you right now, I feel like a lot of arts programs in universities all around Canada don't fit anyone or what they need to do. They're completely out of sorts, to be honest, stuck in -- I'd say 30 to 40 years in the past, properly. I left personally -- I went to OCAD now known as OCAD U and was accepted into the York/Sheridan Animation Program. I was gearing up to become an animator, but then was accepted into OCAD U. I was like, "Okay, I want to move out of my parents' house and move downtown. [Laughs] So, let me take OCAD." So, I got into OCAD. I went to school for about one year, commuting from Scarborough, that's where I'm from. Commuting from certain parts of Scarborough, coming from Bellamy and Eglinton. Unless you take the GO train, which sometimes was too expensive for me, at that time they were starting to cut bus routes in that part of town. The lower income parts. They just cut commuting and bus routes without telling anybody. Yeah, they don't care about poor people in Toronto. And then, I started going to school for one year and moved downtown. And I've always grown up in immigrant centric or heavy neighbourhoods with many different communities around me. A beautiful sort of multi community. And then I moved downtown and started going to OCAD. And I'm starting to realize now that with the curriculum, and as I know it's an immigrant city. The curriculum does not reflect anything close to that, in fact, it's a heavily Eurocentric, White centric curriculum. To the point where parts of that can and are being repeated in courses I've already taken. Again, the Group of Seven is really showing up. And I'm just like, "Because I didn't take OSAP, right?" I worked my way through school and paid for my own.

**Qanita Lilla:** What's OSAP?

**Rajni Perera:** Ontario Student Loan, it's the Student Assistance Program.

**Qanita Lilla:** Oh, yeah.

**Rajni Perera:** So, I didn't really -- the first year I took some and I paid it back later, because I started working. I didn't take OSAP, and because I was paying for the courses, I was even more frustrated. You know, "I'm paying for this." And I was also wondering why they were stuffing Asian and African art into one course, starting to feel a little bit offended there. By this time, my critical skills are really starting to develop, because I don't come from a cultural capital family. I had to develop that critical thinking later and learn about how to do that thing. But I'm starting to get mad, and by midway through the third year, I'm really upset. I just left school and was like, "Screw this, I don't want to do this." I don't need to think about things. I took a break for a year and lived on the Pacific coast of Nicaragua. I manage a surf lodge.

**Qanita Lilla:** What? Excuse me?

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah. I managed a surf lodge.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah, but how did you transition from the middle of Toronto to Nicaragua?

**Rajni Perera:** I was seeing a guy at the time. And now --

**Qanita Lilla:** Okay, well, that makes sense.

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah, he's my baby's father, **David Guyash**. We just met and fell in love. And then he's like, "I got this amazing job offer and I kind of want to go. But will you come?" And I was like, "I'm in school. What are you talking about?" I'm a very young and impressionable girl at this time. [Laughs] And then -- he's left, school really starts to piss me off. I'm reconsidering this offer very much. So, I left and didn't register for courses the next semester, just bounced. It did a world of good for my practice, for my approach to a failing curriculum. Also, how to deal with that as a person rather than feeling sad and down which I have every angry right to do it. What I did instead, when I came back was approach it in a really hopeful, optimistic, and slightly aggressive way. Where I'm pushing my right as a paying student.

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**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Rajni Perera:** To be reflected somewhat, at least in this curriculum. And as a result, my work became more honest. I found during my time away, a creative voice or visual language, that's my own. And that's doing all this work to decolonize my own visual language, it's a lot of work to do when you're brought up in between two colonies. I'm Sri Lankan, which is one colony, and I'm living in Canada, which is another. It was a hard go of it, but I think it's really

worth it to take yourself out of school and drop the hell out of art school, if you can.  
[Laughs]

**Qanita Lilla:** But all that time you were producing, you were drawing and engaged.

**Rajni Perera:** I didn't have a choice.

**Qanita Lilla:** You know, I mean --

**Rajni Perera:** From my past life.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah, that is really fascinating, the route you believed in yourself enough.

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** And to see yourself separate from the system.

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah, I'm lucky, not everybody gets to --

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah, no, no, no, no, because I come from a family where nobody's ever done art at all. Nobody does or knows what it is, "Why are you going to go and study it?" --

[Laughter]

**Rajni Perera:** For sure.

**Qanita Lilla:** -- "Why? This is the kind of thing kids do with crayons." And you are going to go and study it?

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** So, I just had this feeling that if I was not going to go into that system, I would not be an artist -- because their system makes you an artist.

**Rajni Perera:** Right, it's the validation of the system.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yes. Especially a White and colonial system. It gives you a special badge of honour.

**Rajni Perera:** Right.

**Qanita Lilla:** Which is so toxic, and it kills so many people's dreams. Any colonial system is deeply flawed.

**Rajni Perera:** Yes.

**Qanita Lilla:** And it's destroyed many more people than it's ever helped.

**Rajni Perera:** Yes. I agree.

**Qanita Lilla:** What was it in you? You say that "You didn't have a choice."

**Rajni Perera:** I didn't have a choice because I know that I have the opportunity. I have the leg up on the situation where I know what I'm supposed to be in this life. And I've entertained the possibility of other professions. I could pay my way through school. I thought I would be an animator when it's time. But I've always known that I'm supposed to make artwork. I had this weird, spiritual anchor.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yes.

**Rajni Perera:** It might even sound hokey to people who don't believe in reincarnation, because for all intents and purposes, it's completely fictional. There's no real evidence of anything like that, but I have this strange anchor. It's actually amazing to talk to you about this. This strange anchor tells me that I was right to keep going.

**Qanita Lilla:** You were.

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah. [Laughs]

**Qanita Lilla:** Absolutely you were. My gosh, you definitely were.

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah, but I have no proof to show you why.

**Qanita Lilla:** You do, no, this is the proof. This is the proof.

**Rajni Perera:** No, yeah, I'm still here. I'm the proof.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah, your work is the proof. The fact it moves people that --

**Rajni Perera:** That's kind.

**Qanita Lilla:** No, no, that's true.

**Rajni Perera:** Thanks Qanita, I worked so hard.

**Qanita Lilla:** I know, and I think a lot of people who are busy creating things just don't see what it is that we are doing. It's so much --

**Rajni Perera:** It's a lot.

**Qanita Lilla:** You know, yeah.

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah, that's true. Sometimes I get to take a step back and see -- I just did the Koerner residency at Queen's BFA. And realizing as I speak to the students in a BFA program, that, "Oh my god, I've come this far, I'm able to offer them something." That was really, "I got to see what I have to offer and what I have to give to a younger generation." So that was like me, a stamp.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Rajni Perera:** I was able to give myself that cool badge, and I helped a lot of up-and-coming younger artists. So that was really fulfilling and nice for me.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah, and I think when you see and you feel that, "Wow, like this is actually it."

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah, that kind of thing for sure.

**Qanita Lilla:** That's something that I didn't get myself.

**Rajni Perera:** How about now, "You're doing an awesome school podcast?"

**Qanita Lilla:** Oh, yeah, no, no, no, no, it's cool. It's through students, because I tried to give them what I didn't get myself. So --

**Rajni Perera:** That's really it.

**Qanita Lilla:** And that's it, seeing some uptake of that.

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** That's what it is.

**Rajni Perera:** That's kind of what it is. Now I'm realizing what I didn't know before, in the past couple years only I'm raising a daughter, seeing what I have to offer to her from my



life. Seeing what I have to offer to other young people. Only now, am I realizing this. I didn't used to know about that. I don't think you will until a little bit later.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah, and it feels wonderful. You can't buy or pay for that.

**Qanita Lilla:** It's the best.

**Rajni Perera:** That's only sweat equity that can get you to that place where you can really offer that thing.

**Qanita Lilla:** I love that term, sweat equity.

**Rajni Perera:** Sweat equity baby, all day. That's what's going to be when we burn all the money and the banks down.

**Qanita Lilla:** Each other and --

**Rajni Perera:** Each other and the work you do. That's all it's going to be.

[Laughter]

**Qanita Lilla:** Rajni, I want to talk about --

**Rajni Perera:** It's a dark prophecy.

[Laughter]

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah. Speaking of prophecies, I want to talk about the Traveller series, this really popular series of yours. And how it speaks directly to ideas of sovereignty, identity, and personhood. The diasporic person is someone who sees that the future is in the future and embodied. How did these Beings evolve?

**Rajni Perera:** Sure. So, the Traveller series showed up in a solo exhibition that I did with my now dealer in Toronto. It was this person that I painted, who didn't quite belong in the exhibition. But I think I saw a photo of a Mongolian soldier; it was a black and white photo. And I saw this person with the incredible sort of compound -- the composite way that this person's armour with very opulent and protective gear was put together. As you look around this photograph, you can see there's a couple of different influences going on there. I know that it was united under the empire of Genghis Khan, which spanned many countries and even several continents, I believe. So, there are so many influences, just on this one

photograph. That's one thing, I think I saw that around probably 2017 or something. Then later, I came across paintings of Mongolian soldiers. I was like "Oh, that's cool." I remember the photo that I'd seen a couple of years ago or the year before. But then here we have these paintings of men on horseback wearing, and off the horse, wearing these textiles from several different parts of the world. And as we know it today, different countries as. Altogether, there's something that's clearly an Islamic world type of loom. There's also embroidery from the middle of India, and certain types of things. I'm just looking at these paintings, and starting to realize that "You know, think about the nomadic nature of these soldiers. And the fact that there are people of colour. I'm looking at something that was painted in another part of the world than here." The idea of the immigrant, as being, especially nowadays, climate refugees, or having to constantly move. So, these are the ideas forming together of the Traveller series. Immigrants are climate refugees especially in general, having to keep on moving throughout the planet to different places, because they don't have roots anywhere. In a lot of cases, they don't have a place to go back to, because leaving costs them the roots that they had back home. This way of having to keep on moving and accumulating the now, these garments, protective wear, technologies, and adopting different social codes and norms. It's different ways of living together. Dealing with the new landscapes with which they're confronted oftentimes is very hostile. Now I start to think about the immigrant as someone that's nomadically moving along, from place to place, and then it comes to this idea of mutation. I've been a big science fiction fan since I was very small, up until now. Sometimes it's very nerdy and embarrassing, and I don't really care. I think science fiction is something that deserves some of the highest honours as works of art, prophecy, literature, satire, and social commentary. My love of science fiction mutation also came into consideration with the idea of climate refugees. Also, the way that humans will now have to change to suit their landscape, which is becoming increasingly aggressively hostile towards them. I'm thinking of all these things together. And by that time, I painted this picture, and it goes very well. I sold it to my friend Alex McLeod. "Hey, Alex." And I started to become very interested in this series, about exploring and expanding on this idea of a climate refugee person. This is actually the future of planet Earth, because I think we can all see that White supremacy and empires are collapsing in on themselves. One day, they'll be eaten by strong people, because they'll become very weak. Remember Rome? They became very weak and soft; the hard people will eat them. So, these are some of the things I think about because this immigrant race of mutated people are -- by the time this comes along, are actually inheriting the whole planet. They're adjusting systems, living together with the land, or uncolonizing or in some cases. Maybe with the recolonization, they're going off world and coming back with resources from other planets. There's magical technology now because a lot of it used to be magical before we invented it, right? All those ideas swim together in the Traveller series.

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**Qanita Lilla:** Is that how your subject matter always works? Has it always morphed, grown, and changed?

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah, it mutates.

[Laughter]

**Rajni Perera:** Sorry.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah, and it kind of becomes something else. You're not quite restless, but in motion, like your practice.

[Laughter]

**Rajni Perera:** I'm tired. The word is tired, Qanita. We're feeling tired.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah but, I mean, you know.

**Rajni Perera:** It's joyful for me to move between.

**Qanita Lilla:** But even looking in the studio now, working on multiple projects all over the place and thinking about different things. Is that just the way that you --

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah, I have quite a lot. I really do enjoy yoga, it involves a bit of meditation, but I do have an active mind. And I'm not bragging because as we all know, when there's the downside of that. Sometimes I can spread myself a little too thin and take on too much. But most of the time, it's a joyful way for me to practice art. As I diversify, the way that I put my vision forward, each way will inform the other now. So, I'll start a little sculpture series, and I'm like, "Oh, cool. I kind of want to paint about that. I'll save it for a later day." I have -- other things to expand on about what I'm working on already. Say in painting, "That sculpture will work to start to influence it." In a way, with my work, there's a bit of a world building practice that's happening inside there. And to a degree, sometimes it's self-referential and it bounces off things a little. Another piece for me, it's really lovely, and it also works to keep this consistent and steady growth of the manifestation of this world.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah.

**Rajni Perera:** You know.

**Rajni Perera:** And I enjoy that.

**Qanita Lilla:** There are two things that I want to ask you.

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** About the Traveller series.

**Qanita Lilla:** The fact that you, yourself, travel, and that you've travelled back to Sri Lanka.

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** And your practice in clay there.

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah, that was cool.

**Qanita Lilla:** I think that is amazing, because you were able to develop a certain kind of skill really quickly. Tell me about that - just looking at those photographs, it was phenomenal.

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah. Maybe I can send you some and when you post the podcast, they could see a few.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yes. Yes!

**Rajni Perera:** For Colomboscope, the lovely Natasha Ginwala who curated the year that I was participating in. I told her the things I want to do, by saying "I really want to work in clay. And I think it'll be important for my practice." Clay comes from the mountains in Sri Lanka, and it's a beautiful orange clay. She actually set me up with this incredible sculptor named Sarath Chandrajeewa, and he lives on the west coast of Sri Lanka. So, I went there, and stayed nearby. For about two weeks, we made these terracotta works, which he was very nervous about. Clay is not something you rush, and I have worked in clay before. You're supposed to give everything time to dry properly, steadily, and without changes in humidity. And then I had a big idea of many pieces. Of course, it changed over time for what we could do for this art festival. We were to fire all of these items and display them at Colomboscope at the Colombo Public Library. I really love making this sort of abstract sculpture that responds to the shapes of science fiction. We can call them artifacts, spacecraft, wands, and all sorts of medical equipment. Energy and space are these types of things that science fiction is replete with, armour, and a special type of magical technology. I started designing these shapes and everyone's laughing because they're quite traditional sculptures, a traditional studio. They normally make clay and commemorative busts or bronze work. So, I'm coming up with these really whimsical shapes and showing them and they're like, "That one looks like a fish. That one looks like a rocket. Cool." I said, "Yeah, let's do it." We made these, and I got to work with Sarath and his wonderful family. He was a very patient, humble teacher, whose own work -- and I had no idea he was such a prolific artist in Sri Lanka. He did some work in the '80s that reminds me of mine. I'm thinking "It's so futuristic." He had this period where he was exploring cosmology and I was blown away from it. While still working with Sarath, we put forward, I think, about six major sculptures.

Heavy -- when I say major, they're large and heavy. And then a whole set of smaller, conical sculptures that I did with him.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah, I want to talk about those conical sculptures.

**Rajni Perera:** Yes.

**Qanita Lilla:** They kind of look like projectiles. And then on the outside, they've got these circles.

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah, these bulbs.

**Qanita Lilla:** The bulbs.

**Rajni Perera:** Yes.

**Qanita Lilla:** And it made me think of plant life and peas.

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah, totally.

**Qanita Lilla:** What is your thing with mutation and botanical drawings?

**Rajni Perera:** Right.

**Qanita Lilla:** There's something botanical.

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah, I mean, first of all, I love botanical illustration. That's some of the whole scientific illustration world, and my first introduction to illustration in particular, and how it functions. It's an educational way of producing artwork, it has a purpose. When I grew up, my dad bred birds very well and successfully. As a result, he was friends with these members of the Zoological Society, in and around Colombo. In regard to birds specifically, among other species, we'd actually go on expeditions around the island. Visiting certain national parks and his friends would be on buses. And I remember this, once I got really sick, I drank bad water, and I had a fever. It was really messed up. We would go on these expeditions, and they would capture new species for documentation, releasing them later. The documentation, I remember, also some of these uncles of mine, they're my dad's friends. And coming to the house, they had this tiny cage in their hand. It was an observation cage from which you draw these birds. I remember scientific illustrations happening right in front of me at the dinner table at our house. And then later on, seeing the volumes of books that they were producing on endemic species in Sri Lanka. From the mountains from to the south -- beautiful drawings. By that time, they're hand painted plates inside ginormous books, published in Sri Lanka. I had this cool early introduction to

not only the beauty of scientific illustration, but the importance of the educational aspect of it. Only later do I start to learn about, and critically think on the categorization and taxonomy of species. That whole critical theory around that. But at the time, for me, it was pure, it was educational and beautiful. And when I came here, a friend of mine gifted me this beautiful book called The Cabinet of Natural Curiosities, and it's stunning. That's a great example of botanical illustration, among other types of scientific illustration. I'm a huge fan of that style of drawing. So, I'm really drawn to the shapes of it, which are simplified and flattened in this thing. The shapes of plants and plant life are magical in and of itself, and we don't respect the utter magic that happens in the plant kingdom. For example, the seed is one idea that the universe came up with that is unparalleled in its beauty and sophistication. It is a structure that preserves life, it can put life to sleep and also awaken it centuries later. No problem, you just need some water and soil. There are entire seedbanks that protect the life inside it extremely well, for some reason. The structural integrity is perfect and beautiful. That's an example of something the plant kingdom just put together. We can't make a storage unit that's as strong and capable as that, you know. So, I'm constantly in awe of the way that the universe puts shapes and things together. [Laughs] I'm always looking at that for my own work as inspiration.

**Qanita Lilla:** Yeah, so, do you think that's where your environmental consciousness comes from? Just having a sense of --

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** How we fit into the scheme of things.

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah. How we fit into the scheme of things and the importance of having reverence for and educating people about the natural world. We are part of the natural world. So, I always have this thing when people talk about humans and animals. We're animals -- and no one wants to talk about that, because we're so high minded, smart, and cool. [Laughs] So cool that we kill each other and ruin the planet. I want to get closer to the natural world, I don't want to be separated from that because the natural world is beautiful. We come from it. It can teach us about ourselves. I think in a lot of cases, more than what we've written. So that's how I feel about the natural world.

**Qanita Lilla:** I think it's very cool this mixture of manga, science fiction, and the natural world. How does that blend?

**Rajni Perera:** They're not that different in the style that they have been made though there are these flattened figures that represent an almost abstraction. It's an ideal form. Always it's simplified a little bit to get an idea across. There are parts about it that have those styles of execution, of making images, both have this purpose that they utterly fulfil. They're effective. As an artist and craftsman, I'm really interested in the efficiency of both of

those styles of art making. And by the way, Manga illustrators are artists, and scientific illustrators are also. It takes their ideas to make us think about ourselves in our world.

**Qanita Lilla:** And superhero figurines.

**Rajni Perera:** Those figurines are, and that's how I learnt how to sculpt. On YouTube watching people make figurines of superheroes and monsters. Aliens from the movie Predator and stuff like that. Also, I'm a big fan of special effects and animatronics tutorials. There's a lot of people doing cool things like cosplay, beautiful costumes, carving and sculpting it themselves. Applying fur and hair themselves in different ways. I really love that I think that's top-notch new material research.

**Qanita Lilla:** You know, your interest and use of material is so broad.

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah.

**Qanita Lilla:** How does this fit into a day in the life of Rajni Perera, the artist?

**Rajni Perera:** Oh man, what a question that is. I've been on a production schedule for about seven years now straight. And I'm booked until I think, spring of 2026.

**Qanita Lilla:** What does being booked mean?

**Rajni Perera:** Just shows end-to-end. Or residencies.

**Qanita Lilla:** Woah. New work?

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah, and existing work. There's a good amount of it, that's loaned from the buyers or institutions that have purchased them. With a lot of my work there are some pieces that -- and this is a great problem to have. I'm not complaining, people buy it, and they don't really get to see it. Some of the buyers they do, I feel for them, because the work has been travelling the world in some cases. A little bit fragile, materials like paper, I don't want them to travel anymore, at least for one year. The work does get loaned out again. But anyway, sorry. The way that all these interests and materials fit into a day in life is that at this time, quite regimented and planned. It's pre-planned. I don't love to organize, but I understand how organizing my work and my time over months and years now is letting me have regenerative refreshing time. Resting and self-care time. If I don't do that, all that sorts of free time does diminish, and I need that more than ever now. So, in regard to new materials -- something cool and exciting is the horse that I put together in Birmingham for the Commonwealth Games. The centre of the exhibition was a synthesized horse with a mutant rider on top of it. And that's from the Traveller series. We had to get a taxidermy form for that and shave two IKEA cowhide rugs and apply horse form, modifying the form

quite a bit. We also had to go into the Stan Winston School of Special Effects. They've made all of their head technicians' available online as courses. So, we were able to make another amazing new material, using sculpture resources. That was the last thing we're installing again in Philadelphia in December.

**Qanita Lilla:** The meteoric rise of Rajni, really.

**Rajni Perera:** That's nice.

[Laughter]

**Rajni Perera:** Thank you.

**Qanita Lilla:** No, it's not nice. It's the truth. You're everywhere, and there's this kind of love and urgency that's surrounding you and your work.

**Rajni Perera:** It feels really good because of how hard I work. It is nice to hear you say that and it does feel good when people say that.

**Rajni Perera:** Yeah, I mean --

**Qanita Lilla:** We appreciate you, you're a wonderful artist.

**Rajni Perera:** I'm glad that you do. Thank you. I only make what I love, and honestly, I work hard, so thanks so much.

**Qanita Lilla:** Thank you so much for talking with us today.

**Rajni Perera:** My absolute pleasure.

**Qanita Lilla:** Thank you. Okay.

**Rajni Perera:** Thanks.

[Music]

**Qanita:** Thank you for listening to *With Opened Mouths*. Special thanks to our guest Rajni Perera for speaking with us today. This podcast is hosted by myself, Dr. Qanita Lilla, and produced by Agnes Etherington Art Centre in partnership with Queen's University's campus radio station, CFRC 101.9 FM. The music is composed by Jameel3DN and produced by Elroy "EC3" Cox III. Episodes of *With Opened Mouths* are released monthly, and you can find



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[Music]