

# 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, world making

### 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that counteracts antiquated, oppressive discourses, and acts as a restorative force through which people can move outdated, repressive modes of being towards reclaiming their power.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]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[Laughter]

**Qanita:** 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 across a variety of mediums.

**Rajni:** Yes.

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

**Rajni:** Yeah, so as far as making, I'll answer how I came into the visual arts first maybe, and then I'll go into the rest. I've been painting -- this is going to sound very funny -- I've been painting and drawing since I was a baby, and when in Sri Lanka when we're born -- so it's a Buddhist and a Hindu country -- there's a Vedic astrology chart that's read when kids are born. And since it's a Buddhist country, there will be a past life that's part of it and that's Sri Lankan Vedic astrology and it involves reincarnation, so in my past life I was an artist as well. So I was painting and drawing just since I was a baby, and 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, two and a half, something like that.

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

**Rajni:** Yeah.

**Qanita:** You know.

**Rajni:** Yes. Soothing.

**Qanita:** Soother.

**Rajni:** Soothing. Also, my brain was developing -- that's brain development time as a toddler, you're figuring out how to think about the world and operate inside the world. 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, something like that, or 2013. And yeah, I started sculpting, so in regard to your question, going from one meeting to the next to the next. I started sculpting just with like craft store materials. When I began with sculpture, you know I was quite poor, and I didn't have any money to join the whole expensive ceramic studio hullabaloo -- you have to buy a membership, you need access to a kiln and you need access to instruction. It has this involvement with a hierarchy of materials that I don't really like anyway. And so, I was angsty against that too, and kind of resorting to things from Michaels or The Dollar Store, putting sculpture together from polymer clay and aluminum foil, and you know, following a lot of YouTube instruction on sculpture as well from nerdy old guys making the Incredible Hulk out of polymer clay. And I thought that it was a fantastic and beautiful sculpture! I also come from a big-time sci-fi background, extra respect to them, you know, extra -- even more than the artisanal skill. And yeah, I started sculpting that way, so going into some three-dimensional work. Collaborating with tradespeople or skilled workers is a huge joy in my life, because 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 really based on a certain skill level that you've honed over time putting something together. So, I really love working with skilled tradespeople -- the attitude that they bring to the making, the regimen they follow, the schedule they keep and 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 Nep Sidhu as well who works in metal work and been able to manifest these visions that, you know -- I kind of take these on as apprenticeships and try to learn something, learn 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.

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

**Rajni:** Yeah.

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

**Rajni:** That's right.

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

**Rajni:** Sometimes it will be someone who I've known for a while. Sometimes, 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:** So, it has nothing to do with the material per se, just the thing that you wanted to --

**Rajni:** 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?" So we made a piece for the M.O.C.A. [Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto] for the first show at the M.O.C.A. as it moved to Sterling Road. We built a pretty big poplar sculpture for that exhibition together, so that was great.

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

**Rajni:** Yes.

**Qanita:** And as an art school dropout myself --

[Laughter]

**Rajni:** Almost, same.

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

**Rajni:** I get it.

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

**Rajni:** 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, and that they're completely out of sorts, to be honest. They're stuck about, I'd say, 30 to 40 years in the past, properly stuck there. I left personally -- I went to OCAD, now known as OCAD U, and I 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 get into OCAD, and I went to school for about one year, commuting from Scarborough -- I'm from Scarborough -- commuting from certain parts of Scarborough, coming from Bellamy and Eglinton, and unless you take the GO train, which sometimes was too expensive for me, they were starting to cut bus routes in that part of town. The parts of Scarborough, the lower income parts, they just cut commuting -- they cut bus routes without telling anybody.

**Qanita:** Jeez.

**Rajni:** Yeah, because they don't care about poor people in Toronto. And then, you know, I started going to school for one year and I moved downtown. And I've always grown up in really immigrant centric or immigrant-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 like 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 content -- to the point where parts of that canon are being repeated in courses over and over -- in courses I've already taken. Again, the Group of Seven is showing up. Again, the Group of Seven is showing up. And I'm just like -- because I didn't take OSAP, right? I worked my way through school and I paid for my own school.

**Qanita:** What's OSAP?

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

**Qanita:** Oh, yeah.

**Rajni:** 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, like 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, actually, and lived on the Pacific coast of Nicaragua and I manage a surf lodge.

**Qanita:** What? Excuse me?

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

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

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

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

**Rajni:** 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 and I just bounced. It did a world of good for my practice, a world of good for my approach to a failing curriculum and 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.

**Qanita:** Yeah.

**Rajni:** 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 colony. 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:** But all that time you were producing, you were drawing and engaged.

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

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

**Rajni:** From my past life. [Laughs]

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

**Rajni:** Yeah.

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

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

**Qanita:** Yeah, 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:** For sure.

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

**Rajni:** Yeah.

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

**Qanita:** Yes. Especially a white and a colonial system. It gives you a special “badge of honour.”

**Rajni:** Right.

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

**Rajni:** Yes.

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

**Rajni:** Yes, I agree.

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

**Rajni:** 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 it's kind of -- I mean, I've entertained the possibility of other professions. I cooked my way through school. When I say that I paid my way through school, I was a cook. I thought I would be an animator when it was time to consider school, but I've always known that I'm supposed to make artwork. I had this weird, spiritual anchor.

**Qanita:** Yes.

**Rajni:** It might even sound hokey to people who don't believe in reincarnation, because for all intents and purposes, it's completely -- it looks like -- a 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:** You were.

**Rajni:** Yeah. [Laughs]

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

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

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

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

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

**Rajni:** That's kind.

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

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

**Qanita:** 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:** It's a lot.

**Qanita:** You know, yeah.

**Rajni:** 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." You know? 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 my self-stamp.

**Qanita:** Yeah.

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

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

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



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

**Rajni:** Oh? How about now? You're doing an awesome school podcast?

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

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

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

**Rajni:** Yeah.

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

**Rajni:** 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 do until a little bit later.

**Qanita:** Yeah.

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

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

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

**Qanita:** I love that term, like "sweat equity."

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

**Qanita:** Each other and --

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

[Laughter]

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

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

[Laughter]

**Qanita:** 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. And, you know, how the diasporic person is someone who sees that the future -- is in the future and embodied in the future? How did these beings evolve?

**Rajni:** 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 soldier, I think of a Mongolian soldier, it was a black and white photo. And I saw this person, and I saw this incredible sort of compound -- the composite way that this person's armour and their sort of very opulent protective gear and armour 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 at the time 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. Fine, so 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, again, we have these paintings of men on horseback wearing -- and off the horse -- wearing these textiles from several different parts of the world as we know it today, different countries as we know them today. Altogether, there's something that's clearly like an Islamic world type of loom. There's also embroidery from like, you know, the middle of India. There's just certain types of things -- I'm just looking at these paintings, and starting to realize that -- you know, I'm thinking 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. And, you know, the idea of the immigrant, as being -- especially, you know, nowadays, climate refugees immigrants, and climate refugees having to constantly move. So, these are the ideas, this is the way these ideas are forming together for the *Traveller* series. Immigrants are -- climate refugees especially, and immigrants 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. And having to keep on moving and accumulating the now, these garments, protective wear, technologies, and adopting different social codes and norms. Adopting different ways of living together. Dealing with the new landscapes with which they're confronted oftentimes is very hostile. 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, because I've been a big science fiction person. Science fiction 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, works of prophecy, literature, satire, and social commentary. But because of my love of science fiction mutation also came into it when I considered the idea of climate refugee and 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 then it goes very well. I sold it to my friend Alex McLeod. "Hey, Alex." And I start to become very interested in this series, about exploring and expanding on this idea of a climate refugee person. Which 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 and the hard people will eat them. So, these are some of the things I think about because this immigrant race of mutated people are -- you know, by the time this comes along, are actually inheriting the whole planet. They're adjusting systems, living together with the land, de- or un-colonizing or in some cases maybe they're re-colonizing. 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.

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

**Rajni:** Yeah, it changes quite a bit. Yeah, it mutates.

[Laughter and then coughs]

**Rajni:** Sorry.

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

[Laughter]

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

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

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

**Qanita:** 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:** Yeah, I have quite a -- 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. Which is 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, because 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." So, I'll save it for a later day. So, I have -- so I have other things to expand on about what I'm working on already. Say in painting, that sculpture work will 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, so it'll bounce off of things and another piece, and another piece and another piece. For me, it's really lovely, and it also works to keep this consistency -- of like a consistent and steady growth of the manifestation of this world.

**Qanita:** Yeah.

**Rajni:** You know.

**Rajni:** And I enjoy that.

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

**Rajni:** Yeah.

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

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

**Rajni:** Yeah.

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

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

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

**Qanita:** Yes. Yes!

**Rajni:** For *Colomboscope*, the lovely Natasha Ginwala, who curated the year that I was participating in it. You know, I told her the things I want to do and was like, "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 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 I was staying nearby. And 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, and of course, it changed over time for what we could do for this art festival. Because 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 and science fictions we can call them artifacts, like spacecraft, wands, and all sorts of medical equipment or energy and space. 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 sculptors, they're a traditional sculpture studio. They normally make clay busts, 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." And I'm like, "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 made some work in the '80s that reminds me of mine. I'm thinking that it's so futuristic. He had this period where he was exploring cosmology and I was blown away, okay. And still working with Sarath, we put forward, I think it was like 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:** Yeah, I want to talk about those conical sculptures.

**Rajni:** Yes.

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

**Rajni:** Yeah, these bulbs.

**Qanita:** The bulbs.

**Rajni:** Yes.

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

**Rajni:** Yeah, totally.

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

**Rajni:** Right.

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

**Rajni:** Yeah, I mean, first of all, I love botanical illustration. That's some first like -- the whole scientific illustration world was some of my first introduction to how art work -- not artwork -- to illustration in particular, and its functions, it has 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 to 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, coming to the house and 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 like really 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 and the 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 so, so stunning and beautiful. That's a great example of botanical illustration among other types of scientific illustration, but 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, but of course 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 it can awaken it again 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. And you know, 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. I'm always looking at that for my own work as inspiration. The universe. [Laughs]

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

**Rajni:** Yeah.

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

**Rajni:** Yeah. How we fit into the scheme of things and the importance of you know 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. And because 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 or to be separate 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 to teach ourselves. So that's how I feel about the natural world.

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

**Rajni:** They're not that different in the style that they have been made though there are these flattened figures that represent an almost abstraction of the figure, slightly. 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, you know. They're effective. As an artist slash 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 artists. It takes their ideas to make us think about ourselves in our world.

**Qanita:** And like figurines, superhero figurines.

**Rajni:** Those figurines are, and that's how I learnt how to sculpt. On YouTube watching people make figurines of superheroes and also monsters, and like aliens from the movie and *Predator* and stuff like that. Also, I'm a big fan of special effects and animatronics tutorials. Because there's a lot of people doing really cool like cosplay, beautiful cosplay 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 materials research, personally. I really do like it.

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

**Rajni:** Yeah.

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

**Rajni:** 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. So --

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

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

**Qanita:** Woah. New work?

**Rajni:** 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 and I'm not complaining. People buy it, and they don't really get to see it. Some of the buyers, I do feel for them, because the work has been kind of travelling the world, and in some cases, there's 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 anyways, 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, yeah, 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 rider, 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 them onto this taxidermy horse form, modifying the form quite a bit. We also had to go into the Stan Winston School of Special Effects and they made all of their head technicians' available online as courses. So, we were able to -- another amazing new material sculpture resource is the Stan Winston School of Special Effects and learning that thing. That was the last thing, and we're installing again in Philadelphia in December.

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

**Rajni:** That's nice.

[Laughter]

**Rajni:** Thank you.



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

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

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

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

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

**Rajni:** My absolute pleasure.

**Qanita:** Thank you. Okay.

**Rajni:** Thanks.

[Music]

**Qanita:** Thank you for listening to *With Opened Mouths*. Special thanks to our guest Rajni for speaking with us today. This podcast is hosted by myself, 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 them on Digital Agnes, CFRC's website and on your favourite podcasting platform. If you liked what you heard, leave us a review and subscribe now so that you don't miss a single episode. We'll see you next time.

[Music]