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The Navel of the World: Sameer Farooq

With Opened Mouths: The Podcast
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SPEAKER

Qanita Lilla and Sameer Farooq

TRANSCRIPT

[Music]

Qanita Lilla: Welcome back to a new episode of *With Opened Mouths: The Podcast*, where we sit down with artists, scholars, curators, poets and performers to learn from their creative journeys. I am your host, Qanita Lilla, Curator of Canadian and African Art at Agnes Etherington Art Centre.

I first met artist Sameer Farooq at his exhibition, *The Fairest Order in the World* at the Dalhousie Art Museum in Halifax, in 2023. It was his first solo show in his home province. The exhibition takes its title from a text fragment of Ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, reading, "The fairest order in the world is a heap of random sweepings." As a way of commenting on museum collections, Sameer created a collection of remnants— ceramic onions and imprints, margin notes, and layered collage. His artworks are the parts of stories that had not yet been considered, told through an unusual materiality like slick museum glass, bolted to rough concrete blocks.

Through the exhibition, visitors were asked to "imagine a language of exit". A language where objects repatriated from colonial museums leave "punched out holes and gaps" in collections that don't always need to be filled. But there was also an understated humour in his work. Like the way the interior spaces of bellybuttons or navels resemble lingams, and how amorphous museum packaging material look like sea creatures. The spaces left behind and forgotten are what should be remembered. Sameer is more interested in the finger shaped space within a navel than in the knotted navel itself.

If it were possible to collect all navels of the world on the steps to ASCENSION, is an art project that metaphorically gathers humanity's collective centers. It explores themes of belonging, the body, and hidden histories. The navel is a holder of mythology, origins and beginnings but it is also something uniquely museological, it is curious and it is unique. Perhaps it is the ultimate series because it is uncollectible.

A year after I saw *The Fairest Order in the World,* I met Sameer again, but this time at Agnes Etherington Art Centre where he was Stonecroft artist in residence. He had recently returned from another research trip where he had learnt about tandoor ovens. At that time, he was making a “bread library”. He had been assembling the bread and collected them from flat bread bakers all around Toronto. He spoke of their varieties and their migratory histories. I realized again that his artistic practice is about reclaiming stories that are neglected in our gallery spaces. They can be the big stories about returning cultural belongings to their communities, and they can also be intimate, tender stories told by an onion peel or through a heavily kneaded ball of dough. Sameer demonstrates that the remnants of human life should all be considered, celebrated and elevated.

Sameer Farooq is a Toronto-based artist of Pakistani and Ugandan- Indian descent. He has held exhibitions at institutions around the world at numerous venues. Including PRAx, Oregon (2026), the Jaou Photography Biennale, Tunis (2024), the Toronto Biennial of Art (2024), and the Venice Architecture Biennale (2023).

Reviews dedicated to his work have been published by *Art Forum*, *The Art Newspaper*, *Canadian Art*, *Hyperallergic*, *Artnet*, and *C Magazine*.

[Sounds of ocean waves]

Sameer Farooq: Thank you so much. It's such a pleasure to be here.

Qanita: So, I'd like to, you know, like, going through your exhibition that I saw, I noticed all these different components, you know, and that you, you know, your practice includes sculpture and photography and documentary film and installation. But am I right in saying that sculpture has a special place in your heart?

Sameer: Yes, I would definitely say so, I think. It's quite surprising to me. My background was actually being trained in anthropology and then in book design. So, I was very much working in a two-dimensional world, very concerned with form and colour, composition, layout. But I always did very badly in my sculpture classes. And I think the challenge of wanting to prove that I could work with materials in an intuitive way, that I could sort of work in scale and be in conversation with these materials became very compelling to me. And so it became a real challenge to move towards sculpture. What I will say is that I do think I have a deep love of working with materials because you have to work in

collaboration with them. A lot of materials have their own behaviours. They push back on you. They don't do certain things. Clay is an excellent example. It has a very distinct timeline. It breaks very easily during certain times of drying. It can be manipulated, but only at the beginning. So, I really love those parameters and as an artist, being challenged to understand, you know, what I'm working with and how I can work together with that material.

Qanita: I mean, I think that what, you know, what stands out in your sculptures is that they're very tactile and you want to touch them. They kind of have shiny surfaces, you know. And I feel that in that way they're very anti-museum, you know?

Sameer: Yes. I'm so glad you brought up that point. I read a very interesting text about 15 years ago about the advent of the vitrine, or the display case, and how within the context of the museum, how much it denotes private property. So putting an artifact or an object on a plinth and then covering it with a plexi box is a way of claiming ownership. And my interest in drawing the public to the seduction and tactility of, you know, touching materials comes from this understanding that many communities don't see these belongings as objects and artifacts. They see them as being very much a part of the life, the continuing life world of themselves and their communities. I remember in that text it said, "Sometimes we need to touch, hold, or cry over objects." And that really stuck with me, that there is this sensory component that has been completely divorced from the viewer and the object within traditional museum contexts. And I think intuitively that's what is happening when I'm producing sculptural work.

Qanita: Yeah. So when did you become interested in museums as a site of critique? Because, you know, many of your, like that entire show, you know, was about you engaging with a museum in a particular way.

Sameer: So, I can remember from a very young age a compulsion I had to collect and to order and to organize things into narratives. My mom often speaks about me sitting on the bathroom floor, sort of organizing different soaps and towels and little bits and pieces, like, on the bathroom floor. And, you know, I think for me, my early interest in museums was about trying to understand how to organize the world for it to make sense at that time of my own experience, which was really being in the diaspora far away from where my original, you know, heritage is located. So I was both on a small island off the coast of Nova Scotia called Cape Breton Island, which is in the middle of the Atlantic. There are more moose and bears than people there. And, you know, it just goes to say there's not many South Asian or East African families there. So for me, collections and combining things next to each other, creating strings of narrative through the objects that I had at home, helped me make sense of who am I? Where do I come from? Because the world was very different around me. It was very difficult to locate, you know, any sense of heritage or history from

the world outside. There was this one chest we had in our basement that it was all that my parents managed to bring with them when they came to Canada from Uganda and from Pakistan. And in the chest were just a random collection of things. There was a large snakeskin from Uganda that was, like, a wall hanging that my mom had kept. There were these etched tin vases that my father brought from Pakistan, some photographs, some paperwork. And I remember as a child going down to the basement and opening this chest regularly and taking out everything and sort of arranging them and ordering them and then putting them back. So I think these were my very, very early experiences. with, let's say, a domestic museum or a domestic collection that really compelled me.

Qanita: Yeah, so was that perhaps how you got involved in cultural anthropology? What was that connection? Because in South Africa, anthropology has got this very, you know, it occupies a very contentious space, you know, as it does elsewhere. What drew you to studying this?

Sameer: Yeah. So, initially my interest in anthropology was very much just, like, a deep curiosity in the collision of cultures. I wanted to travel, I wanted to meet people, I wanted to find commonalities between cultural groups. And when I got into the study of anthropology at McGill University, what I realized was so wonderful that was happening was that it acknowledged, you know, its very horrendous beginnings. So it became a very self-critical discipline. So the contemporary anthropology that I studied and how anthropology has continued to grow as an expanded field is very interesting to me. I think because it's a discipline that has a lot of shame about its origins, it is willing to kind of take itself apart and keep reinventing itself. So, you know, some of the most interesting thinkers that I still read are anthropologists who talk about cross-pollination, cosmopolitanism, migration, you know, all of these ideas that fuse themselves into my work. And I still go to a lot of anthropologists' ideas in order to frame or bounce off my own material ideas as an artist on their theories. So it's still a very important conversation to me.

Qanita: And I think a lot of, you know, the conversations in critical museology, you know, comes out of anthropology at the moment. It's almost as if they were kind of compelled to make the changes there because they've, you know, got this really kind of negative stereotypes associated with them. But, you know, like one of the interesting phrases that you borrow from a fellow anthropologist, and Ann Laura Stoler, is "the blueprints of distress". You know, and this describes how colonial museum displays items in ways that reveal the violence of their origins. You know, so how does your interest in the workings of museums and the biographies of collections engage this idea of blueprints of distress?

Sameer: Yeah, so that's a term that has really stuck with me and such a great example of how an anthropologist's writing can make its way into a visual artist's practice. And Ann Laura Stoler was writing about Dutch colonialism. In this book, it was called "Against the

Archival Grain", about Dutch colonialism into Indonesia. And from what I can remember, she was looking at colonial documents like ledgers and sort of population studies. And instead of looking at the central data, she was looking at what was happening in the margins. What she saw was a lot of things being crossed out, a lot of things being erased, basically a lot of mistakes that were being made on the document. And what was very beautiful about that is that she managed to breathe in some empathy around the, you know, otherwise very violent actions of colonialism. What she saw was that instead of a unified nation sending, you know, robotic soldiers, you know, over to many thousands of miles away from their own country to ransack and murder and steal, which still happened. But what she also saw were 19-year-olds, 20-year-olds, struggling with adaptation, where they were from, having no idea what the local food was, what the local customs were, how to pronounce names, where they even were, what the landscape was like, what the topography was like. So she calls these documents "blueprints of distress", and what it does is that it turns the frame away from the sort of subjects of violence, the Indonesians in this case, and puts it back onto the fallibility of the colonizers. And I think this idea of turning the mirror back to the initiators, the perpetrators, those in power, it's always a move I do in my practice because I think it shows that much of the work we have to do is grappling with the madness of the West as opposed to the weakness of the global South. So to me, that book was really very interesting because it showed such human fallibility within this sort of organized, you know, colonial intervention.

Qanita: Which then gets, like, transposed onto the museum, you know, those kind of systems, those collections.

Sameer: Exactly.

Qanita: All of those things.

Sameer: Exactly.

Qanita: Yeah, and, you know, I wonder, like, I know that you love travelling for your practice. You, like, whenever I try and catch you or get ahold of you, you're somewhere else. So, you know, like, for example, you've worked with the Tropen Museum in Amsterdam and the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Both of which, they are iconic museums for different reasons. What role do you feel that international collaboration plays in your work?

Sameer: So I think there's two things going on here with the international collaboration question. The first is, I think I enjoy the, it's the idea of collaboration itself within an artistic practice. You know, if I'm critiquing the roots of museum practice, which is sort of expertise, developing ordering systems from a very hierarchical model, sort of taking a global overview of one's belongings, one's stolen goods, and laying them out into a narrative. You

know, if I aim to critique that, then my own process as an artist needs to be highly collaborative. So I see myself as just a very good listener and translator. I have the ability to translate a lot of the ideas that are bubbling up in the museum into sculpture and installation, but by no means am I informed of, you know, the vast amount of holdings or the museum histories that, you know, I'm a part of. So it's vital for me to enter into a lot of deep collaborations with curators and directors of these museums. What often comes out are gossip, stories, mistakes, humour, jokes, things that keep resonating with people, small objects that keep haunting people. And to me, you know, those are all very, very interesting starting points and real keys to understanding the ethos of these places. The second thing about, oh my goodness, now I'm forgetting what my point two was. Let me think for a second. About travelling and international collaboration is, what was I going to say? Oh, maybe we'll just come back to that when I think of it. I'm so sorry.

Qanita: I think, you know, it is like that, you know, like, your process of almost, like, piggybacking on existing, you know, collections and structures within museums, you know, is very interesting. And also, I think, you know, like, when it translates into an exhibition, it, like, results in unexpected, you know, unexpected forms, you know, should I say?

Sameer: Yeah.

Qanita: You know, like, one kind of, like, installation that you did, which was very, it was easy to read because it was something that was very everyday with onions. And I loved your onions, because you captured that, like, purple translucency of a particular, it is an onion that, you know, mothers use when they cook Southeast Asian dishes, like, particularly.

Sameer: Yes.

Qanita: You know?

Sameer: Yeah.

Qanita: And it's, I could tell that you had seen these kinds of onions many, many, many, many times, you know.

Sameer: Yeah.

Qanita: So, you kind of presented the audience these onions in a very, you know, delicate, but also there was a sentimentality like associated to them, you know. So, and humorous. I find that your work is often humorous, you know, which is something that the museum as an institution shies away from, you know. Like, we shy away from the, not only, like, the funny things in our systems and things, but also the way that we fail, you know, how, like, precarious certain systems are, even though it seems as if they're set in stone, you know.

And that's why I thought of these onions balanced on a metal bar. You know, it kind of, it wasn't stuck down. You know, if you move against it, they kind of look like they'll tumble down, which is, and I think especially with collections from the global South, is the way that traditionally how museums have dealt with collections they know very little about, really. You know, so, like, I wonder how you started your journey into the pathways of, like, food memories. Like, how did food become an important way for you to access, you know, your, like, you know, the things that you wanted to talk about, like, you know?

Sameer: So, food is a remarkable blind spot in terms of what is collected in museums. I was just doing some research in the UK where I visited the British Museum, Pitt Rivers Museum, the Horniman Museum of Anthropology. And I was looking for instances of food in their collections, and there was very little. And what's always interesting to me is that, you know, obviously food is probably the most central thing in our lives as human culture, or as, you know, any living being. And with the onion in particular, before starting a meal, most of us chop an onion at the beginning of a meal, you know, from many different cultures. Yet even though the onion is so ubiquitous in our lives that it's in our hands almost every day, that it rarely makes it into the museum. And I always thought that was so interesting, that we hold an onion much more than we hold, like, a royal sceptre or a piece of Victorian flatware or whatever. But, you know, it rarely makes it into our museum collections. And to me, that does such a disservice to future populations that want to understand how we function. And, you know, I think your question on humour is, you know, it's so, it's, you know, I couldn't agree more with that, you know, museums are rarely expressing humour in their sort of external presentation of themselves, but there are places that are just full of humour. And I think, I'm not even trying to show anything extra or anything funny from my own mind. I'm just sort of showing what already exists. So, you know, I spend a lot of time roaming through storage and speaking to museum professionals, and just really funny things keep happening all the time. So, you know, once, as I was discussing the very sophisticated humidity and HVAC system that made like a grade-A quality storage facility, the conservator talking to me about it, like, wheeled over a bunch of paintings with her office chair, like, at the same time. She just, like, rolled over them. And I thought that was so funny because, you know, at once they have these state-of-the-art buildings that they're constructing, but then these collections that continue to accumulate and accumulate and accumulate and grow and take up floor space and cabinet space and fall over. You know, I saw, like, animal bones in Tupperware containers on the top of filing cabinets, or, you know, someone's lunch, like, on top of a Gandharan Buddhist head. Like, very funny culminations of, like, the messiness of accumulation and of life in general, of entropy, and how that collides with this presumed, you know, order and expertise of the museum. So there is a lot of humour, but I don't particularly go looking for it. I just think museology at its core is just such a funny pursuit.

Qanita: And I think also it speaks to the afterlives of collections, like, unexpected afterlives. They're still living, you know, the Buddha's getting fed in a different way, you know?

Sameer: Yes.

Qanita: So, yeah.

Sameer: Yes. Yes. So, I mean, this is a great, I think, moment for me to ask you, I mean, one of the big turning points in my research was a conversation we had many years ago, where you refused to call, you know, objects and artifacts in the museum by those terms, and instead referred to them as ancestors and belongings. And to me, that was such an enormous shift in, just linguistically, a shift in how we should relate to these objects. And I know that at the Agnes, you have been very concerned with understanding these protocols about if we are to see these holdings as ancestors in our storage, there needs to be very specific protocols with how to deal with these things. And I'm just curious about where that has, how that's developed over the last few years, if you could share some of the protocols that you've developed. You know, has there been stuff about feeding artifacts? You know, or other, sorry, feeding ancestors or other ways that you've been working with the collections?

Qanita: Yeah, so my colleague, Sebastian De Line, you know, cares for the indigenous ancestors. And, you know, his approach is very much framed through, like, indigenous knowledges. And that is how, you know, he cares and, you know, engages, you know, with those ancestors. I mean, for me, so I've been here for five years, and I care for, like, the African belongings. And those two collections, the indigenous ancestors and the African belongings, are very, very, very different. You know, the, like, the African collection is very much, it's called the Lang Collection. So, you know, Justin and Elizabeth Lang donated this collection, their African art collection, which had, they populated their living, like, their home, with African belongings, you know. So, I mean, you know, at a time when there was, like, an increased criticality around the things from Africa and how they came to, like, the global North. What kind of stories did they carry that are not written about, you know, in our records? There was also, like, an increased interest in provenance research. So where did they come from? Under which conditions were they bought and sold? But I felt that, you know, like the, so the African collection is 700 pieces. Large. It's really, it's really large, you know, and how do I engage with this in a way by making small changes that have lasting effect? You know, because, like, ideally, you know, we'd want them to be returned, but the idea of return is, like, contested, you know, like, who does it return to? Who are these, you know, who wants them, you know? So I stopped thinking about them as artifacts, as like, you know, because all these terms have, like, Western connotations, are deeply rooted in, like, colonial idea of, like, extraction, you know? So, yeah. I mean, and I think that that has shifted how I work with them, which parts of the collection I feel are, you know, the public

can see. I usually, like, only show the public pieces that have been in public circulation. You know, so I don't usually show, or I haven't shown, pieces that have to do with ritual or, you know, things that are very private, you know, that we know, you know, nobody, you know, that they localize within a particular context. But if they were masks that were danced collectively, if they were, you know, things that people use in their everyday life, you know, I would show those. So I think it's just, it's like engaging with the collection in a different way and, you know, yeah. And a more respectful way.

Sameer: That's fascinating. You know, I was just so interested by just that shift really, the shift in language can change so much the way that you relate to these belongings. And I agree. I think what's very exciting that's happening in Canada specifically is how Indigenous pedagogy is fuelling these discussions and giving us different lenses, even within African collections, South Asian collections, about ways of undoing the freezing effect of museums that a lot of Western pedagogy had on artifacts. So this idea of how do we unfreeze museum time, and I think one of them is understanding a sort of animacy, relational quality between objects, greeting objects, speaking to objects, understanding, like, who, which ancestor was sitting beside another. You know, and as you say, like, it's maybe not even these grand gestures of repatriation, which are so rightfully contested. I mean, everything from what I learnt is so much by a case-by-case basis. But it's really about a smaller shift in the daily working, you know, to kind of acknowledge that we have these holdings and how do we go forward now with this new knowledge. And, you know, I think what's interesting is that the lens, or sorry, the attention really falls on conservators, curators, people who are day in and day out working in the museum. Because ultimately their bodies are metabolizing the decisions that were made a century ago. And they're sort of the frontline workers, you know, in terms of dealing with these collections in the present moment. So I think that's always been really interesting. In our film, "The Museum Visits a Therapist", it's a film I made at the Tropen Museum with Mirjam Linschooten. We really focussed on the figure of the museum worker, because what we saw was that a century after the collection was built, their hands continued to shake, they continued to polish and order and clean, and vacuum and mist and wipe. And we saw a lot of those gestures as being these echoes from this initial violence of when the original objects were taken and brought to the Tropen Museum in Amsterdam. So, proposing, you know, how you and Sebastian De Line are working, it's a proposal to actually change the workers' relationship to the ancestors and the workers' relationships to the belongings. And, you know, I think that's deeply interesting because it is the museum worker that is in contact with these collections the most.

Qanita: I mean, I think that for both Sebastian and I, you know, we, like, fundamentally believe that they are lively.

Sameer: Yes.

Qanita: You know, so they're not objects. They're not, you know, like, not only have, you know, are they lively in a way that where, you know, like fundamentally, they exist in a different way to, you know, things that are not alive, but that they, you know, like in many cultures, they are sentient.

Sameer: Yeah.

Qanita: You know, so I think even in the way that you touch them, like, many belongings were not ever intended to be touched because of their potency, you know, so, like carrying that kind of practice over to, like, you know, respect that, you know, is important. And I think, you know, like with your work, the last time you were here and you were working on your bread library, there was, I just, I remember coming into that studio space and you collecting these, like, miles and miles, like, tons of bread that was alive because of the yeast, you know, because of these different components. And then you, like an artist, like, having to take that on, you know? And it's very, it's very much like the kind of thing that we're doing.

Sameer: Yeah.

Qanita: You know, even though it's not growing because of this class A status thing that museums have, you know, our collections don't grow in the same way. But I, you know, like, I find, I found that, like, really interesting. And the fact that you said, like in an interview, a 2024 interview, you said that your dad said that bread is like the newspaper. Which is so, you know, it just carries very deep resonances of, like, community, communication, and, you know, things that you have every day that constitute your very being. But what he meant was that when the baker delivers the bread door to door, he or she also spreads news about the community. So, it's, you know, not only kind of breaking bread in terms of like bringing a community together, but that it also, like, carries communication, you know.

Sameer: Yeah. I'm thrilled that you made this connection. I don't even know if I've made this connection, you know, until now between this one line of sort of making speculative museums and this other line of bread. And bread is indeed a slippery and fugitive object. And I think it can teach us a lot about how things move in the world. So, I think one of the biggest challenges to museology is sort of typologies. And ways of, like, once a story is told and put in a display case, it usually doesn't change for at least 50 or 60 years before, you know, a funding body comes and says, no, we want to refurbish the South Asian wing, or we want to refurbish the Chinese wing. So, the thing that bread teaches us is that it crosses borders and boundaries much more easily than, you know, people or, you know, other sorts of more, let's say, tangible belongings. Because there's something very unthreatening about bread. What I love is thinking about lavash. Like, lavash can move between Armenia and Iran, and it shapeshifts slightly. So, in Armenia, it's very thin and flat. The surface is very

smooth. And then just across the border in Iran, it's also thin, but then it has bubbles, like bubble wrap, like repetitive bubbles because they bake it on a surface that has these sorts of air pockets. So, but it's still lavash, you know? So, you begin to learn that, like, the same thing can have multiple identities or belong to multiple regions, which is not something that a museum ordering system is very comfortable with at all. Instead, you know, what we're seeing is that museums are these enormous, contentious battlegrounds for ownership. You know, I was just at the British Museum and the extent to which China is controlling the narrative of the Silk Road, as opposed to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Iran, Pakistan, whatever, was really startling. But it shows you, you know, where the donors are, you know, in the museum and who has the money to really control the narrative. So back to bread, I think what it also really reminds us of is that it's, you know, as you say, constantly living and growing and changing. And you could see that developing on the surface of the bread with different moles or little dry spots or things becoming, going from being pliable to really breakable and dry. So, you have a bit more of an awareness of it being a living thing. What I also really learnt was that bakers are some of the best sculptors that we have among us, because they have an ability to carry through very distinct forms of embodied knowledge and then translate them into these forms that we can see. So, you know, Afghan naan with these, like, finger scrapes in order to release air and to keep the bread flat, you know, that's been a tradition that has been carried through the bodies of bakers for centuries and then produces this sort of incredible form that's very indigenous to the region. So, you know, for me, what's very exciting about this is that you very much see the maker in the object and you understand because it's like a consumable object, that this idea of embodiment and that your body is meant to consume this bread plays a very vital role in it. So, I think what bread is teaching us is that we have to open up, you know, all of our senses in order to really experience a belonging that's in a museum. And then it's also troubling, this notion of order and categorization, because it moves very rapidly across places. And it also doesn't just move across the next country. So, I found a very similar tandoor-cooked flatbread in Pakistan and in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Mexico. How did that bread get developed? Is there, like, a subterranean portal, you know, that's where this bread form pops up in one country and appears in another? Was there a buried history that we don't know about where there are groups of people from South Asia and the Middle East travelling to the Isthmus in Mexico at a certain time and brought this technology? So, to me, this is like an endlessly fascinating question, and it really draws to question varied histories that can never quite be understood through conventional museum displays.

Qanita: You know, what I find very interesting when you were working with the bread was your positionality as an artist. You know, so you're trying to present the artistry of these loaves, but you're also trying to maintain, like, something of their quality and kind of keep it in a state of status, you know? Because they, and this is just something that I was very struck by, this, like, you know, perpetual kind of trying to keep it together, but having a light touch, but the stuff, you know, the actual stuff is falling apart, you know? Like, how did you,

like, what was the, not your tools, but your material. Like, what was it that actually made it look the way that it did, you know, when it was finally displayed?

Sameer: I think the big turning point, and I think gentle touch is exactly the guiding mantra, because this material was so fragile. Bread naturally will, you know, when you dry it out, will, you know, can be preserved. Flatbreads by nature were meant to be dried so they could be transferred across long distances with nomadic populations and then they could be rehydrated along the way. So, you know, that's why, you know, nomadic populations were not carrying leavened bread. Leavened bread came later in more, like sedentary populations. So, for my process, I was really interested in how breads were displayed in bakeries in Pakistan and Afghanistan, which were these large overlapping curtains around the doorways of the bakeries themselves. So, the bread almost acted as signage saying, like, this is where the bakery is. But what it was doing was, as soon as the breads were coming out of the tandoor, they were put on nails around the doorway and, you know, kind of allowed to air dry and to crisp up. So, there were, you know, multiple functions of doing this. As an artist, what I began to see was that instead of a very taxonomic archive where everything is symmetrical and spaced out in display cases, what this proposed was a woven archive. So, we kind of go more into the logic of textiles and weaving and sort of understanding a world that is really about cross-pollination, edge effects, one edge meeting the other and fusing with another edge. And so, this idea of overlapping the breads on a frame, on almost like a large loom, is what I constructed. That was a deep challenge to sort of the more discrete logic of display in the museum. So, I often describe that piece as a huge, like, woven bread curtain. But that nods to the logic of how bread operates in the world far more than if I were to have taken a very, like, specimen-like approach to collecting the bread.

Qanita: But it holds its body, you know, it doesn't, you nailed it.

Sameer: Yeah. Yeah, there was a lot of trial and error. Yeah, it was a very, very precarious project. But yeah, it looks like we're also going to be erecting it again at the Agnes. So, I'm very excited about that.

Qanita: Yeah, when we reopen, that's going to be great.

Sameer: Yeah.

Qanita: Yeah. I mean, you know, I think, you know, like, Sameer, overall, you, like, I'm struck by the fact that you research your material and your ideas and, you know, everything, like, very deeply. You know, that's just your practice. Your practice is, you know, really, like, deeply grounded in, like, shared knowledges, you know, on the ground through these trips,

you know, that you make as well as just, like, reading. Can you tell me what you're working on currently?

Sameer: Of course. So, it's interesting that you're bringing up the flatbreads as the newspaper, because I'm taking that concept to, I've been asked to do a project with the Madison Square Park Sculpture, Madison Square Park Conservancy Sculpture Program. So, it's a public art program in New York in Madison Square Park. And I'm basically building a flatbread library informed by bakeries and migrations into New York City. But instead of it looking like Toronto, which was like the woven curtain, I'm taking the concept of sort of New York traditionally being a place with all of these news kiosks and newsstands. And I'm building sort of like a flatbread kiosk in the park around this idea of my father's story, that, like flatbreads, really communicate the news, you know, to the population. Within the current US context, I think it's very interesting because a lot of countries that the US is currently in conflict with are also forming, you know, new and very populous flows into the city. So I'm very curious to see how that is reflected in the bakeries that have popped up in different boroughs in New York. And of course, that's news, that's current news as well. And I think the bread will really express that. I'm also a visiting artist at Massey College at University of Toronto. So, I'll be working with the curator and various students on a new project there, which, yeah, I'm sort of really at the outset of figuring out what I'm going to do, but that will probably be unveiled in the fall. And yeah, I'll be sort of presenting some new sculpture at Art Toronto in the fall as well with my gallery, Nicola Robert. I've started making this series of baker's tools, like, casting baker's tools in these sort of stupa-like constellations and almost making these altars to kind of honour bakers for their role in sort of ensuring our survival over the centuries. So, I've created all of these constellations of different baking implements from different countries that I've collected baking implements from. And the funny thing is, and I only learnt this after completing the first round of sculptures, was that my dad told me that our family actually traded kitchen implements along the Silk Road. That was our job. So, my grandfather and my great-uncle used to travel between Shanghai and sort of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, through Pakistan, and sort of shepherding kitchen and baking implements, like, along the Silk Road. So, you know, it's a huge coincidence, but it also kind of tells you that, you know, as an artist, if you really listen to your impulses and sort of what is pulsing through your body, I mean, this is another term in anthropology, habitus. You know, what is that, those sort of directives that are pulsing through your body? You know, something has been telling me to continue working with kitchen goods [laughter].

Qanita: Oh, wow, yeah. And also, it's, yeah, that liveliness of, you know, things.

Sameer: Things, exactly. Exactly, yeah. Yeah.

Qanita: Well, yeah, amazing. Thank you so much, Sameer.

Sameer: Great. Thank you. It's so nice to be back in touch with you around these topics. And I just wanted to thank you also, what an enormous influence you've been on my own thinking. Sincerely.

Qanita: Oh, thank you so much, Sameer. And we'll talk again for sure.

Sameer: Definitely.

Qanita: Thank you. Thank you.

Sameer: Thank you.

Qanita: Thank you. Bye-bye.

Sameer: Bye. Talk soon.

[Music]

Qanita: Thank you for listening to *With Opened Mouths*. Very Special thanks to my guest Sameer Farooq 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.

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[Music]