



## Renluka Maharaj's latest show digs deep into family, home and glitter

Ray Mark Rinaldi / Oct 26, 2019

Renluka Maharaj arrives in Denver via Trinidad and Tobago, but also Brooklyn and Boulder, with a background in Hinduism, but also Christianity, and experience as a photographer, but also a painter.

That is a very brief bio of the artist, of course, but it provides the background you need to engage with "Home, is a Place Called Home," her current solo exhibition at Rule Gallery. The show is built around a series of vintage, black-and-white family photos, enlarged and printed on paper, and then embellished with glitter, gemstones, paint, mirrors, beads and glass.

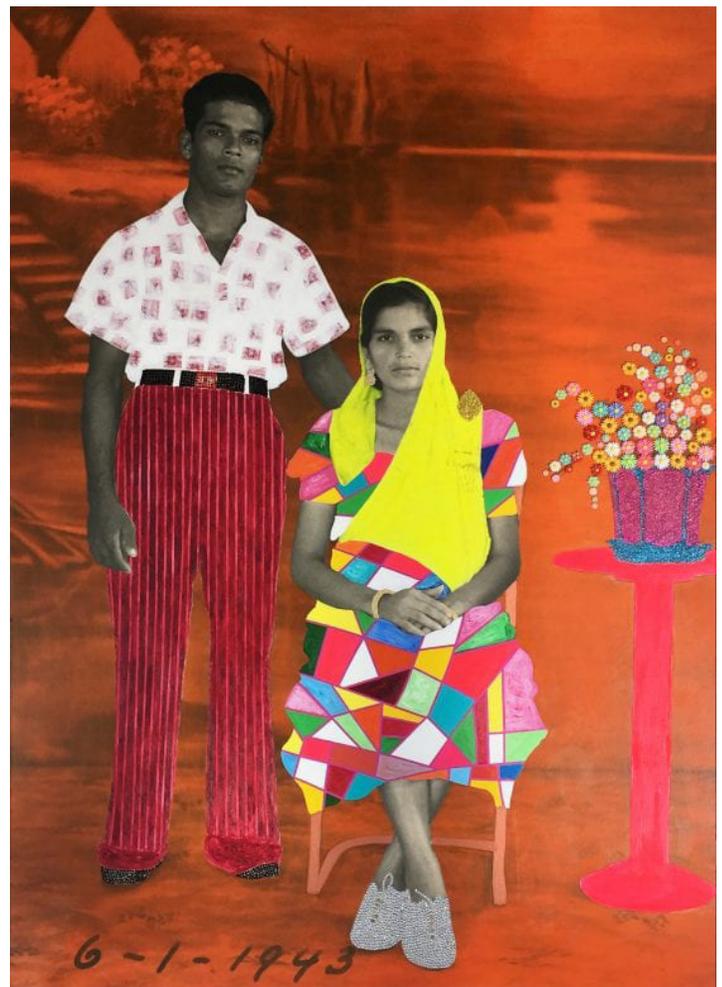
Maharaj's grandparents are in one of the pictures. Others feature her cousins and aunts. One photo is a portrait of her immediate family taken in 1971; her mother and father standing in the center of things, beaming with pride, while her 10 siblings gather around. Maharaj is in the picture, too, but you can only see her outline in the belly of her mother, who was still carrying her at the time.

"It's my autobiography," she said. "This one photo."

But it is part a wider story, of a family originally from India, though brought to Trinidad in the early 20th century at the height of British expansionism. Her grandparents were indentured servants who worked six days a week, 16-hours a day on sugar plantations.

In that way, "Home, is a Place Called Home" is a global tale, crossing continents and encapsulating centuries of colonization and its lingering effects — all in just eight works.

But it's also a personal tale. Within that journey — which stretched from Asia to the Caribbean and ultimately, New York City, where the artist came to live with relatives during her formative years — her family persevered and grew, absorbing traditions of the cultures they encountered along the way.



An embellished photo of Renluka Maharaj's parents is titled "6/1/43, Wong's Studio." Maharaj made it this year from acrylic paint, beads, gemstones and adhesive on a pigmented ink print



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So, while “Home, is a Place Called Home” is backgrounded in some of darker aspects of our not-so-distant social and economic history, it is also a celebration of a clan, steeped in diversity, strengthened by change, bonded by devotion. It is a joyful show.

Maharaj lets the actual, original photos establish the characters in the narrative, but she takes a more artful tact to get at their evolving identity over time. To that large photo of her immediate family, taken a half-century ago in Trinidad, she attaches — on the surface, with glue — various objects that symbolize the things that impacted them.

Her mother gets a crown, a reference to the British imperialism that triggered all that change.

One sister gets shiny bracelets around her knees, a nod to the customs of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean region whose land the family came to inhabit and live among. Other sisters and brothers have their clothing beaded and bejeweled in patterns and colors common to the traditional fashion of India.

Another piece in the exhibit, “Brooklyn Chill,” moves the adventure forward a few decades by starting with a photo of aunts and cousins in the living room of the Brooklyn house that Maharaj occupied with them. There is a clash of cultures built into the scene: people of color firmly established in white America and Westernized with hairstyles and clothing, circa the 1980s.



Artist Renluka Maharaj. (Ray Mark Rinaldi, Special to The Denver Post)



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But Maharaj adds another layer that reminds them of their Indian roots. To one aunt's dress, she adds a row of beads creating a shiny, gold belt. To one cousin's skirt, she layers on a pattern of ripe, fresh mangoes, the national fruit of India.

By intermingling cultural symbols, Maharaj removes the photos from any exact place or time and prohibits us from attaching easy geographic or ethnic labels to the people in them. In several of the pieces, she even blocks out the background of the photo with a wash of acrylic paint, a move that erases the specifics of location and asks viewers to consider them world travelers rather than citizens of any certain political state.

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The artworks, too, exist somewhere in the middle of easy categorization. They are, at their core, photography, though Maharaj moves them into a different realm with her embellishments, into something closer to painting or collage. They still retain their essence as photo portraits — that is to say, they capture a scene set some distance in front a machine we call a camera.

But the glitter and gemstones move the attention to the surface. You consume these pictures in the same way you consume an oil painting because of their hand-rendered quality. In the local art scene, Maharaj is thought of as a photographer, best-known for elaborately staged studio shots that address identity, sexuality and gender, but "my first love was painting, for sure," she said.

Like a painter, she puts in the time it takes to get things right. Her bead and gemstone work is meticulous, and her references to multiple cultures spot-on and well-researched. The finely tuned embellishments are the thing that actually elevates this work from collage and craft to gallery-level art.

And they look terrific at Rule Gallery — which, by the way, recently changed locations, moving a few blocks north to 808 Santa Fe Drive, formerly the home of 808 Gallery.

Rule has been around since 1991, and has made its home at probably a half-dozen spaces over the years, though this new location, with its high ceilings and excellent visibility in the Santa Fe Arts District, will enable it to do more over time. Introducing Renluka Maharaj to a wider public is a good first move.



"Tante Gulab With Her Sons" acrylic paint, beads, gemstone embellishments, and adhesive on pigmented ink print