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I Was India: Embroidering Exoticism

September 29, 2020

Kira Dominguez Hultgren at San Jose Museum of
Quilts & Textiles

by Shilpa Shah

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homespun marigold and primitive rust; mixed yarn blends from the U.S., U.K., and Canada; Indian cotton; Chinese silk; climbing gym rope from Berkeley Ironworks; found wooden frame bars and stakes; cam straps and D-rings. Photo Courtesy of the Artist.

[Kira Dominguez Hultgren](#), a Bay Area-based textile artist whose multicultural background is represented in her work, takes an anthropological approach in her weaving. Not only is her woven work indicative of her family's cultural history, it also reveals themes of identity, colonialism, evolution, migration, and exoticism. Dominguez Hultgren focuses her work on the global migration of textile patterning, which is internalized by the history of her family's migration.

Dominguez Hultgren's grandmother, Lawhail (Kikume) Johal, was born and raised in Hawaii. Although she was the daughter of a half-Black, half-White mother and an Indian father, she grew

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Records on the U.S. Census sheet also show Kikume’s “Color or Race” selection crossed out twice—first marked as “Neg” for Negro and another time possibly, but unclearly, marked as “Fil” for Filipino. Either way, both crossed out selections with no alternative suggest a negation of his racial identity. This further leads Dominguez Hultgren to question if Hollywood is responsible for authoring her uncle and grandmother’s Hawaiian identities.

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Oakland Native, 2019. 38 x 29 x 1 in. Digital-hand loomed cotton, rayon, metallic threads, and sea grass cordage.
Photo Courtesy of the Artist.

Exemplified by Lawhail (Kikume) Johal and Al Kikume, different cultural identities are perceived, performed, represented, and consumed in various ways depending on the individual. In the subsequent generation, Dominguez Hultgren's mother, Lakshmi Johal Dominguez, was selected to represent India in the opening ceremony for *It's a Small World* in 1966. Not only did she ride in the first boat with Walt Disney as part of the

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role as a weaver, however, provides Dominguez Hultgren with the opportunity of figuratively weaving “generational ends and beginnings... reinventions and redeterminations” (Dominguez Hultgren 2019).

[*I Was India: Embroidering Exoticism*](#) includes six woven pieces by Dominguez Hultgren—each representing her elaborate family history by including a range of mediums. Using two Punjabi *phulkaris* (embroidered pieces historically worn with traditional clothing) embroidered by her aunt Dalip Kaur (Johal) Bains in 1925 as her starting point, Dominguez Hultgren is able to add her own voice to her preexisting family history—a history that was somewhat covered through exoticism. She is not only resurrecting her aunt’s traditional work but also starting a map of her family’s migration.

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Horizon Lines, 2020. 86 x 42 x 7 in.

Discontinuous embedded substitutional warp-faced double weave with found wood and metal loom bars left in place; silk from artist's grandmother's and artist's own childhood Punjabi suits; backstrap in cotton jersey sourced from India and Joann's fabrics; climbing rope (Berkeley Iron Works); hand/machine spun yarns in wool, alpaca, silk, acrylic, and other novelty fibers. Photo Courtesy of the Artist.

With one such piece, *Horizon Lines*, Dominguez

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sometimes placed on the ground. Rather, her nontraditionally shaped work is meant to be held up in non-neutral spaces, where the themes prevalent in her work are able to be openly presented and understood. Her work consists of pieces that are interventions of different weaving styles, patterns, and fabrics that explore cultural identity, colonialism, migration, and exoticism.

Shilpa Shah is a graduate student at San Jose State University pursuing her MA in Applied Anthropology. She is also an intern at San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles working closely with curators Amy DiPlacido and Samantha Lyons to develop a virtual exhibition in conjunction with Dominguez Hultgren's on-site exhibition *I Was India: Embroidering Exoticism*.

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