



WALLACH ART GALLERY

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Practice and Process Uptown Triennial 2020 Edition

Artists:

Priyanka Dasgupta and Chad Marshall

Moderator:

Jennifer Mock, Associate Director, Education and Public Programs, Wallach Art Gallery

TRANSCRIPT

Jennifer Mock: Hi everyone, my name is Jennifer Mock and I'm the Associate Director for Education and Public Programs at the Wallach Art Gallery. Today I'm joined by two of the artists that are represented in the *Uptown Triennial 2020* Edition.

We have with us this afternoon, Priyanka Dasgupta and Chad Marshall. And what we do as we do with all Practice and Process Programs and conversations that we have with artists is it's an opportunity for us to hear directly from artists about their work and about their process of making and also their practices as artists and really kind of what informs the work that they do. So I want to welcome you both and thank you so much for joining us for this for this conversation.

And I guess kind of just to get a going maybe, broad strokes, tell us a little bit about your work and what is involved in your practice before we dive into the work in the exhibition.

Priyanka Dasupta: Thank you so much for having us. We're super excited to be in the show. It's a really exciting exhibition. We had a chance last week to spend some time there in person, which was really nice to see how the work kind of relates to all the other artists and the Harlem Renaissance. In terms of our practice, we both started collaborating, we had an individual practice for about a decade before we started collaborating together officially in 2015—I'm sorry, the baby's getting a little vocal.

Jennifer Mock: It's okay.

Priyanka Dasupta: What brought the collaboration together naturally was, I was doing my MFA at the time and I was researching Bengalis who passed as Black in the early 20th century. And we're both in our individual practices been feeling limited by the impositions of the art world on artists of color, which there's always this expectation that you're kind of like an ambassador for your culture. So it's like as a South Asian artist, is your work South Asian enough and is your work Black enough? And what's your typically those things down to, and both of us were frustrated by that expectation and resisted that in our own work. And so this trespassing history created a really nice opportunity for us to think about our own hybrid upbringing in and histories

and find a way to collaborate in order to extend that resistance to being imposed into our pigeonhole practice. And create that resistance to celebrating this hybrid history where Indians passed as Black in order to determine the laws against Asian immigration in the U.S. at the time.

Jennifer Mock: And you talked a little bit, you've mentioned a little bit about the hybrid history and the word history is in terms of in relation to the collaboration that you have as artists working together and kind of how you found this affinity, if you will, to broaden the context for talking about art. I thought I'd use that as kind of a jumping off point because history is something that really comes to mind when I think about the work that's in the exhibition and that work is *Pigeonhole* and what I'm going to do now is I'm going to share my screen and just what I thought we could do is maybe just kind of dive into talking about it a little bit and the title of the work I think is something that's very striking. To me *Pigeonhole* has so many connotations. I feel the restrictiveness of that and it was something that I think you kind of even alluded to when you were talking a little bit about kind of the collaboration and kind of what that moment gives. Maybe tell us a little bit about the title of the work and history, its relationship to *Pigeonhole*.

Priyanka Dasupta: In terms of the title, we went back and forth for a while because there is that awareness of that restriction within the story of the jazz musician who was being celebrated for his career and his survival. But it was important for us to draw attention to the fact that bodies of color have always been hidden. If they were able to be visible, they always been able to be visible and specific restrictions that were imposed upon them by the mainstream culture of the time. Even though this is a celebration of the character Bobby Alam and the larger history of Bengalis passing as Black, it's also an acknowledgment and a call to awareness of the fact that these bodies were only able to be visible under these restrictions that at some level pigeonhole them into being able to perform and be able to be recognized and be visible for their skill but only within specific performative genres.

Chad Marshall: We wanted to make this work that you know an underlying theme of the work is, you know, a person is presented identity and how that constrains a person, an individual, you know, we have Bobby, who is emblematic of this Bengali experience of coming to America and being viewed and seen as Black and being treated as Black and him having to navigate that space and him coming to America to attain freedoms. But, and he having to, because he's being viewed as Black and the restraints that were placed, that society had placed on Blacks that, you know, in order for him to fully achieve the freedoms that we wanted, you know, he had to be a certain type of Black. He had to take on this onus of the performer, you know, as, as entertainers having more latitude in a Jim Crow South in early 20th Century America.

Priyanka Dasupta: So the freedoms themselves are conditional.

Jennifer Mock: Freedoms themselves are conditional. And to be clear, because I think that some of the questions that we fielded from visitors when experiencing the work in asking who is Bobby Alam that Bobby Alam is not, he's a composite, right? He's not an actual person, but his,

he's a, he represents the experiences or the experience of Bengalis in entering into the country? Is that, I just wanted to to be really specific, just for, for folks to understand.

Chad Marshall: Yeah, because Bobby is a composite character, you know, kind of like in a movie when you have this character who's kind of the merger of different things and his character exists to offer a viewpoint, or to allude to things that would be too complicated otherwise. So, you know, we wanted to draw attention to this experience, this Bengali American experience. And we wanted, we didn't want to necessarily, you know, to fictionalize a real person, that you know, that these experiences, you know, and we didn't, we didn't also want to be purely seen as historians and relating this to his story. We wanted to have, you know, the latitude that comes with a composite character to have references to larger ideas and to have a little bit more say over how, the points that we were making is he is based on an actual individual to a certain extent.

Priyanka Dasupta: So there's a book called *Bengali Harlem* that really beautifully traces by the big ball, at the beautiful traces the history of Bengalis passing as Black during this time. But the book also, if you read the book, you realize that excuses that will be done so much research to get into the histories of these individuals, but they're still so fragmented. And so you start to think about like what histories are recorded, what histories are forgotten, what are deliberately marginalized because they're not convenient to be thought about as existing at the time. And so in order to this story, we also wanted to create like an archive that would be, that would be, that would speak to the kind of extensive archiving and extensive archives that exist around performers that are recognized. But we, in order to do that we would have to fabricate information because these histories themselves were so fragmented and not recorded the way they should have been. And so we didn't want to impose information onto an actual life that was lived, and, but we wanted to point to that life. So in order to do that, the best thing to do would have was to create this fictional character that becomes a composite of all of these other fragmented individual stories that then can be as complicated and complex as we want it to be. But then also point to this history that could have been recorded in that kind of complexity if the history was deemed as important.

Jennifer Mock: The complexity of the history and if it were deemed that important. I wonder if we could talk a little bit more about and talking about this complicated history, how this history is constructed and how history is constructed how it's represented and the choices that are made in creating the composite of Bobby Alam, and here we just have a detail of *Pigeonhole* that we're seeing, maybe talk a little bit about the archive and its role. The choices that you made in terms of constructing, is it the archive that you constructed around Bobby Alam or is it that you've looked to the archive?

Priyanka Dasupta: I think it's both like I don't know how to answer this question without like putting on my educator hat.

Jennifer Mock: Please do.

Priyanka Dasupta: Haha, so I always like when I talk to my students, we talk about like archive with a capital “A” versus our time for the small “a”, like archive with a capital “A” is like thinking about writers like Foucault and a number and thinking about like the state like the archive as the, as a state sanctioned way of reporting history, which is always, always prefers the victor. So the archive is compiled and constructed by those that are in power at the time that I was happening but archiving with a small has become increasingly a more well known way of contemporary artists and contemporary thinkers and writers to talk back to history. Well, things like pyofiction and oral histories and storytelling, all of that plays a really important, stories passed down from generation to generation through word of mouth focus on those play a very significant role in popping back to that official repository of the state or the official archive with a capital A, which speak more to the individual experiences of people who have not been remembered the same way as the official archive deemed it important based on their convenience to be. And so that is how we deal with the archive as well, like our construction of bodies archive is a resistance in itself to the state sanctioned official archives and what they contain and the methods with which they're compiled as well. So we also look to a lot of other contemporary artist practices in terms of archiving. Like Walid Ron and Sophie Carr, who have these really beautiful ways of archiving and also critiquing the system of the archive within the work as well.

Jennifer Mock: In visualizing, and thank you for making that distinction, I think it's a really important context to make because you can, it opens up another layer of when you're experiencing the piece, how the archive with a little A is rejecting and questioning the archive with the capital A to a certain degree. I wonder if we could talk a little bit about this visualizing of an archive. And here what I thought maybe and if there's another example, or another way of, of kind of looking at the work that as we, kind of, if we were to, if we were in the gallery and we were walking around the work, the view that we see here as we would enter, this is how you would first encounter the piece. And so I'm curious to hear a little bit about the elements that make up the installation itself. And I'm really curious about this juxtaposition like these two spaces, one that suggests an interior and one that's an exterior and kind of, how do you see, how to, how does this function and how do you, how do you see it reading in telling the story of Bobby Alam.

Chad Marshall: Well, you know, as Priyanka was pointing out, you know, we wanted to have that, to the big “A” little “a” with archive and so we also looked at the way that you know archives are presented, mainly in museums like Smithsonian and other institutions and how they present, you know, historical records and you know the interactive aspects of those installations. So we wanted to for this show we, and *Pigeonhole* in general, we wanted to use the private and personal and public spaces of Bobby and present that. And this is a miniature version of some of the earlier installations that we've done and using the juke joint a Southern as the musical establishment that was common and during that era. And we wanted to make nod towards the juke joint and to have his performance area, the exterior of the club and his backstage area. So his public and his private areas and to deconstruct those areas and to have those areas presented in a way that you know people enter, you know.

Jennifer Mock: Sorry, I was really structured when you were talking about how the work for the presentation was conceived for the Wallach, because even how it's placed in the gallery space, the outside or the exterior, if you will, is this, right? Is it's actually what's facing the window. And what is made visible and what you know the largest broadest public will see but it's this contrast the structure, the what is inside and what's within. I think it's really, it's really interesting and I know you had mentioned, and when I was doing some reading, I know that *Pigeonhole* has been presented in other venues in different configurations, because there's a certain degree about, is it accurate to say there's a certain degree of adaptation that occurs for the site? And maybe you've already answered this, but for this and for this presentation in particular, was there a certain, was there something that you really wanted to really focus on or to really kind of call out more that distinguishes it, this presentation from perhaps other venues when it's been seen?

Chad Marshall: Yeah, our work is site specific and one of the things that we know in our installations, is that we want them to be a certain amount of physical interaction that you know that that you are aware of the physical space that you're entering and that plays a role. Um, and, you know, understanding, getting across the concept of the work. So the other installations, we also wanted to deal with this in the via the space construction to be an extension of the title, of the pigeonhole and the pigeon coop. So pigeon coops have a certain design, they have a certain layout, certain elements with the from the chicken wire screen window of this establishment to the overlapping boxes. So we wanted to kind of give a sense that this is just one corner of a larger pigeon coop, a larger box. You have different corners, you have different boxes come together to make different pigeonholes that come together to make this larger pigeon coop that you know Bobby, again being pigeonholed and so he has his public space. He has his private space of backstage, the public place where he is performing.

Jennifer Mock: Maybe we could talk a little bit about the the backstage, or what perhaps a visitor might read is the backstage? I was curious to kind of maybe just take this apart a little bit and not to be like, so like pedantic, like in this piece and this piece, etc. But how did these elements ... How do they all kind of relate to each other and, in particular, I'm really curious about the juxtaposition that occurs in the corner and maybe just talking a little bit about that?

Priyanka Dasupta: Yeah, sure, just to kind of go back to your earlier question. There's also, I mean, I was thinking a lot about the placement and the gallery looking down onto the Cotton Club... Now, not the original location, but it's also interesting to kind of like imagine the windows open and you can see you're looking at this pigeonhole and then you're kind of diagonally looking down past the Cotton Club in its current iteration. So that's also kind of interesting in terms of the site itself, for us in terms of the, this corner that that we're looking at right now and the elements in it, a lot of, well there's like within this painting itself, a lot of the paintings or images of Bobby and this is an image of Bobby's would be Bobby's like friends or jazz band members, how would you sitting relaxing in Bolinas and kind of talking or just hanging out. But all of these images of his band members of himself, all of his family members are (indecipherable) from an archive that was compiled by the British. There was a finological volume of, eight volumes of many, many images and text that label the people of India that was

compiled to assemble and like photograph and assemble all the different tribes and people groups of people in India by the British administration to be able to more effectively control them and colonize them while they will be while they were colonized. And it was later found out that a lot of these images were constructed and they were actors who were hired and posed into these compositions to represent these so called roofs and and native tribes of the people of India. And so we started to think about the construction in photography and that construction also plays out into like the way that we construct the images in order to give away small clues and subtle clues as to the fact that Bobby himself is a construct and so this portrait, is it kind of takes on the role of like this celebrated portrait of a group of people or a specific individual but then if you look at the composition, you notice that there's a top of like what would have been a label giving away information as to who these people are, that has been obscured, but also that the top of the label is visible to the way the framing is done, it also gives me some information as to the fact that this is an appropriated text or an appropriate image and then it's the same like this appropriation that happens within the video as well. There's the juxtaposition between images from sounds from the 40s that was essentially the earliest forms of music videos are one with Fats Waller in it. And juxtaposed with images of Bobby performing in his studio are Bobby's home videos and rehearsal tapes in order to insert Bobby into this history through this use of appropriation and through this use of juxtaposition to create an archive that situates this character within the history that he live in.

Jennifer Mock: And are these, I just put up on the screen a couple of stills from the videos that accompany, there are two films that are part of the installation. For *The Unforgettable Bobby Alam* these stills that are here, these are records, are these records of immigration or records of record books?

Priyanka Dasupta: Um, yeah, these are the, so in terms of the two videos, *The Unforgettable Bobby Alam* is essentially an introduction to the Bobby and his, instructing his identity on him kind of figuring himself out and arriving and then the second video that's on the other side, which is *If the Suit Fits*.

Jennifer Mock: Yep, exactly.

Priyanka Dasupta: So *If the Suit Fits* the video is essentially a more like a look into Bobby performing or taking on that performative role where he finds a way to perform without ever showing his face but still be visible within that time period. So one of the aspects of that video, particularly is that even when you see Bobby, you don't ever see his face. Why you see the face, faces and the expressions and exotic specifically like the exaggerated expressions of the other performers that have been visualizing the video of a well known at the time. So as that resistance as well. Like, can Bobby be visible on his own terms and refuse to be seen. Or be seen without giving into those expectations of, of the kind of character to risk performance. Performance that is expected off of Black bodies at the time. And then the first video, which is *The Unforgettable Bobby Alam*, it includes ship records from Ellis Island. And specifically closes in on us on the ship that Bobby came on, which arrived in Ellis Island in February in 1918. And so this is the ship record from that ship and then the sculptural bust that you see on the right

side is another still of essentially what is, what could be Bobby's head, bust of Bobby's head, but it's made out of black soap. So we were also thinking about making, well we're thinking that like a hair plays a big role within this narrative as well. And I think it would make more of a appearance in future work, but we were also thinking about conk and like hair straighteners and how Black performers would straighten their hair in order to appear more appealing to the white audiences. And so we wanted to essentially experiment with making Bobby's bust out of conk. And so we started experimenting with making it out of black soap initially because that's how conk would be stabilized by mixing it with elements of also and while we were doing that in the studio, it was really hot and the soap started sweating on its own, and people called this very animated way of tearing up and sweating and so that action kind of took on the tension of like how we imagine like what was happening inside Bobby's head or the tension of performing or the tension of passing or the tension of taking on this other identity that was kind of manifested within the sweating and the tearing up of the bust itself. And so that became a part of this video, that documentation of that tearing up became a part of this video as a as a nod to that.

Jennifer Mock: Thank you.

Priyanka Dasgupta: I was really rambling.

Jennifer Mock: No, no, thank you. Because that really, actually, I was struck by there's a real tension in the, I keep advancing (the images) the wrong way. There's a real tension in in the face and so when you share that, I bet it was like the light bulb that went off for me, it really it really captures the tension that's there in passing. And the other thing it also made me think about as you kind of walked us through the elements of of this portion of the installation is that feelings of comfort or feelings of just being feeling safe to be yourself. It just made me think about one's interior life and their exterior life and kind of when do we allow ourselves to be ourselves? Where do we feel our safest but at the same time, how we're shaped and formed by things that are sometimes beyond our control. Sorry, I'm going off on a tangent.

Priyanka Dasupta: I think that's totally true.

Chad Marshall: Yeah, I mean, we certainly wanted to highlight or make nods to the private and the public, you know, that certainly comes across in the soup that's been his rehearsal space, I mean his backstage area. The suit itself, the interior of the suit has a map of the world and it shows the path that he he took to come to go from Calcutta, India, to New York and to America and it highlights, the map is of the various shipping routes that the British Navy, Merchant Navy used at the time, and within the various merchant routes, which are in arms, there is a golden path of the various shifts that he worked on, or he jumped in between to get from Calcutta to America. You know, as a personal reminder from where he's come from and it's also done in the Bengali selling technique of Calcutta and that you know use to decorate a suit to kind of, add a reminder of his heritage and to what his personal thing and did something he did wear and keep them comfortable and his public sphere.

Priyanka Dasupta: Yeah. And so the, um, I think, also, like, it's really nice that you brought it up because you made me think more clearly about the private and the public within the installation itself. The images that we're looking at right now allude to Bobby's dressing room, which is essentially more of his private space, which is why the video that's in that space also points to a more private musing like a mental kind of reflection that's much introverted and a lot more personal. And then this is the space where you see reveal the map that's inside, like in the lining of the suit that Bobby wears close to his skin. Whereas on the other side, which is his performance space or his rehearsal performance space, you see his more public side so you see him dancing in the suit but you don't see the rider on the inside of the suit. You see a very formal portrait of his band members that have been in very like traditional like zoot suits performances, with zoot suits sitting around seemingly during a performance or in between like you're in again. So it's a lot more public, there's a lot more public space while this side is a lot more private and you see like the suitcases that his personal belongings. Every one of them is open and you can see into some of his private artifacts and so there is definitely that that kind of juxtaposition of a private space in a public space within this construction as well.

Jennifer Mock: I'm really struck with *Pigeonhole* and how it's presented at the Wallach. The, the suitcases. The poignance of that and the objects that one takes when you, when making that journey. And sometimes the those the objects that are placed in what you choose to carry with you in that suitcase, physical belongings. You can tell become in many ways a means of telling your story. I thought it was just really, it's really poignant and the map itself that detail really speaks too. I wonder just about the mirror too, there's also that sense of confronting oneself, which I think you know for visitors also kind of seeing that, it's kind of where do you, I think you both kind of lightly touched on this about the visitor a little bit. I'm curious, just to hear a little bit more. What is it that, what's the role of the visitor in the work itself?

Priyanka Dasupta: Well the role of the visitor definitely is kind of like there is a sense of play within the work itself. Like it is an archive being built but also within the structure and the placement that is this interactive quality where you feel when you're visiting the space that you could potentially put the suit on, you could pick up the guitar and, like, sit down and strum on it. And so there is that kind of invitation to perform as well, or at least like become aware of one's own, like the mask that we put on for the ways in which we perform in public and private spaces and and how we distinguish between the two. And so there the mirror itself like has like extends that playfulness where you are, I mean there is like that the obviousness of the mirror in the dressing room where the performer is in front of which the performer is getting ready. But in this case. The visitor also sees himself or themselves in that same mirror and are able to imagine themselves, putting on the items of clothing that have been placed and left behind in the space and then potentially walking to the more public space, picking up the guitar and engaging in a performance.

Yeah, so that the reflecting like for the intention of reflecting on our own passing and also the really wide way in which passing exists in contemporary culture or in culture, or in day-to-day living. Because I mean the work talks to a specific history of the Bengalis passing as Black but the installation itself and the way that it interacts with the viewer, speaks to a much larger

context of how we are passed in various different ways in order to survive within the impositions that are placed upon our bodies on a day-to-day basis.

So I've had students talk about like passing as straight or passing as an academic or like a lot of times we talk about like feeling not like not imposters but like having imposter syndrome. Again, the academic environment like as an artist and you're just like expected to function on these very different roles and multiple levels of teaching. Well teaching sometimes like feels like therapy and and you have, you end up with imposter syndrome and you're like, I'm just an artist, like, I don't know how to do this, but you have to like sit there and you pass right and so like passing takes on so many different ways as we kind of navigate day-to-day life. So we wanted to make sure that the viewer had a way to relate to the work on a personal level and not just see it from a distance of, like, oh, this is a documentation of a history that I don't know anything about and I'm learning a little bit about now.

Jennifer Mock: So powerful. That was one of the things I was thinking about-- it's historical, it's drawing upon our, kind of drawing upon a history that is not often referenced and has been not widely recorded and you're bringing it into the into the contemporary, into the present in the now and the mirror, I think, is just a really powerful way of doing that because when we look in any mirror, we see our own likeness but we also have to confront things as long. I think it kind of touches a little bit on you know the imposter syndrome or or or just whatever it is that you're holding inside as you try to pass. It's yeah it's profound it's, it really is. Another thing, just when we were, we've kind of during the course of this conversation we've touched on, on the word passing and what that means. And I was just wanted to ask, and I know in other interviews you've been very forthright about this, but just wanted for this interview as well then passing for, and for Bobby Alam and for Bengalis who lived in Black communities were they, they might have been read by larger society, white society, as being Black but within Black communities, were they passing or were they understood to be Bengali?

Priyanka Dasupta: No they were understood as Bengali. They were embraced by the communities and essentially forgotten by the communities and were able to survive in the United States, and because they were embraced by these communities and were able to live. So that, which is why like their families ended up having these very hybrid lives were I mean a lot of the, like historically like some of the stories are about the women who married these Bengali men and they talk a lot about the influences of Indian food that came into their communities through them and then the access to a lot of Indian fabric and textiles that that they brought with them into the communities to create and then that kind of influenced and colored the way that their own food and culture and and clothing was designed and so circulated. And so there was a mutual sense of camaraderie and opportunity.

Chad Marshall: Yeah, and I think it's something that's lost in that you know that the Black community in America, you know, America certainly has historically has been a binary, you're either white or you are Black. So, those that, you know, did not really fit on the white scale, you know what would be absorbed as part of the Black community. So it wasn't just purely Indians from Asia, you know, you had Native Americans. Historically, who, in order to not be to be

ostracized, and to lose their lands and to be sent out less the various programs to be put on reservations, you know, live their lives as Black or married into Black families. But you know their, their history was preserved or was was known. So I think, you know, in some sense, you know, Black is a kind of a catch all for other experiences, particularly in America and that those communities, you know, the Black community has had to be robust and to be accepting because of the various variations that you know encompasses whether you're, you know, you're from Central America is Black, or from the Caribbean or American or you're coming from Africa. When you come to America, whatever distinctions that you may have those distinctions would have disappeared. In fact, your dark skin, your brown skin or not tail and we're just going to lump you up altogether.

Jennifer Mock: Now, the other thing I just wanted to mention is that the *Uptown Triennial* this year, in particular for this edition it coincides with the set of years that marks the centennial of the Harlem Renaissance. And one of the questions that we've been asking artists from the exhibition is we think about the Harlem Renaissance and its Centennial for what, what is the Harlem Renaissance represent to you?

Chad Marshall: Certainly it was a big aspects in my own personal artistic education. Going to an HBCU, took a year off and went to the University of Maryland and work with David Driscoll, and his roles in African art history and promoting it and collecting it and you know the various artists were certainly an influence on my earlier work and kind of develop my own artistic outlooks. So you know it's certainly something that's always in the back of my mind and certainly know some things that we kind of draw, drew on in the designing of the playbills and aspects when we were creating Bobby and how we would put, wanted to create works that involve Bobby. There's this work with the German artists, can't remember it's Weisz with know that he has those constructed bodies, but you know, you have the detailed Black faces. And so they know that something that you know we looked at, and I know that something that you know plays in the back and how we constructed with the paintings and the images of Bobby and his bandmates. And Aaron Douglas and just, you know, just all of them. I mean, it's just, it's and even artists that came afterwards. You know, it's something that you know I drew upon and look to in the layout. So it was certainly great to be in this show and to be able to acknowledge you know some of the aspects, you know that you don't normally talk about when you're talking about contemporary art, you tend to, your influences you tried to keep the things that, you know, people might be more aware of and more recent but, you know, certainly the artists to share that space with those Renaissance artists who, you know, were have been an influence has been a great honor.

Jennifer Mock: I think at this point, I would say if we were in the gallery. I would be thanking everyone for coming and hearing you both speak about the work you've both been really generous with your time. I want to thank you for doing that Priyanka Dasgupta and Chad Marshall, artists for the Uptown Triennial 2020. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Priyanka Dasgupta: Thank you, thank you so much.

Chad Marshall: Thank you.