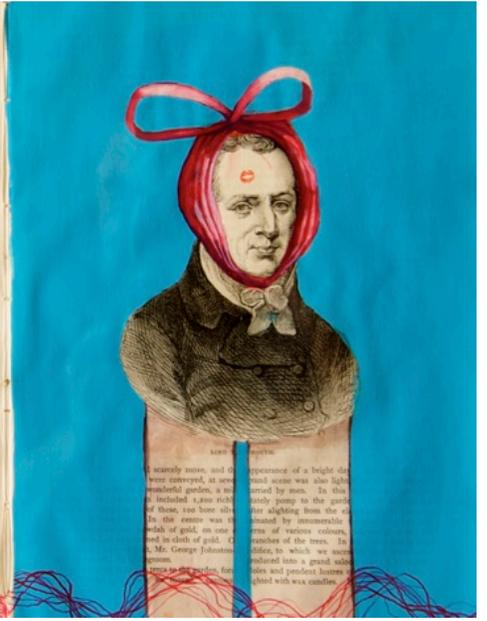
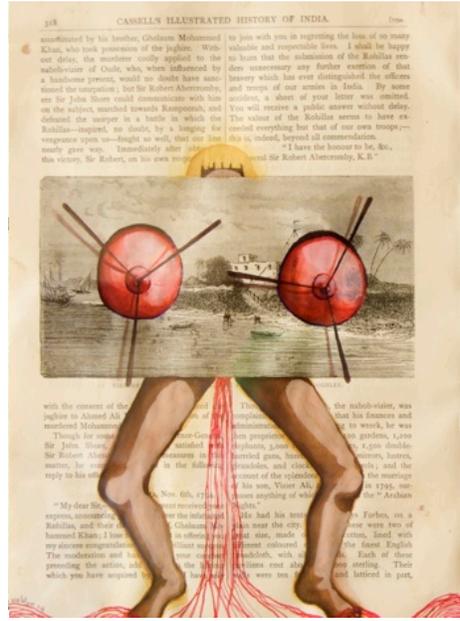


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Contemporary Visual Culture



Projects in the Making... DECONSTRUCTION TIME: RAJKAMAL KAHLON'S DIY CHIC

In a new spin on deconstruction, Rajkamal Kahlon transforms the pages of history by re-sequencing the pages of books and painting directly over the existing text and illustrations. Kahlon cleverly combines paint with the printed image and text, simultaneously incorporating, reinventing and critiquing the original book's content with her own interventions.

Kahlon considers the initial process of seeking out and purchasing the rare book to be an integral part of her latest series of works, "Cassell's Illustrated History of India Project," and included documents of the sale as part of the first exhibition of paintings from the series at White Box New York, in 2003. Kahlon purchased a nineteenth-century copy of *Cassell's Illustrated History of India* at auction from Sotheby's. The book, for which Kahlon paid four hundred dollars, is a twelve hundred-page, two-volume history of India, from the establishment of the British East India Company in the seventeenth century to the declaration of Queen Victoria as the Empress of India in 1877. The book's detailed accounts of battles, military stratagems and tales of native barbarism are told from the colonial and Orientalist perspective of British historian James Grant.

Kahlon, who was born in 1974 and raised in northern California, removed the pages from the book with a knife and painted over the text and image, often combining multiple pages to create one work. Her gouaches expose the violence underlying the original histories through recurring motifs—bandaged figures, imperial stars and distorted and sutured bodies—all rendered in the jarringly disjunctive jewel-tones of an illustrated manuscript or Persian miniature. Strings of pearls, bandages, pink ribbons and ropes dotted with nooses loop through the images like a new narrative thread that comments on the pathology of the colonial prejudice in the pages. Many of the images possess an exaggerated, disturbing eroticism in the form of brown-skinned women, replete with leafy headdresses and sneakers, who are burdened by oversized Venus of Willendorf suits of flabby, pink flesh. The suits' immense breasts have fire-barrel nipples that lactate profusely or sprout Vaudevillian signs reading, "BANG!" or "POW!"

This series is as much about today as it is about the effects of yesterday's history, a point that is brought home by the recent piece, *Public Instruction* (2004), in the "Cassell's" series. The now-iconic image of the hooded Abu Ghraib prisoner balanced on a box appears in one corner of the image on a page of text poignantly titled "Public Instruction." Below the figure, painted over a partially obscured map and suspended by its hair, is disembodied pink flesh suit with a teeth-lined orifice across its belly. The head of George W. Bush, tethered with ropes, appears on another page. Through the paint on the crown of his head, we glimpse the text relating the tale of a "King Dethroned." The recurring strands of pearls and ropes link the figures in this brilliantly colored, violent web.

Kahlon views the works in the "Cassell's" series as forming a new, fractured narrative. She hopes ultimately to bring the project full circle by compiling her page interventions into a new manuscript with re-sequenced and re-formatted pages to create a re-structured narrative, published as a book to be distributed beyond that of the gallery system. —Kristin Poor

KRISTIN POOR is a writer living in New York.

- Rajkamal Kahlon—IT ALL STARTED WITH SOMEONE'S LIE I (2004) GOUACHE ON 19TH-CENTURY BOOKPAGES (CASSELL'S ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF INDIA, C.1875), 30 X 21 INCHES COURTESY OF ARTIST
- Rajkamal Kahlon—GREY SKIES ARE GONNA CLEAR UP (2004) GOUACHE ON 19TH-CENTURY BOOKPAGES 10 X 14 INCHES COURTESY OF ARTIST