

Atreyee Gupta: Professor of Art History by Amy Zhong

This is the 150W podcast and I'm your host, Amy Zhong, a 4th year undergraduate student double majoring in Art History and Molecular and Cell Biology. In celebration of the 150th anniversary of women at UC Berkeley, I'll be interviewing Professor Atreyee Gupta, Assistant Professor of Global Modern Art and South and Southeast Asian Art in the History of Art Department at Cal. Her area of expertise is Global Modernism, with a special emphasis on the global aesthetic from the twentieth century onwards. Professor Gupta has published numerous essays in



established journals and is presently completing her book. Affiliated with the Institute for South Asia Studies and Center for Southeast Asia Studies, Professor Gupta teaches courses on modern and contemporary Asian and Asian American art and architecture.

In this interview, we discuss a humorous undergraduate occurrence that has led Professor Gupta to modern art, her experiences as a South Asian faculty at UC Berkeley and everything art history!

Why did you choose to study art history? Did you study art history as an undergrad?

Interestingly enough, I did study art history in college. I came to art history very early, in high school. It had something to do with my upbringing. My father was a musician and my mother was a professor, who had a very broad interest in art. I grew up among musicians and artists, so it was a very organic interest. Even my babysitters were all artists. Sometimes I would be left in an art studio for the day, where I'd play with the paint. However, I never wanted to be an artist and was more interested in art history, since it had something to do with vision. It's not that I liked art for art's sake. I wasn't interested in art because it was beautiful, but was more interested in **what it meant to "see"**.

My father is blind and so are all the male members of his family. I was the first woman in that line to get glasses, so everyone thought I'd go blind. I wondered what it meant to see and not to see. In a certain way, art history answers and asks these questions. Art history is the discipline that engages critically with seeing. Seeing is not that simple. Seeing is not looking. So I kind of gravitated towards art history. I was lucky enough to have an excellent art history teacher in my high school, who for the first time offered me a very formal introduction to art history.

How did you know you wanted to specialize in modern south asian art (global modernism)?

My undergrad was in India and it was far more structured, since it followed the British system. As undergrads, we had a survey of global art history classes from cave paintings to contemporary art. We learned not only art from South Asia, but also that of the entire world. I always knew that I wanted to specialize in South and South Asian art, but I wasn't certain what period/time.

Since we had the privilege of being close to several monuments, we'd often take field trips to under-explored archaeological sites. We were taken to a 5th century cave site, where we had to trek through an overgrown forest. It was a very hot day, so we climbed and got to the cave. Our task was to take a rubbing of the inscription at the back of the cave, which was significant for South Asian art as it's never been documented. We walked 10 kilometers under the blazing sun and when we arrived, the cave was dark and cold. We rushed in with our flashlights and a swarm of bats flew out. At that very moment, it was decided that I would never again work on pre-modern art. So that decision was not a very thoughtful one. It was just the sheer discomfort of dealing with it. That's how I decided to work on the 20th century rather than anything before.

During undergraduate years and through graduate school, global modernism was not a term that was thought of. There was modern Chinese, Indian art, but not global modernism. Yet, these modern artists did not think of themselves as Indian, Chinese or Japanese. Modernism as an idea and many of its theories are not specific to a region. It was far more universal. Somewhat slowly, I became interested in global modernism and scholars across the board started to think about what it means. That's something that happened well into my grad school and even after my grad school. But the fact that I'd work on the 20th century was decided by the bats rather than me.

What undergraduate and graduate courses do you teach?

When I first enjoyed Berkeley I was surprised that there's no course on Asian American art as part of the American cultures course threads. In a way, **the very term Asian American was coined in Berkeley** because students like yourself campaigned for it. There's a lot of history of Asian American activism that involves artists as well. The inception of Asian American art was quite activist oriented. As much as it has to do with art and architecture, it has to do with social justice. And those are questions that I work with in my own research, especially insofar as it relates to mid-century third world movements. The Asian American network in Berkeley called themselves third world liberation front. So it's interesting to me to think about the liberation front sitting in Berkeley because we tend to think of the third world as being something out there, but here it was, on campus. I strongly felt that this is a history that needs to be taught here and that's how the course came about. In many ways it intersects with my own work but also in many ways intersects with our place on campus, with yours, mine, ours. In a sense **this is our history and we need to own it.**

What was the highlight of your career at Berkeley?

One of the highlights during my day when we are on campus is to walk through Sproul Plaza and see all the students gathered there. Seeing the many activities that take place there after

teaching classes is one of the highlights of my day, as it helps me reenergize. In a sense, the free speech movement as you know took Sproul Plaza as its central platform. The Sproul Plaza also reminds me of the incredible student movements that's been an integral part of Berkeley. The Sproul Plaza is not only connected to the Asian American movement in Berkeley but also to the central movement of free speech, which has defined Berkeley's migrant and marginal communities. It's just this wonderful confluence of things that makes the space brilliant. Walking through Sproul is indeed one of the highlights of my day.

What do you consider to be your personal successes or accomplishments at UCB?

I would consider the South Asian art initiative to be our collective success. I helped to found and now co-directs it with Asma Kazmi from the art practice department. It's not a personal success, but a collective success that a program on South Asian art can exist in Berkeley. The South Asian art initiative was established in 2017 and has since then not only organized programs, talks, and symposiums, but in response to COVID, we were also successful in generating funds to create two awards for scholars.

What challenges, if any, have you experienced as a woman studying art history?

Academia can sometimes be an uncomfortable place for women, not just in art history, but across disciplines more broadly. The challenges that I've faced are not unlike those faced by other women in academia. Sometime its revolves around perceptions of what women academics can and cannot do. It also involves **perception of woman of color and what is expected from them**. It's difficult being a young women faculty of color, as it often includes the need to constantly prove yourself to be better than others in your own field. Those I don't think are insurmountable challenges. They make you stronger in a way. I would say though in academia, women academics have made a place for them and this we owe to those that came before us. There have been very powerful women voices in academia, which may not be the case for other fields, but definitely in the humanities. My senior women colleagues speak of a time when women were excluded in ways that would be quite unimaginable today. We have quite a good fortune to have seniors that have made space for us. And we are very fortunate to have that type of mentorship and leadership.

As a woman of color in a white-dominated field, what challenges and/or discrimination have you encountered, if any?

Berkeley is exceptional in its equity. It's not a question that is restricted to women of color but people of color. My own department for instance is no longer white dominated. By white dominated I also understand that **whiteness is not merely skin color, but something in the mind**. You can be a person of color but still be white in the mind. So I wouldn't think of race as an epidermal position but a mental one. Overall, art history has conventionally been a white male dominated field due to its methods and canons.

The challenges that I've encountered has more to do with the conceptions of art history, specifically modern art, which is my area of research. Everything was originally thought of as European and North American, and everyone else comes into the field from a slight angle. The challenge is really a conceptual one. With that being said, the field has changed a lot, not just

with representation. When I was a graduate student, the idea that asian art engaged with modernism on the same terms as Jackson Pollock or Picasso was an idea that had to be fought for. With the slow shift within the field, we are amassing more vocabulary of art that is outside the European canon. There are also more artists of color within the US and Europe. When Asian modern art was not at the same status as European modern art, it affects the work one can do and how seriously one is taken in the field.

How has your intersectional identity informed your scholarly work?

They affect your teaching and your public space as an intellectual. Color for me is a very loaded form, it's pigment, method and scheme. I do see them as intersectional. Women of color have to work doubly hard in order to be taken seriously and to make their space and place in academia. But I don't necessarily think it's a bad thing, working hard that is.

What do you think Berkeley does well, and what could be improved on in terms of gender equality and diversity in the art history department?

Berkeley faculty are incredibly self reflective about what we have accomplished and what we've done wrong. That is the ideal opening to conversation and change. I'm really struck by how the faculty is as a collective in thinking about changes. We are also lucky to have an incredible cohort of students who are not afraid of telling us when we're wrong. I do feel that there's a very good system of checks and balances. Having said that, it'd be nice to have more diversity on our campus. The percentage of Asian faculty is still very low.

Advice for prospective students of color interested in pursuing art history as a career (be it in industry or academia).

I think more asian American students should pursue art history as a career. In part because there aren't enough. It seems strange to say this, but even today, there's still not enough asian American art historians. And as long as there aren't enough asian American art historians, Asian American art can't become a field in itself, which it should. It has had a long history since the 19th century and even before that. I also believe that people of color bring to art history rather different perspectives.

In many ways, I feel that art history is the space for working out social questions. Art history, more than other disciplines, deals with vision. With the recent turn in the US, there's been several Asian American deaths in the last one year. All of these encounters occur visually. Someone sees you and recognizes you and brings to your body a set of stereotypes. To fully dismantle these stereotypes, you have to begin at vision because that is the first line of encounter. It is urgent that more asian students come to art history and take up these political questions. Art history is an ideal place to raise these questions.



Amy Zhong