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AMBA SAYAL-BENNETT

Beauty on the Go

In the world of contemporary art, Amba Sayal-Bennett stands perched on the threshold of multiplicity. Half-Indian, with Punjabi roots on her mother's side, and half Italian-Welsh on her father's, the London-based multimedia artist embodies a sensibility that is as hybrid and unclassifiable as her background. "I've always had this feeling of being both and neither," she reflects, describing her upbringing in north-west London, between Harrow and Wembley amidst a vibrant South Asian community, as we sit in a corner of her studio in Collective Ending, an artist-run initiative in South London's Deptford. "It's not just South Asian diaspora, but something even more layered, more hybrid. That sense of in-betweenness has always shaped how I see."

Her curiously dense, quietly moving 3D printed sculptures are drawn upon the unseen movements of history: Partition memories carried by her grandmother, the shifting geometries of architecture, the abstractions of the human body. "I approach histories that affect me but that I haven't directly lived," she explains. "Researching them, tracing movements, whether of people, plants, or forms, becomes a way of making sense of my own."

Art has always been her chosen language and as a child she would spend hours copying images from books—her earliest act of devotion to the discipline. "Drawing was my entry point," she recalls. "I never had to question what else I would do. It was simply what I wanted to be doing." This instinctive pull towards image-making evolved through academic inquiry. Her undergraduate years exposed her to architectural theory; a master's degree in art history honed her critical vocabulary; a practice-led PhD at Goldsmiths allowed her to navigate between theory and making. "I've always needed to be doing multiple things at once—teaching, reading, making. That split energy is generative for me."

Her sculptural turn came later, in 2018, when she pursued a master's in sculpture at the Royal College of Art. There, she discovered the "forgiving" malleability of metal. "It clicked," she says of her first encounter with the workshop. "Metal has a strong relationship to paper and it can be slotted together like a card maquette. It relates to drawing, but in three dimensions. And unlike wood, which demands perfection, metal allows for mistakes and lets you weld, sand, reshape it." There is a tender affection in Sayal-Bennett's voice when she makes this remark, that stands in a definite contrast to the resistive ideas that most of her artworks stand grounded in.

Sayal-Bennett's practice today is characterised by a recursive dialogue between drawing, sculpture, and architecture. Her works inhabit that liminal space where the body meets the built environment, where diagrams intended to clarify instead reveal their exclusions. Architecture, in particular, has been a recurring locus of her research. A 2022 residency at the British School in Rome allowed her to interrogate the ambivalent legacies of modernism — from Le Corbusier's Chandigarh to Mussolini's Rome. "Modernist architecture has always carried this paradox," she observes. "It projects a vision of the future, but it can also be appropriated for deeply problematic purposes whether in fascist Italy or postcolonial India. I became interested in how ornament, which modernism tried to repress, might act as an irritant, a threat to the stability of those clean geometries."

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This interest in how bodies and buildings are cut open, reduced to fragments, or cleansed of their visceral realities runs deep in the artist's work. During her undergraduate studies, she drew weekly from cadavers in the medical school, a practice that left a lasting impression. "Those drawings were messy, indiscernible. Yet medical diagrams, like architectural sections, present themselves as clean, rational, neutral. They erase the violence of cutting, the mess of reality. I'm interested in that tension."

Despite the conceptual density of her work, Sayal-Bennett's practice is firmly rooted in the rhythms of daily making. A typical day might involve sketching at her laptop, working through digital drawings, or immersing herself in archives—most recently, the medical manuscripts of the Wellcome Collection. "My practice is very screen-based, quite nomadic," she says. "But toward the end of a project, I'll spend long days in the studio, bringing those ideas into material form." A cup of home-made coffee in hand, she walks to work every day, with music and sound for company. I insist on a rundown of her Spotify shuffle, and after much persistence she relents. What comes forth is a heady mix of podcasts on architecture and art theory, electronic music, radio. "I can't focus on just one thing because of my dyslexia, I need to be partially elsewhere. That distraction helps the work breathe."

There is a lyrical tension in Sayal-Bennett's art. To encounter her drawings and sculptures is to enter a space where histories, bodies, and architectures are dissected and reassembled into possibilities. "I think I'm still figuring it out," she admits with candour. "But maybe that's the point. It's about inhabiting the instability of forms, of histories, of identities—and allowing them to generate new ways of seeing." ■