

# PRIYA KAMBLI

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Connections between displacement and photography are both literal and metaphoric. The record of a moment of light on a fragment of matter not only isolates that fragment but separates it irrevocably from the place and time it once occupied. A photograph is inevitably a representation of there that is read here, and it is both marker and manifestation of then, seen now. This is true when the dislocation is just across the room or a matter of days, but in the work of Priya Kampli, we must consider the distance between worlds, cultures, and continents, and measure the time in generations.

The ability of a photograph to record our surroundings in encyclopedic detail makes it ideal for confronting the wonders and terrors of places seen for the first time. This attribute also makes photographs ideal for retaining and exploring memories of home. The tension between these elements in Kampli's work establishes the authority that characterizes both her images and her life as a woman from India who has chosen to live in the United States. Kampli's photographs are thoughtfully assembled fragments of other photographs, appropriated from the kind of family archive that might accompany a traveler on a journey of expatriation, but also using her own body as both prop and canvas. The juxtaposition of both sorts of images changes them all, creating resolution where one might expect conflict.

The key formal elements in Kampli's constructions are straight bisecting lines, delineating the contradictory yet balanced elements that each piece embodies. In *Me (Flour)* roughly two thirds of the frame is occupied by a kneeling female form in white, cropped so the arms and hands, fingertips gently resting on a worn hardwood floor, are the only parts of the body that are visible. The mysterious element here is the regularly

spaced pattern picked out on the cloth draped across the thighs. Is the pattern part of the woven textile? Our eyes are not enough and our fingers move to touch so as to clarify. Occupying the remaining third of the image is a simple oil lamp, used in Hindu worship, ubiquitous in India but rare and exotic here. It is, the artist tells us, something she has always had, brought with her when she left India at age eighteen. On top of the lamp is a carefully crafted cone of flour. As with the textile pattern, we are bewildered and challenged by the ambiguities of the artist's personal symbols, and again, we wish to touch what we see in an effort to understand it. The flour—both the cone and the design on cloth—would not survive our curious fingers. The photograph protects and preserves a fragile and temporary reality.

*Dada Aajooba and Me* creates a similar balance. In the left third, a man stands in an academic gown, clutching a diploma against a photographic studio background. In the right two thirds, we see a woman's legs, resting casually on the floor and dressed in the top half of the usually trousered *salwar kamiz*, here unconventionally reconfigured as a mini-dress paired with black stockings, a fitting metaphor for Kampli's two worlds. Next to her, a rectangle of sunlight is balanced by the rectangular photographic portrait on the other side of the line. We presume it to be a photograph of Dada Aajooba; it either obscures or establishes the face of the gowned man. Even without knowing that Dada Aajooba is Kampli's name for her mother's long-dead father, we sense loss, memory, confrontation, and the protective and preserving power of photography itself. As in *Me (Flour)* the photograph affirms presence and absence, past and present, India and the United States, and differences and similarities.

Similarly, in *Muma and Me*, the dividing line is the decorative border of a traditional Indian garment. The body it shows is fragmented so only hands and torso are visible, and there is evidence of an Indian tradition radically altered by its presence in the artist's American life. The image refers to tattoos in henna, a vegetable dye that is drawn in elaborate patterns on the hands of Indian brides. Here, instead of the detailed and precise stylings seen in customary Hindu practice, we see wildly spontaneous markings made by the artist's young son. Below are two mirrored figures of Kampli's mother, in a photograph taken by her father, staring intently at the small cage she holds.

Much of our contemporary knowledge of the American lives of people from India comes from writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai. It may be significant that these writers are women, for it is women who traditionally have been the keepers of culture and memory even in families whose experiences, like Kampli's, are of two contradictory worlds. Kampli pictures what she calls her dual nature, a binary self that finds resolution where it can. Perhaps the strongest example of this is her son, with whom she can "finally" speak the language of her childhood.

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