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Magic masala

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Magic Masala
by
Rohini Kummitta

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Integrated Visual Arts

Program of Study Committee:
Cindy Gould, Major Professor
Barbara Caldwell
Anson Call

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2015

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DEDICATION

For Sudheer Tenneti
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is the written component accompanying my graduate exhibition “Magic Masala”. The exhibit consists of an animated film, photographs, and a cooking performance. My thesis and art focuses on the important role played by food as a cultural signifier in the lives of Indian diaspora in the United States. I examine current food practices and consumption rituals from the perspective of a particular Indian immigrant. Though this work is informed by my personal experiences, memories and imagination, it also reflects wider global issues.

This thesis contains a discussion of the personal, artistic and narrative influences on my original body of work. The central concepts and the techniques used to create the work in this exhibition are explained and the conclusions are incorporated. This thesis mainly examines the significance of cooking, assimilation, impact of Westernization, changing realities of the immigrant Indians and gender roles in the Indian domestic arena.
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“Food shapes and reflects all levels of human experience. It demarcates cultures, borders, nations and generations, while its significance cuts across all of these categories.” (Chester III and Mink)

Food is an important part of all cultures, it is seen as a cultural signifier. For the immigrants, on one hand it can act as a bonding agent and on the other hand it may be a form of resistance to assimilation. Within this thesis I explore the connections between food and homeland, especially in the context of immigration, intercultural exchange and globalization, while emphasizing the importance of cooking and homemade food. By using culinary discourse I reflect upon issues of identity, consumerist food culture, globalization and gender roles of Indians in the domestic arena. In an age where geographical locations are measured in time and not distance, Indian immigrants living in the West are constantly negotiating their way between India and the U.S. Their contemporary realities are changing rapidly, shaped by globalization and Westernization as well as by traditions and rituals. As an immigrant Indian living in the U.S., the concepts in my work are predominantly centered around cultural dislocations and collisions, nostalgia and ironic conditions of modernity.

Home, homeland and food are the most significant factors of nostalgia for me. It is a result of this discovery that the role of food becomes important for this thesis. I believe it is vital in connecting immigrants to their past and traditions. This thesis presents the cultural, artistic and narrative influences on my artwork. It also documents the creative process, conceptual development, artistic methods and techniques employed in the creation of the work presented in my graduate exhibition. This document complements the visual
component of my thesis, which will be exhibited at the Design on Main Gallery in Ames, Iowa, from 06-30-2015 to 07-07-2015. The focus of this body of work is to explore the links between food, assimilation and cultural overlapping, and to examine the changes happening in cooking practices and food consumption rituals in our modern world. My work displays both my deep affection for India, and a critique of significant issues prevalent in my homeland and in the United States.

**Artist Statement**

Coming from a country of diverse cultures and rich traditions, my artwork is greatly inspired by the thoughts, values and aesthetics of both ancient and contemporary India. As an outsider living in the U.S., I am interested in the concepts of belonging, mélange of cultural differences and issues regarding identity. I draw inspiration from both Eastern ideals and American values. The idea of blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction is also of great interest to me. The interaction between our imagination and reality, and our ways of making sense and making up nonsense always fascinate me. The dichotomies of fantasy and reality, past and present, East and West have been recurring themes in my work.

The work I create is greatly influenced by my personal experiences, cultural past, Indian mythology and Western children’s literature. Indian textiles, folklore and miniature paintings and my travels in India and the U.S also inspire me. I have always been drawn to the traditional patterns and ornamentation found in Indian architecture, textiles and art; these intricate details and patterns echo in my artwork. I look at artists working with a wide
range of materials and media for inspiration. My artwork incorporates mixed-media illustrations, photography, painting and animation.

My work becomes a passage for me, to take my viewers to the liminal space I constantly navigate, the world intertwining East and West, India and America, home and home away from home. I navigate the world where fantasy and reality blend, the world where the tensions between familiar and unfamiliar, past and present, old and new, evoke a sense of nostalgia, wonder and whimsy.
CHAPTER 2: INFLUENCES

A variety of personal experiences, as well as artistic and narrative sources discussed in this section, have significantly inspired and influenced my work. I draw a great deal of inspiration from a sumptuous reserve of Hindu mythological sources and childhood stories. My extensive travels in India, exposure to different cultures and crafts, lifestyles and landscapes and my traditional roots steeped in Indian textiles, as well as fond childhood memories of my father’s village, greatly influence my work. The narrative influences found in books, art theory, animation and film also play a significant role in shaping this work.

Personal Influences

Growing up in contemporary India where success is measured by having a career in engineering, medicine or business, I was encouraged to study Sciences. I earned Bachelors in Mechanical Engineering and subsequently worked as software professional for a reputed company in India for three years. My life journey took an important turn when I moved to Ames, Iowa, U.S., to join my husband who was pursuing his PhD in Mechanical Engineering at Iowa State University (ISU). While he was busy studying, I was stuck by boredom living in a new place with no friends or extended family. I started dabbling with colors trying to recreate the colorful memories of my homeland. It was during this time I also started exploring photography. I was captivated by it. It was only after coming to the U.S. that I got a chance to realize my true calling and decided to pursue a career in the visual arts.

Living abroad has been an inspiring experience for me; it changed my perception of life and opened doors to exciting possibilities and experiences. Living in a different country
made me embrace my Indian roots while at the same time providing exposure to different cultures and lifestyles. My personal experiences as an immigrant Indian living in the U.S. greatly influenced and shaped my body of work; the overarching themes have always been about location, belonging and migration.

The patterns, motifs and color palettes that are integral to this body of work are greatly inspired by my exposure to traditional textiles and my childhood memories of rural India. My mother comes from a family and community associated with textiles and handlooms. Although I was not engaged in formal art education prior to pursuing my MFA, I learned the basics of color theory by observing the creation of rich Indian textiles and vibrant color combinations contained in Indian sarees (Figures 1 & 2). My mother’s saree shop provided easy access and exposure to myriad types of sarees and fabrics. The beauty of interwoven weft and warp, Indian handlooms, rich textures and an array of colors and smells of new textiles stayed with me. Stories and memories associated with those beautiful lengths of sarees are deeply ingrained in my mind.
I share my love for nature with my father who comes from a farming family in rural India. Frequent visits to my father’s village as a child left me with many fond memories. Running around in the fields, climbing mango trees, listening to mythological stories from elders, playing in colorful cozy rooms (Figure 3), cooking and eating together had a profound influence on me. Somewhere in my depths, each story, each memory, each experience, each pattern is tucked in fondly. Those images often float in and out of awareness and resurface in my work.

Recent travels to Gujarat and Rajasthan expanded my knowledge of various art forms and traditional textiles. In India, textile patterns appear everywhere from architectural details on temples and mosques to intricate step wells and carved doorways. Ornamentation plays a great role in both Indian life and art. From designs painted on the backs of trucks and auto rickshaws to humble doorways, from carpets to elaborate floor...
designs, everything is bedecked with vibrant colors and painted symbols (Figures 4, 5 & 6).

This pervasive adornment of patterns, symbols and colors echoes in my work. For example, the lines and forms in my drawings are inspired by the intricate details in the traditional patterns and designs of Henna painting and Indian folk art. These details are also seen in my photography and animated film.

Photographs taken during my travels to Gujarat, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh in India were also showcased in my graduate exhibition, as these are integral to the development of my later work.

**Artistic Influences**

I work in multiple media including photography, painting, mixed media and animation and I draw inspiration from diverse artists from the East and West. Though my list of influential artists keeps evolving, the artists discussed in this section had a significant influence on the aesthetics, as well as the concepts and themes, explored in my graduate exhibit.

I am greatly inspired by the Indian painters, Jamini Roy and Ramesh Gorjala, who were highly successful in appropriating traditional Indian folk paintings blending tradition and modernity to create their own signature styles. Jamini Roy was one of the
most significant and influential Indian painters, counted among the early modernists of the twentieth century. His work was greatly inspired by Indian folk arts, particularly Kalighat arts and craft traditions of his native Bengal. His style is an amalgamation of modern sensibilities and Indian folklore. I am particularly drawn to his unique painting style and his choice of subject matter. His use of bold and versatile lines, linear strokes, simple yet dynamic forms and flattened areas of colors had a great influence on my work. Roy often painted village life, scenes from the Indian epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, and rural and folk motifs among other forms (Figure 7). His work expresses strong sentiment of nationalist pride and glorification of the Indian past, which deeply resonates with me.

Like Jamini Roy, Ramesh Gorjala celebrates his traditional Indian roots in his art. His work is drawn from the iconic paintings of Kalamkari from SriKalahasti, Andhra Pradesh, India. His paintings are also characterized by subject matter derived from Indian mythology. Gorjala says, “The beauty of mythology lies in telling a story in a way that engages people” (Dundoo). I believe Gorjala’s unique interpretation and expression of mythology is what makes his work stand out. By blending age-old Kalamkari style with modern mixed-media techniques he creates stunningly beautiful paintings (Figure 8). His painstakingly detailed portrayal of Indian gods and goddesses, his ability to create

Figure 8.
Ramesh Gorjala, *Untitled*
Mixed Media, 60.96 x 60.96 cm, 2014
multiple layers to convey rich narratives and his decorative sensibilities inspire me in numerous ways.

The appropriation of Indian folk arts by these contemporary artists in order to create their own distinct styles is inspirational to me. I, too, draw from the sumptuous reserve of rich Indian heritage and fuse it with my contemporary reality to create artwork and visually articulate the topics that resonate with me.

Another contemporary Indian artist, who inspires me with his themes and innovative choice of materials, is Subodh Gupta. His large-scale sculptures made out of everyday objects creatively address concepts of sociopolitical and culture-specific phenomena that I find quite interesting. Subodh Gupta’s “This is not a Fountain” uses everyday utilitarian household objects like pots, pans and pipes to make a statement about contemporary socio-cultural realities of India (Figure 9). Aluminum and stainless steel cooking vessels are stacked in a large pile and combined with faucets and running water. The installation
symbolizes the exploitation, hard work and challenging circumstances of the villagers in India. By depicting everyday scenes using mass-produced objects, Gupta’s art explores the dichotomies he finds between traditional values and the impact of globalization. These scenes also reference the class inequalities that still prevail in rapidly transforming India. Cooking and eating are other themes Gupta’s work revolves around. His work is particularly relevant to me as I explore the implications of globalization, nostalgia for homeland, cooking and consumption practices in my thesis work.

I also draw inspiration from various Western artists. My exposure to art was limited to traditional Indian artists and Western masters like Leonardo Da Vinci and Pablo Picasso until I enrolled in the graduate studies program at Iowa State University. Introduction to modern art history and various contemporary artists was instrumental in shaping me as an artist. Exposure to an increasing range of artists and styles has impacted my work in many ways.

British photographer Tim Walker is one of the biggest influences on my work as a photographer and visual storyteller. His photographs are characterized by strange juxtapositions and unexplained elements that evoke a sense of whimsy and wonder. Walker’s images blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality. His work blends childhood memories with nostalgia using extravagant

Figure 10.
Tim Walker, Lily Cole
Photography, 2005
settings and melancholic models (Figure 10). According to photographic historian and Vogue magazine’s picture editor, Robin Muir, Walker’s art is rooted in real-life and memory, specifically the British countryside of his childhood. Walker’s idea of what Britain was and what Britain should have been is the key to many of his photographs. (Muir 8-10) Walker draws inspiration from his own childhood memories as well as from fairy tales and films to create his images. He uses surrealist aspects of fairy tales in a number of his images giving them a dreamlike quality. Blending fantasy with the real world has been an important aspect of my work since the beginning of my journey as an artist. Walker inspired me to find ways to introduce fantasy into the real world. His work was instrumental in enhancing my creative imagination and opened doors to ideas of fun, magic and endless possibilities.

**Narrative Influences**

My work reflects a number of narrative influences and elements drawn from Indian and Western films and literature. I have gained inspiration from the stories I heard, read and watched as a child, ranging from Indian epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata and folktales, to classic Western fairytales like “Alice in the Wonderland” and “Cinderella”. Indian movies, television shows and cartoons I grew up watching, especially “Maya Bazar” and “Malgudi Days”, had a significant impact on my animated film, “Magic Masala”. Books that explore ideas related to immigration and food, such as “The Namesake” by Jhumpa Lahiri and “Climbing the Mango Trees: A Memoir of a Childhood in India” by Madhur Jaffery, are also particularly influential on this body of work.
“Maya Bazar”, a mythological epic Telugu film shot in 1957, is an mélange of mystery, mischief and magic spells. This film has mesmerized several generations of Indians and continues to do so today. It is a brilliant adaptation of traditional folktale that revolves around the characters in the Indian epic Mahabharata. The central character in my film, Bakasura, bears resemblance to the character Ghatotkacha in “Maya Bazar”. The scenes that unfold during the Vivahabhojanambu song in this movie were the major inspiration for the food-gobbling scene in my animated film (Figure 11). The imaginative cinematography of Marcus Bartley artfully used to create the magic scenes in the movie “Maya Bazar” is highly inspirational.

Figure 11.
Scene from the movie Maya Bazar, 1957
Source: Telugu wave
“Malgudi Days” is another example of film that left an indelible impression on my mind as a child. I grew up watching Shankar Nag’s adaptation of R.K.Narayan’s “Malgudi Days” on television. Even today the familiar tone of the show takes me back to my childhood. The stories are about the trials and triumphs of the ordinary people living in the fictional village of Malgudi. These stories are of yesteryear but the complexities of human nature remains the same in contemporary life. In Jhumpa Lahiri’s words,”Malgudi Days reveals how broader changes, both social and political, alter the every day lives of the people”. (Lahiri) The impact of modernity on the transformation of Indians is one of the important themes I explore in this body of work.

In her novel “The Namesake”, Jhumpa Lahiri uses her immigrant experience to explore the meaning of identity. The story conveys the perpetual dilemma faced by the Indian immigrants and their children as they struggle between cultural preservation and assimilation into American life. In her text, food becomes a vehicle in determining the cultural identity of her characters. She subtly encodes emotional, cultural and psychological aspects of their experiences by tapping into the potential and versatility of the culinary discourse. Culinary nostalgia has been one of the recurring themes of diasporic experiences, which is also addressed in my animated film, “Magic Masala”.

Madhur Jaffery, through her descriptions of food, cooking and eating practices, emphasizes important questions of identity, class and ethnicity in her book “Climbing the Mango Trees: A Memoir of a Childhood in India”. What makes her book interesting to me is the way she narrates her memories of family, home and food traditions in the socio-political...
context of India’s transformation during the final years of colonial rule in India. Her book also contains instructions for recreating recipes from her past, encouraging the readers to try their hands at cooking. My film is also a hybrid narrative featuring both immigrant experiences and cooking lessons.

Finally, Indian mythology played a strong role in the creation of my animated film. I was influenced by the episodes from Mahabharata and Ramayana that dealt with Gods, demons, food and magic spells. The demon Bakasura, one of the central characters in my animated film, “Magic Masala”, is a character from the Hindu epic, Mahabharata. Hindu mythology has been a recurring theme in my work since the beginning of my artistic practice. I grew up listening to the stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata, narrated by my grandmother and parents as bedtime stories. Deeply rooted within me are the moral values are strongly connected to these stories. These epics are magnificent resources of Indian traditions, values, cultures, philosophies and religious views. Those fascinating tales and the characters within them never cease to amaze me.
CHAPTER 3: THE WORK

The various components of the thesis exhibition including animated film, mixed-media illustrations, photographs and a cooking demonstration, are all designed to work together to create an immersive and engaging experience for the viewers. Though the media are varied, the overarching theme and style unifies all of the pieces. Over the course of four years of study at Iowa State University, I worked in multiple disciplines including digital photography, mixed-media painting, illustration, as well as stop-motion and 2D animation. What began as a painting experiment undertaken to document my experiences as an immigrant living in the U.S. gradually transformed into a much deeper exploration of a sense of belonging, nostalgia, cultural displacement and identity. Within this section I will first discuss formative early work and then how my artistic progression led to the creation of my animated film “Magic Masala”. Finally, I will discuss the key concepts conveyed in my film and explain the process and techniques employed in the creation of it.

Artistic Development

My formal training in visual arts began when I became a graduate student in the Integrated Visual Arts program at Iowa State University (ISU). The techniques and concepts I learned during my four years of study at ISU laid a solid foundation and helped me gain a stronger and deeper understanding of art. My professors and mentors not only nurtured my creative spirit but also helped me discover the freedom of authentic self-expression. In this section I describe artwork fundamental to my graduate thesis development as well as the latest artwork I created, including animated film and food photography.
My first painting series, “Home Away from Home”, reflects my initial experiences as an immigrant Indian living in the U.S. The sense of loneliness, isolation and nostalgia for my homeland is mirrored in these paintings. I used ornamental abstraction on one side of the composition, symbolizing my memories of India and minimalistic contemplative expanses of color on the other, symbolizing my feelings about the U.S. (Figures 12 & 13). The minimalistic style, which represented my experiences and emotions felt during the initial days of my stay in the U.S., is meant to evoke a sense of isolation and alienation. I found a stark difference between my past life in India and initial days in the U.S. The Indian side is adorned with the colors and patterns of India and is heavily influenced by Rangoli patterns (decorative floor patterns).

The intricate language of symbols in these paintings refers to people, places and my experiences. These paintings explore how it feels to be living in two different worlds at the same time, to be culturally displaced, to belong and not belong, to transform and fit in, to
reminisce old memories and make new ones. One can see the tensions between familiar and unfamiliar, past and present, old and new, American experience and Indian identity, in this series of paintings. The patterns, shapes and symbols I used are purposefully meditative are meant to be observed closely and slowly. The images of present and past float in and out of awareness.

My photography series, “Reminiscing Childhood” and “Tales of Whimsy”, are both heavily inspired by childhood stories, memories and imaginary places. Drawing inspiration from Tim Walker’s work and artistic philosophy, which blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality, I created playful thought-provoking paradoxes using my own symbolic vocabulary to capture the imagination (Figures 14 & 15). These images fuse fantasy with nostalgic memories and convey my longing for a lost place and time. In retrospect, this theme helped me cope with my homesickness as I attempted to recreate memories from an idealized past. Photography became a window to my imagined world. Illogical settings and unexplained elements, evident in my photographs, are meant to evoke a sense of wonder and confusion.
My next series, “While Pregnant”, was a combination of digital photography, painting and illustration. I gradually moved to using mixed-media as it gave me freedom to merge different media, techniques and conceptual approaches. This series reflects the emotions I went through during pregnancy when I was living alone, away from my family. Homesick, I began to depict an imagined world inspired by longing for my family and my motherland, India. While some may choose to approach life in a rational, logical manner, my intention was to create my own world by initiating a new, irrational train of thought. This imagined world had a unique visual language that found roots in Indian culture, symbols, textiles and patterns (Figures 16 & 17). Every inch of these compositions is full of things to look at, so that viewers remain suspended in an overwhelming sensation of mixed emotions. I felt as though I had been to these imagined environments, somewhere along the way, perhaps in my dreams.

Figure 16 and Figure 17
Rohini Kummitha, While Pregnant series
Mixed media, Digital, 2013
Works from the photography series, “Tales of Whimsy” and mixed-media series, “While Pregnant” are also included in my graduate exhibition as they are fundamental to the development of the animated film and food photography. In both my photography and mixed-media, work material objects and abstracted symbols become equally important in telling the story. Objects serve as cues to call to mind a prior life and identity. In a migratory context, material culture symbolizes non-material aspects of the past lives lost in the transition period. The original use-value gets replaced with the symbolic value. Explorations related to identity, cultural displacement and meanings one could attach to material objects guided me in the selection of key concepts to address in my animated film and my food photography. By using mythology, memory and culinary discourse I reflect on the changing realities of Indian immigrants living in the U.S., shaped by modernization on one hand and cultural preservation on the other.

**Animated Film**

The film “Magic Masala” is a mixture of 2D and Stop-Motion animation produced using Photoshop and After Effects software. This film merges traditional painting, photography and digital illustrations, spanning themes of culinary and eating practices, cultural identity, fantasy, mythology, globalization and modernization, as well as everyday immigrant life and Indian traditions. In order to aptly examine the film, the analysis will be broken down into three parts, a plot overview, discussion of key concepts, and an explanation of the process involved in the creation of the animated film.
Plot Overview

The story revolves around Karthik, a young man, who comes to the U.S. from India. Karthik discovers his first days in the United States to be anything but dreamlike. He gets used to the conveniences of the “fast-food culture” but like many immigrants, Karthik finds himself homesick longing for home-cooked food. One day he crosses paths with the demon, Bakasura, who is on a redemptive journey from that of a greedy devourer to a humble chef. The rest of the story is about how the magic of cooking leads to finding friends and family in the most unexpected places.

Key Concepts

Food is one of the key concepts I explore in this body of work. Food can be associated with different social, personal and cultural meanings having many symbolic connotations. Food is never just about consumption or nutrition. Sarah Sceats in her book *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* says, “Food is our centre, necessary for survival and inextricably connected with social function. What people eat, how and with whom, what they feel about food and why - even who they eat - are of crucial significance to an understanding of human society” (Sceats 1). In the migratory context, food can be seen as a cultural signifier. Although cooking is traditionally a female domain in India, I started cooking only after coming to the United States. For me cooking transformed into a newfound interest, as food became an essential connection with my homeland. By recreating recipes of my homeland I felt more rooted and connected to my culture. In the film, I show the protagonist, Karthik, longing for his native food as he deals
with dislocation from his homeland. For a person dislocated from his/her homeland, food becomes both an intellectual and emotional anchor (Mannur 11). Although at first Karthik likes the conveniences and easy accessibility of fast food in the U.S., he soon gets bored eating out and craves fresh home-cooked food.

“Food and the activities connected to food – including the refusal to cook as well as to eat – ultimately serve as sites of longing and desire, of self-identity, as symbols for the hungry self longing to feed and nourish its soul.” (Goeller 21)

I have a lot of associations with food and family. Eating together was a daily ritual we followed as a family in India. I don’t know if I was happy about doing it for the first 24 years of my life, but I soon recognized the importance of it after coming to the U.S., living away from my family and homeland. Getting caught up in our busy student lives in the U.S., my husband and I partially succumbed to the fast food culture. However, things changed after having our first baby. We realized that we wanted to continue the culinary rituals that were passed onto us and impart the same values to our children. Also, we became more conscious of the negative effects of processed food, which encouraged us to cook at home.

Food is our common ground, a universal experience – James Beard

Food plays an important role in any celebration, across the world, regardless of culture or place of origin. Doring, Heide and Muhleisen examine in Eating Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Food (2003), how cooking and eating define “group and gender identities, celebrate social cohesion and perform rituals of cultural belonging.” (Döring,
Heide and Mühleisen 2) One of the important scenes in my film “Magic Masala” shows Karthik sharing food with Bakasura during the Western holiday of Thanksgiving. This scene not only emphasizes the role of food in celebrations but also highlights Karthik’s assimilation into American culture. The eclectic food practices of Indian immigrants living in the U.S. in celebrating holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas seem to reflect a desire both to adapt to a new culture and preserve their Indian heritage.

Globalization and capitalism have a significant impact on food. The introduction of global foods and brands has transformed food in India as a status symbol for middle-class people. Consuming food at Western food chains like Dominoes, Pizza Hut, Starbucks and McDonalds, represent status and popular culture in India.

Consuming these products has become a way of showing sophistication and worldliness for Indians. The culinary traditions and family consumption rituals are getting whittled away in favor of easy accessibility and conveniences of fast food not only in the U.S. but also across the globe (Figure 18). According to Leon Rappoport, “These foods carry an ideology of immediate sensual gratification and convenience that all too easily undermines traditional family values associated with social discipline and respect for authority.” (Rappoport 126) In my film, I explore the trope of food against the backdrop of globalization. Karthik’s exposure to fast food joints like McDonalds and Pizza Hut in India even before coming to U.S. is
highlighted to show the ubiquitous presence of these capitalist commodities in our
globalized world today.

Even though food is the overarching theme of the animated film “Magic Masala”,
the story also sheds light on other issues like the impact of technology, need for connection
and varied gender roles in the domestic arena. Throughout the film there are many scenes
that show Karthik talking on the phone to his mother in India (Figure 19). These scenes
emphasize the advances in communication technologies that help immigrants’ maintain
close ties with people back home. As a result they do not find the need to fully
assimilate into the migrating country.

Although we may appear to live in a time of unprecedented communication and
connectivity, I feel in reality we are lacking real social interactions. The sense of
isolation and loneliness is mirrored in Karthik’s character. Karthik’s bonding with
Bakasura shows how we all long for real

connections.

Another theme I address in this film
is changing gender roles as seen in a
kitchen. All the interactions that happen

Figure 19.
Production Still

Figure 20.
Bakasura cooking
Production Still
between the central characters in the story, who are both male, are set in a kitchen, a traditionally female domain. Women are almost always associated with cooking in the Indian domestic arena. My story challenges patriarchy and breaks the stereotypical belief that only women should cook, by portraying both of the male characters actively cooking (Figure 20).

Process

“There is no particular mystery in animation...it’s really very simple, and like anything that is simple, it is about the hardest thing in the world to do.” – Bill Tytla at the Walt Disney Studio, 1937 (Mixamo)

This quote sums up how I initially felt about animation. As an artist who loves narrating stories, animation to me seemed like a natural progression from photography. The idea of combining my passions for photography, storytelling, mixed-media and painting into a single discipline led me to create animation. I leaped into the world of animation without any kind of formal training in it and soon realized how overly ambitious my undertaking was. The process involved in making “Magic Masala” was extremely tedious and slow. While working on this film I had to wear many hats, including that of a scriptwriter, character and background designer, 2d and stop-motion animator, photographer, sound designer, editor and director! What follows is a description of the various steps involved in the process of this film’s complex creation and production.
Pre-Production

Pre-production was the first stage. It consisted of story development, character designs and script writing, as well as creating basic storyboards and the animatic. Animatic is the preliminary version of the film made by combining storyboards and soundtrack. When I first came up with the idea of “Magic Masala”, I knew how I wanted the film to look. I envisioned simple characters and elaborate backdrops using intricate Indian patterns and designs. It was decided very early in the process that I would be doing 2D animation for a flashback sequence and Stop-Motion animation for the rest of the story, using a real person and a small handmade puppet to portray main characters. The mixed-media illustrations used in the 2D Animation were heavily inspired and influenced by an Indian color palette, rural life and Indian folk art and procession paintings (Figures 21 & 22).

I wanted to create a meaningful story that was personally relevant to me. In the story I infused magical elements into everyday situations, continuing my interest in blending fantasy with the real world. After multiple brainstorming, feedback and revision sessions with my committee, I completed the script and storyboards over a course of four months.
Storyboarding was an extremely important and helpful step in the creation of the animated film. It helped me immensely in planning and timing the scenes and in deciding the style and camera angles, movement, editing details and many other important elements even before starting the production of the story. At the end of this process I created an animatic by combining my rough storyboard sketches for 2D animation and some still photographs taken during stop-motion photography tests (Figures 23 & 24). My storyboard went through a lot of changes during production, but having the layout well planned beforehand helped me greatly in saving time during the production process.

Another important component of pre-production was developing, sketching and designing Bakasura, one of the main characters in my story. Bakasura is a rakshasa (demon) in the Hindu epic Mahabharata. He is notorious for devouring food and men. His atrocities towards ordinary people end when he gets defeated and killed by one of the Pandava brothers, Bhima. Though Bakasura is famous as a horrendous demon in the Mahabharata, in my story he is shown as a friendly being helping humans as part of his journey of redemption. One of the important concepts that influenced the characterization of Bakasura is the idea of karma and reincarnation in the Hindu belief system. I was also partly
inspired by western movies such as *Monsters Inc.* and *How to Train Your Dragon* that portray demons and dragons that have traditionally been considered evil and hostile to humans as friendly beings. In the film Bakasura gets cursed for his wrong doings and gets a chance to redeem himself by cooking for humans in his next incarnation. The act of redemption has universal appeal. His character suggests that all of us, whatever our flaws or circumstances, can redeem ourselves. After finalizing the concept sketches of Bakasura, I collaborated with my major professor for the puppet construction (Figure 25). The puppet was constructed using lightweight materials taking several key functions into account such as size, shape and the ability to assume varied body postures.

![Bakasura concept sketches](image)

Figure 25. Bakasura concept sketches

**Production**

Next came the production stage. It involved 2D animation, Stop-Motion photography and sound recording. Working with two types of animation that are
stylistically and technically quite different from each other was difficult but, at the same
time, it kept the work from getting monotonous. It was quite difficult to learn the animation
techniques from scratch and to complete the film in a condensed amount of time. Most of

![2D Animation still]

Figure 26.

the illustrations for my 2D animation sequence were painted using Photoshop software.
They are a mixture of hand drawn elements, traditional paintings and digitally rendered
images. Though I had prior expertise in Photoshop, learning a completely new tool, After
Effects for animating, stretched and expanded my abilities. With valuable input and
mentoring from my animation professor, I was able to pull off the most difficult task of
creating 2D animation sequences (Figures 26 & 27). The major part of my film is created as
a Stop-Motion animation. My skill set in photography proved to be really helpful in shooting
the sequences for Stop-Motion. Over 4000 photographs were involved in making this film.
Sound recording was done during the same period of time. The story demanded high
quality recording of the dialogue. The decision to keep the dialogue in the Telugu language, my mother tongue, was vital to stay culturally true and authentic in the story.

Post Production

The final stage in the process was post-production. Editing, rendering the movie, and creating the sound design and music, title, credits, as well as transcription of dialogue for closed captioning were all done in the post-production stage. I consider sound and music important to my animated film and so I worked on those components from the early stages of the film production. It was important to find music that had an Indian flavor to it and evoked feelings as envisioned. I spent a considerable amount of time in the editing phase, cleaning up and polishing my animation and finally, rendering the movie. I spent thousands of hours in the realization of this project. It took me about two years from start to finish to
complete this film with 6 months in actual production. It was quite a challenge for me in all aspects, as I had never worked on a project of this size. It was a wonderful experience and I learned many invaluable lessons, technically, personally and professionally.
Food Photography

The exhibition will also showcase food photographs created during the production of “Magic Masala”. These photographs celebrate the art of food and cooking through colorful stories and memories. The color, composition and the way images are combined to create stories are inspired by my exposure to Indian and American cultures.

*Red Chili Peppers* and *Spices* (Figures 28 & 29) represent the main ingredients that add flavor to Indian Cooking. Chilies and spices are intrinsic to Indian cooking. They come in different shapes and colors. Cinnamon, cardamom, cloves and chilies are the most common spices used in Indian dishes. One can see the play of vibrant colors, interesting shapes, forms, textures, patterns and flavors in these pictures. These pictures not only suggest different flavors of Indian cooking but also reflect the spirit and vibrancy of Indian life.

The artifacts I brought with me from India, including cookware, spices and textiles, emphasize culture and family and help me maintain symbolic ties to my homeland. The role of material objects in the preservation of identity and culture is powerful and significant,
especially to immigrants and those who are in identity transitions. Objects hold special
importance for identity and become meaningful as they remind people of their past life,
friends and family. These possessions become highly charged with meaning and help
organize experiences. These are especially true for the objects linked to eating rituals. I used
various Indian artifacts and ingredients related to Indian cooking and eating rituals in this
series. The objects used include brassware and copperware, spices, ornaments and textiles.

The items I brought with me from
India transcend from being mere material
objects and attain profound symbolic
meanings in the context of immigrant
identity. For example, spoons of different
origin, created from various materials and
different shapes are juxtaposed in *Spoons*
(Figure 30) photograph. The spoons in the
photograph are filled with different kinds of
Indian spices and seeds that are commonly
used in Indian cooking. The cultural collisions
and mélange is symbolically shown in this
photograph. Indian copper spoons symbolize
my nostalgia for homeland and the American stainless steel spoons suggest my integration
into the new country. These possessions become important in both cultural retention and
adoption processes. The brassware used in *Memories of Home* (Figure 31) remind me of my
grandmother and brings back memories of childhood in India. Kitchenware and Indian cooking ingredients juxtaposed with intricate Indian textiles and patterns reflect vibrant Indian flavors and enriching colors.

*Auspicious Grains* (Figure 32) is a digital photograph of a woman holding rice grains in her hands. The gesture shown in the picture metaphorically suggests both receiving and offering. Rice holds a great spiritual and ritual significance in India. It plays a significant role in Hindu ceremonies like a baby’s first feeding ceremony, education initiation ceremony and weddings. Rice is used as a symbol of auspiciousness in the ceremonies that signify transition periods in an individual’s life and development. This picture holds personal meaning to me as I came to the U.S. from India as a young bride. The woman in the picture adorned in colorful bangles, holding rice grains in her hands, suggests an Indian bride and also implies the daily ritual of cooking rice at home.

*Methi Bouquet and Men Can Cook* (Figure 33 & 34) photographs are related to the issue of gender roles in the Indian domestic arena. Kitchens are considered a female domain in India and traditionally women are expected to do the cooking. However, with the increase in the number of working women holding high-power careers, gender roles are slowly shifting. Although women are still majorly responsible for cooking in India, the
number of men sharing responsibilities in the kitchen is increasing. *Men Can Cook* portrays a cosmopolitan man sporting a branded watch, carrying a steel utensil filled with fresh vegetables. It implies the beginning of the cooking trend by the modern Indian man. Through *Methi Bouquet* and *Men Can Cook* pictures I attempt to break the stereotypical portrayal of gender roles in the Indian domestic arena and motivate more Indian men to take up cooking.

Figure 33
Rohini Kummitha, *Methi Bouquet*
Digital Photography, 2015

Figure 34
Rohini Kummitha, *Men Can Cook*
Digital Photography, 2015
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIONS

In this thesis I have explored the connections between food, home and homeland in the migratory context and the significant role played by food in maintaining symbolic ties to one’s country, family and friends. By incorporating social issues with mythology, personal memories and creative expression, this thesis explores the concepts related to fantasy in real life, cultural fusion, issues related to assimilation and identity transitions, changing realities of the immigrant Indians and shifting gender roles in Indian households. Reflecting on life experiences and fond memories made me realize that artistic expression and creation can be therapeutic for those in cultural transitions. Though this work is centered around my personal and cultural experiences and memories, I discovered that personally authentic art could inform viewers of cultural differences as well as human commonalities. Through this body of work I hope to draw viewers’ attention to food practices, cooking and eating rituals. I encourage them to pause and consider the significant role these practices play not only in relation to health, but also in family and social interactions.

The work displayed in my graduate thesis and exhibition reflects my learning experiences and my growth technically, artistically and personally. I have learned a number of valuable lessons during the process of creating the body of work. Working on the animated film pushed me into new realms of digital and traditional media. My diverse skill set, problem solving abilities of an engineer and creative insights of an artist, helped me in exploring new media. I would like to continue using both traditional and digital media in my future work. All of the factors that had to be considered in various stages of creating this film presented unique problems that had to be effectively solved while keeping within time
constraints. The experience I gained in this process is invaluable. My work continues to evolve, strongly guided by my conscious and subconscious. With time I learned to trust my judgment in creating unique work that combines cultural influences and personal experiences with fantastical elements. Looking forward, I would like to continue exploring issues related to identity and cultural dislocation from an immigrant perspective. I will continue to work on themes that are personally meaningful and relevant to my life but the same time reflect wider global issues.
Works Cited


Sceats, Sarah. *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction.*
APPENDIX A

Animation Film Link

https://youtu.be/rxRStAYHvGU
APPENDIX B

Storyboard Sketches
APPENDIX C

Stop-Motion Production Stills
APPENDIX D

2D Animation Production Stills