

Mequitta Ahuja

*Automythography**

INTRODUCTION

If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched
into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive.

—Audre Lorde

IN Mequitta Ahuja's self-portrait *In Back Garden: Green Carpet*, the painted figure is centered, filling most of the frame. Naked, her back toward the viewer, she has her face turned over her shoulder to confront an unseen camera as she holds its shutter release in her left hand.

The image is emblematic of both Ahuja's body of work and her process of building a picture. Typically, she starts by taking a series of self-portraits, a type of solo performance with the camera. Contorting this way and that, she aims to capture the gestures of her figure—and the narrative potential within them—and to use the finished representations as source material. She clicks the shutter release and repositions herself. She clicks the shutter release again. "I want to stretch the space in front of the camera," she explains.†

*Editor's note: Mequitta Ahuja's *Automythography* marks *The Georgia Review*'s first collaborative project with the University of Georgia's Lamar Dodd School of Art Galleries. Sponsored by the Willson Center for Humanities and Arts, Ahuja will be in residence at the school from late January to early February 2015, and an exhibit of her work will be on display at the Dodd Galleries. In celebration of this collaboration and of Ahuja's visit, *The Georgia Review* and the Dodd Galleries will host an issue-release party at the Dodd at which Ahuja will be present. Look for more details to come on our website (www.thegeorgiareview.com) or follow us on social media.

†All quoted material is taken from Ahuja's 12 July 2013 artist talk on Chicago Access Network Television (CAN TV): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_AzNDoZftA

In Back Garden: Green Carpet reveals Ahuja's performative self-portraiture in a very direct way. In most of her other works, however, posturing for the photo process provides Ahuja with figures that she sketches into more epic, fantastical landscapes. Consider, for instance, *Wiggle Waggle*—the second image in *Rhyme Sequence*, the five-panel foldout that concludes the portfolio presented here: the nude female figure stands boldly, as an adventurer might, in a dense landscape of otherworldly water and wood.

The surfaces of both *In Back Garden: Green Carpet* and *Wiggle Waggle*, as is common with Ahuja's work, prove multifaceted, and are covered in patterns made with Indian textile-printing blocks, old letterpress type, and streams of nonsensical words. These patterns are often printed onto materials such as vellum paper and papier-mâché, which Ahuja then tears and rearranges to create a quilted backdrop. "What I'm starting with is a cultural ground," Ahuja states, "using pattern, color, and marks to form a kind of paper quilt that integrates elements across time and across geography."

Ahuja's practice of using herself as subject and history as context inspired her neologism "automythography," which also serves as the title for the following selection of her work. The term was also inspired by Audre Lorde's 1982 book *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, in which Lorde introduces the term "biomythography" to describe the woven nature of myth, cultural history, and the notion of telling one's story. Lorde's term allowed Ahuja to rethink her own story, and to imagine and project her various identities onto canvas. However, beyond using "automythography" to describe the act of constructing art and narrative, Ahuja is also defining a way of being in the world, "a strategy I use to counter limiting frameworks. It is the expansive and inclusive process of self-construction and self-representation, a creative form in which I gain and enact my agency."

Ahuja's mother is African American and was raised in Cincinnati. Her father, an Indian, moved to the United States from New Delhi when he was in his early twenties. The blending of these heritages forms the basis of *Automythography*, and this commingling of lineage comes across most clearly in the richly worked patterns her compositions explore. Take for example *Jingle Jangle*—also in *Rhyme Sequence*—in which a nude female stands in a forest, filling the

frame. She looks directly at the viewer, one eye askew in reference to Ahuja's own amblyopia or "lazy eye," a detail she includes in all of her self-portraits. Importantly, the figure is overlaid in prominent tessellations of blue which harken back to the mosaics of her heritage. The mythic being—standing upright, self-possessed—raises her dappled arms as gold coins fall from her outstretched hands.

Katie Geha, Director
Dodd Galleries, University of Georgia



Mequitta Ahuja (b. 1976, Grand Rapids, MI), who holds an MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago, lives and works in Baltimore. Her paintings have appeared in solo exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago; the Lawndale Art Center in Houston; Arthouse in Austin; Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Paris; and BravinLee Programs in New York. Ahuja has also exhibited work at the Bakersfield Museum of Art in California; the Brooklyn Museum; the Museum of Fine Arts Houston; the Ulrich Museum in Wichita, Kansas; the Studio Museum in Harlem; and the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC, among others.

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In Back Garden: Green Carpet (2013)
58" × 41", enamel, acrylic, colored pencil, and waxy chalk on paper



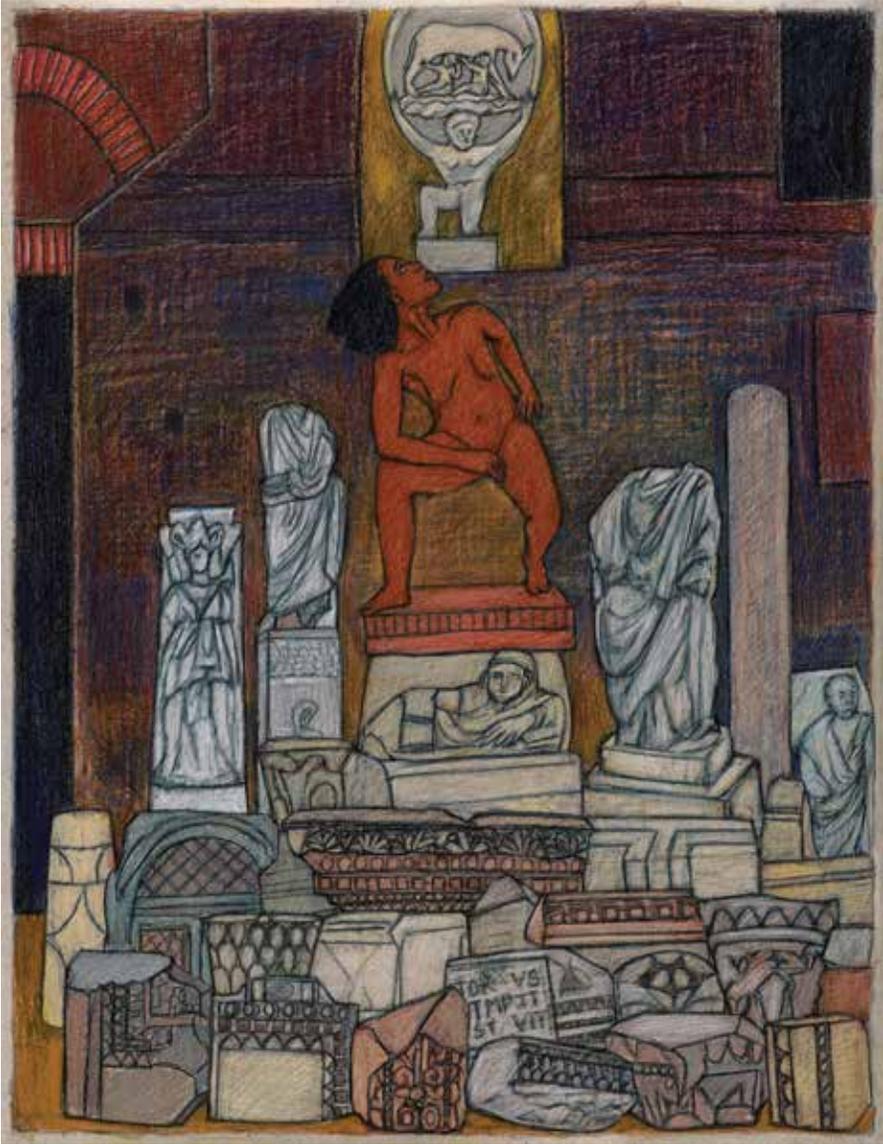
Mocoonama (2012)

87" × 73", acrylic, colored pencil, and enamel on vellum collage



Autocartography I (2012)

82" × 93", acrylic, oil, waxy chalk, and watercolor on paper



The Italy Drawings: Statues (2014)
22" × 17", colored pencil on paper