

HISTORY IS

PRESENT



a conversation with ZORAWAR SIDHU,
ROB SWAINSTON, and MIRABO PRESS

This conversation was recorded on February 20, 2024 between Rachel Shelton and Bob Fleming of Mirabo Press, and artists Zorawar Sidhu and Rob Swainston on the occasion of their exhibition *History is Present* at UB Art Galleries.

RACHEL SHELTON: Thanks for doing this, everyone. How did the collaboration between you two come about? We know in order to be vulnerable and generous with another artist, there needs to be some level of trust and commonality in your approach, or concept, or both. Could you talk about that joint history a bit?

ZORAWAR SIDHU: Rob had a show in Philadelphia in 2011-12. I think that's where we first met. I would eventually show at that gallery too, in 2016 or so. But then we met again in New York and found that we had a few things in common. We were both into historical print processes and contemporary digital fabrication, and we started a little joint collaborative project that was supposed to be a small print. It came out terrible...

ROB SWAINSTON: It's okay!

ZORAWAR: It was pretty bad! So we had to save it. And that was an 18 month process. And we've been collaborating ever since.

ROB: We have an overlap of our interests, but there's some stuff that Zorawar has specialties in and some stuff that I specialize in. I was like, *you teach me that, I'll teach you this*. And we were going to do it through a project that we just kept working on and working on, we just kept throwing on layers and layers and layers. It was like a 30 layer woodblock, but our process evolved. There are the historic processes, but there's also the use of the image historically and how it appears in painting and print and in different media outlets, which informs our content. But there is also technical stuff we've been trying to do, which is break the code on how images are broken apart in Photoshop and Illustrator, not to rely on CMYK or process colors and to introduce more of a painterly sensibility of pigments and colors and palettes into print processes. It's exciting. But I don't know about the trust part. That's like, sociology talk.

BOB FLEMING: We gave a talk for high school kids, Rachel, Mizin and I—and a question came up. *How did you guys do this? How are you able to trust each other?* That was a very interesting question to us when we got asked that and it wasn't even about working on our own stuff, but it was just having a print shop together. We didn't think about it that way, you know. But that's kind of why I think it popped into our question to you.

ZORAWAR: I think the trust is something that comes out in seeing how Rob might make a decision, or how I might make a decision. We trust one another to make a good choice when we divide tasks, especially when that seems like a "Rob task" or a "Zorawar thing to do."

ROB: Yeah, and I'll definitely listen to him. I'm not going to be like, no, no, no, that color yellow is great. Instead it is, *okay, I see what you're saying*.

ZORAWAR: Listening to one another is definitely a part of it.

ROB: In the act of listening, what has happened numerous times is I'll have an idea and I'll have to verbalize it. When it's me by myself, I just get it in my head and I'll do it. And instead of going "where did this idea come from?" I'll have to articulate it. And then in the act of articulating it, my opinion about it will be solidified, or I'll actually kind of doubt it. And then Zorawar will be like, I like the idea and I want to do it, while I've talked myself out of it. So the act of verbalizing...

BOB: That's a very important point, to have to articulate something when normally you don't, you just move on to what you want to do.

ROB: Yeah. And maybe this is me, but I won't necessarily think it through, or see all the consequences of a decision. I'll just assume that's the right thing because I thought of it. When there's two people working on it, you have to question it. And it makes for stronger work.

RACHEL: For sure. Can you describe how you together take the seed of an idea through the process, from concept to production, in terms of how do you divide the labor? How do you combine your separate aesthetics, and do you share all the parts equally or does one of you take the lead on a certain piece or part of the process and the other one tackles other things?

ROB: It has evolved, but in general, we'll agree to work on something that's a little more historical, or media oriented, or news media related because that's already a shared part of our society. So that is freeing. We've been working in cycles or a series where there's a group of images that reinforce each other, like *Doomscrolling* and the one we are working on now, *History is Present*. There are certain things we'll want to tackle—like, we need to do something about climate change here, or do something about protests, or *Roe v Wade*, or something about gun violence or the refugee crisis. And then we'll collect a big stack of images that will be painting or historical or news media, and we'll throw it all in one big folder to show each other. We'll set up our two computers where we can always see the other person's monitor, and we'll try to compose it collectively. For the images, one person will do a little bit more of a move forward and someone else will move a little bit forward on the other one. But after we get to a certain point the construction of the image is done. We have to agree on it. And it's a lot of discussing what would be interesting there and *remember this painting that's in the National Gallery that we saw, or remember the news event that happened last year, the footage of the smoke in the air above the train wreck was kind of amazing*. We sift through it and try to make something out of it. Making something out of it is the technical thing that we were describing, about how to break images up and how they sit with other news media. So it's a conversation about the **meaning** of what it is, but also formally what it is. And it also is a conversation about how we can make this thing and how it fits in with the other things as a series. Once we get into the weeds of it, then it's *will you take that task? I'll do this color, you do that color*. So we both get our hands in it and will bounce it back and forth.

BOB: You've mentioned that it's evolved. What you're describing right now, Rob, sounds like fairly advanced coordination of almost unconscious doing it as opposed to conscious.

ROB: I think in the beginning it was more that we would just have one image or two images. After making these for awhile we see the longer consequences of what we're doing and want to bring more into it and understand the nuances. We are more willing to throw stuff at it that maybe doesn't sit quite right just because we know that it wants to be there, but we're not sure exactly how yet.

RACHEL: Do you sort of set parameters like, these are the processes we work in, and then does that help you evolve and be able to try new things within? *Here's how we process our images, here's how we break down*. Is there something like a framework that helps you?

ROB: It's more like there's a series of loose ends and historic processes that weren't fulfilled because the technology sort of ended and something else happened. And now we live in a landscape of new technologies that can reinvigorate old stuff. And in general, we have this idea that we can slow down contemporary media by using an older media.

ZORAWAR: You also have to find viable source material in the first place. And it's not all viable. It's not as simple as just grabbing an engraving off the Internet and being able to vectorize it and CNC it. You have to find a physical engraving, a real engraving that you can scan, with a scanner that's strong enough to scan it. And then the subject matter has to relate to a contemporary event of some kind. And ideally there's a painting that might correspond to it. Those are kind of the ideal set of circumstances that we would work with. And you don't always have all of those criteria, but when you do, the parameters are already kind of set. There's what we want to make, but there are always limitations every step along the way. The wood can only hold so much detail. The mark of the original engraving kind of dictates the scale at which it can be reproduced because of that.



Zorawar Sidhu and Rob Swainston, *July 18, 2021*. Multi-color woodblock on paper, 57 1/2 x 45 1/4 inches. Courtesy of the artists and Petzel Gallery.

RACHEL: We're familiar with each of your separate practices as well as the work you make together. How does it differ for you working on this collaborative project rather than in your solo work? I know Rob said that he gets an idea, and runs with it, and you don't have to articulate or think it all the way through. But are there maybe more aesthetic things that are different for you?

ZORAWAR: You have to negotiate everything. You don't have to be in control of every aspect of it, which is nice. It's slower, but it goes through that process of conversation along the way that I think is better.

ROB: It's definitely slower. And the subject has to be something we have shared, like our collective media landscape or our collective art history or a collective something.

ZORAWAR: Right, something we share with one another, things that two people share, and that we share with the rest of society.

ROB: Other projects are now so influenced by what we've been working on collectively that I don't even feel like I'm working on my own, even when I am. It's like Zorawar will be on my shoulder! I was doing a project in North Carolina and I was making some color decisions and I could hear Zorawar in my head going, *hmm I don't know about that overlap, I don't know about that color.*

ZORAWAR: I think we've learned things while working together that we would take to ourselves. So as we would hypothetically return to solo practices, we would carry that with us.

ROB: We're texting and sending ideas back and forth and emailing and discussing and writing it down, all that stuff helps us go, Oh, remember this idea? *Oh yeah, let's think about that again.* When you're doing it yourself, you think you know it, and then you maybe forget it and never go back to it.

RACHEL: So relatedly, what do you each gain from collaboration on a personal or studio practice level? You've talked about it in terms of learning from each other, but is there one nugget where you think your personal practice would be in a totally different place if you hadn't been working together for over the past ten years?

ZORAWAR: I guess we would have to be thrown into our personal practices again to really see the effects of it.

ROB: I think you're probably right. We'd have to try to make independent projects to see what the full ramifications of it are. But the print shop historically has always been a place where there's a sort of sharing. What we describe today in terms of master printer, artists, apprentices. Personally, I don't really like those terms, but there's always been a certain sharing and making of images. The myth of the genius individual artist is a myth, as we know. There are always people in the studio helping you, you're getting ideas from someone else.

RACHEL: That is a really good answer. What is the most difficult part of collaborating for each of you, whether it's a personality thing or a functional thing?

ROB: There's always that interview question that's like what's your biggest weakness? I don't know, Zorawar, what's...

ZORAWAR: We were joking that the hardest part is the color green, but it's kind of true. That's the subjectivity of the whole thing. When you're mixing a green, for example, you have to think about how all of the other colors before and after are going to interact with it. The red that's coming later, it's going to desaturate it. The yellow that's underneath that is going to contribute its own thing. And then you have your own set of concerns that your collaborator might not exactly share. So you have to talk it out and there's this idea that art is this individual inspiration that isn't the result of a protracted conversation of something as subjective as the color green. But that's how the decisions are made every step along the way. So that thing that happens when we're talking about green is the hardest part.

ROB: It's because it is a subjective thing. Colors are not objective. We all see things a little different. And that's just a basic fact. And we disagree about how the color green should be. I say Zorawar, *you're afraid of green.* He's like, *No, I'm not!* The other day he wanted more green and I was like, wait a second, what kind of green!

ZORAWAR: If we were composing a picture by ourselves or including a certain subject matter by ourselves, we'd probably do it slightly differently, the same way as we might mix that green slightly differently.

ROB: When working with someone else you're striving for something objective that you can agree upon. However, not everything fits neatly into that box. There are things that are more subjective or even simply unknowable. Some people claim this is aesthetic knowledge; aesthetics is where we try to articulate things we don't really understand. Maybe this is a little too meta. But as a collaborative team we can agree that we don't know something, but we can't agree on what we don't know.

ZORAWAR: But there are a set of things that we do agree on. And there is a lot in the center of that Venn diagram. So when we go to a museum together and we're looking at paintings, we're agreeing on a lot of the things that we recognize as good; ideas that we want to borrow. There's the other side of that, that we're both aiming for the same thing. We're both kind of striving to achieve this thing that we both agree on.

ROB: Yeah, I think we agree on like 90% of it. And if it was less than that, we probably wouldn't be working together.

ZORAWAR: Yeah, at least we both agree that it should be a green of some kind.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION:

Zorawar Sidhu and Rob Swainston: History is Present
UB Anderson Gallery, April 6–July 26, 2024

In *History is Present*, Zorawar Sidhu and Rob Swainston's large scale woodcut prints layer art historical references with contemporary catastrophes: America's political climate, the continuing aftermath of the pandemic, environmental devastation, and erosion of bodily autonomy. They document horrors that we become immune to, and prompt us to reckon with them. New large format works join their series *Doomscrolling*, 18 moments collected between May 24, 2020 and January 6, 2021, carved and printed from plywood that had been used to board up NYC.

MIRABO PRESS is a printmaking studio and gallery founded by Bob Fleming, Rachel Shelton, and Mizin Shin. Mirabo offers artist residencies and limited edition printmaking by contract, working to expand the local art scene by collaborating with both regional and national artists and institutions. Working with artists both inexperienced and well versed in print media, these collaborative opportunities allow for advancement of the medium. Equipped for intaglio, monotype, relief, and screen printing, Mirabo Press also provides educational and community programming. Workshops for small groups designed to give individual attention cover a range of processes, and local educational institutions are welcome to bring students to the studio to learn about this democratic and socially formative medium.

ZORAWAR SIDHU & ROB SWAINSTON are a collaborative art duo exploring the intersection of historical print processes with contemporary technologies. Their projects investigate the complexities of contemporary social issues, drawing from the history of print as the medium par excellence of social movements. They have exhibited together at Petzel Gallery, Five Myles, 601 ArtSpace, and Field Projects Gallery.

ZORAWAR SIDHU was born in 1985 in Ludhiana, India and currently lives and works in New York City. With a background in art history and fine arts, his projects recreate art historical artifacts using contemporary technology and historical materials and techniques. He has exhibited projects with galleries and museums nationally, including exhibitions with Marginal Utility, Spring/Break Art Show with Field Projects, Five Myles, the Museum of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and the Museum of The Town of Vestal, NY.

ROB SWAINSTON was born in 1970 in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania and currently lives and works in New York City. His work is informed by a dual academic background in political science and art. He is an Associate Professor at Purchase College and co-founder and Master Printer for Prints of Darkness. Swainston has been awarded numerous residencies including Skowhegan, Marie Walsh Sharpe, and the Fine Arts Work Center. Solo and group exhibitions include Marginal Utility, David Krut Projects, Bravin Lee Programs, Socrates Sculpture Park, Smack Mellon, Provincetown Art Association and Museum, IPCNY, Canada Gallery, Queens Museum, and the Bronx Museum.

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Above: Zorawar Sidhu and Rob Swainston, *June 1, 6:30 pm, 2021*. Multi-color woodblock on paper, 57 1/2 x 45 1/4 inches. Courtesy of the artists and Petzel Gallery.

Below: Zorawar Sidhu and Rob Swainston, *January 6, 2021*. Multi-color woodblock on paper, 57 1/2 x 45 1/4 inches. Courtesy of the artists and Petzel Gallery.

Cover: Zorawar Sidhu and Rob Swainston, *July 4, 2021*. Multi-color woodblock on paper, 57 1/2 x 45 1/4 inches. Courtesy of the artists and Petzel Gallery.