

***Sculpting Lives* podcast transcript**

Series 1, Episode 5: Rana Begum

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Hammad Nasar: She's somebody who doesn't respect those divisions or those hierarchies of design, of fine art. She doesn't give them so much reverence.

Anne Barlow: How to balance work, life, family. I think they're age-old concerns.

Rana Begum: I don't want to use a language that really segregates people. I don't want to use a language that makes them think about gender if they're looking at a female artist or a male artist.

Sarah Victoria Turner: Welcome to *Sculpting Lives*, a podcast with me, Sarah Turner.

Jo Baring: And me, Jo Baring.

Sarah Victoria Turner: Today we're going to be talking to the artist Rana Begum. I hesitate trying to describe her there because she is someone who works across disciplines. She's worked with sculptural materials, she's worked with baskets, with the reflectors that you find on the back of your car.

Jo Baring: I thought it was really interesting that you stumbled almost over calling her a sculptor because I think she does not want to be defined by being simply a sculptor. As you say, she crosses disciplines, doesn't she?

Sarah Victoria Turner: But she did agree to come on a podcast called *Sculpting Lives*.

Jo Baring: She did.

Sarah Victoria Turner: Sculpture is a really big part of her thinking process, I think, and working through what objects can be in the world.

Jo Baring: That's right. She moves across disciplines like painting, architecture, design, she even makes furniture, doesn't she, Sarah?

Sarah Victoria Turner: She does and she uses color as a form and a formal language in its own right. It has a life of its own in Rana's work. We went to see her at her current studio in Haringey in North London, where there was lots of fabrication in process. She's got lots of big projects coming up in 2020. In that space of work, we talked to her about her trajectory actually, coming to Britain from Bangladesh as a young girl.

Jo Baring: Yes, she's quite young. She's Born in 1977 and came from Bangladesh to Britain aged by eight, I think.

Sarah Victoria Turner: Yes, and then she trained at various art schools in Hertfordshire at the University of Hertfordshire. She also attended the Slade from 1999 to 2002 where Tess Jaray was an artist. He was really influential on Rana's career and still is, they're great friends. Then we talked about her trajectory, how she became an artist, how she maintained a career as an artist, and the challenges that she's faced in doing that, and also the possibilities that have opened up.

Rana Begum: I chose to do painting for my BA and MA because I found both of those disciplines to be quite open, and it meant that it was also open for collaboration as well. I really wanted to continue that.

Sarah Victoria Turner: The collaborative element, is that something that has stayed with you as your work developed?

Rana Begum: Yes, at that time, I knew that I was interested in architecture, I was interested in design, I was interested in textile, I was interested in a different kind of medium as well, and I wanted to keep my options open.

Sarah Victoria Turner: I was thinking actually, "Or maybe you don't think of yourself as a sculptor," would you self-define in that way?

Rana Begum: It's so difficult. It's not really me that needs it. I don't need that definition at all. In fact, I'm much better without it. I say I'm a visual artist and I feel that's enough, but then people need to pigeonhole you in something. Usually when that is necessary, then I say, well, "my work kind of between painting, sculpture, and architecture". I think I struggle with just being boxed in one discipline. I don't find it informs that experience. It just limits the experience, I feel.

Sarah Victoria Turner: We're sat in your studio.

Rana Begum: Yes.

Sarah Victoria Turner: Can you just tell us a bit more about the space and how you begin an idea or work, this kind of models, and these ideas?

Rana Begum: I currently have my studio in Haringay. It has gone through various kinds of usage and it's been a nursery, to storage space, to a garage, to people actually living in it. I love this studio, it's fantastic. It's got two floors and it means that I can really, one, be quite efficient in the studio and separate certain aspects of it, have a messy workshop downstairs, and a clean space upstairs. I really like to produce a lot of my work in-house, which means from beginning to the end, there are parts of the work that get sent out and someone else will have to do, but most of the time, if we can, I'd like to do it in the studio.

So then you need to have certain spaces, you need to have perfect clean space, and you need to have space where you can create dust and so on. A lot of the time the way an idea would start would be if I'm working for a proposal for something, and usually, I tend to look at the space, look at the way the space works, how people function in the space. The other major element or factor in the way that I make the work or the way the ideas come up is natural light. How much natural light comes into a space, and how that affects the space.

Sarah Victoria Turner: So is light another material for you?

Rana Begum: Yes, it is. It really determines the kind of material I then go to use to describe or to conceive an idea.

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Sarah Victoria Turner: One of the issues all artists face, as they get busier and more successful, is having the time to make their work. There are just so many demands as you do more exhibitions or asked to give talks, even sometimes a teaching. So an artist residency program is often a really crucial moment in an artist's career for developing an idea or an exhibition project.

Jo Baring: That's right, so they're able to go to an institution or a studio and just take some time to think and maybe work through some ideas, some projects that they hadn't had time to think through formally before. Rana spent some time in 2018 at Tate St Ives. There's some very historic studios in St Ives called the Porthmeor Studios. Quite a lot of very famous St Ives artists like people like Ben Nicholson have their studios there.

Sarah Victoria Turner: Yes, Wilhelmina Barns-Graham.

Jo Baring: That's right. They have these incredible windows that look out onto the beach and onto the sea.

Sarah Victoria Turner: Probably quite distracting because there's lots of kids having their run.

Jo Baring: They're having their bucket-and-spade holidays.

Sarah Victoria Turner: Even doing their surf lessons and things like that, so you do have some kind of competing distractions.

Jo Baring: As a result of that residency, Rana had an exhibition at Tate St Ives,, and we went down there to speak to Anne Barlow.

Sarah Victoria Turner: Yes, Anne Barlow is the director of Tate St Ives and Anne's work with Rana quite closely. She spoke to us about how she perceives Rana's career developing, and some of the things that really interests her about the way that Rana works with color and with form.

Anne Barlow: She spans sculpture, painting, and architecture, and how she can move easily between creating more intimate work such as those that she's exhibited in gallery and museum spaces, and major commissions, like the one she did recently in Kings Cross, No. 700 Reflectors. In that sense, I think she sometimes makes me think of Barbara Hepworth even though they're very different in the way in which she can move quite easily and very skillfully between these different degrees and different scales in her work from very intimate and private to very public in scale and scope. She works with materials that sculptors have used for decades, in some cases, centuries.

You could have plaster, for example, but she also works with powder-coated aluminum or other kinds of metal that she has been inspired to use by looking at industrial sites or urban architecture, and then create something incredibly different with those objects. It's about seeing different patterns, different geometries, and different, perhaps, inherent structures in a material or in a form that she then adapts to and makes into something else.

I think in terms of sculpture more broadly, there are so many strands, obviously, that have existed from modernism onwards from the solid form, to the pierced form, to the stringed form, to the open form, to installation and mixed media that incorporates photography and video. I think there's, in a way, no one easy definition of sculpture anymore.

Jo Baring: We had quite a wide range in conversation with Anne during our time at Tate St Ives. What became apparent was how important supporting women artists have been throughout Anne's career. Before Tate St Ives, she was at a non-profit arts organisation in New York. Again, she had supported emerging women artists, late career women artists, but also, Sarah, she talks about another point in an artist's career where it's crucial to support them.

Sarah Victoria Turner: Yes, she pinpoints this mid-career moment when it's absolutely fundamental for artists to have some support to maintain a career. It's all well and

good supporting emerging new artists, they obviously need help coming out of art school, but what happens 10, 15, even 20 years into someone's career? That's often when they need that extra lift, those exhibitions to really get their name even better known and just make a career as an artist feasible.

Jo Baring: During our conversation with Anne, we actually asked her explicitly about the gender issue. We talked about what are the obstacles to, A) pursuing a career as an artist, but B) more pertinently, are there still obstacles as a woman to pursue your career?

Anne Barlow: I think it's still perhaps, unfortunately, a pertinent question. If you look back and probably they're going through many generalisations here to address the question, but broadly speaking, if you look at the history of modernism and the prominence that artists received, Hepworth, I think, is an exception because she was well known in her lifetime, although she might have faced struggles at various points. The history of British modernism, there's a lot of male sculptors. It's still is, but I think now, perhaps the focus in redressing that balance is still really important to do.

Looking particularly at women working in modernism, whether sculpture or otherwise, and making sure that you continue to support their work I think is really important or revisit their work if it's a more historic piece. With women, a contemporary artist working today, I think those challenges do still continue, how to balance work, life, family. I think they're age-old concerns and it also depends on where you live in the world, what kind of societal support you receive. Certain countries are more supportive to women generally, and so that makes it a bit easier for female artists to take the time to do both.

There was an interesting panel recently where the subject was spoken about overtly, about what is it like to be a mother and a female artist working today. That received so many comments on Facebook and so many retorts of at last someone's talking about this. I think it's also unspoken because we all speak about it in the field, but mostly when we get together. It's not necessarily something on a public stage, so I was really glad to see that actually put out there. That does speak to the fact that these are still concerns among contemporary female artists that they still feel that there's a pressure or that, in some cases, will it damage their ability to have a really fulfilling professional career?

There are many artists that I've seen who do manage both and are doing really well, but I think for others, it remains a struggle depending on their contexts. I think it's just important if you're a museum or an arts organisation or a small non-profit to just be mindful of the fact that people have a life-long career, and it's important to support people early on. It's often in that mid-period, that 'midlife moment' I think that many artists feel that they're between two stages of their life. They're neither emerging anymore nor are they incredibly established and nor, perhaps, are they old

enough yet to have a life-long retrospective, which almost implies we're at the end of their career.

It's a couple of middle decades that are often particularly charging. Actually, for both men and women, but I think more traditionally for women.

Jo Baring: When we spoke to Rana, she was really open and frank about the impact that being a woman has had on her career, but also the myriad roles and responsibilities that also impact the amount of time she has available to pursue her career. In particular, she's got two kids, hasn't she?

Sarah Victoria Turner: Yes. I think the politics of being a parent and running a full-time business as an artist is something that she has been part of a conversation that has opened up in the art world recently, which is not just about specific personal biographies, but is about the wider infrastructural issues about how artists can do these things and can sustain careers, and how particularly this has an impact on women.

Rana Begum: The reason I guess I'm speaking out a bit more is probably because of those frustrations, but also because I've had people call me, I've had people messaged me even on Instagram. I've realised more and more actually how important it is to help support other artists that are struggling that want to have children, but also want to have their career as well. Actually, why shouldn't we have both? Why do we have to choose one or the other? That's not the same for men. I don't know why. I remember growing up as a child and just wanting there to be no differences between myself and my brothers. I was like, well, if they're not in the kitchen washing their plate, why should I be in there washing my plate if they're not in the kitchen cooking? My father really struggled. This is one of the reason why I didn't want to learn to cook. I said the minute I knew that if I learned to cook, I would have to be in the kitchen cooking five different curries a day. I made a conscious decision and I remember telling both of my parents that, no, I'm not interested. I'm not interested in being in the kitchen.

Jo Baring: You have a sense of injustice?

Rana Begum: Yes, and I said if I have to do the same, then it means the boys in the family have to do the same. That was quite interesting and it took a while for my father to accept. It's quite funny how he's like, "Yes, my daughter doesn't know how to cook. She doesn't want to be in the kitchen." It is difficult, it's not easy, and especially if you're having to compete with men that have 24/7 to be able to focus on their career. Everyone moves at a different pace and everyone has their own ways, but I don't believe that I need to choose one or the other. I'm learning how to be firm about my opinion without needing to scream and shout about it. There is a stage where, last year, it just got really intense: I had a mother at the school say to me, "If you're a freelance, you should be able to go on all these school trips." I just lost it because I

was like, well, I'm freelance, it's just that I have to work the hours that I have. Again, I'm strict: the minute I pick up the kids, I try not to open any emails or have any work communication, but I can't have that if I then have to take time out to work hours. It's never going to happen again at school after my massive outburst. It's surprising because sometimes it is actually women that put that pressure on other women, and it's really sad because you'd think they'd get you.

I feel like more and more people don't want to choose. They want to be able to have everything that is there.

Sarah Victoria Turner: Another thing, which is probably quite personal as well is you, I think, increasingly have talks about your background and thinking about issues about racism in the UK growing up. Again, you've come to a point in your career where you feel you can actually address some of those more personal issues about identity, the politics of Britishness, and coming to Britain and whether you feel--

Rana Begum: It's quite a lot.

Sarah Victoria Turner: How you address that, or do you ever get frustrated that sometimes biography bumps into your work or do you feel that it is actually passive, the process?

Rana Begum: I like to think that I'm just incredibly fortunate that I grew up with two different cultures. I'm just really lucky that my father was able to bring me over to the UK. He didn't have an easy childhood, he had a really tough childhood. Both of his parents died when he was really young, so he was left responsible to take care of his younger sister. There's a lot of things and I think, I don't know, I don't blame my parents in terms of the difficulty I've had to face either at school or getting a job or anything like that because they've had to deal with things themselves. Living in East London in Hackney, I feel like I am almost living in a bubble. You don't realise how bad it is until you step out of Hackney and you think, "Oh my God," you remember your skin colour. You're made to kind of remember your skin colour, you're made to remember your gender, you're made to remember your religion. All of those things you take for granted when you're living in a place like this. I think this is one of the things: I was so proud of living and working in the UK before the whole Brexit thing, and it's been quite upsetting. Obviously, when the whole Brexit thing happened I just cried. You don't realise the impact it had and immediately took me back to when we first arrived in the UK, and we got put on a street where there were loads of other Asian families living there. They tend to just put you all in the same area. It's not easy integrating.

Sarah Victoria Turner: It brought that back.

Rana Begum: It brought that back. It brought back the fact that we had our window broken, spat out, shouted out, all of that kind of stuff. I knew that it was exactly that, that it was happening all over again. I just feel like everyone goes through all sorts of things and it makes them who they are, and I think it definitely affects people.

Sarah Victoria Turner: Do you think your work responds to the current climate? Is it the responsibility of artworks to somehow position themselves in relationship to what's happening in the world and that?

Rana Begum: I think if you can, and if your work does, then that's amazing. I don't really know politically if my work has any correlation, but what I've really realised over the years is that having been through what I've been through, it's made me move towards more minimalism or abstraction because, again, there is just so much division, so much about borders and putting up walls that I wanted a language that was universal, that it didn't dictate anything. It didn't segregate anyone. I found myself –and that's something I haven't spoken about before, actually– it's only that your questions just made me think of.

I remember thinking that this is the direction I want to go. I don't want to use a language that really segregates people. I don't want to use a language that makes them think about gender if they're looking at a female artist or a male artist. I guess that's my way of fighting in a way.

Sarah Victoria Turner: That having the same politics, doesn't it?

Rana Begum: Yes.

Sarah Victoria Turner: Maybe as well as something, I don't know, that work, it can give people a place of solace in a way because it's about your physical interaction with it and your psychological interaction with it. It's not dictating, it's not representational so you've got to find your own position in relation to it, and that is perhaps something that offers people, different ways of being or a different place in the world.

Rana Begum: Yes, and I think also the fact that the works doesn't have any titles. I don't really like to have any labels next to it, so it really is open for the viewer to interpret it or experience it.

[music]

Jo Baring: Sometimes the problem in the art world is that we love to pigeonhole people and we love to ascribe certain motives or look into people's backgrounds to deduce inspiration or to find out a little bit more about them. Rana resists being pigeonholed. Rana resists people looking for interpretation into the work by talking about her race, her religion, her background. Actually, Sarah, you had a very interesting conversation with a curator about precisely those issues, didn't you?

Sarah Victoria Turner: Yes, Hammad Nasar Nassar, a Senior Research fellow here at the Paul Mellon Centre, and curator the next British Art Show Nine, was really perceptive about the way in which Rana has used and intersected with Islamic culture, and particularly her use of abstract form as well. We opened up that conversation and talked more about biography, Britishness, and identity.

Hammad Nasar: Perhaps artists have to be really guarded and careful as to even how they articulate their practice in terms of trying not to be pigeonholed or not to be reduced to particular frames. Perhaps as you know, Rana's practice has grown in maturity as her work has circulated, as she's won prizes, and then shows that there's a growing confidence that comes with that that allows you to claim your multiple selves.

Sarah Victoria Turner: Do you think that's partly getting older that there is a bit distance or you've got a longer perspective on your own history and your family's history? Especially for Rana, her family's history of coming to Britain, and processing some of those experiences of moving to Hertfordshire in the South East of England. Whether it's something about that, yes, maybe an emotional as well as an artistic maturity that allows you to look backwards a bit more.

Hammad Nasar: Perhaps. One of the things, a few years ago, I served as a jury member for the Victoria & Albert Museum's Jameel Prize. For those who don't know it, this is a prize that's given, I think, every other year for art and design that's inspired by Islamic cultures or Islamic art and design. What struck me as really interesting was the kinds of artists who were presenting their work and claiming that lineage and heritage. Including people like Rasheed Araeen or Cevdet Erek, people who have histories and a presence in the contemporary art world, who've shown at Documenta or at Venice. People who've gone out of their way to distance themselves from particular Islamist readings of structures, who are now coming back and saying "no no" or Wael Shawky, for instance, who are then claiming their work to say, "No, we can be contemporary and Muslim" or claim that link to Islamic culture. To me, it felt like – or maybe that's just my most hopeful reading of it – these are artists, perhaps, yes, I'm sure there are personal factors at play, but I think there's also a collectivity about wanting to claim a space in saying that the universal is not just the cookie-cutter modern that people fit on. Is that there are ways to expand that universal set.

Sarah Victoria Turner: Do you think that's a political act? Because obviously, in our wider society, wider culture, Islamophobia is on the rise, we hear always daily of incidents of racism. Perhaps a more collective strategy of speaking out, of claiming one's history is also an act of politics of saying, "We are here in Britain, this is all work that we're doing and we belong to this history as well." Could you read it that way?

Hammad Nasar: I certainly think you could read it. I would resist the temptation to fly the flag in that way, but in the last couple of years, particularly while I was leading the

Stuart Hall Foundation and coming across young artists, activists– and quite often, they don't see much of a distinction–I see a much more claiming of space and wanting to project a kind of identity that perhaps would have come across as old fashioned a few years ago. I do think that claiming different lineages of saying that "No, you can," rejecting the tyranny of the "or", and claiming an "and" is a political act.

Sarah Victoria Turner: Then it's interesting to think in the context of Rana's work what very abstract geometrical practice can do in that. It's not obviously depicting stories or obviously representing Islamic ideas or Muslim ideas. It's so much more nuanced and complicated than that, isn't it? This work of abstraction and the role it has to play in the world and perhaps opening up interpretation, as you say, that the viewer comes to it. You have to make your own relationship with each work in a way.

Hammad Nasar: Very much so. Rana's work is also slippery in the sense that it plays with languages but also materials from the design world, from industrial road-building. You can think about that also from a utilitarian angle of things like how do you use reflectors under bridges or how do you use road signage or even furniture. She's somebody who doesn't respect those divisions or those hierarchies of design, of fine art. She doesn't give them so much reverence and I think that's really interesting.

Sarah Victoria Turner: We spoke about, with her, that this is a podcast about sculptors, and we're claiming her as a woman sculptor. There's, again, a productive misfit, in a way, that she works across. She's spray painting sometimes, she's using neon others, and just thinking how useful categories like sculpture can be at certain moments, and then increasingly, especially I think for contemporary artists, where that just breaks down and becomes almost irrelevant.

Hammad Nasar: Categories are useful to frame meaning, but they're most useful when you break them.

[music]

Jo Baring: Rana has had a lot of public commissions recently. She has a major installation in Kings Cross, she's got one in Oxford, and she was also selected in 2018 for the Frieze Sculpture presentation, which is a free presentation of sculpture in the public realm in Regent's Park, which is open every summer. Frieze Sculpture is selected by Clare Lilley. Clare is very involved in the sculpture landscape in the UK. She's Director of Programming at Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Sarah and I went to visit her and asked her specifically about the bigger picture, about representation, about women, about sculpture and sculpture in the public realm.

You're hugely involved in the sculptural landscape in the UK generally, and you are also selected for Frieze Sculpture. Can you tell us a little bit about how you select for that: Is gender an issue for you in that, or is it purely based on the work?

Clare Lilley: It really is an issue because it's so hard to get a significant number of women into it. Last year, we went all out to get 50/50.

Jo Baring: Did you manage that?

Clare Lilley: No, we nearly did, and then a couple dropped out and that's so frustrating. I ended up with just over 40% women. The other element here is galleries just not investing in women. Galleries invest in people who make the money. If you look at who's selling in the world, it's not women.

Sarah Victoria Turner: It's not women sculptors.

Clare Lilley: It's not selling at really high prices.

Sarah Victoria Turner: That speaks very loudly that this is still an issue, isn't it? If you've asked us why we're doing this podcast, does it even matter anymore - it's the 21st century? If we're looking at those hard facts, and lists, and the data, it does matter. That's shocking.

Jo Baring: It's all part of the process. You can't separate the commercial aspect from the institutional side at all in terms of the visibility of women.

Clare Lilley: Absolutely not. In Frieze it's really stark because it is all about money. It's about reputation and a number of other things as well. This has happened to me countless times, and I say, "Can we do this?" "Can't do it, Clare." Then you asked about a male artist, and they go, "Yes, we can figure that out." They'll fabricate something really quickly. Something quite significant in three, four months.

Sarah Victoria Turner: This all obviously has an impact on then, what feeds the national collection and public collection. These decisions, there's a future in who gets represented within collections, which are meant to represent the nation as well. We're still talking about the imbalance there about how many women artists are on the show and how many women are into the collections. It's these decisions that have an impact on that. I think it's really interesting that it's still such a significant issue in 2019/2020.

[music]

Jo Baring: Rana is the last artist that we've chosen for our series on women sculptors. It's interesting to think about that idea of sculpt(ors) and sculpt(ing) particularly in relation to Rana, isn't it, Sarah?

Sarah Victoria Turner: Yes, and what Hammad said about breaking categories that they are the most useful when you break them, when you disturb them. I hope that's what we've done here in these episodes, is not essentialise or protect any of the categories, sculpture, sculptors, women that we've used, but we have tested them and seen what the challenges, what the pressure points are as well.

Jo Baring: Also presented different artists who have experienced very different careers.

Sarah Victoria Turner: Huge generational differences. We're talking about someone like Barbara Hepworth, born in 1903, to Rana Begum, born in 1977. The experiences are not going to be the same are they?

Jo Baring: No, but also in terms of just the different reputations that they have, different career arcs, so comparing someone like Kim Lim to someone like Elisabeth Frink, who obviously got her success really early on, and then now Kim Lim, posthumously, is getting huge academic and intellectual recognition.

Sarah Victoria Turner: Seeing those changing fortunes, seeing how our history like all history is constantly being rewritten and is not a linear trajectory, is something that is open for debate, that is something that we can all intervene in rethinking.

Jo Baring: I really hope there's more women yet to discover within the narrative.

Sarah Victoria Turner: I do hope so, well, I know so. Maybe for Series Two.

Jo Baring: Thank you very much for joining us on *Sculpting Lives*. Huge thanks go to our contributors for this episode. The artist Rana Begum, curator Hammad Nasar, the director at Tate St Ives, Ann Barlow, and Yorkshire Sculpture Park programming director Clare Lilley.

Sarah Victoria Turner: We also want to thank all the artists and contributors to the *Sculpting Lives* podcast. In particular, we want to thank Isabel Mooney for research support, Claire Lynch, our producer, Kathy Courtney and colleagues at the Artists Life Project at the British Museum, and for support and sponsorship, enormous thanks go to the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British art.

Jo Baring: You can keep up to date with all our *Sculpting Lives* news on our Instagram page which is [@sculptinglives](#). Thank you for joining us.

Sarah Victoria Turner: Bye.

Jo Baring: Bye.

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