



An installation by Chiraag Bhakta / *Pardon My Hindi
At the Asian Art Museum (SF) thru May 25, 2014

This piece is a reflection of my personal relationship, as an Indian American, with yoga and its migration to today's Western context. I call this piece **#WhitePeopleDoingYoga**, the hashtag symbolizing the commercialization and commodification of a culture.

Not too long before moving to the Bay Area seven years ago, I began to collect grassroots-level meditation and yoga ephemera from the 1960s through the 1980s. During that era, particularly in the Bay Area, yoga started making a big impact on Western culture. I became interested in how yogic practice was being mined and commercialized; how the South Asian face of the discipline was being removed in the branding and portrayal of the practice and culture. Today, an online image search for "yoga" mainly returns images of white people in various poses, followed by images of dogs and cats doing the same.

This project is not about the individual pieces in my collection, but the overall voice that is put out in front of us, which is overwhelming and suffocating to me. After you go through the exhibition *Yoga: The Art of Transformation*, you will notice a sharp turn as yoga enters a new level of commercialization in the West. The \$27 billion yoga industry in the U.S. has rebranded a complex and rich discipline to make it easier to sell "yoga" as a line of products. Brands like Lululemon and Nike have started appropriating and trademarking phrases, postures, and clothing—aligning and embedding themselves in our understanding of yoga. Simultaneously the South Asian face and voice are relegated to an exotic caricature—cartoons,

adoption of South Asian names by Westerners, mystical creatures, Hindu gods. One archival study of the health and wellness magazine *Yoga Journal* found that over the course of two years "there was never a South Asian person on the cover, and less than one percent of content contributors were South Asian."¹

The act of selectively choosing what works in popular Western contexts, while ignoring aspects of yoga's core philosophy and historic practice, is telling. It shows an ironic attachment of one's ego to a desire for ownership over an ancient practice of material denouncement that emerged from an altogether different, South Asian, tradition.

In the end, I feel compelled to draw parallels between the current state of yoga and the industrial colonization by the same dominant voice that now adds another conquest to its collection. Meet the new founders of **Yoga™**.



¹Roopa Singh, Esq., Archival study for the South Asian American Perspectives on Yoga in America, SAAPYA

Photo of Chiraag by Timothy Palmer / @suprememoves
Shot at *Pardon My Hindi Studio, SoMa, San Francisco, California