Down to the Struts

Season 6, Episode 2: Embodying the Body with Bhavna Mehta

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Guest: Bhavna Mehta

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**Introduction**

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[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Hi, this is Qudsiya Naqui, and welcome to Down to the Struts, the podcast about disability, design, and intersectionality. Today, we’ll be listening in on my conversation with Bhavna Mehta. Bhavna is an Indian American artist specializing in cut paper and embroidery. She has exhibited widely across Southern California, and she lives and works in San Diego. Bhavna and I talked about her journey from India to the United States, and its connection to her journey living in her disabled body. She describes both as forms of immigration. If you want to learn more about disability, ableism, and the American immigration system, check out Season 2, Episode 1, Law, Policy, and Disabled Immigrants. For now, I hope you value Bhavna’s wisdom about the body and migration as much as I did. Ok, let’s get down to it.

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Well, thank you so much, Bhavna, for joining us on the podcast. I'm so honored to have you.

Bhavna Mehta:

Thank you, Qudsiya, for inviting me.

Qudsiya Naqui:

I'd love to start by asking you to briefly introduce yourself and, and tell us a little bit about your disability journey.

Bhavna Mehta:

I was born in India. I was born into an extended family system. So I lived with my father's brothers, their wives, their kids who were my cousins. At the age of seven, I was in Mumbai, which was about west of my hometown, Ahmednagar in about 150 miles. And I was in Mumbai for two just to visit some relatives with my mother. And I happened to get sick. And within a day, I had lost the use of my legs and my hips. And I was diagnosed with polio, I was paralyzed

I then was fitted with braces. And I learned to walk with crutches. And that's how I came back home. after many, many months, I came back home to my hometown, everything had changed for me. And also also for the rest of the family. Like suddenly, here was this kid who who needed to be carried who needed a lot of help. And so things were quite different. Although I don't have a lot of memory from that time, I do remember that my father said, like you're going to school, like there's nothing, there's no there's nothing to talk about. You're going to school. And and so by, you know, because of that real adamant his his sense that school was going to be even more important from it for me than it was initially in his mind because he was trained as an engineer, school, just like school had changed his life. And he knew that for me, it was going to be really important to have an education. And despite the fact that there were no other disabled kids in school or college or university, all three places where I went to school in India, I kind of blundered forth. I would say, you know, when you're a kid, you just think like, Okay, this is what you have to do. And you kind of have some support, I had a lot of support, my family really kind of rallied around me, I think it's the way I think about it. People carried my books all the time, you know, somebody came to drop me off, somebody came to pick me up. That wasn't the way kids were going back and forth to school. And then eventually, when I was a teenager, my father built, my father built a three wheeler, like it's called a rickshaw like a rickshaw like contraption. But it's a vehicle and it enabled me to drive myself to college, which was about only about a kilometer away from my school from my house. In that way, I finished college. I then went to university, and then eventually, at the age of 21, right at the cusp of like adulthood, I had the opportunity, and I was surrounded by women and men who were making preparations to go to graduate school in America. And I decided to join them. And it wasn't, it wasn't like a spur of the minute decision. It came from years of having talked to my uncle who live in the who lived in the Bay Area, and who is who used to be an orthopedic surgeon. And he would tell me, and especially my parents that things were much better in America like that I could be independent, I could live on my own, I could have a different kind of life than he thought was going to be possible for me in India. As a kid, I think I then, you know, nobody thinks about it, like how you have what your future is going to be like. But as an adolescent, and as an as a young adult, I definitely could see like, I couldn't like really locate my future. I don't see my future being similar to the other women around me. And I couldn't see I absolutely could not see it being the same as the male friends I had in college. Many of my male friends were entering the Indian Army, and other male friends were entering their parents, businesses, their father's businesses. And so I really could not see myself like, where did I fit in as a young person and as a person who really wanted to be out in the world. And so I ended up coming to America at the age of 22, to pursue a master's degree in computer science.

[Jazzy musical interlude]

Bhavna Mehta:

my disability journey after I came to America was definitely helped by the fact that the ADA had just passed. So the ADA passed, like, within six months of my coming to America, I came in 1989, and the ADA passed in January of 1990. I came to California and I realized that I did not have to use my braces and crutches anymore after I came to California, which is how I flew from India to California. And then within a week or two weeks, I completely stopped using my braces and I started using my manual wheelchair full time. And I've never really gone back. That was a huge change for me, like just a massive, massive change because it enabled me to just do many more things. It gave me a way to be, I suppose more included because wheelchairs were more common. I didn't see anybody wearing braces and crutches when I came to California but I definitely saw other students in wheelchairs on campus. That was a big change. And then I got a job I got another job. I got married and through all that I think the disability journey has been one that keeps moving you know like it keeps pushing me into like new directions and also it keeps kind of revealing itself.

Qudsiya Naqui:

I'm curious, you know, you talk about the decision to come to the United States for graduate study as a pivotal moment and describe how it reoriented the way you thought about your disability, the example of the braces and crutches versus using the wheelchair. So I wanted to go back to that a little bit and unpack it some more. When you were growing up, what were the messages that you sort of got from your community and your family around your disability? And like, how did immigration and you know, moving to the US, you know, shift the way in which you thought about yourself the way that your family thought about you? Like, what, what was that like? And did that? How did that change for you, aside from like, kind of like the sort of, you know, embracing the wheelchair and that sort of thing, but just kind of attitudinal changes.

Bhavna Mehta:

I think, to be honest, we didn't talk about disability too much, either in my family, or when I came to America. Basically, the idea was that you're already and this is not this is not to say that this was done in any kind of mean, or put down put down way, you know, like, let's put her down by saying that, but I think the idea really was that I was already kind of getting a lot of attention. Maybe not so good attention, but I was already getting I was already different. I already was standing out or sitting down or what have you. And so so why would I think in India the idea of talking about the body, as it is talking about the body is not a done thing. And then talking about the disabled body is also really fraught with like, very awkward language. And a lot of like, he or she is like, she can't do this, like, you know, the language is basically like, What can't you do? And how you're different? And how, how it is going to affect the rest of your life. I think that's what the language is around. And so I think everybody shied away from that. Like, I think people didn't want to point out how different I was. And I appreciate that, like I do understand, I do understand how hard it was to point out the differences, although I think there was a lot of curiosity. But I think there was also not enough language to say, well, these are the ways you are different. And, you know, I mean, that's okay. Like, everybody is different. And so I think that discussion didn't happen, either in my growing up, or, or when I came to America, I think those that kind of talk, I only have, I've only really had it with my husband, who's also disabled. My husband, George is also paraplegic. And so I've really only, I think, dived into how how, what does it mean to live in a different body with George. At the same time, I think going back to the idea that coming to America was this transition for me. And I think I am thinking about how when I came to America, I was young, I was single and I was a woman, and all that is associated with young and single and woman in California. I definitely was like, not part of that. I was not part of that. You know, it meant it meant you you were dating, it meant you were you know, you were like going to parties and clubs and drinking and it meant skimpy clothes, it meant, you know, flirtation, and I did not have any of that. So what I had was a very, again, a very awkward kind of like entry into a culture where I just felt like I didn't fit in me and I had friends and I had a good circle of people I hung out with, but it was never any question that I was different. And I wasn't going to be doing everything that everybody else was around me was doing it. So I think that has carried over. And part of it is my personality, probably because I'm shy, and maybe. I retreat a little bit, I'm not like, oh, here I am, I'm this sexy woman. You know, so I don't, I don't express that, I think part of it is that you just said, Never, you just never learn how to do that in the Indian culture. Like, if you start talking about your body, and you're an Indian woman, that's like a little beard, unless you have like a beautiful body, you know, and then you can talk about how fair your skin is, and how tall you are, and how graceful you are. But if you want to talk about a not a body that does not fit in those kinds of categories, as a woman, I don't know what your places. And that was, like, you know, that was just like, triple times the issue with me. So I think talking about the body and being in the body, like really embodying the body has always been kind of tricky for me. And I think that embodiment for the disabled body can be like, you're really in your body, or you're really out of your body. So So I think, I think those things has have carried onward through my growing up in India, and entering another culture where the body is, like, where, where a woman's able body is everywhere, like, in media, in advertising in, in literature, That's everywhere. And it's, you, you just know, like, that's not your body. so that carries that has carried over and both the cultures for me.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's really interesting. Just kind of like were being in your body was both the same, but also different across in the culture. So that being said, Well, what do you what do you think is the relationship between immigration and disability?

Bhavna Mehta:

disability could be a form of immigration. And immigration could be a form of disability. And I regard my disability at the age of seven, and my immigration at the age of 22, like as these big transitions, and also not just transitions, like transformations. And when I think about disability as a kind of immigration, I think about like how when you acquire a disability, or permanent disability or a chronic illness, or a catastrophic injury, I mean, you know, it could be anything, like you travel to another country, you basically are entering a space where you have to learn another language, you have to figure out customs that are, you know, local to that place, you have to navigate certain attitudes and certain rituals that that are completely foreign to you. I mean, when you when I became disabled, I basically entered a space where I wasn't playing with other kids out in the, you know, out in the yard, or I wasn't getting like you know, up going up the tree to, you know, pluck the pluck the ripe guava. You're entering another country where basically you are closer to the I was closer to the groundI was I was trying to figure out how to move in a different body. And I was also, I was also figuring out like how adults were perceiving me like, I wasn't a kid anymore, almost. I think when I became disabled, I suddenly became old, like, you know, because you do, you're doing things with old people are doing like you're not moving that fast. You know, you're sitting in one place and given special attention, things like that. And then when I think about immigration as a form of disability, again, I think when you immigrate, you're suddenly in a in a place where you really need a lot of help. I think about that, like when you become an immigrant, you really need a lot of help and as a disabled person, you need a lot of help and who is going to help you, you know how to figure it out who's going to help you, where your allies are? How do you figure out how to speak this new language, and then how to get how to claim it also, how to claim another country as your own as you live there, and as you as you build a community in this new country, as you figure out how you fit in, and will never fit in how you become part of the politics, and the geography, and all those things, can feel disabling at some times, because, because I think that it's so hard. When you when you live in the country that you're born, it's like, you're learning not just from your family, but you're learning from everybody around you how to be a citizen, or what you like about being a citizen, and what you don't like about being citizen, when you come to another country and your family is still at without a family, then you basically have to figure it out, you know, and, and create this new identity for yourself. Those ideas of disability and immigration just overlap for me in ways that are really like, just made me make me think about how how to, you know, as, as an artist, which I am, I'm like you, you want to make meaning out of the things that have happened in your life. And so these, these kind of larger ideas about how we really navigate in a new country, how we navigate navigate in a new body, or a changed body are interesting to me.

[Jazzy musical interlude]

Qudsiya Naqui:

You recently were one of the featured artists and Amanda Cachia’s Exhibit Script, Rescript at San Diego State University. And I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about that, how the exhibit was focused on disability and art and how disability comes into your art and your body of work as you try to make meaning in those in that medium.

Bhavna Mehta:

Thank you for that question. And I would love to talk about the exhibit, and specifically Amanda Cachia, who is an extraordinary curator and a thinker and a writer and she she created this exhibit at San Diego State University University Gallery and called it script rescript. Amanda has written and curated many, many exhibits about art and disability, and she has a large network of artists who she works with. And she has a wide reach in terms of her knowledge and her research. Script, Rescript really came about because we wanted to create an exhibit where the main idea was how do artists with disabilities take the script that they have been handed so for example, script really comes from like a medical script like a medical diagnosis, you know, you've been handed this medical diagnosis. And if you're an artist and making work, how do you take that script and really re script it, like flip it over, rewrite it, add to the script, create art out of it. And Amanda was included 10, I think artists, visual artists in this exhibition, all of us, I was one of them. And there were artists from the West Coast, there was an artist from Mexico. And all of us were taking, taking scripts, scripts that we have had all our lives. So taking the idea that our bodies are different, and using that to really create a new narrative, a new visual story. And we had a very successful exhibition. And we also, were able to have a discussion about how this exhibit came about. And also we were able to create audio descriptions and invite students from different classes to come see the exhibition, the fun part of having an exhibition in a college is that many different departments can see can bring students so you don't have to be an art student to go see the exhibition, you know, you can be, you know, a history student or a sociology student. In fact, I went and talked to a class where the teacher was teaching a class about assistive technology. And so many different kinds of students can come see the exhibit in a University Gallery and take something from it. So there was there were many different things that happened along with the exhibit that were really, really great. I got to meet a couple of the artists in the show. And I also, you know, got to make some new work for the show. In my own personal art story, I think this was an important exhibit, because for many years, I have been making art, but I haven't really figured out, like how to include my own disability ideas, and how to how to kind of really kind of go deeper into my own story to tell it in a way that was visually kind of interesting and challenging for me. I think in my own personal art practice, I haven't been able to, I hadn't been able to do that.

Qudsiya Naqui:

And Is there a piece that you created for this exhibit that has particular meaning for you? If so, could you describe it and tell us a little bit more about it?

Bhavna Mehta:

I have X rays from a very intense surgery I had when I was a teenager, and I had surgery that corrected my scoliosis. And it was it was a surgery where they put like two steel rods to hold up my spine, my spinal column, and also the doctors had decided that it was time for, for me to have the surgery because I was sort of fully grown at that time. But I also was really, really struggling with the scoliosis. I think if I hadn't had this surgery, I would have never come to America. And I would never be here talking to you. So the surgery sort of was transformative for me and I have these X rays I have the before surgery X ray, which shows the entire scoliosis of the spinal cord spinal column. And then I have post surgery X rays that show the metal rod in the spinal column and the connection, the scoliosis is not completely corrected. It cannot be but it's corrected much more than it used to be. And so I have I have these two sets of X rays. So I decided to use the X ray as as as a backdrop for embroidery. And what I did was I printed the X ray and the X ray is a kind of normal size. They're like, you know, just like a sheet of paper, small sheet of paper, but I printed them, I printed it really large on a piece of silk. And then I embroidered, embroidered on the X ray, the embroidery on the X ray evokes a landscape, it evokes a river, it evokes mountains and valleys and meadows, and trees and flowers, deserts and pools and ponds. So the color choices and how the embroidery is laid out, the kind of the repetitive stitching in the embroidery, all of it is a working landscape and nature. And I had been playing with the idea that as a disabled person, I haven't been able to be out in nature so much. And I really wanted to kind of figure out a way to claim nature, like I wanted to, I wanted my body to be part of nature. I think that's where I've been, my my thinking has been in the last couple of years is like how do we, how are we? How are you? How is the human body part of nature, and so often, like nature is the mountain that you're going to climb, and nature is somewhere else. And, and it's unreachable for me, like, I just find it sort of very hard to be, you know, in those spaces. And even when I am it's really like, this so much like to figure out about like, is this going to be accessible? You know, am I going to be able to be on that path? You know, how much help am I going to need? What's the grade of the, you know, the path? I want the experience of nature to be closer to me, like closer to me in terms of my senses, and closer to me in terms of my own understanding of what nature is. And so I'd been thinking about those ideas. And by embroidering nature on the X ray, I'm like, I just wanted inside of me, I suppose, you know, the X ray is like, the X ray basically shows you what's inside, right? You know, it's showing you an architecture of your body, it's showing you how the body is put together. And, and then when, when you have ideas of nature on top of that, like you sort of like are, are filling it filling that architecture with an idea of a tree or an idea of a meadow. And in doing so I think I want I want access, basically, you know, I want to access and that was the piece that was one piece that I created for the show. And it was it was just again, taking a script, which is an x ray, and X ray showing you like here's your body, it's so different and strange. And then re scripting it by saying like, yeah, it is different. And it is strange, but it is still a body is still alive. And it is still nature.

Qudsiya Naqui:

I love that. And it also evokes to me. I don't know if this is what you were thinking also. But it connects back to what you were saying earlier about disability as this other country, this other landscape this other way of experiencing the world that is, and sometimes, especially when you're new in it, like feels sort of foreign.

[Jazzy musical interlude]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Are there any projects that you're working on currently that you're particularly excited about?

Bhavna Mehta:

I'm still continuing to make work on the idea that I just talked about, usually when I you know usually as an artist, like you have like a fundamental or a core idea. And then I want to make more work connected to this idea. So that it's it's a body of work.

Qudsiya Naqui:

No pun intended.

Bhavna Mehta:

No pun intended. Exactly. It's continuing to kind of simmer inside of me. I also am beginning to write a little bit about this idea that, you know, how do we how do we think about nature, and I've been very influenced in this thinking by an artist and a writer, who in fact was also in our show, and I just want to take a couple of minutes to talk about her. Her name is Sunaura Taylor, she is fantastic painter. She also is feminist. She is a writer, and she has been, she has been researching and writing about how a disabled body can be instructive and living in a disabled ecology. So her main idea is that, look, the Earth is, the earth is disabled. At this point, you know, we have so many, so many like big issues that are exacerbated by climate change by the presence of poisons in our, in our land, the presence of plastic in our oceans, the idea that trees are dying, the idea that there are droughts and rivers are dying, I mean, you know, there's just so many climate and land related problems around the world. And so the world is disabled, like the land is disabled? And how can a disabled How does a disabled body exist in society? And how can we live in these disabled ecologies? How do we take care of our land, even though it's disabled? I've been very influenced by her in my thinking, and I'm, I'm wanting to do more research into that. Taylor is a great place to start for me. She's a fantastic writer, and I would recommend her essay, there's an essay in the Orion magazine that's very interesting. And there's an also an essay in the feminist magazine called Lux Magazine. That's also very interesting. She writes a lot about animals. Her book is called, it's called Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation. So she is, she's one thing good that that is very influential for me. And she also happens to be a visual artist.

Qudsiya Naqui:

I'm personally very excited to see where this intellectual journey takes you. And we'll certainly share those resources and links in our show notes so other people can read more of Taylor's work. And thank you for sharing about that. Where can our listeners find you and your work?

Bhavna Mehta:

I do have a website, bhavnamehta.com. I have another essay that was published in Catapult magazine that has that is online I've been really fortunate, like people find my website, they look at it, and some people find the contact information on the website and do write to me. It's always exciting to hear from people I feel the more connected we are in terms of our individual experiences, but kind of the the places where we find commonality, I think we feel not alone. I mean, sounds like a cliche, but it's really true like the more we hear about other people's stories, the more or less alone, the less alone we feel. I definitely felt that when I got to know you.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Well, the feeling is extremely mutual and I'm so honored that you agreed to share your story on the podcast so that I can can share your beautiful self with everyone else. So thank you, Bhavna. This has been such a wonderful conversation.

Bhavna Mehta:

Thank you so much for the work you're doing. You're like you're you're a light. You're a bright light and you are a warm, warm and kind person and I'm excited to talk to you and get to know you

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

This episode was produced by Ilana Nevins and me. Our social media manager is Avery Anapol. Special thanks to Claire Shanley for designing our logo, and to Eiffel Gangsta Beats for our theme music. If you like what you’re hearing and reading, be sure to subscribe or drop us a review on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Sticher, or wherever you love to listen, follow us on Twitter and Instagram at Down to the Struts, and join our Facebook group, Down to the Struts podcast. If you want a monthly update from me, including news from the disability community, sign up for our newsletter, Getting Down to It on Substack. If you have disability news or thoughts to share, drop us a line at downtothestruts@gmail.com. Thanks for listening, and see you in a couple of weeks so we can get back down to it!