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## Found in Translation

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# F O U N D



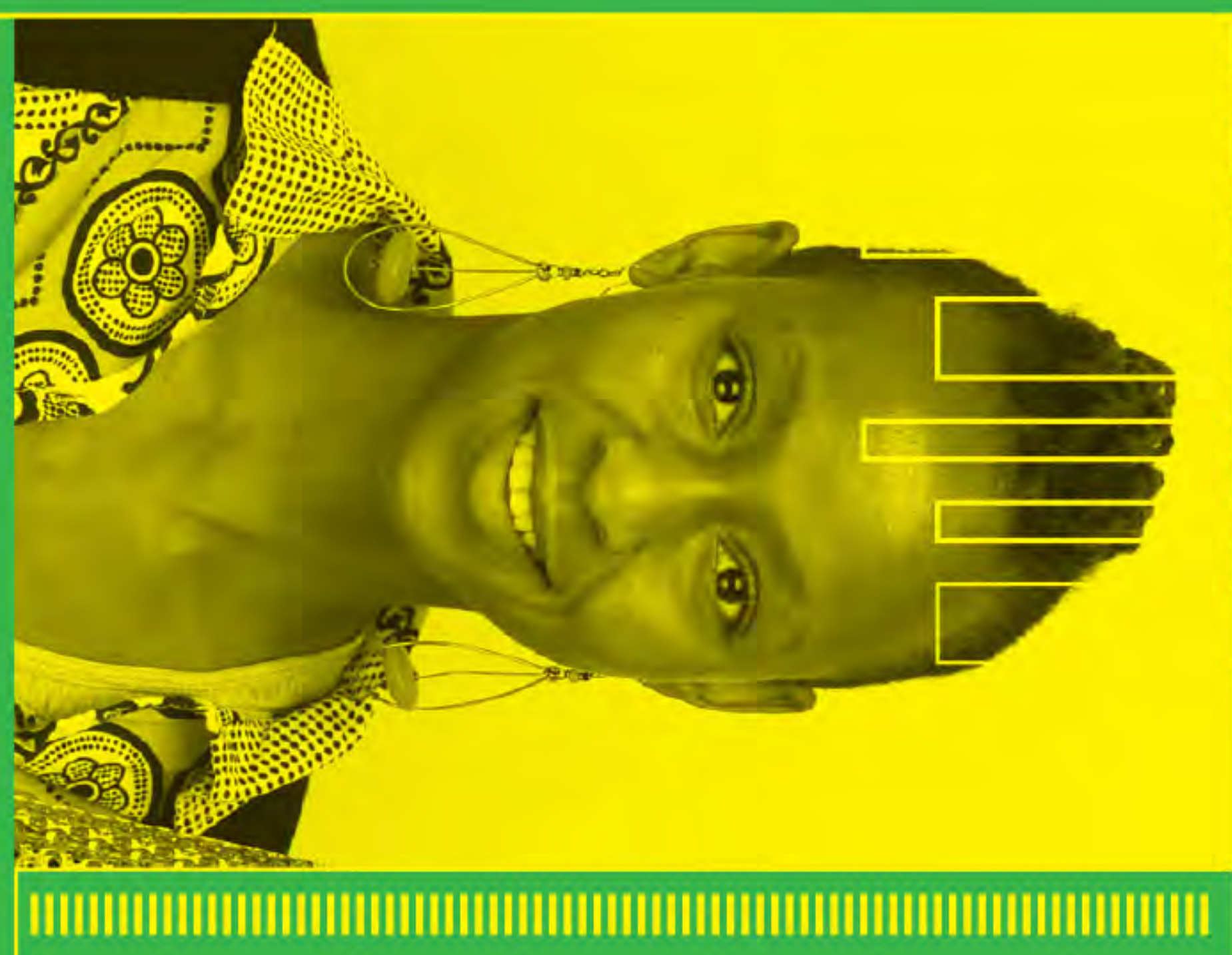
# I N

Four international alumni find a common language between their RISD education and their own rich, evolving cultures.



# T R A N S -

# L A T I O N



by Francie Latour



IN THE FALL OF 2002, Ng'endo Mukii 06 FAV ARRIVED AT RISD

Orientation after a very long trip. The first in her Kenyan family ever to leave her home country—never mind travel to America—she had already gotten an orientation of sorts from the back seat of her taxi: stories about a convicted felon named Buddy who ran the city as mayor for decades, and a celebration where residents descend on the Providence River several times a year to set things on fire.

That was unsettling enough. Then later, in the middle of a festive drumming circle on the Quad where she'd started to have fun and relax, she struck up a conversation with a new classmate.

"I saw this guy looking at me. He's smiling at me a lot, and all I was thinking was, 'His drum looks way cooler than mine,'" Mukii says, recalling the exchange. "So I walked over to him and I said 'Can we exchange?' He said 'Yes'—and then he said, 'Have you met the others?'"

Mukii froze. Then cautiously—tentatively—she asked who the others were.

"He said, 'You know, the other black people. The other people like us.' And I had no idea what he was talking about," says Mukii, now an award-winning filmmaker, animator and editor living in Nairobi. "I'm from Kenya. There were no 'others.' I couldn't fathom at all what he was saying."

It was a peculiar moment of racial disconnect, but it was also a telling cross-cultural encounter—one of many experienced by young artists and designers who come to RISD each year as international students. For these students, who represent about a fifth of the undergraduate population and as much as 40% of recent grad applicants, the opportunity to master new visual languages and find their own voices as artists and designers is what draws them to RISD. But in some ways, this is just the beginning of their education.

Whether they come from East Africa or the suburbs of São Paulo, whether they've seen Providence as a Pre-College student or only in pictures, whether they do or don't share English as a native language, RISD students from abroad are also immersed in an altogether different kind of foundation studies. They're learning to navigate the subtleties of *American* culture while simultaneously adapting to an academic culture that can differ sharply from the rigid training that has shaped them thus far: deeply collaborative, deeply invested in looking and making, deeply driven by the ever-present dialogue of the crit.

For four alums who have returned to their native countries—Mukii to Kenya, designer **Anjali Mody** 09 ID to India and architecture/design team **Eduardo Sucre** BArch 01 and **Karina (Schrappe) Sucre** BArch 00 to Brazil—the cross-cultural lessons and adaptability learned at RISD have proven critical to their success back home. Grounded in their vision, nimble in their abilities and refreshingly innovative in their approach, each has found a way to stake out his or her own creative ground, often bringing a new voice to old traditions in their homeland.





“Because of our RISD experience, we see collaborations between people and... different ways of expression... as the way to generate better ideas.”

Eduardo Sucre BArch 01

#### GLOBAL BRANDING BRAZILIAN-STYLE

“I had started in architecture for six months in Venezuela before I had the opportunity to come to the US,” says Eduardo Sucre, the co-founder of Studio Sucre, who still remembers his first childhood sculptures of hands, feet and torsos made from clay he mixed from mud in his parents’ garden in Caracas.

“Like Karina—who grew up in Brazil—I was looking for a more expansive educational experience abroad and was drawn to RISD’s strong reputation for creative design,” says Sucre. “Today, one of the reasons I think we stand out when we present a project is that because of our RISD experience, we see collaborations between people and all those different ways of expression—charcoal, sculpture, computer animation—as the way to create better ideas.”

Fresh out of RISD and determined to get their own firm off the ground in Brazil, Eduardo and his design partner and wife Karina were still in their 20s when they stumbled across their first client. It wasn’t someone looking for a private residence or a local business needing new space. It was Nike—the athletic shoe giant—looking to raise its profile and unify its brand in Brazil.

“We met somebody at Nike,” Karina says. “They had opened their offices here, and they were asking several different architects to make proposals. They didn’t have a real identity

in Brazil yet, so they were looking for a firm to kind of be in charge of taking their global design and adapting it to Brazilian culture and our way of life.”

Neither Karina nor Eduardo had any experience translating a global brand to a local market. But in more ways than one, it seemed like the kind of challenge they were destined to take on, almost from childhood. Some of Karina’s earliest memories involve accompanying her engineer mother to work in Brazil, observing large construction sites and getting her first lessons in labor and materials. As she took turns at her mother’s drafting table, in Venezuela Eduardo experimented with bricks, wood and eventually modeling clay in a family home built by his uncle, José Tomás Sanabria—the renowned Venezuelan architect who studied with I.M. Pei at Harvard in the 1940s.

But for the people at Nike Brazil and other companies that followed, it was actually another name that ultimately made Studio Sucre stand out in the design realm: RISD.

“It was really interesting to have Nike be a first client for us, because it’s an international company, a creative company, a design company,” says Karina. “They knew where we were coming from and it was easy to understand and communicate with them. And they had a global design concept—even though it was one that had to be translated and made relevant to Brazilian reality.”





As it turned out, there were a few Brazilian realities that Nike had not considered. For one, since Brazilians generally aren't as tall as Americans, Eduardo and Karina immediately sensed that the proportions for any furniture brought in to the stores would have to change.

Secondly, and much more importantly, shopping in Brazil is not like shopping at the local mall in suburbia, USA.

"When Brazilians shop, they never go alone. They go with their mother, their friend, their husband, their kids—the whole family goes shopping," Eduardo says. "People here probably spend two hours in a store, maybe more. We saw a need to make a lounge area design that would lend itself to Brazilian traditions of shopping, where people can sit comfortably, where the husband can read a magazine while his wife is trying on clothes."

The couple also had to persuade Nike to relax the sleek, futuristic décor at the heart of its brand identity and introduce a material more in keeping with a Brazilian sensibility: wood, with its natural warmth.

"That was kind of hard to help them understand," Eduardo says. "There was a lot of back and forth—a lot of talking, a lot of iterations, 3D renderings, models, different materials—

*opposite page and above: Eduardo and Karina Sucre started their practice together in São Paulo right after graduating from RISD and were lucky to*

*land Nike as one of their first clients. Now, every Nike store in Brazil bears the locally tailored branding Studio Sucre brought to the equation.*



until we got to the place that would be successful in the local market and still consistent with the brand.” After Studio Sucre and Nike opened six stores in a single year, Eduardo says: “That’s now the way every Nike store is here in Brazil.”

The studio’s nine-year collaboration with Nike—and the reputation for innovation the Sucres built along the way—opened the door to many more projects. In 2006 the studio collaborated with a Dutch engineer and his wife to build a 10,000-sf home using solar power, recycled rainwater and other green technology on the outskirts of São Paulo. More recently, Studio Sucre renovated a massive 22,000-sf warehouse facility for a German company that manufactures irrigation pumps and systems.

Once again, the Sucres found themselves taking on projects with specific challenges for which they had little or no prior experience. Almost all of the green technology used in their residential project was foreign to them. And in remodeling the manufacturing warehouse, they found themselves encountering new problems that were not only technical and logistical, but also psychological: trying to understand how a large group of employees could best work together.

“That was extremely difficult but at the same time, a lot of fun,” Eduardo says. “How does a group from the marketing department interact with people from a more industrial department? How do we make these connections among groups work? How can we understand the roots of this company and translate that into architecture?”

But as with the Nike collaboration, Studio Sucre quickly emerged as the most natural candidate because of their ability to apply their own brand of openness, rigor and creative problem solving to local clients and contexts.

“RISD can feel so open and so much about the process that it’s easy to get lost,” says Karina. “That was frightening for me at first. But you start to appreciate those all-day studios and all those crits, because they allow you to gain an authority over your work that is really important. Maybe we didn’t have all the experience of other firms in the beginning, but when we explain to a new client how we think and what we’ve done before, I think what they see is that we’re problem solvers.”



Studio Sucre also handles a wide range of residential projects and has been incorporating new green technologies as they become available.









### ANCIENT WAYS/CONTEMPORARY VISION

Anjali Mody, a young entrepreneur who runs both a budding design consultancy and a boutique furniture studio, was born and raised in Mumbai, the daughter of a lawyer and a businessman. There are no artists or designers in her family; she first heard about RISD through a cousin, who flirted with art school before deciding to attend Wellesley College in Massachusetts.

At Mody's RISD Orientation, Wellesley might have seemed like an appealing option to her parents, who had accompanied her to campus and were promptly greeted by Scrotie, the unofficial and distinctly penis-shaped RISD mascot.

"I'd say having Scrotie running around during Orientation definitely didn't help," Mody says. "My parents were a little scandalized. And they weren't very convinced that I would enjoy myself or that RISD would lead to a fruitful career."

Within just a few years of graduation, the path to that career would become clear as Mody returned to India and began building Josmo Studio from the ground up, blending the traditional and modern sensibilities of her homeland to create a growing line of furniture. But her interests reach far beyond crafting funky bedside tables. With a small business staff and a

team of roughly two dozen carpenters and craftsmen, she wants to articulate a new and uniquely contemporary vision for furniture design in India—one that challenges the dominant European design trend, honors India's tradition of craftsmanship and artisan culture, and reinvents that tradition for a younger, modern, globally aware Indian audience.

"Right now, I think what we have going for us is our very adaptive aesthetic," says Mody, who attracted sponsorship from Kenneth Cole New York and a number of Indian conglomerates to mount *Doubledecker*, her debut show last fall with a local fashion designer. "It's a hard bargain trying to convince someone you can get the same caliber of design in India as you can outside. That is by far the biggest challenge. But people come to me because they want something that you don't see every day in the market. In a market that's saturated with a lot of European designs and also a lot of heavy, traditional, very carved Indian furniture, they want something new."

Although Mody didn't quite grasp it at the time, realizing her vision meant pushing through creative and academic challenges at RISD that she had never experienced at home. "The level of intellect and the incredible dedication of the





“There’s a learning curve [for the local artisans] and there’s a learning curve for me.”

Anjali Mody 09 ID

Through her fledgling company in Mumbai, **Anjali Mody** (left) designs and produces a wide range of furniture that melds contemporary aesthetics with Indian tradition.

students—it was all very inspirational, but I did have a lot of trouble,” she says. “I hadn’t ever been exposed to art or design in such a rigorous way. That conditioning taught me something that’s become really invaluable since I moved back: how to up the ante in order to accomplish what you want to accomplish.”

One of her biggest challenges as an ID major came after deciding to take a Wintersession jewelry elective. Mody found herself working with silver for the first time—and she struggled. But the roadblock she hit with jewelry would eventually lead to a turning point in her understanding of craft.

“When you’re working as a furniture or industrial designer, your scale is a lot larger,” Mody says. “The dimensions of a chair, for example, are going to be a lot bigger than an earring.

I started to realize how much I would let slide with a finishing or a joinery detail, because with a bigger piece I knew I could cover it up. I’d find myself working until 4 am or 5 am because I just couldn’t get the joint right in the silver, and I would think, ‘Why aren’t I putting the same amount of attention in the details of my furniture?’ I knew my finish work had to get a lot better.”

Today, the precision Mody painstakingly learned by working with silver can be seen in the clean lines, finishes and detail of her bespoke furniture line. Just as she needed jewelry to learn a new approach to furniture, she says the local craftsmen who are central to manufacturing her designs also struggle with adopting her standards and approach to making.







“I’m teaching them new techniques with joints or stitch work or how to stretch fabric. I play a very sensitive role, because I’m the boss, but I’m also trying to make them understand...and use what I teach them,” Mody says. “Most of these guys have learned their skills from their grandfathers, and their grandfathers before them. So it’s difficult to make them break out of what they already know. There’s a learning curve for them and there’s a learning curve for me.”

Highly personal and often custom-designed for a particular client, Mody’s work ranges from more traditional styles, like her high-back upholstered *Wing Chair* or lacquered *Crown Desk* with curved legs, to the playfully modern, like the video game-inspired *Tetris Bed* or the *Lasercut Coffee Table*—a highly crafted, minimalist and geometric design whose recessed layers reference India’s centuries-long tradition of hand-carved wood.

“I like to force a reaction out of people when they look at my furniture, no matter what that reaction is,” says Mody, who has furnished private homes, hotels and casinos. Her goal for the coming year is to showcase her work at *Maison & Objet*, the annual winter design show in Paris. “A lot of what I like to do is kind of taking the familiar and flipping it on its head.”





“In Nairobi it’s very different. You feel the eyes of society more. You feel their judgment.”

Ng’endo Mukii 06 FAV



## SPACE IN BETWEEN

For Mukii, the young Kenyan filmmaker, being African but not African American on an American college campus meant a number of moments where things got lost in translation. She can still remember being stopped in the middle of Thayer Street during her junior year, as a black student from Brown criticized her for having a white boyfriend.

“He started talking about how white people can never understand the black experience. So I asked him, ‘What is the black experience?’” Mukii says. “And he said, ‘You know, slavery, hardship, struggle, living in the ghetto, and so on.’ And I said, ‘Why is there some universal consciousness of black people, and it’s only limited to suffering?’ Because what that means is that we’re not allowed to have any experience beyond suffering.”

Mukii may not have fully identified with that experience, but as a young woman growing up in Nairobi, she feels the impact of color and culture. Her 2012 short film *Yellow Fever*, a mixed-media project that incorporates hand-drawn and computer animation and live action layered with television footage and documentary-style interviews, opens in a Nairobi hair salon saturated with color. As she recalls the eggplant dress, dark skin and bleached hands of the hairdresser who braided her hair as a young girl, she narrates the cartoon scene in a low hypnotic voice-over:

*My sister is asleep. She is chocolate.*

*I am toffee.*

*The woman tugging on my hair is mkorogo: a mixture of both. Meaning, she could only afford enough beauty cream to bleach her hands and face.*

*Which are now yellow.*

It’s a haunting, richly collaged meditation on the black female body, and this year it won Mukii both a European premiere at the CinemAfrica Film Festival and Kenya’s African Magic Viewers’ Choice Award for best short film.

Mukii’s emerging film voice—experimental, layered and often deeply personal—isn’t one she acquired easily. The foundation in drawing was always there: Her father, discouraged from pursuing his artistic talents when he was young, had encouraged her to draw as soon as she was old enough to hold a pencil. And as her own talent developed, she instinctively gravitated towards technical and aesthetic questions in her work.

“I remember doing these studies of pineapples in different mediums—just doing it over and over again and really trying to get control of the medium I was working in, trying to draw even the little hairs on the pineapple,” Mukii says. “The technical aspect of it was really consuming, and I really enjoyed that.” Those formal interests continued at RISD, where she resisted choosing a focus among the three disciplines within her major—film, animation or video—and instead became far more interested in exploring the different ways they could be combined.

By the time she returned to Nairobi after graduation, Mukii was skilled enough in all three to land a job doing editing and animation, working for an ad agency and later creating educational programming for a media company that worked with NGOs. But slowly, she found herself confronting cultural attitudes at home that seemed as alien and limiting as her encounters with race in America. Suddenly, she couldn’t wear a short dress just because it was hot. Suddenly, she was no longer being evaluated or appreciated for her work.

“In Nairobi, it’s very different. You feel the eyes of society more. You feel their judgment,” Mukii says. “And there’s this reality where you’re just a young female. So people really aren’t

Ng’endo Mukii (above left) draws inspiration from every aspect of life in Africa. The still to the right is from a series created with Alex MacNaughton combining her panoramic travel photos with close-ups of the female body.





With her award-winning film *Yellow Fever*, Mukii says she was finally able to incorporate animation into documentary film-making in a way that makes sense.





“In my work I want to talk about something that is close to my heart, and that is serious. But I don’t want it to have that weight of: Here we are in Africa again.”

Ng’endo Mukii 06 FAV

interested in hearing your voice. When I was interviewed for my first job, the woman in charge of hiring me decided what I would get paid based on my appearance. She didn’t look at my videos, she didn’t look at my credentials. She just looked at me and gave me a figure.”

Over time, Mukii’s own abilities in various media presented another type of obstacle. As she advanced to a better paying job producing educational programming, she found herself playing multiple roles and also taking on an ever-growing workload.

She felt that if she was going to return to her own interests in animated film—if she was going to find her voice—she would have to go back to school. So in 2010, she enrolled at London’s Royal College of Art to earn her master’s.

“It’s not that I wasn’t being creative at work,” Mukii says. “I was creating stuff all the time. But it was just very different from what I would be making myself. I felt like if I left it for too long, I would just disconnect, without the ability to reconnect again.”

With the newfound freedom of academia, Mukii returned to what came naturally: experimenting and searching for a hybrid form that spoke to her as an artist. She found herself struggling to marry two styles that seemed inherently at odds: animation and documentary-style filmmaking.

In her short film *Untitled: Dust*, which explores issues of identity in South Africa, she wrestled with integrating her hand-drawn animation sequences with documentary-style interviews she had conducted there.

“I started to do some animation based on these interviews. But it was really awkward because in my head, I’m working with documentary interviews, but I’m drawing,” Mukii says. “Somehow in my head, I felt like I was lying to people. It wasn’t until *Yellow Fever*, when I had more time to investigate and

look at more documentary animation work, that I started to feel it was legitimate to use animation for a documentary—and that there are reasons for using it over video. But getting there was a process.”

For Mukii, those reasons are largely cultural. While *Yellow Fever* explores serious themes—the history of colonialism, the relationships between mothers and daughters, race, class, popular media and body image—it actively avoids being the kind of filmmaking she finds increasingly problematic: The Serious Documentary Film about the Plight of Africa.

“It’s sort of the same as the way that man in the street was talking to me—the idea that there’s one black experience, and it’s an experience of hardship,” Mukii says. “In a lot of ways I feel that documentaries underline this idea and regurgitate these same themes, without allowing for any other avenue.”

“In my work I want to talk about something that is close to my heart, and that is serious. But I don’t want it to have that weight of: Here we are in Africa again. I wanted more openness to feel something different. For me, once you’re drawing these animations, then all of a sudden it’s not that child crying in the video with the Red Cross symbol. It’s more like fantasy and reality coming together.”

For Mukii, Mody and the Sucres—alums living and working on three different continents—to translate is not at all to betray. If anything, they are most at home in that space in between: for her, where “fantasy and reality come together”; for Mody by bridging cultural divides through design—interpreting or reinterpreting tradition; for the Sucres and the many other international alumni who study in Providence and then return home, by discovering a common language between their RISD education and their own rich heritage and evolving cultures. ■