



Art

# Curator's Choice: South Asian Artists Addressing Migration through New Artifacts

Sadaf Padder

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**C**urator's Choice is a new monthly guest curator series featuring collections of artworks and essays by rising and leading voices in the arts, or in culture more broadly. The featured artworks are all available on Artsy.

Through art, I, like many South Asians of the diaspora, have found a sense of community, self-love, and belonging. But I still yearn for expansive representations in art that depict the many ways it looks and means to be South Asian.

As Bangladeshi American novelist Tanaïš writes in their book *In Sensorium: Notes for My People*, “Fractures and cracks emerge when we occupy ‘South Asian’ spaces — organizing collectives, conferences, campaigns, fancy galas — obscuring what is actually meant: India. They are mostly always run by upper-caste Indian Hindus.”



**Suchitra Mattai**  
*girl beast suspended in time*, 2022  
Kavi Gupta  
Price on request



**Misha Japanwala**  
*Hands of a Revolution: Sophia Balagamwala*, 2023  
Hannah Traore  
Price on request

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Today, contemporary artists of the South Asian diaspora are exploring futurism, hybridity, and spiritual traditions to shed light on migration and the subsequent search for home. Rajni Perera, Misha Japanwala, Suchitra Mattai, Chitra Ganesh, and Ashwini Bhat draw inspiration from their global ancestries, namely cultures from Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Guyana, and India.

“When it comes to economic security, money, recognition, institutional support, we, the peoples beyond India’s borders – Bangladesh, Bhutan, Kashmir, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, all the way to Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Fiji – are forgotten. We have less proximity to whiteness, our lands and histories outside the bounds of the Great Indian imaginary,” Tanaïs continues in *In Sensorium: Notes For My People*.



Ashwini Bhat  
*Fainting in Coils 5*, 2021  
Shoshana Wayne Gallery  
Price on request



Chitra Ganesh  
*Guardian*, 2021  
Hales Gallery

In a nutshell, South Asia is not a monolith. We extend far beyond Bollywood and bindis. For example, my father is from India-occupied Kashmir, the most militarized region in the world. My family belongs to a small sect of Islam which is persecuted in Pakistan. I have yet to see these specific life experiences captured in the commercial galleries and institutions that surround me.

In order to heal ancestral wounds, we must learn and acknowledge our histories and our differences. We must also reckon with the present rise of religious ethnonationalism in the Indian subcontinent, which bleeds across the global diaspora and is resulting in mass atrocities.

In these artists' work, the body is the foremost site that stores these memories, histories, and traumas. The body is the axis upon which the caste system was built, designating ranks of people as "pure" versus "impure." The socially oppressive structure affects over a billion people to this day, and the art world starkly reflects this inequality.



Rajni Perera  
*The Dream, 2023*  
Patel Brown  
Price on request

Meanwhile, mutation and hybridity serve as metaphors for the experience of migration and of the “other,” who is familiar with the need to assimilate and adapt.

Growing up, Rajni Perera paid close attention to the rare animals her father and uncles would return with on their expeditions to the jungles on the southern coast of Sri Lanka. Her uncle meticulously drew these birds while sitting at her kitchen table in Colombo. This experience inspired Perera’s fascination with the wonders and mutability of nature.



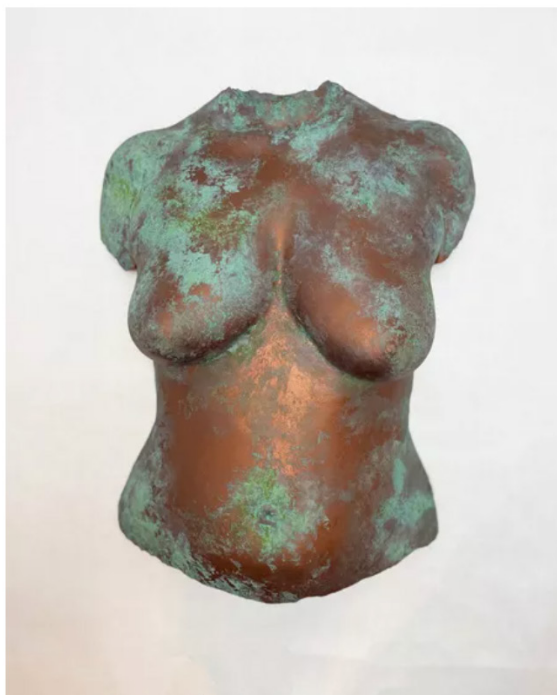
Rajni Perera  
*Only enough air for myself*, 2023  
Patel Brown  
Price on request



Rajni Perera  
*Kevuni's Curse*, 2023  
Patel Brown  
Price on request

In "[The Vessel with Two Mouths](#)," her current exhibition at [Patel Brown](#) in Toronto, Perera presents new sculptural, installation, and mixed media works that draw inspiration from a recent trip home to Sri Lanka with her daughter and research of ancient Sri Lankan spirituality. Imagined deities like those in *Only enough air for myself* (2023) are rendered in reddish hues, similar to the soil of Sri Lanka that Perera and her daughter molded with their hands, while *The Dream* (2023) depicts an omniscient divine being suspended in liminal space.

Misha Japanwala was born and raised in Karachi, Pakistan, the city which saw the first annual Aurat March ("Women's March") in observance of International Women's Day in 2018. Thousands rallied together in protest of gender-based violence, chanting slogans like "Mera jism meri marzi" ("My body, my choice").



Misha Japanwala  
*Artifact SJ01, 2022*  
Hannah Traore  
Price on request



Misha Japanwala  
*Hands of a Revolution: La Mimi, 2023*  
Hannah Traore  
Price on request

Japanwala's current show at Hannah Traore, "Beighairati Ki Nishaani: Traces of Shamelessness," presents an array of imagined fossils and artifacts shaped from breasts, nipples, and hands of her community members. The shapes are rendered in resin and patinated bronze, copper, and gold.

Japanwala's work speaks to those who have witnessed and experienced domestic violence firsthand. Her casts are like steely armor, evoking protection as well as softness, resilience, and malleability.

The "Hands of a Revolution" series is especially poignant, capturing the hands of prominent artists, thinkers, and activists, such as Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Aziz Sohail. These are people at the forefront of an artistic revolution that is bending societal norms in Pakistan.



Ashwini Bhat  
*Liquid Earth Series 3, 2021*  
Shoshana Wayne Gallery  
Price on request



Ashwini Bhat  
*Bhumi, The Living Earth, 2022*  
Shoshana Wayne Gallery  
Price on request

While Japanwala forms casts of the body into resin and metal, Ashwini Bhat does so in clay. "In Your Arms I'm Radiant," Bhat's recent exhibition at Shoshana Wayne Gallery, draws inspiration from her home in the foothills of Sonoma Valley, California as well as her agrarian upbringing in Puttur, India. She contemplates these disparate but very similar environments as she considers how to find a home away from home.

Bhat shapes the slabs of clay directly on her body, then pinches and twists the forms to twist, bend, and dance like fire. The composition of the structures is inspired by her training in the classical dance form of Bharatanatyam. She incorporates rocks and quartz that have undergone forest fires by embedding them into her final glaze.

In this way, the found object becomes a repository of memory as well as a fragment that holds potential to create something completely new.



Suchitra Mattai  
*A Time Machine for Renewed Love*, 2021  
Kavi Gupta  
Price on request



By using found objects like statues, brooches, and hair curlers, as well as heirloom fabrics that belonged to her family members, Suchitra Mattai merges nostalgia with experimentation, evoking the omnipresence of ancestors. She uses craft and labor traditions of embroidery, crocheting, and knitting that were passed on to her generationally to reflect on “women’s work.” Her woven sari tapestries tell stories of mental health, motherhood, and Indo-Guyanese migration.

For example, *girl beast suspended in time* (2022), which was exhibited at her recent solo exhibition “Osmosis: in the face of the sea” at Kavi Gupta, depicts the silhouette of a figure who “embodies everyone who has been cast aside – immigrants, the ill, people of color,” the artist said in an email interview. The mixed-media work *A Time Machine for Renewed Love* (2021) uses vintage brooches to celebrate the powerful spirit of matriarchs past, present, and future.



Chitra Ganesh  
*Untitled*, 2021  
Hales Gallery  
Price on request

Like Mattai's, Chitra Ganesh's oeuvre spans many media, such as painting, installation, print, collage, film, and sculpture. Her futuristic practice emerges from intersectional feminism, queer theory, mythology, science fiction, and sociopolitical investigations. Specifically, Ganesh considers how to transform Hindu iconography, a visual grammar that has unfortunately and dangerously been weaponized by religious fundamentalists to justify casteism.

In "Nightswimmers", her 2021 exhibition at Hales Gallery, Ganesh presented a series of hybrid and transmogrified figures that explore the connection between animism and mythology. Whole and fractured bodies erupt into flora and fauna as seen in *Guardian* and *Untitled* (both 2021).



Chitra Ganesh  
*Severed Body With Many Legs (Individual from portfolio)*, 2009-2010  
The Brodsky Center at PAFA

The figure in *Severed Body of Many Legs* (2009–10) is inspired by the octopus and its hyper-sensory capabilities. The series is printed with varying transparencies of ink onto rice paper which is then collated onto rainbow paper, lending the print a luminescent, cephalopodic hue. The prints, part of a series called “A Delicate Line,” can also be found in the permanent collection of MoMA.

**Browse available artworks by the featured artists in the “Curator’s Choice” collection.**

Sadaf Padder

*Sadaf Padder is a Brooklyn-based independent curator, writer, and community organizer who is focused on excavating underrecognized contemporary art movements and histories related to the South Asian and Caribbean diaspora. She has curated across the country, from Philadelphia to Los Angeles to Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts, focusing on themes of social justice, futurism, radical liberation movements, caste abolition, climate change, and neo-mythology to weave connections between various communities.*

*Header image: Suchitra Mattai, “superpowers,” 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta.*