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# Shivnanjani Lal

इस धूप की तरह आपकी आत्मा जला देना चाहिए

LIKE THIS INCENSE YOUR SPIRIT MUST BURN



## ABOUT THE ARTIST



Shivanjani Lal is a twice removed Fijian Indian Australian Artist and Curator. Lal works across video, installation, archival images, found materials, performance and ritual to explore her dislocation that seeks to account for memory, erasure, and the archive. Through these multisensory explorations of intergenerational trauma, grief and healing, Lal preserves, creates and redefines the history of the Indo-Fijian Community away from the narratives produced by the current political climate in both Fiji and India.

For CV head to: [www.shivanjanilal.com](http://www.shivanjanilal.com)

## KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

**Kala Pani:** Lal's history is shaped by the Kala Pani, meaning "Black Waters". In Hindu culture, Kala Pani, refers to a past proscription of crossing the ocean. According to this mindset, crossing the seas to foreign lands causes the loss of one's social respectability, as well as the putrefaction of one's cultural character and posterity.

**Sunno:** Currently Lal frames her personal narratives through Sunno a Fijian Hindi word which is to listen with understanding; to the social history which brought her family from India to Fiji and now to Australia.

For more on this watch: [Language Diaspora & Listening](#)

**Diaspora:** Lal is from the indentured labour diaspora of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Diaspora is the dispersion of people from their homeland or a community formed by people who have exited or been removed from their homeland.

**Indentured labour:** Indenture is a legal agreement, contract, or document. Under the indenture system, which lasted from 1834-1917, the British employed Indian labour for five-year terms, with some 1.2 million Indians serving, largely as plantation workers. For Fiji, a British colony, 60,965 Indian indentured labourers were recruited to work in the country's sugarcane plantations. The system came to be known as 'Girmit' (derived from the word 'agreement'), and later the labourers came to be called 'Girmitiyas'. While the system differed from slavery in that workers were hired for periods of five years, it was still based on deceit and exploitation of people from mainly a rural background. To qualify for a free return passage to India, the Girmitiyas were required to stay in Fiji for another five years. The idea behind this provision was that they would re-indenture or break their links with the homeland and stay back in Fiji, thereby providing for the labour needs of the colony. Few re-indentured with most engaging in farming to support their livelihood and began raising families.

Contributing to their decision to stay on in Fiji were reports of those that had returned to the motherland. Many were rejected by their families, and were accused of having lost their caste after crossing the kala pani. A large number were stranded and destitute, living in appalling conditions in depots at Calcutta's Metiabruz. Those that had returned to Fiji shared their stories, discouraging others in Fiji from returning. An Indo-fijian culture formed with Fiji Hindi emerging from an amalgamation of Indian dialects as the primary language.

For more on Indo-Fijian history and politics:

Banished and Excluded: the Girmit of Fiji  
By Rajendra Prasad

A century after the end of Indian indenture  
By Rajiv Mohabir

Fiji Girmit descendants part of our national fabric: Bainimarama pays tribute to girmitiya Indians  
By Arvid Kumar

Girmit.org

Girmit and Girmitheers video

Coolitudes: Images of the Indian Ocean Labour Diaspora



#### 4 Lines Across a Horizon

This work is a photograph printed of a horizon, this photograph of Fiji was taken in 2004 before Lal was an artist. It has been printed onto recycled Indian brown paper. Across each image is 4 red lines hand stitched to represent each generation of my family that lived and was born in Fiji.

## CURRENT WORK

Her current research posits that her body and the landscapes she is from hold the grief of being removed. In her works she is attempting to document and create gestures of healing. By using unmaking processes such as erasure, she hopes to document the ghosts of her ancestors and account for their silences through gestures which atone and account for our grief.

Critically, she seeks to identify where healing begins: in the body, in the land or does it begin in the Kala Pani?

## LIKE THIS INCENSE YOUR SPIRIT MUST BURN

Burning incense is a tradition in India passed down by grandmothers, to mothers and finally to daughters. This act of burning is a tradition that enables the body to breathe and heal. Using this as a beginning point, this exhibition brings together works from the last 3 years. Exploring familial relationships, landscapes and healing as a way to understand and transform grief of both personal loss and intergenerational trauma. These works account and hold space for this pain and its potential release.



### यहाँ से देखें (yahaan se dekhien)

An experimental film, exploring the artist's return to her Aaji's (grandmother's) house in Fiji after an absence of 11 years, 13 years after her passing. The film explores the landscape of the countryside, and the house, whilst slowly moving inwards to reveal an unchanged room. Throughout the visuals we hear disembodied conversations, in Fijian Hindi and English. These conversations speak of the relationships of the artist to the house and her family.



### आप यहाँ नहीं हैं (You are not here)

A video Momento Mori to the artist's grandmother. It is a symbolic representation of memory and was created to act as a meditation on the cycles of life. Using the photographic image to engage the audience through nostalgia.

### काला पानी Kala Pani 2017

Is a hybrid space, that shaped my family from landlocked caste member to casteless indentured labourer, internally I am no longer Indian, yet my body will always bear the marks of another country that was once my mother and my home.

Working with my mother to explore healing through the visual metaphor of spices, hands and water to dissolve and reimagine the Kala Pani as a site of healing and reforming imagined identities.

The work offers a possibility of new site, a new identity. This work questions: if you are no longer from where you should be can you recreate self identity? Where does it begin in your body or does it begin in the water?



# THE THREAD IS MADE OF FLESH

Your spirit – sugar milk – must burn. Your blood – silk mosquito – must burn. Your memory – disembodied crematorium – must burn. Your heart – limewater and seafoam – must burn.

The spirit is a floral cotton jungle breathing in pentatonic scales. Naked fruit flies hang in dark blue humid air. The sun speaks a puraana kahānī. Sour. Warm. Palpable. The thread sews through collapsing clouds. Polyphonic mynah bird choirs orbit the haldi sun halo. Even when it burns. Even when it blackens. Even when it chars lips and splits tongues.

Smudging is the ancient practice of burning herb and plant objects for medicinal and spiritual use. It is an early form of antiseptis – an early form of exorcism – an early form of unbecoming. Yellow smoke is fragrant and bitter. The ceremonial burning is passed down matrilineally – the line which carries water – the line estranged from luck – the line which walks hand-in-hand with demons.

Carbon nanodots in haldi smoke loosen the congestion of floral cotton jungle spirits trapped in the liver – loosen the congestion of cane cutting-motions trapped in the wrist – loosen the congestion of prayers diluted by oceanwater trapped in the lung.

Black smoke like hawan aftermath – black chipped-lips – black nectar eyes – black sticky tongue – black smoke birthed from the origins of grief.

Black laughter imprinted on banana leaves. Later used for wrapping fish to cook underground. Later used for wrapping hair of plantation spirits at sundown. Later used for catching warm blood – soaked in muumuus and saris – later sewn into translucent kitchen curtains.

Later – much later – burn the old blood off. To burn a memory that is deposited in the blood is the process of blackening.

look closely at her photograph.  
take with you a kerosene lamp.

A puraana kahānī can be brought back into the blood with the placement of water between a monochrome photograph and palms full of marigold – water that is composed of equal parts milk and bone – water that swells when the hurricane hits – water that remembers every time it is touched.

does it begin in the blood?  
does it begin in the water?

Water conducts the alchemical change from land-locked to hungry ghost – hanging by the thread woven through the DNA for one hundred and forty years – hanging by the thread with one finger pointing to naraka – one finger pointing to the sky. Water is percussion hitting hard on the corrugated tin iron roof as cha is prepared in a hundi on a flame – as she opens her mouth and shines her gold tooth – as she adjusts her petticoat and clears her throat – beta ek story bathao.

Water lives in the interval between one piece of land and another – one jasmine garland and another – one mandir and another. The space in-between flickers in and out of phosphorescence – the space in-between is not hollow – the space in-between is a tangible entity – the space in-between is where gods and spirits dwell. The thread is stitched into the Bay of Bengal into the Indian Ocean into the Pacific Ocean into the wildflower heart of Sigatoka Valley. To live in purgatory with memory of an existing plane is the process of exile.

To unbutton an injury inflicted on psychic tissue by water tread your fists lightly into the floral cotton jungle bed. Loop your spinal cord like a thousand-legged millipede. Extract bittersweet dye from the sun. Breathe in pentatonic scales – raag maulkauns for reflection – raag bhopali for peace – raag durga for luminosity. Separate the thread from the diagram. Separate the gold from the tooth. Separate the theory from the belief. Separate the burn from the flesh. Inhale the black water. Press record.

dyan se sunno.

Your spirit – inflorescent mehndi – must burn. Your blood – fragmented bitter melon – must burn. Your memory – departure museum – must burn. Your heart – a girl with the head of a mongoose – must burn.

The unbecoming of a spirit is rooted in archival documents carried in the bones – the unbecoming appears in dreams – in apparitions – in dark blue air where naked fruit flies fall. The unravelling of a puraana kahānī is chronicled in tape-recorded talanoa tableaus – in baby blue paint metamorphosing in the cyclone – in the unclothed body of a cane pulled from sweet green dirt. In the folds of a disembodied language lives the undoing of time – time stitched to yaqona and bidi smoke – time stitched to cracked heels and haldi dust – time stitched to soft pockets of air in sugar milk. To burn sugar milk that sinks the spirit is the process of erasure.

does it end in the body?  
does it end in the water?

The thread from Calcutta to Levuka is ten thousand seven hundred and ninety-one kilometres long. The time it takes to embroider that distance of oceanwater is seventy-two days. The time it takes for the moon to swell two and a half times. The time it takes for the zygote to become an embryo to become a tongue to become a political body which holds the unbecoming. In seventy-two days the thread stitched together one hundred dialects.

Later – much later – the thread will stitch through disembodied language – the contours of vernacular.

Later – much later – the thread will stitch through the architecture of the lung – still holding black oceanwater – still moving in five notes ascending and descending – sa re ga pa dha sa – sa dha pa ga re sa.

The thread stitches underneath raw atta – underneath coral bobbin teeth – underneath braided skulls and jewellery buried in coolie soil. The thread stitches together hairs of black sugar leaves – woven by camphor and mangrove – woven by mourning prayers – woven by the dichotomy of exile and home. The thread speaks a puraana kahānī.

the thread is made of flesh.  
the thread is made of flesh.

**BY MANISHA ANJALI**



# MANISHA ANJALI

Manisha Anjali works with text and performance. Her practice and research explores narratives and languages of dreams and exile.

Manisha has written *The Thread is Made of Flesh* to accompany Lal's exhibition, *Like This Incense Your Spirit Must Burn*. She is also the author of *Sugar Kane Woman*, a collection of poems about the dreams and hallucinations of exiled Indo-Fijian women.

She has been a Hot Desk Fellow at The Wheeler Centre, an Emerging Cultural Leader at Footscray Community Arts Centre and a Writer in Residence at Incendium Radical Library. Manisha is currently the Poetry Editor at The Lifted Brow.

For CV head to: [manishaanjali.com](http://manishaanjali.com)





# Curriculum Links

## Visual Arts

### Critical and Historical Studies

#### Stage 4 Outcomes:

4.7 explores aspects of practice in critical and historical interpretations of art

4.8 explores the function of and relationships between artist – artwork – world – audience

4.9 begins to acknowledge that art can be interpreted from different points of view

4.10 recognises that art criticism and art history construct meanings.

#### Stage 5 Outcomes:

5.7 applies their understanding of aspects of practice to critical and historical interpretations of art

5.8 uses their understanding of the function of and relationships between artist – artwork – world – audience in critical and historical interpretations of art

5.9 demonstrates how the frames provide different interpretations of art

5.10 demonstrates how art criticism and art history construct meanings

## Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia

Lal's exhibition provides an opportunity for students in the Bega Valley to engage with the cross-curriculum priority of Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia. In the arts, students can examine art forms that have arisen from the rich and diverse belief systems and traditions of the Asia region, as well as their local, regional and global influence. This learning area provides opportunities to investigate the role of the arts in developing, maintaining and transforming cultural beliefs and practices and communicating an understanding of the rich cultural diversity of the Asia region. Students can reflect on the intrinsic value of these artworks and artists' practices as well as their place and value within broader social, cultural, historical and political contexts. The following concepts can be addressed in relation to Lal's exhibition:

#### Asia and its diversity

OI.1 The peoples and countries of Asia are diverse in ethnic background, traditions, cultures, belief systems and religions.

OI.2 Interrelationships between humans and the diverse environments in Asia shape the region and have global implications.

#### Achievements and contributions of the peoples of Asia

OI.3 The peoples and countries of Asia have contributed and continue to contribute to world history and human endeavour.

OI.4 The arts and literature of Asia influence aesthetic and creative pursuits within Australia, the region and globally.

#### Asia-Australia engagement

OI.5 Collaboration and engagement with the peoples of Asia support effective regional and global citizenship.

OI.6 Australia is part of the Asia region and our histories from ancient times to the present are linked.

OI.7 Australians play a significant role in social, cultural, political and economic developments in the Asia region.

OI.8 Australians of Asian heritage have influenced Australia's history and continue to influence its dynamic culture and society.

# BEGA VALLEY REGIONAL GALLERY

Zingel Place  
Bega NSW 2550  
0264992222

<https://gallery.begavalley.nsw.gov.au>  
[gallery@begavalley.nsw.gov.au](mailto:gallery@begavalley.nsw.gov.au)  
Monday to Saturday 10am- 4pm

