

# Suchitra Mattai weaves textured narratives in her multimedia art

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The longer one gazes at Suchitra Mattai's iridescent, densely layered works, the more narratives the viewer starts to become aware of nestling inside them. While Mattai's works are visually arresting in themselves, they additionally encode multiple narratives and associations, making them powerful commentaries on various issues as well.

Born in Guyana and currently based in **Denver, United States**, Mattai has previously lived in **Canada, India, France**, and in various states across the US. "The disparate landscapes and cultural environments (that I have experienced) have left me devoid of a single sense of 'home'. My memories therefore are pronouncedly disorienting (as memories often are) and provide me with a wealth of visual and aural material from which to mine for my work," she says. While her practice is conceptually focused, she creates with a multitude of materials and processes, including painting, fibre, drawing, collage, installation, video and sculpture.

History and memory are crucial to Mattai's practice, especially giving voice to the historically quieted and questioning of historical and authoritative narratives, especially those surrounding colonialism. She is deeply invested in unraveling the tales of her ancestors (two to three generations back) who were indentured labourers from northeastern India and brought to Guyana, South America, to work on British sugar estates/plantations. "The slave and indentured labourers of our colonial past are perhaps the most voiceless of all. I have researched photos, stories, and documents shedding light on their lives," she says. In one of



*Self Portrait as a lost wall flower* Image: Suchitra Mattai

the works in her exhibition, *Sugar bound*, one sees how Mattai revisits her heritage and subverts stereotypes and associations by overlaying a tropical leaf fabric print with a painting of an old Caribbean island prison, similar to the slave castles in Africa where captured people were held before being sent overseas in bondage.



*Exodus* Image: Jordan Spencer

Forging connections with those part of the Indian diaspora is also important to her as she is interested in how migration and displacement transform one's connection to 'homeland'. "For example, in *Exodus*, and *Imperfect Isometry*, I weave large-scale tapestries together that connect people of various parts of the Indian diaspora," she mentions. The *saris* she used in these tapestries were from across the world and of different vintages (including her own Indo-Caribbean family), thereby uniting migrants over place and through time. Additionally, "Migrants occupy time in a peculiar way: one foot in the past, one foot in trying to assimilate into a foreign present and future," she adds. By using vintage textiles, furniture, objects, and documents alongside contemporary materials in her work, she feels that she is "able to collapse and capture a 'migrant's' sense of time".

A vivid feminine, feminist presence strongly imbues her work, which is unsurprising given that Mattai says she is particularly interested in excavating the buried stories of women. What with women having been historically dealt the most challenging circumstances and



*Silence* Image: Suchitra Mattai

continuing to encounter and overcome numerous obstacles, Mattai deliberately focuses on highlighting female narrative and herstories in her body of work. “I tell intimate stories that I hope have timely relevance,” she says. One conceptual aspect of her practice is to visually and psychologically reveal and conceal within the pieces, almost akin to the process of gradually unearthing once invisible stories of women, as in this work, *Silence*. “The faces and bodies of the women in my works are therefore sometimes partially hidden and sometimes completely apparent,” Mattai says, explaining that this is a move in which the heroines and the artist both exert control over the viewer's gaze, investing the women with agency and power.

The vibrant, exciting preoccupation and interplay with textiles form a signature aspect of Mattai's work. While some works are ones that Mattai has embroidered herself, others are found embroidery interventions. Embroidery historically was not considered as much as an art as women's craft, a wrong which many contemporary feminist artists are now seeking to redress through polemical art. How does then Mattai employ embroidery vis-a-vis women's identity while simultaneously highlighting it as a complex, beautiful art in itself? “I am very much interested in bringing embroidery and other 'craft' and 'domestic' art forms such as crochet, needlepoint, macramé, and more into the **contemporary art** dialogue. It is one of the ways in which I try to give voice to women,” she informs, adding that she learned to sew, embroider, and crochet from her mother and grandmothers and that she pays homage to them through her work. Mattai sees her interventions in found embroideries and needlepoints “as collaborations with women of the past, giving voice to these artists and raising interest and awareness of their work (mostly authorless)”. She also seeks to expand the traditional boundaries and potentials of the medium by increasing the scale of the work and combining and embellishing found works with other mixed media components.



*Imperfect Isometry* Image: Suchitra Mattai

One of Mattai's statement works involving fabric are large-scale site-specific vintage *sari* tapestries, as referred to above. "I have always loved textiles from India. My mother, aunts, and sisters wore them on special occasions and it was a way for us to connect to our Indian heritage," she says. While pursuing her MA in contemporary South Asian art, she used some of her time researching in India looking at these fabrics, being drawn to patterns and process of weaving. "The *saris* are cultural identifiers that reflect a shared history of women. When I made the tapestries for the Sharjah Biennial, I wept as I wove the vintage *saris*," she talks about what was evidently a visceral experience. "The dust and smells enclosed within the *saris* made me aware of the human presence in each one," she recalls, pointing out that she deliberately used sarees which were worn in daily life, as opposed to ones for events and rituals.

The passage of time and processing of historical events being so crucial to Mattai's practice, it is inevitable that there would be a significant impact of once in a lifetime event such as the pandemic upon Mattai as an artist. Mattai held one solo exhibition during the period, *Innocence and Everything After*. "During this time, we witnessed a collective loss of innocence and this loss was a precondition for our coming to terms with the problems (and indeed the evils) of the past—the dark legacy of slavery, colonialism, globalisation and greed," she explains. This exhibition explored the possibility of regaining a kind of second-order innocence, Mattai describes it as akin to voyaging to a collective childhood, when the world

was full of tantalizing possibilities. “I suggested that tapping into this deep and universal experience of “innocence” could help us re-imagine a new “normal,” one that makes space for unheard voices, environmental reforms, and racial and economic justice,” she says. Mattai conveys through the works in this exhibition how while the loss of innocence is often painful and uncomfortable, it can also be liberating and a potential for creating new beginnings.

Perhaps, in the end, Mattai's self-portrait from this exhibition, *Self Portrait As I Was And I Am*, where a red floral patterned web both conceals and reveals her face, best embodies the intersection of her personal and collective herstories and identities, themes that have fundamentally defined her body of work and practice over the years.



Self-portrait as *I was and as I am* Image: Suchitra Mattai

## Comments

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## About Author

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#### Contributor

Priyanka is a writer and poet based in Bangalore, India. She grew up in the Sultanate of Oman and has previously lived in the United Kingdom and United States. She has been published in many publications such as *Guardian*, *Literary Hub*, *Hyperallergic*, and *Scroll* with a special focus on art, gender, diaspora, and identity. Her literary work and art have appeared in various literary journals and anthologies.

