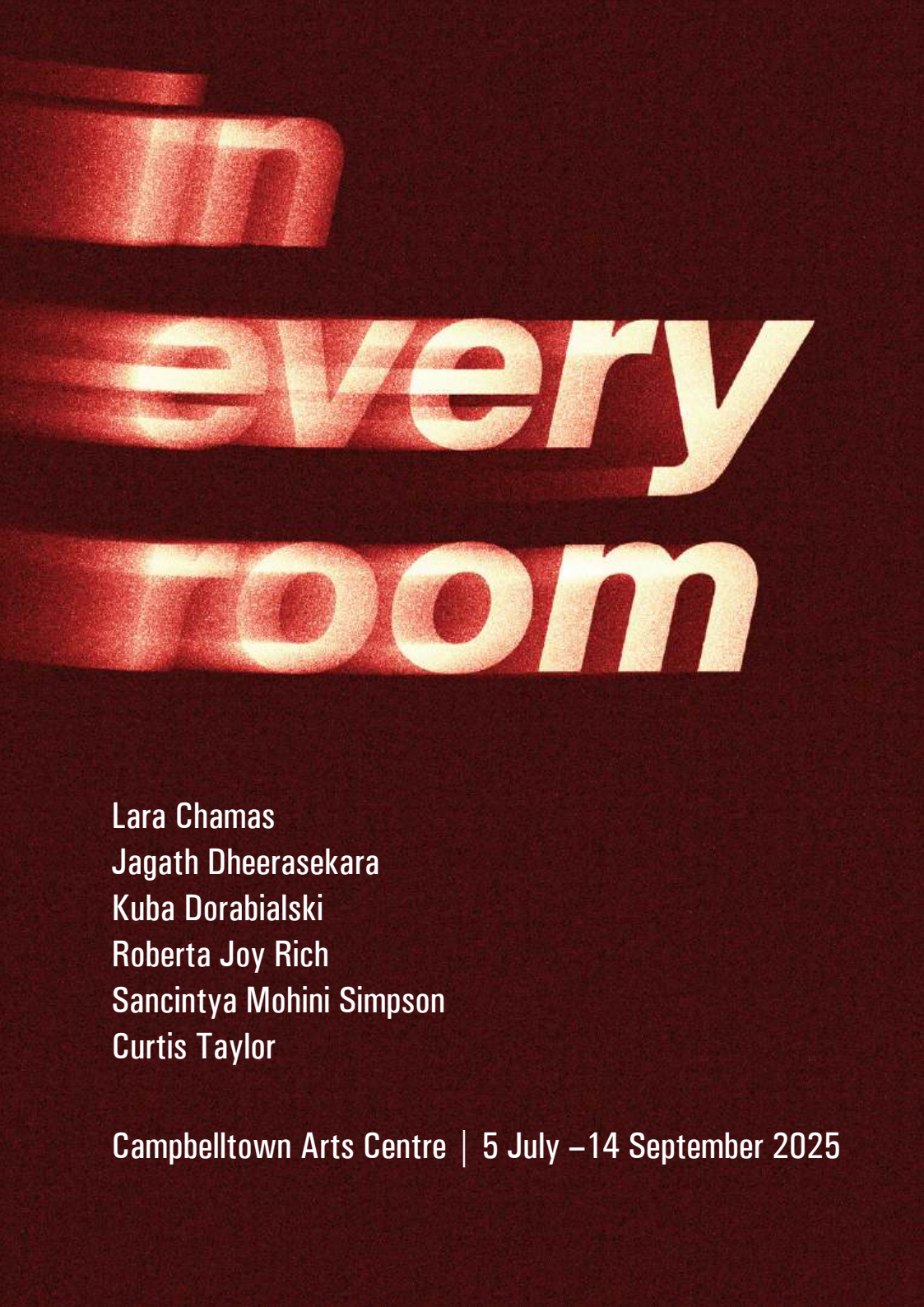




every room

Lara Chamas
Jagath Dheersekera
Kuba Dorabialski
Roberta Joy Rich
Sancintya Mohini Simpson
Curtis Taylor

Campbelltown Arts Centre | 5 July – 14 September 2025

We pay our respects to the Dharawal people who are the traditional custodians of the land, whose deepening connection to culture and customs have cared for this country for over 60,000 years.

We acknowledge Elders past, present and future for their immense spiritual connection to place which was never ceded.

Dharawal land has always been recognised as a meeting place for people from other lands, and in this spirit we respectfully continue this tradition through the bringing together of our communities through arts and culture.

This Always Was and Always will be Aboriginal land.

in every room

Campbelltown Arts Centre presents *in every room*, an exhibition of new commissions and existing works by leading contemporary artists from around Australia.

Lara Chamas, Jagath Dheeraseskara, Kuba Dorabalski, Roberta Joy Rich, Sancintya Mohini Simpson and Curtis Taylor are artists of integrity and grit. Their works draw on personal and communal histories, pointing to tragic political projects from around the world. In doing so, they invite an unravelling of contemporary complicities, delicately tracing connections between past and current systems of control and pulling into focus timely questions around responsibility, dignity and legacy.

In each room, they cast a light on a towering elephant while contemplating the role of the artist and creative practice in the current moment. Through their work, complex histories confront us, daring us to review our own positions and paths individually and collectively.

in every room centres a space for children and young people which encourages engagement with relevant stories, histories and provocations.

The project is curated by Isabelle Morgan and Emily Rolfe in collaboration with guest curator Eddie Abd.

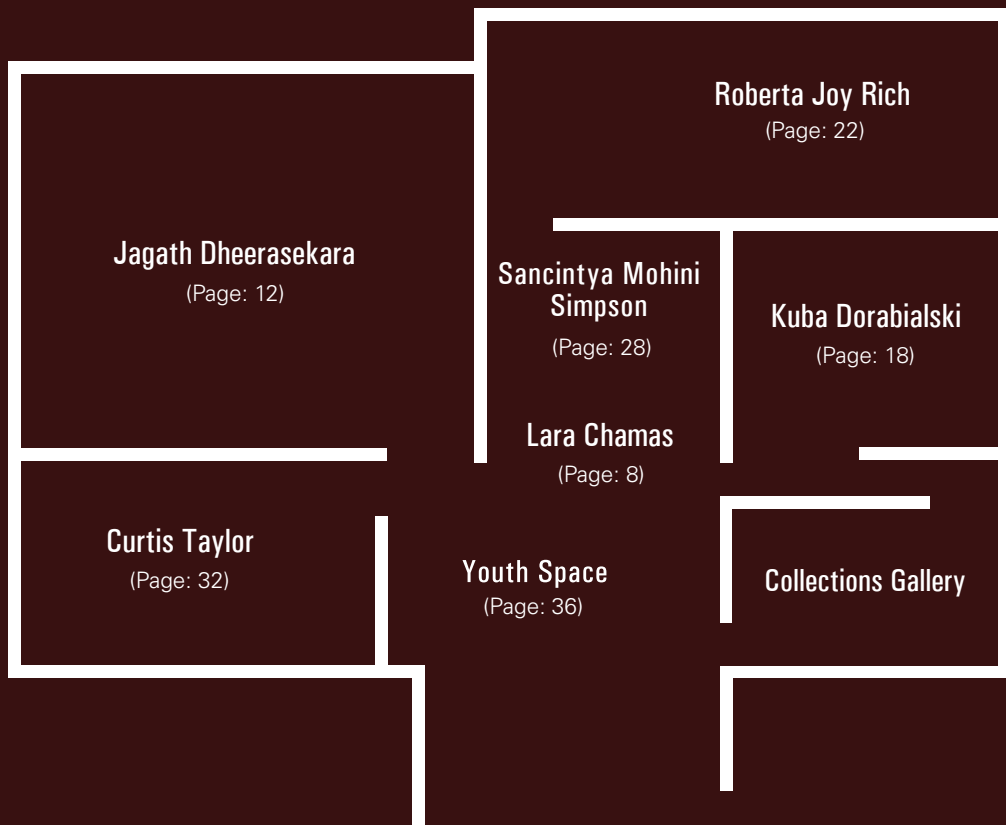
Guest Curator: Eddie Abd

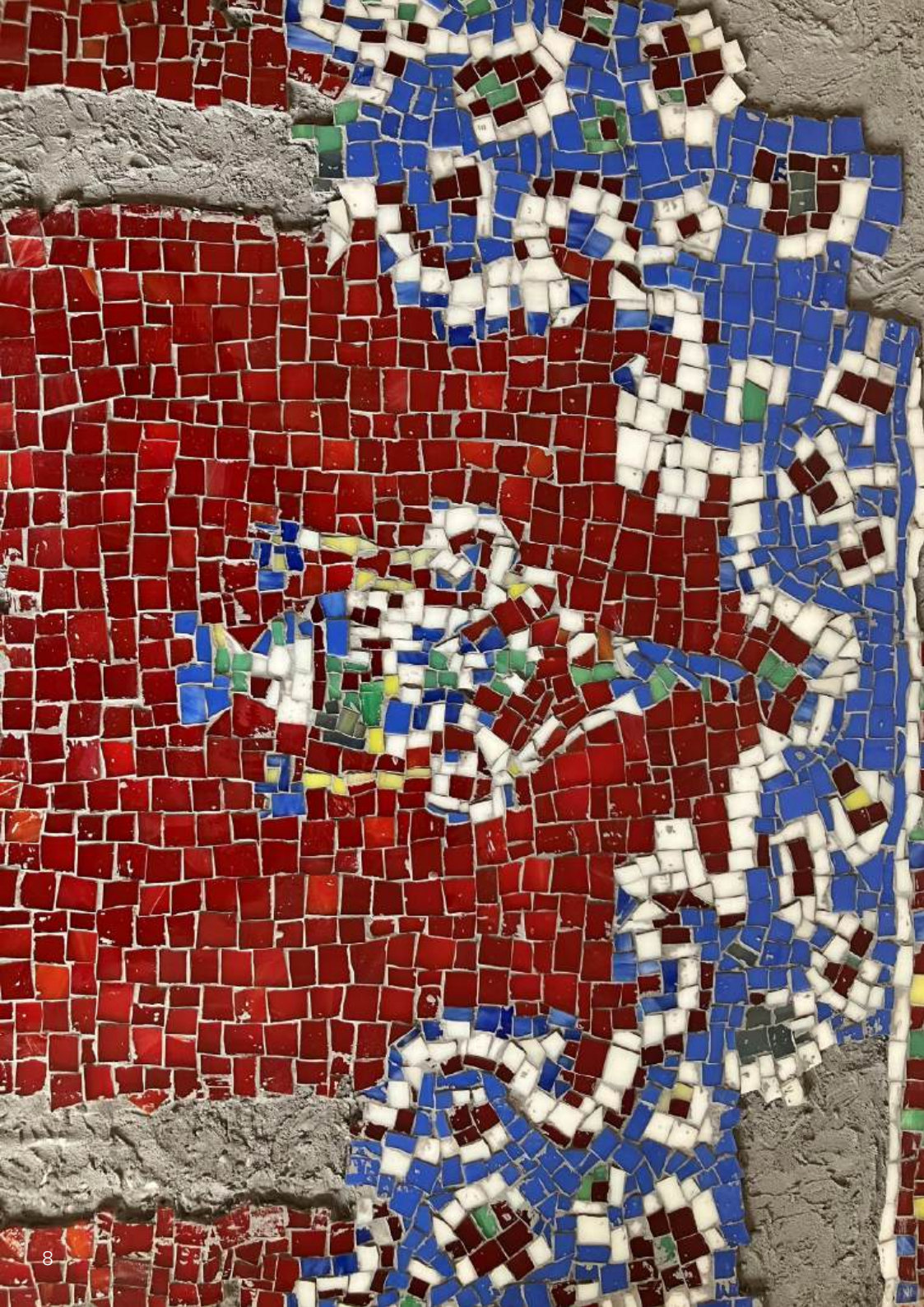
Eddie Abd is an artist and arts worker living on Dharug and Gundungurra Country. Through digital imaging and performance, she explores the politics of image-making and consumption, framing them through a personal lens. Over the past fifteen years, she has worked across Western Sydney, collaborating with and supporting creatives to realise arts projects grounded in Community Arts and Cultural Development processes. Her experience as a creative producer and curator spans a range of multidisciplinary projects across visual arts, screen, and performance.

"The artists invited to share their work in this exhibition have, through their practices, extended an ongoing invitation to engage with stories of place and people — offering perspectives beyond our own, and in doing so, revealing how we are all inextricably linked in tragedy, but more importantly, in solidarity."

— Eddie Abd.

Gallery Map





Lara Chamas

Dawa Ahmar دواء أحمر 2025

Glass, wood, betadine, grout, steel, concrete, blood, besser blocks
Dimensions variable

Dawa Ahmar دواء أحمر is a love letter to my ancestors and bloodline. Referencing Byzantine empire mosaics, stored in the Lebanese town Beit ed-Dine, I have recreated sections of my grandmother's prayer mat in mosaic form.

Betadine, like blood, is spilt on the grout-veins running through each piece of glass, much like the threads of my grandmother's mat. The veins are like the threads; a memory, a story, a hurt, pain, prayer, a forced displacement, a life lost, countless threads that together tell the story of my lineage. A still moat of Betadine elevates the work's namesake and my bloodline.

Heroing glass, concrete, and metal in the installation references the long and recent history of material debris in Lebanon and surrounds after airstrike, invasion, and war. Predominantly from civilian housing, educational and medical buildings, the materials are that of construction and are echoed in the metal frames holding the mosaics and the rubble-like concrete cast Quranic fruit tree branches, referencing the trees found in abundance, inedible and barren from poisoned soil.

About the artist:

Lara Chamas is a Lebanese artist, based in Naarm (Melbourne). Fleeing war, her parents migrated to Australia, where she was born. Her practice investigates topics of postcolonial and migrant narratives within the context of her cultural identity.

Using narrative and experience documentation, storytelling, transgenerational trauma and memory and tacit knowledge; her research explores links and meeting points between narrative theory, cultural practice, current political and societal tensions, and the body as a political vessel.

Central to her practice is the expansion of these notions in a more historical and anthropological sense. Geopolitical issues, research and first-hand experience is important to the authenticity of her work.

Dawa Ahmar دواء أحمر, *Lara Chamas*

By Lamisse Hamouda

How many times must a woman stand upon her prayer rug before the threads wear down to reveal the floor beneath her feet? What does a son possess when he holds onto the rug, the only material left by his mother? And what does a granddaughter remember when she inherits her pain before she's given her name?

Through *Dawa Ahmar*, دواء أحمر Lara Chamas alchemises faith, medicine, and blood in a five-piece mosaic installation that extends upon her body of work investigating matriarchal inheritances. Here, Betadine is the red medicine. It is Beit-ed-dine Palace in Lebanon: a UNESCO protected site and museum for Byzantine mosaics. Beit, house; ed-dine, of faith. It is a worn prayer rug, threaded in red. Many kids would have had their cuts, scrapes or grazes cleansed with betadine — the golden-brown iodine solution almost indecipherable from the blood it clears.

The red prayer rug referenced in *Dawa Ahmar* دواء أحمر is the only material possession left from Chamas paternal grandmother. Parsing the prayer rugs' imagery into five sections, each section is reimagined into mosaics utilising glass, concrete and metal. With this work, Chamas continues a conversation of matriarchal inheritance begun in her video installation, *I have her hands and I have her pain* (2019) — a conversation which also considers the intimacies of the gendered experiences of pain and sacrifice held by Arab women. This is a red tethering; a blood spilt, inherited, and shared. In an interview, Chamas says, "when I see the rug, I think of labour. I think of the labour associated with praying. I think of my grandmother's feet and knees... I think of how many times she stood on the rug and sought refuge. And I think of all the labour she did in giving birth and like, all she suffered."

Chamas spills betadine on to the grout — like blood spilt on rubble, the grout takes on a rusted colour. A sixth stand holds a tray of betadine; standing in conversation with the stained grout, the sacredness of the spilt blood is made evident through elevation and containment. Just as the grout holds the mosaic in place, so do the bloodlines that thread through the prayer rug and run through the body of the artist who made the mosaic. Glass, metal and concrete are elements left in excess as debris after an explosion or an air strike.

For nearly two years, the state of ~~Israel~~ unleashed a devastating bombardment upon the Gaza strip, with airstrikes also targeting Lebanon and Syria. Through the choice of materials, state violence is made visible — and the quest for refuge becomes apparent. In this framing, the reddened grout shifts from bloodlines to

blood spilt. The hand-cut glass mosaics are held by unpolished raised metal stands; the exposed bolts, the roughness of the steel reflect the ongoing construction and destruction of a built environment regularly faced with man-made violence. The glass, rather than being shattered, has been hand-cut by Chamas.

The fragmentation of the glass into small squares opens the question of choice; the choices which break apart a whole, and the choices that inform the reassembly; how does one put the pieces back after war? Thus, the mosaics are left incomplete: the gaps mirroring the holes worn into the rug, orienting us toward the stories held by damage and loss. Along with the mosaics sit five concrete-cast branches. The holy fruits of pomegranate, olive, grape, fig and date are rendered barren by concrete — laying exposed, fruitless, broken and bare.

Through holding the integrity of labour and repetition through the creation of mosaics, Chamas acknowledges that choosing to create this time-consuming work has hurt her body — from cuts on her hands, to strain of creating while living with chronic pain and health conditions, stating “the closest thing I get to prayer or meditation is when I’m lost in some sort of repetitive, mindless action.” Here, labour and pain morph into inheritance as a source of connection through the body — “I’m proud that I resemble my grandmother” Chamas states, “and that this pain can be a source of connection, and not just a thing I hate.” Thus, it is through process that Lara brings the multiplicities of her inheritance, embodied by the prayer rug, into conversation via mosaicing.

The labour and repetition of mosaic-making sits in relation, and reflection, of the labour and repetition of prayer: it is the ache of a body bending, kneeling and seeking refuge. It is the salve of the red medicine; it is an act of faith.

About the author:

Lamisse Hamouda (she/her) is an Egyptian-Australian writer, poet, performer, workshop facilitator and narrative therapist in-training. Her debut novel, ‘The Shape of Dust’ won the 2024 National Biography of the Year Award.

Hamouda has published across a range of platforms and anthologies; her recent works include published poetry in the Sweatshop anthology *Ritual: Australian-Muslim Poetry*, and her poetry series *Griefscape* — produced in collaboration with musician Han Reardon-Smith for issue 48 of Runway Journal. An experienced workshop facilitator, Hamouda teaches creative writing, and provides mentoring to emerging and established writers.

Jagath Dheerasekara

Gaja: a story of the elephant 2025

Installation: four channel video with sound, banners, archival material
14:00 mins

Gaja: a story of the elephant (artist book) 2025

Mould-made paper, laser/inkjet prints, coptic binding

For thousands of years, the elephant has held enormous cultural significance for the inhabitants of the island of Sri Lanka. European colonial rule — under the Portuguese, the Dutch and then the British — significantly altered the balance between human and natural worlds on the island, including the human-elephant relationship. The British inaugurated a transformative onslaught on the natural environment alongside the introduction of capitalist economic relations to Sri Lanka. The clearing of vast swaths of rainforest in Sri Lanka's central hills to make way for plantations, such as for tea, epitomises these interconnected colonial practices, the legacies of which continue to be felt today.

The present-day plight of elephants in Sri Lanka stands in sad contrast to their cheerful depictions in tourist merchandise and religious ceremonies. Despite ongoing conservation efforts and protection under the law, the Sri Lankan elephant population faces significant threat due to habitat loss and degradation, human-elephant conflict and poaching.

The story of the Sri Lankan elephant reflects the neocolonial tragedy that has befallen the country over the past few centuries as a result of destruction by European colonial civilisations and continued degradation at the hands of the local ruling class under the auspices of neocolonial domination. This trajectory is common to many countries in the global south that are similarly inhabited by elephants.

This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through Creative Australia, its principal arts investment and advisory body.

This project has been supported through a collaboration with TAFE NSW.

Credits and Collaborators:

Lead Artist:	Jagath Dheerasekara
Director and Editor:	Ludwig El Haddad
Camera Operators (Fashion Performance):	Gotaro Uematsu and Heath Franco
Composer:	Isuru Kumarasinghe
Narrator:	Amanda Dheerasekara
Video Footage (Sri Lanka):	Thushantha Vidanage (cultural), Dilum Alagiyawanna (wilderness), Pathum Bandara (wilderness)
Photography (Sri Lanka):	Bushana Kalhara (prehistoric cave art), Eranda Adikaram (images from 'Coinage of Sri Lanka: Pre- Colonial Era')
Garment Embroiderer:	Anamika
Screen Printing:	Mary Williams (Lead), Tierney Holland, Libby Davies, Chelsea Cassidy, Aeryn Beard and Dani Green
Photography (garments):	Eddie Abd

Performers:

Eddie Abd, Sana Al-Ahmar, Anamika, Bina Bhattacharya, Amanda Dheerasekara, Jagath Dheerasekara, Milith Dheerasekara, Ruchinda Dheerasekara, Jess Fesic, Ram Fesic, Jemma Milloy, Ayousha Prasad, Antony Ponnor, Senthana Sanchayan, Jennifer Nguyen, Nithya Nagarajan, Anusha Suranji Wijenayake, Maya Sathiamoorthy, Eric Vu, Lachlan Nguyen, Saabiq Chowdhury, Budwini Madagammana, Sumithri Venketasubramanian

Acknowledgements:

Aunty Delphine Leslie, Aunty Nesa Arumugum, Ling Thoroughgood, Tharaka Prasad, Director Wildlife Health at Department of Wildlife Conservation, Sri Lanka, Dhanesh Wisumperuma, Department of National Archives, Sri Lanka, TAFE NSW (Campbelltown Campus), Anglicare (Campbelltown), Vinnies (Warby Street, Campbelltown), First Option Print and Signs, Lingel Pty Ltd., Laser Wizard.

About the artist:

Jagath Dheerasekara is a multi-disciplinary artist whose work is informed by his personal and collective memory, colonisation, and the fragility of the principles of humanity. Born in Sri Lanka, Dheerasekara was forced to flee the island due to political persecution in the early 1990s.

Dheerasekara is a recipient of grants from the Amnesty International Human Rights Innovation Fund and Creative Australia. Dheerasekara has presented his work in a number of solo and selected group exhibitions. His work is held in both institutional and private collections, including the Campbelltown City Council Art Collection, the Museum of Australian Photography, the State Library of New South Wales, the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and the Liverpool City Council Art Collection. Dheerasekara has been a resident at several art organisations, both as an artist and a curator, including Bundanon Art Museum, Utp, ArtsHouse and the Museum of History NSW. Dheerasekara lives on Gundungurra and Dharawal Country in Western Sydney.





Images: Jagath Dheerasekara, *Gaja: a story of the elephant* (film still), 2025

Gaja: a story of the elephant

By Neha Kale

It's hard to imagine a creature that speaks to the power and fragility of the bond between species quite like the Sri Lankan elephant. This majestic and sensitive animal has long inhabited the jungles of this island. It appears in cave art made by Sri Lanka's First Peoples.

It recurs in the Hindu figure of Ganapathi. Again, in the legend of Queen Mahamaya, who dreamed of a white baby tusker, an omen that the son she was carrying would one day reach Buddhahood.

But this story of relation is also a story of rupture; of a tusker export economy that intensified between the 16th and 18th century by the Dutch and Portuguese colonists. Of hunts that proliferated in the 19th century alongside the arrival of the British Crown. Of a history of extraction, legible today, in habitats that are shrinking, in the image of the animal immortalised in souvenirs and revered in processions.

This, even as its physical self is maimed, deaths from human-elephant conflict, the highest in the world.

If, "animals first entered the imagination as messengers and promises," as John Berger put it in his 1980 essay *Why Look at Animals?* should a story of the elephant centre our desire to co-exist or the conquests we are casualties of? What might an elephant *mean*?

Jagath Dheerasekara's four-channel video installation *Gaja: a story of the elephant* is a tribute. An elegy. A profound form of witness. The viewer enters a space, flanked with banners, the rich burgundy of a temple painting. On screen, a fashion show.

This is footage from two performances, the *Samuel Baker Collection* and the *Thomas Rogers Collection*, named for British hunters, whose arrival in Ceylon marked a moment that saw Sri Lanka's elephant population half between the years of 1829 and 1835.

On the catwalk, performers of colour step forward, hold our gaze. They're wearing clothes embroidered by Dheerasekara's collaborator Anamika and screen-printed by a team led by Mary Williams, with an elephant motif, the creatures' body squashed and splayed.

Alongside it, footage — narrated by the artist's daughter Amanda Dheeraseskara — of elephants grazing in the wild. Adorning temple facades. Then, elaborate land plans, intricate etchings of elephant hunts, the documents that legitimised the slow march of empire, made it seem inevitable, gave it shape and form.

The sets of footage are woven together by video editor Ludwig El Haddad like hands interlocking, each granted equal authority. What is true and what is false? The narratives of the west are bound up in the idea of progress but to understand the fate of the Sri Lankan elephant — a neocolonial tragedy — we must look backwards. To make *Gaja*, Dheeraseskara, who was born in Sri Lanka and sought asylum in France because of political activism, the artist invited performers from lands where elephants widely roamed.

Colonial logic has made the elephant 'other', stripped it for what it deems valuable, but in *Gaja*, from the Sinhalese for elephant, the fate of the elephant and fate of the human is inextricably intertwined.

When Dheeraseskara was a child, he drew elephants, watched them at Colombo Zoo and as part of *Gaja* there is a children's space that plays a film, conceived by the artist and animated by Jerome Pearce called *Metta the Tusker*.

In the film, Metta trumpets with joy when his friends embark on a journey to help him and — in a glimpse of a future that might yet be possible — his tusks are rightfully returned.

About the author:

Neha Kale is a widely-published writer and critic. Her work has appeared in many publications such as The Sydney Morning Herald, The Saturday Paper, Vogue, SBS, The Guardian, ArtReview and more. She is editor-at-large at Art Guide, former editor of VAULT magazine and her first book will be out in 2026 with NewSouth.

Kuba Dorabialski

Field Recording 2025

Single channel video with sound
25:00 mins

The Field Recordist (image 4, Trnovo) 2025

Digital print on PhotoTex
Dimensions variable

Field Recording is an essay film installation that focuses to two continuous threads in my art practice: the fraught nature of Pan-Slavic solidarity, and the ethical obligations and responsibilities of artists to engage with political conditions.

The video obliquely touches on questions that have become tragically pertinent, yet again, as Israel, the US and their allies enact genocide in the Palestinian territories. When do artists have the right to engage with fraught and traumatic histories, and what does it mean to make art responding to these events? Artists have a duty to engage with the world around them, but how do we measure this “engagement”? What does it look like? Can there be a genuine creative engagement with human catastrophe? What are the alternatives for an artist?

Set in Sarajevo 30 years after the devastating Bosnian War, the video looks at — and listens to — the traces that are left on the psychic landscape and the way the city is remembered, and what it is remembered for.

Credits:

Voice of friend: Miška Mandić

Camera operator for mountains sequence: Szymon Dorabialski

Made with funding support from Create NSW

Special thanks to Uroš Cvorović, Eddie Abd, Emily Rolfe, Isabelle Morgan and Alex White.

Thanks also to Katy B Plummer and Lamorna Nightingale.

About the artist:

Kuba Dorabialski is an artist, filmmaker, and teacher born in Wrocław, Poland, and currently based in Sydney on Gadigal country.

Kuba Dorabialski's practice bridges the worlds of gallery-based video installation and cinema, often exploring themes of language, political histories, and mysticism. As a writer, director, cinematographer, and composer, Kuba Dorabialski takes on multiple roles in the production of his works, often appearing as the lead performer, maintaining a hands-on approach throughout the creative process.

He has exhibited extensively in Australia and internationally and has won the celebrated John Fries Award (2017) and the Fisher's Ghost Art Award (2019). He had his first major institutional solo exhibition at Carriageworks, Sydney in 2021, and his feature film *Connection of the Sticks* premiered at the Sydney Film Festival in 2023. He teaches Moving Image and Cinematography at the School of Art and Design, UNSW.



Image: Kuba Dorabialski, *The Field Recordist (Image 4, Trnovo)* (detail), 2025

Four Materialist Theses On Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) as the context for Field Recording

By Uroš Čvoro

1. BiH is less a physical space and more as a readymade: 30 years after the end of the war, BiH has become synonymous with a post-conflict society plagued by rampant nationalism, political nepotism and corruption, social decay, and mass migration out of the country. BiH has become a readymade of nationalism, corruption and instability. As part of the symbolic geography of mythical 'Balkans', BiH has figured in Western representations as a less-than-civilised, backward zone not quite belonging to (Western) European culture, and hopelessly mired in tradition and violence. This image of BiH as a powder keg of nationalist resentment and unrestrained patriarchal violence has been instrumentalised by populist politicians.

2. BiH in art is a representational burden: Artists grappling with how to represent BiH are artists with a geopolitical burden: taking on the role of spokespersons for an entire culture and turning their artworks into grounds through which to resolve the issues of that culture. In the context of BiH, we can add to this that name and location of the artist entails a politics, inscribing a positionality of that artist in a certain group: who are they speaking for? Who are they speaking about? The geopolitical burden of BiH artists is evident in countless projects, publications and exhibitions in the last two decades that instrumentalise their work as vehicles of reconciliation or post-conflict reparation.

3. BiH is a symptom of the present historical condition: BiH has undergone changes in the last three decades that encapsulate the global realities of the present: the end of state-socialism, the global spread of neoliberalism, war and the rise of nationalism as a populist mobiliser. The current state of BiH is one of a post-sovereign periphery of global capital in which the effects of its devastation are highly visible, from a rapidly shrinking population to the disappearance of its language and cultural identity. The geopolitical position of BiH on the periphery of Europe perfectly illustrates the contemporary historical condition, including the failure of the political left as a progressive mobiliser, the patterns of global migration and contemporary global geopolitics. The traditional ideals of the left — social justice, solidarity, the struggle against capitalist wars — today appear in a distorted form as a return of the repressed in right-wing politics, manifested through increasingly open misogyny, nationalism and racism expressed in toxic public speech from political leaders on a daily basis.



4. BiH is the site of intersecting borders that frame the present: BiH sits at the nexus of a shifting set of borders, all of which reflect current geopolitical power relations: a buffer zone between the EU and the flow of displaced peoples from Africa and Asia; a zone between states with neo-colonial aspirations (Serbia and Croatia); an internally divided country on the European periphery; a pseudo-sovereign peripheral state locked in neo-feudal dependency on centres of political, military and economic power; the site of skilled cheap migrant labour for economies in Western Europe.

About the author:

Uroš Čvoro is Associate Professor in ArtTheory at UNSW Australia. He researches contemporary art and politics, cultural representations of nationalism, post-socialist and post-conflict art. His books include *Transitional Aesthetics: Art at The Edge of Europe* (2018) and *Turbo-folk Music and Cultural Representations of National Identity in Former Yugoslavia* (2014).

Image: Kuba Dorabalski, *Field Recording* (film still), 2025.

Roberta Joy Rich

!Norasa Khâimâ: †Aiho Aboxan *"Dawid Stuurman" 2025*

Mixed media installation with single channel HD video, five channel sound,
stainless steel and print on aluminium composite material

10:00 mins (looped)

Dimensions variable

The life of Khoikhoi chief David Stuurman is a largely untold story of African resilience. Stuurman's resistance to British colonial rule in Southern Africa led to his exile and death on Gadigal Country (Sydney) in 1830. Through the stark and unforgiving gaps within the colonial archive, I pursued the places Stuurman once inhabited; Hyde Park Barracks where he was imprisoned to government labour, the remains of the Rum Hospital where he sadly passed on, to visiting my motherland of South Africa — travelling from ||Hui !Gaeb (Cape Town) to Robben Island where he was imprisoned, escaping twice before being sentenced to Transportation.

In my yearning for arterial routes following the traces of ancestors, I held Stuurman's 'Ticket of Leave' with both wonder and dejection, poignantly underscoring the erasure of a hero denied the very freedom he so fiercely fought for.

!Norasa Khâimâ: †Aiho Aboxan "Dawid Stuurman" (Unbound Resistance: Remembering Ancestor "David Stuurman") (2025) invites viewers to listen to a re-imagined letter from Stuurman (that exists within State Archives) in his Khoikhoi language while meditating upon the ocean waters that surge between Robben Island and Hoerikwaggo (Table Mountain). Adjacent, Stuurman's 'Ticket of Leave' is memorialised, supported by a framework reminiscent of commemorative headstones.

I invite you to mourn and acknowledge the profound and continuous loss of human life in this moment, while encouraging us to honour the presence of those who fight for justice; to find strength in their enduring trace, survival, and memory.

Vocals:	Toroga Denver and Roberta Joy Rich
Vocal Script:	Roberta Joy Rich
Translations:	Toroga Denver, Fredricka Vogelsang and Paul Vogelsang
Sound Consultation and Support:	Marco Cher-Gibard, Akil Ahamat, Kieran Daily
Metal Fabrication:	Tetsu-1 Objects
First Nations Consultants:	Dharawal Elder Auntie Glenda Chalker, Khoikhoi Language Revivalist Toroga Denver
Archive Source:	Museums of History New South Wales — State Archives Collection: Principal Superintendent of Convicts; NRS- 12213, Convict Death Register. NRS- 12213-1-[4/4549]-4/4549 David Steerman, 20/02/1830. Museums of History New South Wales — State Archives Collection: Principal Superintendent of Convicts; NRS-12202, Ticket of leave butts. NRS-12202-1-[4/4069]- 4/4069 David Steerman, 1829.

The artist would also like to thank and acknowledge support from Michael Gellert of HC Pro, Archivist Bonnie Wildie of the Western Sydney Reading Room and the team at Campbelltown Arts Centre.

About the artist:

Born on Wathaurong Country (Geelong, Australia 1988), Roberta Joy Rich is a multi-disciplinary artist also working as an educator and curator in Naarm (Melbourne). Often drawing upon her lived experiences as a diaspora Southern African *Kaapse* woman with African and Asian lineages, Rich utilises language, text, video, archives, photo-media, satire and storytelling, as platforms to interrogate constructs of race, gender, history and notions of authenticity. With a focus on communal knowledge systems, alterity, imperialism, and socio-political histories, much of her installation and mixed media projects explore resilience, power, memory, belonging and truth-telling. Rich is interested in critical fabulation and anarchiving as processes for unearthing silenced and emergent narratives, and the possibilities they conjure. Rich's practice aims to deconstruct colonial modalities and Western singularity, whilst proposing empowering sites of collective self-determination.

!Norasa Khâimâ: #Aiho Aboxan “Dawid Stuurman”

By Santilla Chingaipe

As leader of the Khoi people, chief David Stuurman had been exposed to colonial violence throughout his life prior to being sentenced to deportation for resistance activities as the British replaced the Dutch in KhoiSan territory and other parts of what is now South Africa. ‘KhoiSan’ is the collective term to describe the ‘Khoikhoi’ and the ‘San’ Indigenous groups of southern Africa. Stuurman was one of several KhoiSan convicts transported to the Australian penal colonies and arrived aboard the *Brampton* in New South Wales in 1823 after being sentenced to seven years’ transportation.¹ And while Australia’s convict history is well documented, the histories of non-white convicts are less well known.

Stuurman (also recorded as Steerman/Sherman/Sturnman) was born around 1773, “50 miles from Cape Town”;² and rose to prominence as chief of the Khoi people and later became a staunch opponent of colonialism. Because of this prominence, he is recorded within the colonial archives more than the other KhoiSan convicts. It was this resistance that led to his capture and arrest — along with other KhoiSan prisoners — on several occasions. The first was for his involvement in the third frontier war in the eastern Cape after allegedly forming an alliance with the Xhosa and, despite not being tried for a crime, was banished to Robben Island for “suspicious conduct, living in a Kraal near the boundaries of the Colony.”³ Stuurman escaped and returned to the eastern Cape where he sought refuge amongst the Xhosa. When the fifth frontier war started, in 1819, Stuurman continued to be a threat to the British and he was recaptured and sent to Robben Island, again without charge.⁴ During his time on the island, a mutiny broke out in 1820, when one of the convicts, Johan Smit, “over-powered and disarmed a sentry” stealing armoury and freeing other prisoners. Several soldiers were injured and one was killed during the incident.⁵ About 30 mutineers, including Stuurman, managed to escape before being recaptured and tried.⁶ He was “sentenced to witness the execution” and “to be transported for life to New South Wales” aged 50.⁷ It is impossible to know what impact bearing witness to this violence had on Stuurman — the colonial archive provides no detail on these matters.

1 State Archives NSW [4/3521], p.334

2 State Archives NSW; Series: NRS 12202; Item: [4/4069]

3 V. C. Malherbe (1980) David Stuurman: “Last chief of the Hottentots,” *African Studies*, 39:1, 54

4 Malherbe, *Last Chief of the Hottentots*, 59

5 Malherbe, *Last Chief of the Hottentots*, 5

6 CA, CO 146, Letters Received, 1821, Criminal Prisoners No.10, Fiscal, December, 1820.

Cited in Fine, H. 1991. *The administration of criminal justice at the Cape of Good Hope, 1795-1828*. University of Cape Town

7 CA, CO 146, Letters Received, 1821, Criminal Prisoners No.10, Fiscal, December, 1820.

While recording his physical description on arrival, colonial officials in Sydney noted that he was “lame of right leg.”⁸ Stuurman was issued with a Ticket-of-Leave in March 1829 in Sydney. The highly respected Khoi leader died the following year, as a labourer, in February 1830.⁹ Here, many unanswered questions emerge: What caused his right leg to be “lame”? Was there a funeral? Was he eulogised? Stuurman appears through fragments within the archive. We can only catch glimpses of him and there are few known records of his experience in his own words. Much of what we know about him in Australia is drawn from colonial archives, which centre white men in positions of power.

Attempting to reconstruct Stuurman’s life exposes the limits and challenges of working with colonial archives. Roberta Joy Rich’s work offers an intervention to this archival violence by centring the man who appears in fragments within the archives. Despite our cultures being threatened, these archival traces offer us an opportunity to rediscover ourselves. Rich’s use of Chief Stuurman’s language here is not simply cultural preservation, but a creation of new archives which centres the Khoi perspective. There is a power in hearing these languages being spoken out loud: like Chief David Stuurman, so many of us came to this continent carrying our languages, and our histories. We did not discard them even though we communicate predominantly in English. They remain a part of our identity and connection to heritage.

In settler colonies, the histories of Black and Indigenous peoples are marked by violent erasure — and erasure that continues within archives. And for Black settlers on colonised lands, locating our own histories within these violent archives is fraught and complicated. While brought here against their will, many people of African descent in colonial Australia were unwillingly part of the colonial project.

These histories are also marked by an enduring grief; grief that is rarely acknowledged and continues to impact these communities. By reimagining Chief David Stuurman’s life as a descendant of the KhoiSan people, Roberta Joy Rich allows us to trace the wounds of colonialism and offer up a liberatory perspective: one which centres this revered hero, celebrates the survival and resistance of Indigenous and Black communities around the world, and affords the safe space to mourn these ancestors. It is also a powerful reminder that despite Empire’s countless attempts at massacring, exiling, and enslaving us, we are still here.

8 State Archives NSW; Series: NRS 12202; Item: [4/4069]

9 The National Archives [4/4549; Reel 690 Page 191]



About the author:

Santilla Chingaibe is a Zambian-born, Melbourne-based filmmaker, historian and author, whose work explores settler colonialism, slavery, and contemporary migration in Australia. Chingaibe's first book of non-fiction *Black Convicts* was shortlisted for The Stella Prize, and the critically acclaimed documentary inspired by the book, *Our African Roots*, is streaming on SBS On Demand. Chingaibe is the founder of Behind The Screens, an annual program supported by VicScreen, aimed at increasing the representation of people historically excluded from the Australian film industry.

Image above: Roberta Joy Rich, *Where the clouds gather upon Hoerikwaggo* (film still), 2025
Image on left: David Stuurman, *Ticket of Leave*. MHNSW-StAC: NRS-12202-1-[4/4069]-4/4069

Hopes changed.

TICKET OF LEAVE.

No. *29/78* *24 March* 182*9*.

Prisoner's No. —

Name, —

Ship, —

Master, —

Year, —

Native Place, —

Trade or Calling, —

Offence, —

Place of Trial, —

Date of Trial, —

Sentence, —

Year of Birth, —

Height, —

Complexion, —

Hair, —

Eyes, —

General Remarks, —

David Stuurman

Brampton

Moore

1823

50 Miles from Cape Town

Labourer.

Cape of Good Hope

2nd September 1820

Life

1773

Five feet 3 & 1/4 inches

Copper colour

Black to grey & hoary

Brown encircled in blue

Lame of Right leg

Allowed to remain in the District of

On recommendation of

dated

Sydney
Bench,

vide Gazette 5th March 1829

Sancintya Mohini Simpson

JAHAJINS/SHIP-SISTERS 2023

Watercolour and gouache on handmade wasli paper

15 panels: 64 x 88 cm (irregular)

MECCA Collection, Naarm/Melbourne

JAHAJINS/SHIP-SISTERS, made up of wasli panels, tells a fragmented story of the experience of indenture for Indian women on the sugar colonies. By stripping away the stereotypical imagery of the plantation landscape, colonial figures or men, focus is brought to the relationships formed between the women, showing their complexity and fullness as friends, lovers, and individuals — beyond just their agricultural/domestic labour and the narratives of the colonial archive. Traditionally Miniature painting within South Asia focuses on privileged persons both in terms of gender, caste, class and colourism. Simpson's use of the style of Miniature painting centres casteless Coolie women bringing their history onto the page and allowing their history to be accounted for. In this act, audiences are critically asked to think about these women, and where their place exists in the archive. In centering these stories Simpson asks the archive to account for her family's history. Simpson's work seeks to acknowledge interconnected histories, looking at the experiences of Indian women indentured on sugar plantation/the sugar colonies, broader experiences, not just in South Africa, but to plantations in South Africa, Mauritius, the Caribbean colonies, and Fiji.





About the artist:

Sancintya Mohini Simpson is a descendant of indentured labourers sent from India to work on colonial sugar plantations in South Africa. Her work navigates the complexities of migration, memory, and trauma — addressing gaps and silences within the colonial archive. Simpson's work moves between painting, video, poetry, and performance to develop narratives and construct rituals that reflect on her maternal lineage.

Recent solo exhibitions include Artist's Rooms: *Sancintya Mohini Simpson*, Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai (2024), *pār-para / phus-phusā, Tales of Land and Sea*, Bundanon Art Museum, Shoalhaven (2024), *ām/āmma/ma marām*, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Perth (2023) & The Condensery | Somerset Regional Art Gallery, Toogoolawah (2024). Simpson's selected recent group exhibitions include *Sharjah Biennial 16*, Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (2025); *The 11th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Queensland Art Gallery & Gallery of Modern Art, Meeanjin/Brisbane (2024) and *Making Worlds*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (2023). Simpson's poetry has been published in *Artist Profile*, *Correspondence* (The Physics Room), *Cordite Poetry Review*, and *Peril* magazine.

Sancintya Mohini Simpson is represented by Milani Gallery, Meanjin (Brisbane), Australia.

Images: Sancintya Mohini Simpson, *JAHAJINS/SHIP-SISTERS* (detail), 2023, watercolour and gouache on handmade wasli paper, 15 panels: 64 x 88cm each (irreg). Photo: Louis Lim.

Ship sisters

By Shivanjani Lal

Jahajin, kūli to my girimitya. An oceanic palwaar. Family separated by oceans, sisterhood defined by pani. Sister to my sister. Didi to my gigi.

Barrii bahini leaves the motherland, becoming amma in a new land; in 1860, the ship *Truro* leaves Madras now known as Chennai carrying 342 of our family across the ocean, to Natal, South Africa. A new bloodline forms. Chhotii bahini leaves the motherland, becoming chhotii amma in February 1879, the ship *Leonidas* carrying 463 souls bound for Levuka, Viti from Calcutta. A new palm line forms.

Sancintya and I meet on the phone in 2014. A mutual friend connected us on a project I was developing. She is my sister from another ocean. We begin our paths together. In life I am the big sister to her little sister but in ancestry we are flipped, her community in South Africa begins before mine in Fiji. Our shared sisterhood is one of ancestry and twice removal. We are both South Asian and not, we are both lost from history and using our work to find our place.

An indentured labour contract is “signed”; claiming lives for 5 years at a time, until time becomes meaningless. Language sustains us. Land sustains us. The samundar sustains us. Changing our palm lines. Changing our bloodlines, earthing us in new earth.

Our histories are connected to colonial tethers. Colonial architects move bodies, replacing slaves with indentured servants. Same body different names. Connecting us to empires, the British, the Dutch, the French. All replications of systemic colonial power.

Living in Australia and making work here, Sancintya Mohini Simpson sees the complicity of colonial histories. Of which she is implicated. Indentured monies forming the basis of colonial societies she inhabits. Histories that mirror across borders — black birding and indenture are the same, apartheid and the White Australia Policy are connected. Kūli and Kanaka, Kanaka and Kūli. When we live within these systems of power we too are now complicit in these foundations. It is in the questioning of these powers that Simpson’s work exists. It is in choosing to archive the unseen and shedding light onto the stories of women that we can provide a counter history. The only thing left is to memorialise the unseen.

When I look at *JAHAJINS/SHIP-SISTERS 2023* I see the small central figures wrought painstakingly in South Asian miniature traditions. Each stroke defines a history. Each body an investment in her ancestors but told through family; not

through an archive denied or an academic lens. It's this speculative investment in the specificities of women's stories, in the small details of living: birthing, cooking, sweeping, healing, walking, washing and sleeping that an archive is built and sustained through matriarchal methodologies; they are memorialised.

What is absent is the fields of sugarcane, what is absent is the colonial overseer, what is absent is the sugarcane dhuuan, the smoke of the burning fires. What is left is sisterhood.

jahajin	n.	woman who travelled by ship, or jahaaji bhai / jahaaji–people who came on the same ship
kuli	n.	a derogatory term for a person brought to Fiji, from India, as an indentured labourer
girmitya	n.	person who served under indenture
palwaar	n.	family, relation [from Awadhi/Bhojpuri]
pani	n.	water
didi	n.	older sister
gigi	n.	younger sister [also spelt jiji]
barraa	adj	big [from Hindi], feminine: barrii
bahini	n.	1. sister [from Awadhi], synonym: jiji [from Hindi], a respectable form of address to a female
chhotii	adj	small (feminine) [from Hindi] employed in British colonies
colonies		in the 19th and early 20th centuries.
samundar	n.	sea [from Awadhi/Bhojpuri]
kanaka	n.	a worker (voluntary and involuntary) from various Pacific Island nations
dhuuan	n.	smoke [from Hindi]

About the author:

Shivanjani Lal is a Fijian-Australian artist, curator and writer whose work uses personal grief to delve into issues surrounding ancestral loss. Recent works have incorporated storytelling into objects and video to account for lost stories of the Girmitya (Indentured) from the Indian and Pacific oceans. The artist graduated with distinction from Goldsmiths, University of London, with a master's in Artists Film and Moving Image (2021), and she received the QAGOMA Vida Lahey Memorial Travelling Scholarship (2023).



Image: Curtis Taylor, *Ngarnda* (film still) 2019

Curtis Taylor

Ngarnda 2019

Digital video

2:00 mins

Courtesy the artist

Richard Court and Charlie Court 2022

Ink and oxide

Courtesy the artist

In essence, *Ngarnda* (meaning pain in Martu) is about loss. It considers the experience of losing someone and then losing yourself. *Ngarnda* expresses grief and sorrow as an experience that is both personal and physical.

Charlie Court and his son Richard Court are both former Premiers of Western Australia. During his tenure, Charlie Court cut up Martu land to form a national park (Karlamilyi National Park). More than a decade later, Richard Court excised land from this same site to make a mine for uranium. Both actions were without consent from the Martu people. In making these works, I have used ochre from the national park site to create the shape that has been cut into the land.

About the artist:

Curtis Taylor is a Martu artist who grew up between Bidjardanga in the Kimberley Region, and Parnngurr in the East Pilbara. Currently based in Boorloo, the past decade has seen Taylor develop a distinct practice that spans sculptural installation, painting and filmmaking. Through these mediums he presents urgent narratives that speak across generations, exploring ideas about identity, language, cultural practice and responsibility. Taylor grew up learning the jukurrpa (stories) of his Elders being spoken, sung and painted. Early on Taylor chose a different medium to begin telling his own jukurrpa. Drawn to the limitless potential of film and digital media to be distributed, shared and stored for future generations, he started writing and directing short films that presented narratives which spoke directly of Martu knowledge and experience. Producing stories in Martu Wangka dialect for his community and younger generations is fundamental to Taylor's practice. He has a collective approach to filmmaking often working with collaborators and finding opportunities for younger generations and community members to build skills and discover their own practices and methods of storytelling.

Curtis Taylor – Blood Ties

By Jessyca Hutchens

Taylor's work has a restless, fugitive energy, pulling on different cultural visual strands to tease them out and examine them together — rites and ritual alongside the shock-horror cinema of colonialism, deep wells of on-going grief and the quick freedoms of profanity, irony, and resistance.

Both *Ngarnda*, 2019 and *Richard Court and Charlie Court*, 2022 bare the traces of deep ancestral continuities yet occlude overt cultural representation. They have unsettled topographical surfaces, marked by physical traces of pain and loss. In *Ngarnda* — a Martu word for pain — a closeup view of Taylor's face streaming with dripping blood — is said to reference rituals related to the loss of a loved one, without revealing such rites directly. The accompanying audio track is an old recording of Taylor's family in the 1980s, singing first contact stories — extending what could be personal loss to a communal and symbolic one.

This topography of loss, symbolised in the journey of rivulets of blood across the face, hands and back, finds parallel in *Richard Court and Charlie Court*, where the pre-invasion world is indelibly scarred by a new reign of blood ties. Karlamilyi National Park (originally Rudall River National Park) was established in 1977 under the Charlie Court government, explicitly against Martu wishes. Thirteen years later, when Charles' son Richard was then premier, a uranium mine was carved out of the same park, once again without the consent of Martu traditional owners.

These two small unassuming canvases show maps of this large-scale expropriation (of the park) and excising (of the mine) and are partly painted in ochres from this country. The meaning of blood across these works has an oppositional quality. In *Ngarnda* there is blood-letting that potentially heals — a grief carried safely by collective ritual. And then, in the Court painting, there is the blood of the squattocracy — violent, extractive, and self-serving. Beneath the lie of a democratic meritocracy is really a story of families destroying other families. Burdening communities with more grief than the body or the land can always take.

About the author:

Dr Jessyca Hutchens is a Palyku woman living and working on Noongar boodja. She is a Lecturer at the School of Indigenous Studies and a Co-Director at the Berndt Museum, at the University of Western Australia. Jessyca is an art historian, curator, and writer who has previously held positions as the Curator at the Berndt Museum, a Curatorial Fellow at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection at the University of Virginia, the Curatorial Assistant to the Artistic Director for the 22nd Biennale of Sydney, and as a Lecturer in Global Art History at the University of Birmingham.



Image: Curtis Taylor, *Ngarnda* (film still) 2019

Youth Space

in every room centres a space for children and young people which encourages engagement with relevant stories, histories and provocations.

Jagath Dheerasekara

Metta the Tusker 2019

Digital animation

3:17 mins

Animator: Jerome Pearce

Composer: Isuru Kumarasinghe

This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through Creative Australia, its principal arts investment and advisory body.

Resource List

A collection of books selected by the artists and curators

The Cat I Never Named: A True Story of Love, War, and Survival

by Amra Sabic-El-Rayess and Laura L. Sullivan

Young Dark Emu: A Truer History

by Bruce Pasco

When We Say Black Lives Matter

by Maxine Beneba Clarke

Amma's Sari

by Sandhya Parappukkaran / Michelle Pereira

Home: Drawings by Syrian Children

edited by Ben Quilty

Black Artists Shaping the World

by Sharna Jackson

Karrin (My Body)

by Maureen Yanawana



Images: Jagath Dheerasekara, *Metta the Tusker* (film stills), 2019

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