

## Weekends at PICA: Sancintya Mohini Simpson [Transcript]

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Location: West End Gallery

Speakers: Shivanjani Lal and Sancintya Mohini Simpson

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SARAH WALL:

I would now like to welcome back Sancintya and introduce and welcome to Shivanjani Lal, who is joining Sancintya for a discussion on her practice and on her new exhibition for PICA. Shivanjani is a Fijian–Australian artist whose work uses personal grief to account for Ancestral loss. Recent works have used storytelling, objects, and video to account for lost histories and explore narratives of indenture and migratory histories from the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Between 2017 and 18 she sought to globalise her arts practice with a prolonged stay in India, which led to periods of research in Nepal, Bangladesh and Fiji. Shivanjani's work has been exhibited across Australia, and internationally in Aotearoa New Zealand, India, Barbados, France, Indonesia, the United Kingdom and Italy. Sancintya and Shivanjani have enjoyed a long friendship and a close artistic dialogue. I'm sure some of that will come through in this morning's conversation. Following the conversation, please join us in the PICA Hub for coffee and pastries and I'll now hand over to you Shavanjani.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

Thank you so much for this opportunity to kind of continue our conversation in our dialogue. I sort of wanted to just begin by acknowledging community and place, I grew up on Darug country but I'm currently living on Gadigal land, but I was born in Ba and have matrimonial ties to provinces in Fiji and ancestrally I am from the north and south of India. And I, we realised a little while ago, that actually our families are probably from the same part of India, particularly our matrilineal families. My parents, like my mother's mother, my great grandmother is from Gola, and your mother's mother is from Trivandrum. Which is very close. And I think this is the seventh time.

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

We have discrepancies in counting, I am not good at it, so I will trust Shivanjani

SHIVANJANI LAL:

Yeah, I was thinking that the publication was like, a conversation

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

That was another conversation you are correct, it was a conversation that.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

Was recorded

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

Well, it was recorded. So that is definitely seven. Correct. So, this is a little one-off roomsheet thing

SHIVANJANI LAL:

So, I have known Sancintya since 2014. And, you know, I think of you as my little sister in the arts, and so I don't know what's happening. But it was really important for me to be present to all of you and I am really proud of you. I love you so much. So I'm really so grateful for this opportunity to hold space for your work. And I was just thinking that actually, this was the first time I'd seen you perform. Because it was the IMA performance and the MCA thing, I think were timed around the things that I was already like.

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

We were co-performing separately.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

So, one of the things that I was thinking about was firstly, that I don't know if this has come across in your research or not but in mine, one of the objects that were given to people who left India, well, there were two things. There were ten bowls that were given to people. And also, Ganges River water was taken onto the ships, which I just think is wild.

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

This is a whole box of discussion. I think I think it's one of those things that they're like, it's a complex history of indentured labour. 1.5 million Indians are taken to the Caribbean, to South Africa, to Mauritius and to Fiji. They were also going to be brought to Queensland but instead, they let that law lapse and forcibly took and stole South Sea Islander peoples. So the idea of post-slavery, abolishing slavery, what was meant to feed that all that took place in that terms of how can we have cheap labour and know whose bodies can we exploit for this sort of comes into that, but I think the ocean is also very big. Here's the ocean. And the discussions of taking Ganges water across the ocean, which was called the kala pani, dark waters, dark waters.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

I mean, the darker water, the kala pani is like a taboo in which the specifically the Hindu community when they're removed from India no longer become Indian. And there are meant to be rituals that enable you to return. I don't know what they are.

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

I don't, I think it's, it's a lot of indentured communities, I'm not going to speak for every person. You know, if they go back to India, they're not considered Indian. But in the places that they live, they are Indian, they have communities in South Africa, they had apartheid. So they were very much forcibly made to be just together. But also, there is a joy in a sense of through this crossing, castes did mix, and religions did mix. And there is.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

And language.

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

And language mixed so this is why this poem there is words that have different meaning during indenture and maybe a multiple of images or logos, not just one way of looking at a homogenised India, and in a sense of that those power structures. Yeah.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

Yeah, so I was wanting to think about this idea of the vessel for you, and what that meant to you? And what does it mean to kind of reclaim that as an action, as an object as well?

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

Yeah, I think it's this thing that's like, it's very everyday to us, like I grew up, having a sense or place on the floor you come from school, Mum would have dinner ready, and you sit on the floor and eat that, which was, you know, to some exotic, but it's not it's just like everyday utensil very normal. But the idea of the vessels just being a basic, utilitarian item used to carry water used to cook with used to bathe with and do all these things. But quite often, now, they hold a place in ceremonial religious activities, which is that, for example, the lotus here, sort of hold that place, but they weren't made originally for that. And they're not, you know, you might drink a lassi from it, or it might drink something from it. But like, what does a vessel hold? What is a vessel? So very much responding to Edward's way of thinking about what a vessel is? Is the vessel a boat? Is the vessel an ocean? What does the ocean hold? A vessel is something that holds something? The body is a vessel? And what is held in these spaces, you know, memories in vessels are we holding memories, are we vessels holding memories, and thinking about the science that has come out that should we sort of, we inherit memories in our DNA, our DNA changes with trauma, our DNA is passed down, we inherit these things in our DNA. So there is memories in the body. So how do you bring them out? How do you acknowledge them? And how you acknowledge that, although this archive and this history that stands to represent us that wasn't made for us or written by us and our ancestors? How do we find those memories and stories that aren't there? But you've inherited?

SHIVANJANI LAL:

So how do you find those stories?

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

Well, I think the thing is, originally, I felt a lot of loss and frustration. And I didn't know that there was perhaps, like, perhaps thinking about other ways of understanding this. You know, I did touch on oral histories, and we're talking about oral histories, too. And the importance of that so song, language, language used in different spaces, but also smell memory, you know, me burning these pots and having these huge coils of fire, that memory being on a boat of what did our ancestors go through and experience, some sense of understanding?

SHIVANJANI LAL:

I mean, I think this, I was, I sort of texted my Mum yesterday, because there's a, there's a ritual in Hinduism, in Hindu rituals, called the Hawan. And I just had this memory of my Dad buying wood. And in my head, I was like, there was a specific wood. And I was trying to Google it. And then I said, I'm just gonna text my Mum and she's, she was like, it's mango wood. And I just thought that was like a really interesting way to kind of bring it back to the exhibition and the use of mango wood

in this work. Particularly because like, it's like the beginning of a fire or the beginning of unmaking things that are unknown into things that are unfamiliar with fire.

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

Well fire has a, I guess, like a massive cultural relevance in terms of, a fire is where all these life rituals do exist around what has been cooking and just basic things there but yeah, marriage, passing of family members, these different things. Also sort of sentimental just, you know has fire with it. So, so that change or progression, or what, what fire can do in violent ways, but also in purification.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

What do you think the use of the fires in the context of your work? Because it's been used in different ways, you know, like, there's the kind of transformation that occurs with the ceramic vessels into actually making them the vessel that they are but also been applied topically. And yeah, I'm just really curious about these sort of transformational aspects.

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

I think fire is acknowledging transitions in time. So if I were to sense, something can change, but there's still fragments of that original. So with the pigment, on these works on mango paper they made from sugarcane ash, you wouldn't know it necessarily looking at it. But that is still you can still know it was once sugar cane in a field somewhere, has a history and a memory. And although we can't see it, it's still there, there's still some trace or residue of that. So for me, I guess, trying to make sense of my family history and these parallel stories and the sort of experiences that will kind of continuing generationally. I was trying to look for that original, were like looking through the residue of where this was coming from. And sort of, you know, that that is still present and still present in us. But where was it and what happened to these women and what happened to our family?

SHIVANJANI LAL:

Family is such a huge part or component of your work. And the thing that really struck me about this exhibition, and it so visible in the context of your work, in a sense, they usually Isha would be here with you, Isha is your brother. Like I remember the first work that I saw of you that wasn't to do with identity, but like, was in the relationship to the indenture have your Mum singing. And this is the first work that doesn't have any of those sort of sort of real presence of your immediate family. But what it does have is like an image. And this is the first time that you've ever actually used any familial images. And there's something that's really interesting to me about the presence of these ancestral women. And I also just want to sort of clarify that use of the word because I think for you and I, when we talk about ancestors, is family, and we're talking about, like, our great grandparents, we're not

talking about people any further than that. And there's sort of like a huge gap where there should be knowledge, and there isn't. And so like, there's both presence and absence in this work, where normally in your miniatures, there are women present and today, like in this mural there is not, so would you like to kind of break apart that?

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

Shivanjani uses images of her family beautifully in her practice for some time. So I thought it was quite fun to tell Shivanjani 'Look, I've got, I've got a family image'. But we don't have we don't have many photos. And the ones I have copies of are incredibly precious to me and personal. I think there's a thing where I'm looking at the past. Making sense of the present. But it's also I think, this is the most personal show I have made, even though it might not seem obvious in that way, I think looking closer to home, to Australian apartheid, my mother. You know, and the woman in my family more immediately rather than, I guess, sort of further generations or sort of, more broadly speaking, rather than precise stories of family members revealing them to the public is something, but I also see the women there, watching and protecting, and also challenging that looking. There's something really powerful in them. And I'd come up with sort of the different works in the exhibition. And I had this photograph on my studio door and realised everything that was in the photograph that was in the exhibition. So the mango tree, the corrugated house, the women, the table, like, everything, everything was there. So I felt like I didn't need to include other women because they were already there. But also vessels and the tables are reclaimed mango wood that have been scorched and they're the length, the tabletops, they're the lengths of my mother and I, so I feel like it's sort of generationally. They're looking towards us, protecting us, but also were continuing their story, their journey.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

I wanted to talk about place and about the fact that we are in Western Australia, and we are in proximity to the Indian Ocean. And so this is like the first time that I've been to the West Coast, this is your first time as well.

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

Thanks for having us here.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

And so what does that feel like for you to have this proximity to an ocean that has held your family, our community? And it's sort of a deep connection to both India and, and South Africa? Because it's both it connects both, you know,

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

Yeah, I think the exhibition, sort of the proximity to South Africa, the Indian Ocean, but then also the distance from a place that I live, and grew up and sort of allowed for this middle conversation, I think, and maybe to be more personal, because it sort of wasn't at home with everyone who sort of knows me quite well. And it's in a new place and allowed a bit more playing in a bit more experimentation, which was really great. But I think that also sort of ended up just sort of acknowledging, I guess, that proximity to South Africa and those more recent histories, not just you know, and I think it is like here, you know, finding mango wood tables on Facebook marketplace is not as easy as it is in Meanjin. So it's acknowledging like these, these landscapes that are really familiar to me in place, perhaps not here from subtropical Brisbane. So they sort of, for me, for me, being someone who's born here, but having heritage from different places, but also sort of their stories of multiple displacement. What makes home with like, when, when we had when we did this piece of writing for the Physics Room in Christchurch and you invited me to respond to it. And it was very much about your feelings of home?

SHIVANJANI LAL:

Well, yeah, I had just come back. But I think it also ended with actually, maybe this is a nice moment, it ended with some lines talking about both my grandmother's had tattoos. And we also have a bunch of tattoos. And in Fiji tattooing is women's business, which I didn't know until I learned about a project run by some really incredible, indigenous Fijian women. And I was just thinking about that experience, like, what would that be like to sort of it's like I wouldn't like? My grandmothers were relatively conservative women, I mean, who basically got to remake their lives. But both of them had tattoos. And I was just thinking about that experience of probably getting tattooed in the evening. But how it would have been filled with laughter, you know, and joy. And it makes me think about that image about women gathering and kind of.

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

Well, there's another photograph from that day, it was my uncle's first birthday. My mother was in her mother's womb at the time. And there's a photo of my Mum's maternal great-grandmother, and her paternal granny holding her cousin and her brother. And I can see there is a tattoo on the hand of my mother's paternal great-grandmother. And I asked her about this, and she said, yeah, all the old people had tattoos. I was like, well, she hates tattoos. That's a terrible thing. But the thing is like, yeah, she's like, you know, they had tattoos. They had tattoos of names in case they were stolen, or something happened to them. So, there's a history there in terms of tattooing, and that tattoo was a column, which is like this pulley design you see here it, which is again women's work, so done outside of houses done welcoming people to houses and entryways and done by women.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

I've lost my train of thought.

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

Yeah. I think we were talking about something else and then we started talking about tattoos?

SHIVANJANI LAL:

No, I guess like there's that conversation. The kind of responses came from the kind of those lines about women gathering.

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

Place

SHIVANJANI LAL:

Place

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

Place, Fiji and home.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

and home, but also like, I guess I kind of wanted to return to you and, and I guess like, I guess one of the things about your practice is you're writing and in this, but also like the invitation for others to write or contribute to contextualise your work so when I contextualised your work. Has Manisha, I can't remember? Manisha has, Léuli and whole bunch of other people. And this process of trying to contextualise and figuring out is really about history making and, and in your poetry. I think a lot about that you know about how when we write, I guess speaking for myself, like a lot of Fijian men love to write. And so like in some ways, like when I write and when I think about the context of my work, I am always trying to invite or reimagine the possibilities in the invitation of asking what a community, like a person from my community, can write about it. And it doesn't matter. Like we're not thinking about low brow, we're not thinking about high brow context, we're just thinking about feeling and emotion. And I guess like one of the things that I'm interested in, is like, the ways in which you nurture your writing.

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

The last word, what was the last word.



SHIVANJANI LAL:

Like nurture your writing,

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

Nurture, nurture, I was like, well, for me writing was something that I did, as a little kid, like writing poetry, in primary school in high school, not really, for anyone, but myself. And so the poetry came out of, there were things I need to talk about, which I didn't want to reveal explicitly. But I'm looking at this history of my family, I'm working with my mother and going through this journey with my mother. But there's stuff inside of me that I need to process and make sense of and have space for, that's just for me, to make sense, and reveal, but in a way, that's not telling stories that I shouldn't tell, but hiding things in there. So be it proposed metaphors and these different things to put little. Yes, little secrets, and all the things that sort of I want to convey with or share. And so for me, poetry really allows that freedom of that, but also its sounds. So when I write, I speak, so the poetry is, is that for me, it is how it sounds, how it comes out, and playing with words and language as well.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

Yeah. I'm gonna, like ask one more question. And then we're gonna go to like further questions. But it's nice that you were talking about language because in our first conversation that we had, we did talk about use of language and I. And.

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

like, I was trying to learn Hindi back then.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

Oh gosh, I've never learnt Hindi, and so like, I guess, like, at that time, you weren't using Hindi in the context of your work, but now it feels really embedded.

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

Well, I use not just Hindi because I think that's the thing, like that was my mother tongue. Like I should speak Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, but I don't. My mother wasn't taught, she could hear and understand, you know, that this was sort of like her mother integrated, so to speak to each other. But because it was apartheid, the schools were all English, everything was English, and then if you learnt a language, it was Afrikaans. So things weren't passed down. She went and learnt things her self but it's self-taught, or self, try and make sense of this. So there was loss there that I felt and I you know, it's that kind of thing where someone's like, Oh, you don't speak. You don't speak this. Like you're very looked down on. But I would love to and I like I

love to acknowledge my culture. So I think using language especially words that were used during indenture, so research of Rajend Mesthrie where the University of Cape Town is, I use a lot of his research on like, from oral history about language that was specific. So it's funny because someone who might speak in Hindi, or Tamil might read the word and be like, I don't understand what's meaning in this context, because it doesn't make sense. Because that word changed and shifted meaning in that space. So it's kind of, it's okay.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

Yeah, I think I sort of speak Fijian Hindi, which means that I speak Hindi from like the 1800s. strictly correct. And that's okay. Should we open it up to some questions? I mean, we can keep going?

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

We can always keep going. That's fine that's fine there's seven of them.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

There was a question that I kind of lost track of, but we were talking about language.

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

I didn't finish the place conversation.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

Do you want to continue with the place conversation?

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

Yeah.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

Okay let's do that

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

And then we can like, we'll be like, a little ribbon. Yeah. So that sense of you have been, you write about place and you acknowledge you place for me, it's always been a tricky thing. You know, like I acknowledge that I've, I grew up and I live on the unceded lands of the Yugara, Jagera, Turrbal peoples in Meanjin And I'm kind of I guess, in that space, in South Africa, again, the Zulu people believe that that's their

land. I also wasn't born there or up there. I have family there, my mother's stories that have been passed down to me and family stories. But again, that is the home we were taken to and India itself, there is a lot of distance there. You know, I can go there and see things that are my culture and I know makes sense and are very comfortable there, but I'm also on the outside. So what makes a place home or what makes home and I think it's like family, but also sort of those things. It's like that mango tree that marks a childhood home. It's a mango tree in my mother's garden. It's the landscape that keeps following when I'm in Bangalore, like, I was in Hampi, there is sugar cane burning and people are cutting. You know, like traditional methods of harvesting, and then it's along the East Coast there is sugar cane again. And then when I took my Mum back to Durban there it is again. It's these same. I think there's sort of, that, we can talk about colonisation, that part of the British and how they like to move things around. But I think it's like materials in the history of materials, not necessarily the place.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

Yeah, I mean, it's interesting to think about that, the replication of that, the kind of consistent, like even in Perth, about Hyde Park, there being a Hyde Park here, but there's also Hyde Park in Sydney and.

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

and London.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

And London and it's like the insidiousness of that.

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

And also, the the amazing video work down there, there is Indian Ring Parrots in Hyde Park in London, which are not from there, but there they are, very happy.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

But I was also thinking about, you know, there's this kind of colonial replication, but I guess in the in, in relationship to something like oral history where you're repeating a story over and over again, in so many ways that feels like a way in which, and maybe this is bringing it back full circle to our conversation, this present moment. In, in thinking about things like oral history, what we're really doing is trying to make sure that this conversation is still present, you know, and then it's not historicised, you know people are still living these experiences. And in a dying industry, like the sugar cane industry is not like an industry that is sustainable in any way, shape, or form. But how, how, what do you think about that idea of replication versus like, I guess, like trying to hold on to something? But it's like?

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

I think that is, you know, interesting. I was in the Physics Garden in London and there was a banana tree there. And it was very depressed. It was a really, really unhappy, banana tree that shouldn't have been there. So, it shouldn't have been there. But the parrots in the park are happy. They're not from them. But the banana tree really didn't want to be there. So I think I think it's one of these things of sort of, you know, the displacement of people the displacement of landscapes, what does that mean when these places shift and change? I think there's a lot in terms of good sense writing about how we can move in these spaces and what can happen. That's really beautiful and magic-like communities coming together, you know my sister-in-law who is Indo-Fijian, has a Muslim father and a Hindu mother, you wouldn't do that in India but these spaces allowed for these things. The woman in that photograph, their Muslim neighbours and the old lady, as well as Tamil, Hindu, you know family members all at one table, sharing food and meal. And again the cast backgrounds from the members of my family it's all mixed so, that, that, those spaces they're not necessarily replicating and I think it's, I think it's, it can't be, I think when you move something things change, things shift and I think it is acknowledging, you know they're definitely holding onto 1800s, early 1900s India but at the same time, making new spaces, for new things and bending practices.

SHIVANJANI LAL:

Yeah, it is sort of different coming together, a kind of responsiveness of language as well as, something that I found really fascinating was that Fiji or Fijian, changes across the land, so like if there is more presence of a Tamil community it reflects that, and I think there is really nice about being present in that, cause that doesn't usually happen unless you are paying attention. Does anybody have any questions? How would you like to finish up?

SANCINTYA MOHINI SIMPSON:

I would just like to thank Shivanjani, look at my bad Hindi, it is always a joy to be in conversation with you and I think it sort of really, you know this accidental, sort of like you how friendships happen and, you know we have both been looking at this history and what it means to be able to support each other and have that community means so much, so thank you always.