



Kiran  
Nadar  
Museum  
of Art

La Biennale di Venezia

61. Esposizione  
Internazionale  
d'Arte

Eventi Collaterali

Malini Malani



Of Woman Born











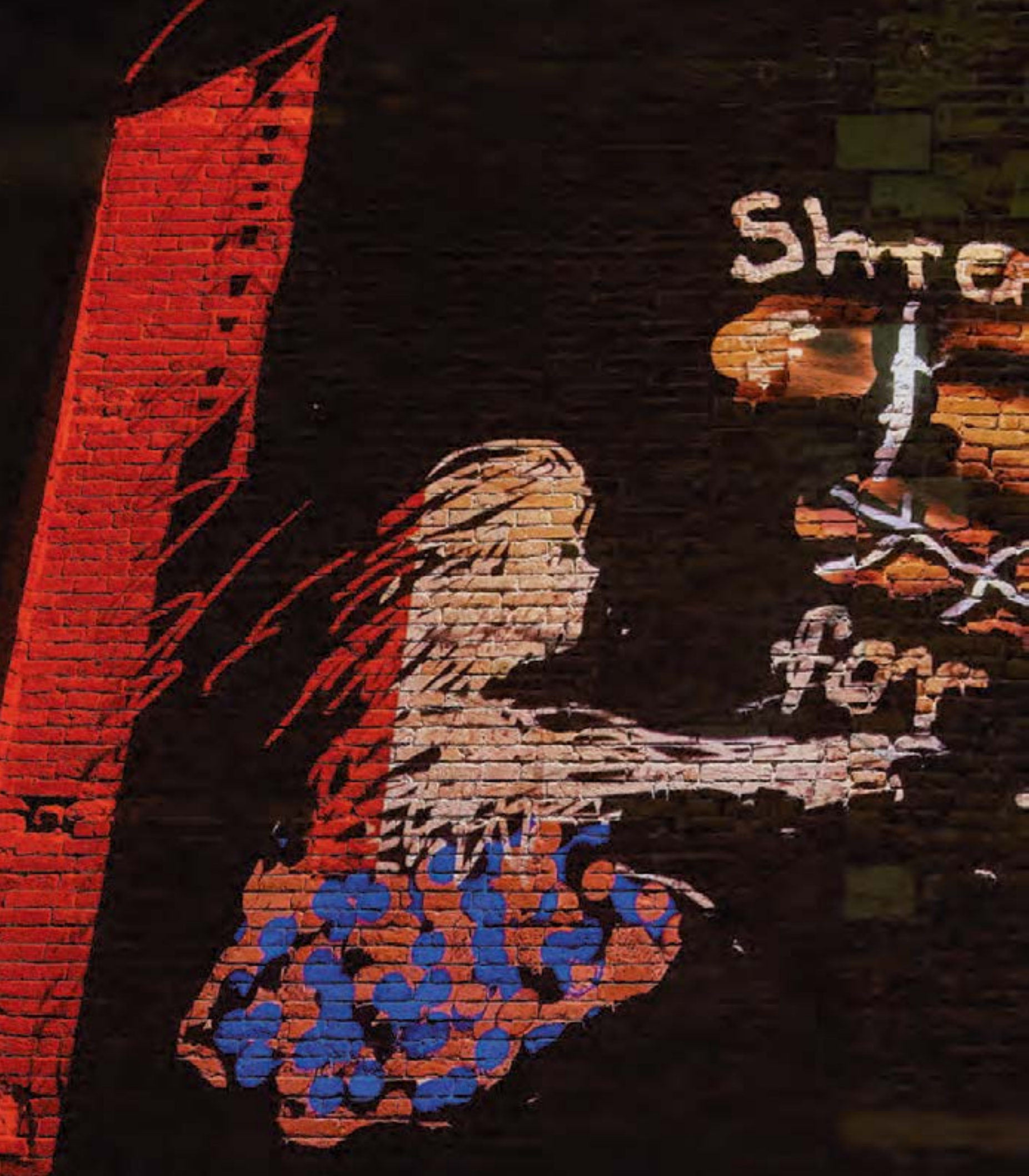




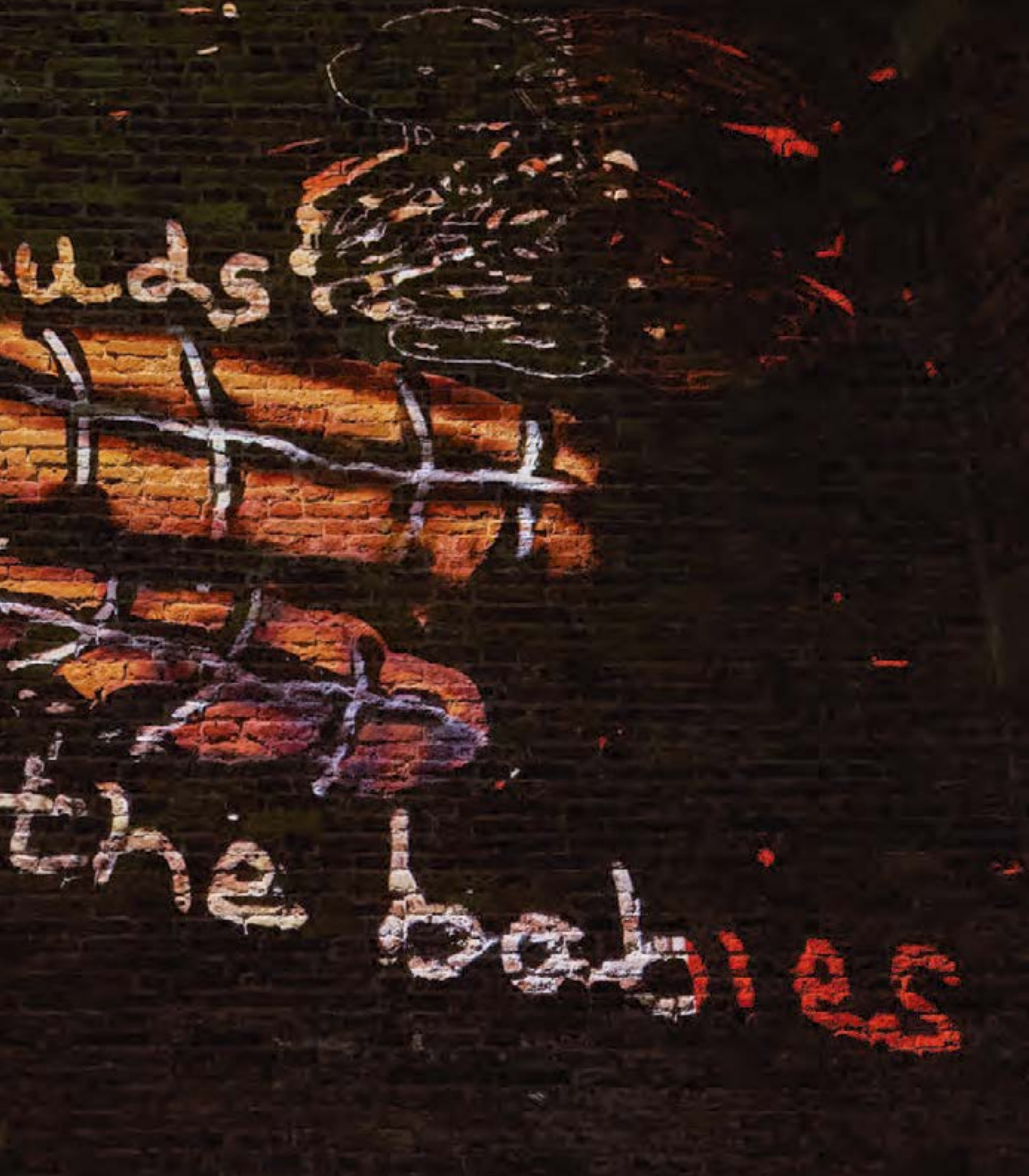


















Nalini Malani









# Nalini Malani

## Of Woman Born





M



VENETIE.  
MD.



# Contents

15	Chairperson's Note
23	Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev <i>Of Woman Born: Skipping Rope as a Modus Operandi in the Works of Nalini Malani</i>
47	Roobina Karode <i>The Oozing Body: Staging Superimpositions and Temporal Disruption</i>
93	Nalini Malani <i>Of Woman Born: The Forgotten Gender</i>
109	Emily Butler <i>Through Salt, Shadows and Echoes: Translating the Untranslatables</i>
126	Exhibited Artwork
130	Audio Transcription
135	Artist's Biography





## Chairperson's Note

It is an honour for the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA) to present Nalini Malani's solo project *Of Woman Born* as a collateral event of the 61st International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia in 2026. With this newly commissioned site-specific work, KNMA continues to build an ongoing and sustained engagement with Malani's practice. A significant artistic figure of India's post-Partition generation, Malani has consistently addressed some of the most urgent questions of our time, including the aftereffects of displacement and communal violence, the persistent erasure of women from history, and the predicament of female life under authoritarian and patriarchal regimes.

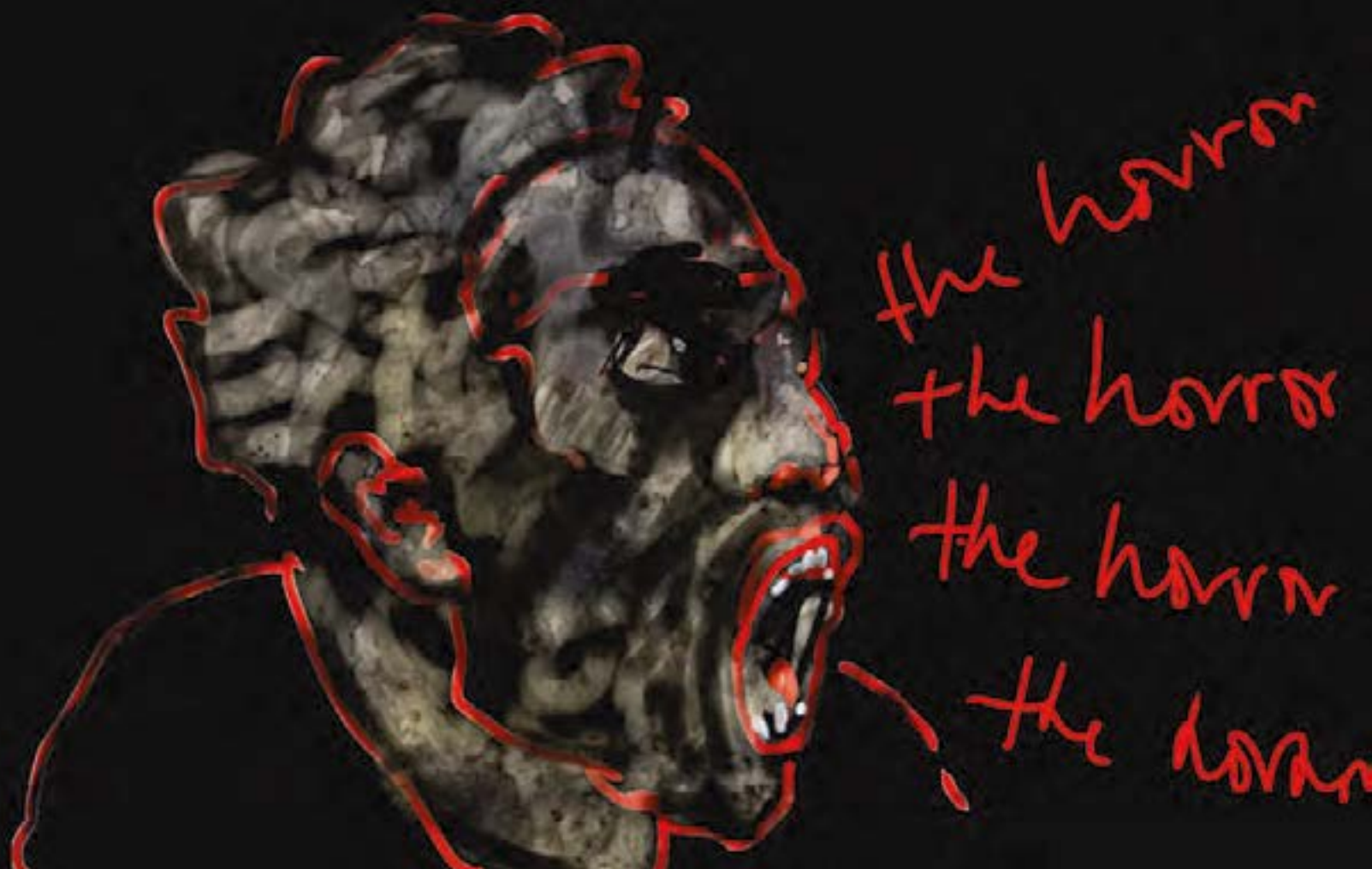
*Of Woman Born* expands Malani's iconic work with reverse paintings on Mylar, animation chambers, and iPad drawings into a powerful environment comprising nine simultaneous projections, sound, and text. The walls of the salt warehouse become carriers of stains, flickering shadows, and urgent phrases; viewers are surrounded by images constantly forming and deforming, insisting on a shared responsibility to witness rather than to look away. That *Of Woman Born* chimes with Koyo Kouoh's curatorial framework, *In Minor Keys*, makes this collaboration especially meaningful, affirming the importance of unheard voices, overlooked histories, and suppressed narratives.

Here, Malani unfolds a constellation of images and texts, drawing viewers into pressing concerns that converge with renewed force as she draws on the myth of Orestes and the spectral figure of his mother in the *Oresteia* to ask why she who brings the world into being is repeatedly silenced, punished, and made to vanish.

On behalf of KNMA, I extend my appreciation and gratitude to Nalini Malani for this undertaking, along with Johan Pijnappel and Roobina Karode; their commitment and dedicated efforts in this landmark experiential installation have transformed the Magazzini del Sale, a historic Venetian site, into an intense, immersive animation chamber for sustained attention and reflection on the frequencies of injustice and resilience.

I wish to thank the Biennale's organisers and our colleagues, collaborators, and supporters whose efforts have made this exhibition possible. As KNMA continues its mission to deepen dialogues around modern and contemporary art from South Asia within a global context, we are proud to stand alongside Malani's uncompromising vision in Venice and are confident that *Of Woman Born* will resonate with audiences as a call to collective renewal.

**Kiran Nadar**  
Chairperson, Kiran Nadar Museum of Art







The  
Smell  
of  
fear







THE FURIES :



The Judgement  
of Orestes





















CAROLYN CHRISTOV-BAKARGIEV

# Of Woman Born: Skipping Rope as a Modus Operandi in the Works of Nalini Malani

## A grieved child

When experiencing an exhibition by Nalini Malani, we are thrown first of all into a double world of contrasting associations. On the one hand, it is like entering a space of children's play, where the artist has gleefully indulged in sensually painting shapes, making them move, and creating her own optical devices reminiscent of early marvellous image-making such as shadow puppetry or early proto-cinema rotoscopes, and this is sheer pleasure. On the other hand, as soon as one focuses on what is being drawn or depicted, the viewer is captured in a complicit gaze and shocked by the gloomy worlds of violence and pain, of war and trauma that are depicted.

Rooted in her own personal family history of displacement and trauma following the post-Second World War period, during the Partition (1947), out of which modern India was born – one year after her own birth – Malani's multimedia works have, over time, become large, epic immersive environments in which these contradictions play out. Partly cathartic, as in ancient Greek tragedy, they present a world tormented by the repetition of cycles of violence and oppression, associated from her perspective principally with patriarchal worldviews, where violence is endemic and chronic, and which engenders corollary histories such as the colonial occupation of India by the British. Firmly feminist, Malani pursues her art like an unheeded Cassandra. This deep connection between childhood play and adult trauma is anthropologically and psychoanalytically entangled, connected with fear, phobia, and vulnerability at the core of what it means to be human. The child is vulnerable and can be silenced or punished by adults, or more simply her tales can be relativised, diminished and disregarded as infantile projections and inventions. This is similar to female knowledge that has nowhere else to go than into art – a form of truth produced under conditions of silencing, but that rejects those conditions and is allowed its visibility and its sound in the suspended time-space of the art exhibition.

There is an early picture by Nalini Malani called *Grieved Child* (1981), painted when she was 35, which has been in the collection of the Indian art critic Geeta Kapur since then. It seems to hold a secret, a suspended communication.<sup>1</sup> The pictorial dynamism is cinematic, to say the least, with forms twisting and turning to envelop the viewer's gaze into its complex visual structure, woven, embroidered, or stitched together, *in medias res*, only alluded to by the title of the work – *Grieved Child*. What has happened just before this scene? The literal splitting of the little girl in yellow preludes a non-integrated self, but also points to the force and power located precisely in that split subject: subjected, broken, divided, yet, precisely for that reason, an uncapturable self, always moving, rotating, crouching, falling, over and over.

Art is a topsy-turvy space where artistic freedom and a proto-revolutionary spirit reign, much as they do in the world of the medieval feast. Discussing the grotesque and carnivalesque, the literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, in his seminal *Rabelais and His World* (1965), illustrated how this subverts seriousness in a radical and ambivalent way, creating a vital, unofficial cultural space where hierarchies are inverted and the sacred becomes profane.<sup>2</sup> Here, new social orders and norms can be experimented with and produced.

A similar belief in a space of play, laughter, and subversion lies at the root of Malani's artistic strategies, and such a space is not entirely unlike what we know of the early

<sup>1</sup> Thomas McEvelley writes about this painting in his illuminating essay 'Locating the Female Gaze', in Seán Kissane and Johan Pijnappel (eds), *Nalini Malini* (Milan: Charta, 2007), p. 11. He notes the family scene of the Indian middle class, with men wearing Western suits and women wearing saris and staying mostly at home. However, McEvelley omits mention of the doubled image of the little girl in yellow and the structural devices in the painting that lend the work its enigmatic nature.

<sup>2</sup> Written in 1940, the book originally titled *Rabelais in the History of Realism* was not published until 1965 (1st English edition 1968), and a new translation by Sergey Sandler came out in 2025.



*Grieved Child*, 1981

Oil painting on canvas, size 122 x 122 cm



3 Across the Canale della Giudecca from the Magazzini del Sale, with its glistening and watery surface criss-crossed by boats both small and large, I met Malani in 2005. It was on the occasion of a group exhibition on contemporary art from India, where she first presented her five-channel video/shadow play *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain*, which included a projection onto two beds of salt in reference to Mahatma Gandhi's Salt March of 1930. We have not stopped talking and working together since then. I had already seen one of her first installations, *Unity in Diversity* (2003), a few years prior – a single-channel video collaging Ravi Varma's *A Galaxy of Musicians* (1893) with animations referring to the Gujarat massacres of 2002, projected in a gilded frame in an installation suggesting a living-room setting with blood-red walls. The contrast between the make-believe domestic world and the violence depicted was striking.

4 The title immediately invokes the foundational feminist text *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* by American poet and essayist Adrienne Rich (1976), which explores motherhood both as a personal experience and as a social institution of reproductive labour shaped by patriarchal society that restricts women's autonomy.

5 In the case of Malani's art of fluid metamorphoses and movement, Bracha L. Ettinger's matrixial theories around co-poiesis and co-emergence – of mother-child as the not-yet-mother and not-yet-child, whose mutual recognition might allow for non-traumatised subjects to emerge – may be useful as conceptual tools. See Bracha L. Ettinger, *'The Heimlich'* (1997), in her collected essays, *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

Dionysian feasts and rituals, with their choral song (the dithyramb) and dance, use of masks, themes of death, rebirth, dismemberment, and return, from which the Greek theatre of the fifth century BCE later arose. Only a few works by Aeschylus (including the *Oresteia*, the subject of the following pages), Sophocles, and Euripides have survived the storms of historical erasure. These would later emerge as canonical. Although its source was the Dionysian ritual, Greek theatre was quick to assert that the annual competitions called the 'Great Dionysia', held in the Theatre of Dionysus on the Acropolis' south slope, had nothing to do with Dionysus, the god of metamorphosis, beyond gender and totally non-patriarchal.

In some ways, Malani not only re-translates myth and tragedy from a feminist perspective, but she also pulls them back in time to the pre-theatrical world and brings them closer to that of Dionysus, the god of nature and of the indistinction between human and nature, or between genders, whose rituals were immersive and communal – without rules, without judgement, without the strictures of patriarchal civic society. The energy that circulates in her works through rhythms, sounds, and flowing images, is a liberated energy: the energy of art.

## Of woman born

'The work is very dark – it has to do with the wars', Nalini Malani says about her new work *Of Woman Born* (2026).

In the 56-metre-long, 7.5-metre-wide, and 8-metre-high terracotta-bricked walls of the Magazzino del Sale,<sup>3</sup> formerly a salt warehouse of the Venetian maritime empire, Indian artist Nalini Malani has created a newly commissioned multi-channel work that the artist calls an animation chamber, titled *Of Woman Born*.<sup>4</sup> Here, salt crystals have formed along the walls, creating a mesmerising luminescent effect when Malani's nine large projections of digitally generated animations are turned on. Together, they create an immersive environment – a chamber. The sequence of images both repeats the experience of the flow of images on the internet and embodies it in physical space, pulling it back into the world of things, people, and the places that we inhabit in the physical world. The projections do not fit precisely on the walls, but overlap on the buttresses of the space, or spill over onto adjacent walls. A collage of sounds, music, and voices also inhabits this echoic place. This work emerges from Malani's fascination with the story of *The Eumenides*, told in the third tragedy of the *Oresteia* trilogy by Aeschylus, where the Eumenides, originally earth deities, born of night, and formerly the Erinyes or Furies, are re-rooted in the earth below the city of Athens as guardians of civic justice by the goddess Athena, after passing judgement and acquitting Orestes of matricide.

We are all 'of woman born', yet sharing this origin with all humans has never guaranteed an appreciation of the matrixial condition of subject formation<sup>5</sup>, whereby every subject co-emerges as relational from its beginnings, since our first experiences, whether male or female, are pre-linguistic forms of mother-child communication through the womb; nor has this common origin provided a line of defence for women and children against violent men's 'thanatoic' death drives (*Todestrieb*). Murder and rape of girls and women have accompanied the history of humanity since the beginnings of historical memory, even though we are all 'of women born'.



*Of Woman Born*, 2026  
Installation view Venice

The music and sounds of war in the animation chamber *Of Woman Born* are particularly striking.

A looped collage of sound unfolds for 20 minutes and 20 seconds, through discontinuous fragments rather than linear development. High-pitched screeching – suggestive of the distraught Erinyes – cuts through pulsating electronic tones, brittle timbres recalling a harpsichord, intermittent beats, and broken piano phrases. The sonic field carries associations with science fiction, but these function less as futurity than as estrangement: a sense of temporal and psychic dislocation.

Rhythmic slowing occurs intermittently, at moments evoking a child tentatively practising notes on an electronic keyboard – repetition without mastery, gesture without progression. Distant female voices surface only to blur into instrumental, wind-like sounds, hovering on a threshold where voice loses semantic clarity and becomes pure affect.

Brief, intense violin passages erupt, then collapse into a diffuse, cosmic background, producing a recurrent sensation of withdrawal and distance. Choral voices return again and again, operating like the opening music to a scene that never arrives. Each recurrence promises narrative continuity, yet remains suspended at the level of onset – an auditory analogue of traumatic latency.

The work advances through short sequences lasting only seconds: violins reappear, are interrupted by pulsating tones, and dissolve into other sonic remnants. This compulsive restarting, rather than development, evokes trauma's temporal logic – repetition without resolution, memory without integration.

The overall effect is one of unresolved aftermath: a soundscape haunted by distant, unassimilated events, where the past persists not as recollection but as recurrent disturbance.

In the animation chamber *Of Woman Born*, one hears a looped soundtrack composed



of words spoken by Nalini Malani herself, alongside those hummed by Neha Karode: her voice is layered over music she has written, carrying fragments excerpted from Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, especially from *Agamemnon* and *The Eumenides*.<sup>6</sup> What unfolds is not an adaptation, but a polyphonic collage – a reactivation of the trilogy as an archive of patriarchal thought, juridical misogyny, and silenced female testimony.

Malani works with Aeschylus' texts much as she works visually: by fragmentation, overlay, echo, and return. The chorus' opening meditation in *Agamemnon*, which focuses on memory, pain, and knowledge – 'In our sleep, pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart' – reappears transformed in Malani's voice as 'In visions of the night, like dropping rain, descend the many memories of pain'. The shift is subtle but telling: pain is no longer a moral educator, as it is for Aeschylus, but an accumulated residue that does not resolve into wisdom.

Other lines move between plays and speakers, collapsing the structural distinctions of the original trilogy. 'Terrors to tell, terrors to see! ... Crawling on all fours' evokes Cassandra's prophetic breakdown and foreknowledge of her own murder in *Agamemnon*, while 'I was slaughtered by his matricidal hand' comes from the ghost of Clytemnestra, who accuses Orestes in *The Eumenides*. Temporal sequence dissolves; accusation, prophecy, and aftermath coexist in the same acoustic space.

Most starkly, Apollo's defence of Orestes in *The Eumenides* – one of the most explicitly misogynist passages in Greek tragedy – reappears almost verbatim: 'The woman you call the mother of the child is not the parent, just a nurse to the seed'. In Aeschylus, this biological argument enables Orestes' acquittal and underwrites the founding of Western juridical reason. In Malani's work, it is stripped of ritual framing and civic reassurance and exposed as naked ideological violence: law founded on the erasure of the mother, the absolution of the son who kills her, and the neutralisation of embodied female rage.

The soundtrack thus makes audible what the *Oresteia* historically performs: the transformation of the Furies, figures of bodily memory, vengeance, and female excess, into the Eumenides, benign protectors of the city. Malani refuses this conversion. Where Aeschylus turns the Furies into the Eumenides as protectors, Malani lets them fade into melancholy – humming, unresolved, unappeased. What remains is not harmony but resonance, not law but echo.

Read as a whole, the soundtrack of *Of Woman Born* operates as a fractured choral field: a polyphony of interrogation, lament, prophecy, quotation, and acoustic residue. Malani is not re-staging Greek tragedy; she is placing it under sustained pressure, testing its claims to justice, reason, and resolution against the lived persistence of violence – especially as borne by women.

Aeschylus' trilogy is structured around a historical promise, namely that cycles of blood vengeance can be transformed into civic order. The *Oresteia* moves from the intimate brutality of familial murder to the founding of law, from scream to verdict, from the Erinyes to the Eumenides. Malani's soundtrack inhabits the same terrain – war, testimony, guilt, judgment – but refuses the teleological arc. Instead, it insists on duration without redemption, on voices that continue to sound after meaning has supposedly been stabilised.

<sup>6</sup> With assistance from Stuart DaCosta.

This refusal is established immediately in the opening interrogation. A woman is questioned repeatedly – about her name, age, origin, allegiance, and survival – and responds almost exclusively: ‘I don’t know’. In Aeschylus, identity is never uncertain. Every figure is positioned within a legible moral and genealogical order: mother or son, citizen or enemy, guilty or avenger. Even Cassandra, the paradigmatic disbelieved woman, knows exactly who she is and what will happen to her. Her tragedy lies not in uncertainty but in the refusal of others to act on her certainty.

Malani’s woman occupies a different historical condition. Her ‘I don’t know’ is not ignorance but resistance to forced categorisation. In war, identity is demanded violently: ‘Whose side are you on?’ Yet the only stable answer she can give arrives outside politics and law: ‘Are those your children?’, ‘Yes’. Motherhood here is not the ideological abstraction it becomes in Apollo’s courtroom argument; it is simply relation, vulnerability, and exposure. Malani stages the subject before the law can recognise her, or after it has failed to do so.

The long choral lament that follows – men sent to battle returning as ashes in urns – echoes the choral passages of *Agamemnon*, where war already appears as irreparable loss rather than heroic achievement. Yet Malani alters the temporal logic. In the *Oresteia*, choral grief prepares the ground for judgement; mourning is folded into process. In *Of Woman Born*, grief expands, repeats, and stalls. Long stretches without words, filled only with music and echo, suspend the listener in time rather than advancing them toward resolution. Sound replaces narrative progression. Memory does not lead forward; it circulates.

## The Cassandra condition

It is within this circulation that Cassandra emerges – not first as a character, but as a condition. Lines such as ‘Rumours voiced by women come to nothing’ and ‘There is no sickness worse for me than words that to be kind must lie’ articulate her position with precision. When Malani inserts the question, ‘Is that you, Cassandra?’, it functions



Cassandra  
*Of Woman Born*, 2026  
 Installation view Venice



less as identification than as transhistorical recognition. Cassandra becomes the figure of truth spoken without protection, of testimony that is structurally inadmissible.

Malani extends Cassandra's dilemma into the realm of representation itself: 'She looked just like a painting dying to speak'. Cassandra becomes an image trapped in visibility without audibility – a condition that resonates with Malani's shadow plays and projections, where women appear as silhouettes, fragments, and rotating figures: present, luminous, and generally denied agency. Aeschylus gives Cassandra a monumental speech; Malani shows what happens after centuries of such speech have failed to intervene.

The closing movement of the soundtrack abandons tragic destiny altogether. With the citation of T.S. Eliot, 'This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper', the cosmology of fate gives way to entropy, exhaustion, and repetition. When 'Is that you, Cassandra?' returns at the end, it confirms that nothing has been resolved. The witness remains. The voice persists. History does not conclude.

In this sense, *Of Woman Born* can be understood as a counter to the Eumenides. It accepts Aeschylus' diagnosis of violence but rejects his cure. Where the Oresteia imagines justice as the successful integration of rage into law, Malani insists on what that integration costs: the silencing of women, the naturalisation of power, the conversion of pain into precedent. She offers no alternative system – only something more difficult and more necessary: sustained attention to what cannot be resolved.

The final gesture – melancholy humming, neither speech nor silence – is not consolation. It is an ethical refusal to forget. In this, Malani remains closest to Cassandra herself: not the prophet who is finally believed, but the one who continues to speak after belief has ceased to matter.

## Child-code language

The agency that does, however, persist in Malani's oeuvre is paradoxically that of the child, who is *of woman born*.

The dominant visual language of Nalini Malani's animation chambers, including her new work *Of Woman Born*, is indeed deceptively childlike. Figures are drawn with simple outlines; bodies are turned into mechanical puppets reminiscent of early twentieth-century cut-out collages; gestures are exaggerated; movement is looped, mechanical, cartoonish. This is not a stylistic regression into innocence but a deliberate positioning of the work inside the psychic infrastructure of the digital age. Malani constructs her animations using an iPad programme designed for children aged 12+, Animation Creator HD. The work therefore emerges not from the heroic modernist studio but from a technological environment shaped by games, screens, and casual visual manipulation. Similarly, in making the soundtrack, she used GarageBand and then transferred the composition, with the assistance of Stuart DaCosta, with advanced music software.

This child-coded language functions as a diagnosis. It reflects the condition of the contemporary subject, whose relationship to reality is increasingly mediated through

interfaces that flatten affect, fragment time, and dissolve accountability. In this environment, violence is no longer encountered directly but as something seen, replayed, scrolled, and consumed. Killing resembles gaming; war resembles a screen; trauma becomes content. The digital subject is thus infantilised: emotionally raw, constantly stimulated, reactive rather than reflective, and capable of both vulnerability and sudden cruelty.

Malani's animation chambers become immersive theatres of this condition. The viewer is surrounded by images that feel improvised, unstable, and playful, yet what they depict is atrocity, rape, abandonment, execution, and spectral haunting. The disjunction is essential. The childlike surface does not soften the horror; it reveals how easily horror is absorbed into contemporary visual culture. What should be unbearable is rendered drawable, animatable, and loopable. The very gestures of play become carriers of trauma.

It is here that Malani's choice to incorporate Goya and Aeschylus becomes precise, rather than merely referential. Goya's *Disasters of War* series records a moment in early nineteenth-century Europe when violence first became modern: when bodies were no longer heroic but disposable, when rape and mutilation became structural weapons rather than exceptional crimes. Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, meanwhile, is the founding drama of Western law, a legal order built on the erasure of the mother and the silencing of female memory. In *Of Woman Born*, these two archives of violence are passed through a digital child's hand. The ghosts of Cassandra, Clytemnestra, and the Furies speak through figures that look as though they have been drawn in a school notebook or on a tablet screen.

What emerges is a devastating insight: patriarchy and war no longer require mature, ideologically hardened subjects. They now operate through infantilised ones. Drones, algorithms, automated weapons, and remote surveillance are handled with the same gestures as toys. The contemporary subject can be both a victim and a perpetrator, both fragile and aggressive, without ever fully inhabiting either role. Responsibility slips. Guilt dissolves. Violence circulates as image and action without depth.

Malani's animation chambers thus stage not only historical trauma but its technological afterlife. They show how ancient structures of domination – the sacrifice of women, the legitimisation of violence, the rewriting of guilt – have found a new medium in digital play. *Of Woman Born* becomes a haunted nursery of Western civilisation, where law, war, and memory repeat themselves in loops, and where the child, far from being innocent, is revealed as both the most vulnerable and a disruptive and revolutionary figure of our time.

## Childhood play

Children's play as a safe space where traumatic content can be elaborated lies at the heart of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's theories, and she applies this insight to therapy sessions where traumatised children could repeat and thus express the violence to which they had been subjected through childhood 'make believe' and oblique re-enactments.<sup>7</sup> For Klein, play is the child's primary language for expressing traumatic experience, insofar as it is symbolically enacted through play. It reveals primitive

<sup>7</sup> Melanie Klein, *The Psycho-Analysis of Children*, trans. by Alix Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1932).



8 Hannah Segal, 'A Psycho-Analytical Approach to Aesthetics', *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 33 (1952), pp. 196–207.

9 'Ring-a-ring o' roses, A pocket full of posies, A-tishoo! A-tishoo! We all fall down!'

10 D. W. Winnicott's first mention of this term was in his lecture given at the British Psychoanalytical Society in London on May 30, 1951 (published in 1953 as 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena: A Study of the First Not-Me Possession', *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 34, pp. 89–97). He develops this further in *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971).

anxieties including fear, guilt, fragmentation, and this symbolic plane forms the basis for a psychoanalytic aesthetics, such as that developed by Kleinian theorist Hannah Segal in later years.<sup>8</sup> For Segal, who situates aesthetic response primarily in the depressive position, the subject undergoes aesthetic experience when able to tolerate ambivalence and a sense of loss and separation from the world, such that art becomes a form of symbolic reparation for the damaged object of one's love (the maternal symbiosis), acknowledging the absence of the object. It is profoundly empathetic insofar as it reactivates early experiences of love and loss.

Childhood play has long functioned as an elaboration of horror, a way of containing violence through rhythm, repetition, and form. Games such as 'Ring-a-ring o' roses' – retrospectively, in the twentieth century, linked to the plague of the seventeenth century – circle around catastrophe through song, movement, and collective falling, transforming historical trauma into ritualised play.<sup>9</sup> Both Melanie Klein's use of play in child analysis and Donald Winnicott's theory of the transitional object help to illuminate what is at stake in the immersive environments Nalini Malani creates.<sup>10</sup> For Klein, the traumatised child may repeat violence compulsively, yet through play this repetition becomes performative rather than purely symptomatic: ritualised, distanced, and therefore potentially bearable. This echoes Sigmund Freud's observations on trauma as repetition and silence – the unspeakability that marked soldiers returning from the First World War – while also suggesting how play allows what cannot be spoken to be enacted, again and again, until it becomes thinkable. Winnicott extends this logic by locating play in an intermediate zone between inner psychic reality and the external world, a space structured by illusion and by objects that are neither fully internal nor external. The transitional object – a blanket, a doll, a thumb – marks the child's passage from omnipotent fusion to separateness, surviving destruction and thereby becoming usable. In Malani's work, circular forms, repeated figures, and immersive spatial loops operate analogously: they function as transitional devices that allow violence to be held at a distance, relocated into the realm of make-believe, storytelling, and myth, where it can be endured without being denied. This logic of repetition also resonates with Roger Caillois' category of *ilinx* – play that seeks vertigo, disorientation, and the temporary loss of equilibrium – suggesting that Malani's

*The Landscape of my Death*  
iPad animation, still  
*Of Woman Born*, 2026



environments do not resolve trauma but instead suspend the viewer within it, in a space where instability itself becomes the condition of perception. In this sense, art and play converge: not as escape, but as a mode of survival and rebellion.<sup>11</sup>

## Spatialising experience

The animation chamber *Of Woman Born* raises, from the outset, two interlinked questions: how to spatialise the experience of the internet within a physical, embodied exhibition space; and how to spatialise what occurs in the brain when different senses – sight, sound, touch – are activated simultaneously. Both questions are addressed through a careful ordering and disordering of elements within the chamber.

In Venice, nine video projections unfold across a 42-metre-long, 7.5-metre-wide space, accompanied by a soundtrack composed of music, humming, and speech. Image and sound are deliberately unsynchronised, ensuring that the installation never repeats itself in the same way. One large projection on the back wall fills its entire width and rises to a height of 8 metres. The two long lateral walls and the buttresses of the old Magazzino del Sale each host four projections. On each wall, three projections start from 2 metres above the floor, while a fourth begins at 1 metre above the floor. The scale of the imagery thus increases toward the back – not to heighten perspectival depth, but to contradict it. The back wall appears to advance toward the viewer, foreshortening the space and intensifying a sense of proximity, intimacy, and encroachment: the way digital space presses relentlessly upon consciousness. ‘It is the reverse of perspectival space’, Malani states, ‘it can be perceived as a foreshortened space. In terms of the architecture of the Magazzino, the back wall is the first thing you see on entering. The buttresses of the architecture conceal the videos on the right and left walls. These are revealed as you walk the length of the space until the end’.<sup>12</sup>

Sentences, sometimes quotations, appear intermittently as animated script on the walls, as if a hidden, omniscient writer were present in the space, writing in real, linear time while visitors watch. Simultaneously, words are spoken in the soundtrack, interspersed with passages of music alone or humming. Visitors’ brains enter a state of multisensory language processing in which neural systems negotiate meaning across different registers: visual words activate the visual word form area of the cortex, while spoken words of the soundtrack activate the auditory cortex. These processes unfold in parallel and are sometimes bound together, sometimes forced into competition. The resulting experience is disorienting and uncanny, capable of holding contradiction and uncertainty.

Fragmentation becomes a structuring principle, heightening awareness of language itself – as if words were objects, and language were experienced spatially rather than through linear comprehension. The installation moves away from instrumental reason toward an affective and emotional mode of engagement, at times haunting, at times overwhelming, within an immersive environment.

The central and largest work occupies the entire back wall of the chamber and functions as the gravitational core of the installation. Running for 4:31 minutes and rising to 8 metres in height it becomes a field in which words drawn from the Oresteia accumulate: ‘The Furies’, ‘The judgement of Orestes’, ‘Our power stripped’, as inter-

<sup>11</sup> Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. by Meyer Barash (Urbana: of Illinois Press, 1961); first published in French as *Les jeux et les hommes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958).

<sup>12</sup> In conversation with the author, 13 Jan. 2026.



twined bodies compress into a single mass. A Goya etching of violence against women is enclosed within a red circle, as if in a Petri dish of proliferating evil.

From the gaping mouth of a mutant woman's head emerge the words 'The horror! The horror!', written in red; nearby appear the words 'the smell of fear'. An abstract form, suggestive of a brain or amorphous mass, takes shape. Figures from Francisco de Goya's *Los Caprichos* surface, including *Subir y bajar* (*To Rise and to Fall*): a girl balancing precariously atop a satyr who grips her ankles. The image evokes social instability but also agility, resilience, and survival through balance rather than force.

A uterus appears – perhaps a womb, perhaps a foetus – rendered as a holding environment for life. Fragmented phrases flash: 'It hasn't changed', 'the lust for power never dies', 'who has the right to take away the vision of a child?' The central projection ends with a young girl skipping rope beneath the repeated words: 'I am tired, I am tired...' She skips continuously, falls, stands up again, and resumes. The action persists as an act of endurance rather than progress.

*Skipping Girl*  
iPad animation, still  
*Of Woman Born*, 2026



The repeated phrase, 'I am tired', alludes to Koyo Kouoh, curator of the Venice Biennale, who shortly before her death wrote, 'we are tired'. These words articulate a contemporary *Weltanschauung*: exhaustion as a shared political, psychic, and ethical condition. In this sense, *Of Woman Born*, although Malani began making this animation in 2024, before Kouoh's statement was presented at the Biennale press conference in May 2025, becomes both an elegy and a homage.

Radiating outward from this central image, the projections along the side walls unfold as variations, echoes, and amplifications of its themes.

Beginning on the right-hand wall near the entrance, one animation runs for 3:24 minutes and opens with a woman's head – suggestive of a mutant – emerging from black

ink-wash stains. Her eyes are deep black. Through stop-motion animation, her head darkens, almost carbonised, before the image fades to black. A red fist appears, choking a face. This cuts to a fragment from Goya's *The Disasters of War* series, overlaid with red wash and the words 'Hatred! Is this what we were born for?' Malani isolates the piled bodies from the foreground of the etching, transforming Goya's testimony into a contemporary act of witnessing.

Opposite this animation, another unfolds over 2:44 minutes on the left-hand brick wall and begins with a large mutant head surrounded by moon-like dots. A prone red male figure suggests both blood and life. Text appears: 'Pity the nation whose leaders drink the blood of the citizens'. Spoken and written language overlap: 'Nothing has changed', 'The body is a reservoir of pain'. Figures fall, bodies are tended, and the question 'Who will ask the women?' appears.

Just beyond a buttress on the right, another animation lasts 3:58 minutes and introduces crude, childlike figures against a China-blue background. Buildings explode beneath a child's touch. A geometric puppet of authority declares, 'I will be judge and jury and condemn you to death'. Text links power, religion, and erotic ecstasy. Rubble fills the screen; children turn debris into play as drones circle overhead. The line 'and then the jeeps and the tanks followed' closes the sequence.

Opposite, on the left-hand wall, an animation runs for 3:13 minutes, in which white dots form a face; red sketch-like figures, perhaps Erinyes, appear alongside Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*. Phrases surface: 'I am the angel of despair', 'My song, the scream of the world'. Gestures, fists, collapsing figures, and the grotesque presence of Ubu Roi create an unstable field of power and collapse.

Midway down along the right-hand wall, an animation lasting 3:30 minutes centres on a girl who falls and rises again. Women's faces appear; red circles swirl like Furies. A girl protests, 'You can't take my home away', pushing aside a uniformed man. Goya's image of a woman resisting attack appears. The screaming head returns.

Opposite this, an animation running for 4:09 minutes begins with a head morphing into an animal; colonial maps of the Middle East appear; soldiers shoot and bayonet a girl; the map becomes a globe. Text reads: 'No one leaves home unless home won't let you stay'. A girl with crutches walks away into the distance. Words inspired by the Chorus in *The Libation Bearers* appear: 'And life beats on, and we nurse our lives with tears...'

The final animation on the right-hand wall lasts 2:56 minutes. Graffiti-like figures composed of map fragments ask: 'Where or when will humour return?' Children declare: 'Adults are not grown up', 'Adults can't take care of us'. Verses from T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men* (1925) appear. The mutant head becomes hollow. The final stanza, 'This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper', is heard in the soundtrack.

To the left, another animation runs for 3:16 minutes and condenses the chamber's visual and affective intensity. Mutant heads appear – human, animal, plant, abstract. Circular text reads: 'The drones appeared above me and turn my body into the landscape of my death'. Images from elsewhere in the installation intrude and overlap:



*And Humour is Gone*  
iPad animation, still  
*Of Woman Born*, 2026



huddled figures, a weeping mother, flashing red and grey heads. Abrasive editing renders the experience of war almost unbearable. Hands cradle the head of a sleeping, or dying, child. The animation ends with the words 'goodbye child'.

Together, the nine projections form a non-linear, pulsing field of images and voices, anchored by the skipping girl on the back wall. She does not promise redemption. She persists.

**13** In one of her first Instagram posts on 27 May 2018, Malani uploaded a work from *My Notebook Series*, which includes a short scene titled *Girl with Skipping Rope*; in it, a girl launches the rope as a weapon, wrestles with, and ultimately defeats a man who approaches her. Since then, she has posted many short animations, like graffiti on the walls of a city. In 2020, these animations made for Instagram also populated her first physical, immersive animation chamber, *Can You Hear Me?*, consisting of short, rapidly made images. In *Can You Hear Me?*, the *Skipping Girl* appears, this time created using her iPad. Here, Malani adds: 'She was blinded by pellets', as if the bodily movement of skipping could itself dodge bullets. She subsequently posted animations from *Of Woman Born* on Instagram.

**14** The technique is reminiscent of William Kentridge's early *Drawings for Projection*.

## The Skipping Girl

The colour red appears forcibly in *Of Woman Born* and in the short animations that Nalini Malani has been creating on her iPad since late 2017, and which she has posted on her Instagram account since May 2018.<sup>13</sup> She experimented with the medium throughout 2018, learning how to draw and write with her fingers directly on the screen, how to animate, and how to add sound. These childlike, rough-hewn, hand-drawn moving images, made with her fingers directly on a screen using a children's app, form the basis of Malani's animation chambers, which she has been developing since 2020 (*Can You Hear Me?* Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2020; *My Reality Is Different*, National Gallery, London, 2023). The new work presented in Venice in 2026 constitutes the most recent iteration of this ongoing series.

The animation chambers developed after her video/shadow plays, in which images were produced by projecting videos or light onto rotating reverse-painted Mylar cylinders, creating shadows and overlapping, changing imagery on the walls around the viewers. They began with her thinking about the internet, and with the creation of a short analogue animation, *Skipping Girl*, in 2011 for the dOCUMENTA (13) website. The stop-motion drawing technique used – an early way of animating to give the sense of movement at 24 frames per second – records the erased and redrawn loops of the rope above the head of the little girl, and beneath her feet, as she jumps over and over again to avoid being caught.<sup>14</sup>

Her dexterity, her ability to move constantly and to coordinate her movements, keeps her free from being controlled and from all coercion. As long as she keeps moving, she controls her space. This projection onto the figure of a playing child, as a figure of freedom, resonates both with Malani's feminist perspectives and with the language of her art: theatre, storytelling, video, rotating cylinders producing liquid, shape-shifting forms – never still or tangible, always hovering in a space of metamorphosis. Content, intent, and technique are perfectly correlated, yet camouflaged behind the figure of a skipping girl, apparently always in the same space, yet never still for long enough to be captured.

Furthermore, if one slows down the animation to fewer than 24 frames per second, one sees that the little girl is in fact plural, made up of many different little girls, wearing different clothes and having different hairstyles. It is the speed of the filmic illusion that allows different people to hide within one character, safely concealed in the moving frames and only perceived subliminally by the viewer.

A child skipping rope, Mylar cylinders rotating to produce ever-changing images on the walls around in the shadow plays, revolving, rotating – all these forms of play, all these techniques, coalesce into a world of emancipation and refuge, that Malani's works imply subversively.

## Cassandra in Venice

Venice is not only a city but also a juridical and economic invention. The Venetian maritime empire began to take shape around the ninth century and consolidated its power between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, when it emerged as one of the dominant trading forces of the Mediterranean. Its power rested not only on its naval reach, but also on an exceptionally precise legal and contractual system. Carefully drafted agreements produced trust, enforceability, and predictability, allowing commerce to operate across vast distances and between strangers.

At the centre of this economy was salt – essential for food preservation, bodily health, and survival. Human bodies depend on salt; even our brains require it for synaptic transmission. Since antiquity, salt also functioned as a form of currency. The Latin *salarium*, from which the word 'salary' derives, refers to the payment given to Roman soldiers, often in salt. Venice's control over salt routes thus bound together law, economy, and life itself. In this sense, the Venetian maritime empire stands at the historical threshold of what we now call modern Western capitalism: an economy based on capital investment, accumulation, abstraction, and the juridical regulation of value.

This system is subjected to one of its earliest cultural critiques in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, written around 1596-1598. The play centres on a contract between the moneylender Shylock and the merchant Antonio. When Antonio defaults on his loan, the penalty specified in the bond is brutally literal: a pound of Antonio's flesh. The trial scene hinges on a juridical distinction made entirely through language. Antonio is saved not by overturning the contract, but by rereading it with terrifying precision: blood may not be shed in the taking of flesh. Law is revealed here not as moral truth, but as an interpretive mechanism, one capable of sparing a life through

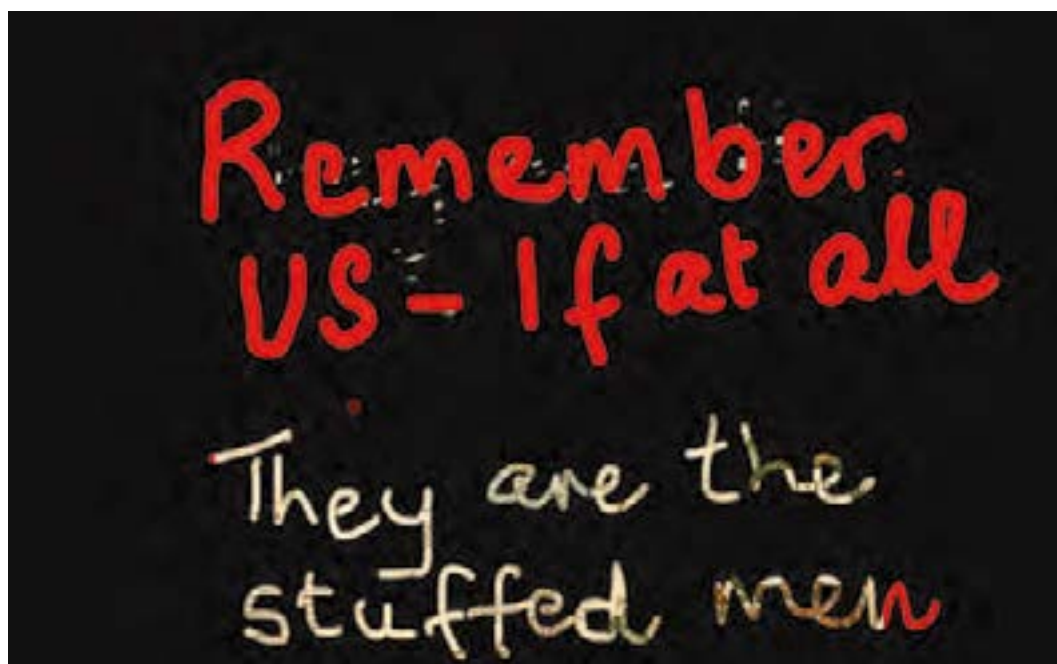


linguistic exactitude, even as it remains entangled with violence, power, and exclusion. Justice emerges as contingent, rhetorical, and ethically unstable.

Malani's *Of Woman Born* enters this lineage of critique but pushes it further back, to the foundations of Western juridical thought itself. She turns to Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, first performed in 458 BCE, a trilogy that narrates the transition from archaic cycles of vengeance to institutionalised law. In *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra murders her husband in revenge for his sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia. In *The Libation Bearers*, their son Orestes kills Clytemnestra to avenge his father. This matricide summons the Erinyes – ancient female deities of rage, blood, and retribution – who pursue Orestes relentlessly. In *The Eumenides*, Athena intervenes by founding a court of law. Orestes is acquitted, and the Erinyes are pacified and renamed the Eumenides, the Kindly Ones, charged with safeguarding civic order. This transformation is foundational for Western law. But it comes at a cost. The murder of a woman by her son is rendered excusable, even necessary, while the murder of a husband by a wife is framed as monstrous. Patriarchy is thus installed at the heart of justice. Female rage – embodied by the Erinyes – is not abolished but neutralised, domesticated, and reclassified. Law is born through the disciplining of women's anger and the conversion of violence into order.

*Of Woman Born* confronts this inheritance directly. Drawing on her own texts as well as those of Hannah Arendt and other feminist rereadings and translations of the *Oresteia*, Malani skews the very ground on which patriarchy and law stand. At the same time, her textual field extends beyond feminist discourse alone. She folds in voices from a wider modernist and colonial archive, including T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men* – with its vision of a world ending not through catastrophe but through exhaustion – and Joseph Conrad's final words in *Heart of Darkness*, 'The horror! The horror!' These fragments function not as citations of authority, but as signals of ethical collapse: moments where language confronts the limits of meaning in the face of violence, imperialism, and historical devastation.

*Shrouds for the Babies*  
iPad animation, still  
*Of Woman Born*, 2026



This concern with empathy is made explicit through a sentence widely attributed to Hannah Arendt, which Nalini Malani handwrites directly onto her iPad and layers over one of the images in the animation chamber: 'The death of human empathy is one of the earliest and most telling signs of a culture about to fall into barbarism'. The sentence condenses a central thread of Arendt's political thinking: that barbarism and totalitarianism do not begin with violence alone, but with the collapse of the capacity to think from the standpoint of others. For Arendt, the erosion of judgement – understood as the ability to imagine perspectives beyond one's own – produces the conditions in which fanaticism, mass behaviour, and totalitarian domination become possible. By writing the sentence herself, Malani does not treat Arendt as an authority to be cited, but as a voice to be activated. Writing becomes a form of thinking, inscribed onto an image that already carries the weight of historical and contemporary violence. In *Of Woman Born*, empathy is not sentiment or consolation, but a political faculty under threat.

Within the immersive animation chamber, these strands converge. The space unfolds as a long and dark passage. At its far end, deceptively close, a luminous projection draws the viewer forward. On both sides, multiple projections echo one another. Mutant female figures emerge from watery washes of grey, recalling Malani's drawings from the 1990s, made in response to nuclear radiation and mutation, while also evoking spectral presences – Cassandra, Clytemnestra, the Erinyes – or perhaps a contemporary subjectivity fractured by technological saturation and accumulated trauma. Eyes surface, dissolve, and reappear. Bodies refuse coherence.

As one moves through the space, images of war drawn from Goya collide with reflections on the collapse of empathy – a condition that signals the breakdown of judgement, shared reality, and political responsibility. This collapse resonates sharply today, against contemporary political and technological discourses that frame empathy as weakness, inefficiency, or obstruction.



*The Furies*  
iPad animation, still  
*Of Woman Born*, 2026



Crucially, Cassandra is no longer alone. She is no longer the isolated figure condemned to speak without being believed. Instead, another voice calls out, 'Cassandra, are you here?' Through the doubling and overlapping of female voices, *Of Woman Born* reverses the historical condition of not listening. The Erinyes are not transformed into the Eumenides; they remain restless, unresolved, and vocal.

In Venice – a city built on contracts, trade, and law – Malani's work reopens the question of what justice is founded upon, whose voices it silences, and what forms of rage, grief, and empathy must be listened to if another future is to be imagined, without war.



They are the  
~~hollow men~~

They are the  
stuffed men













The Grinding  
SCREAM  
of DEATH



AND THE  
STROKE  
THAT HIS  
THE VEIN.





What  
would  
have  
happened  
if a  
hand,



a leg,  
one step  
a hair  
away?  
So you are  
here?  
I can't stop  
wondering  
at it,



Can't be  
silent  
enough.

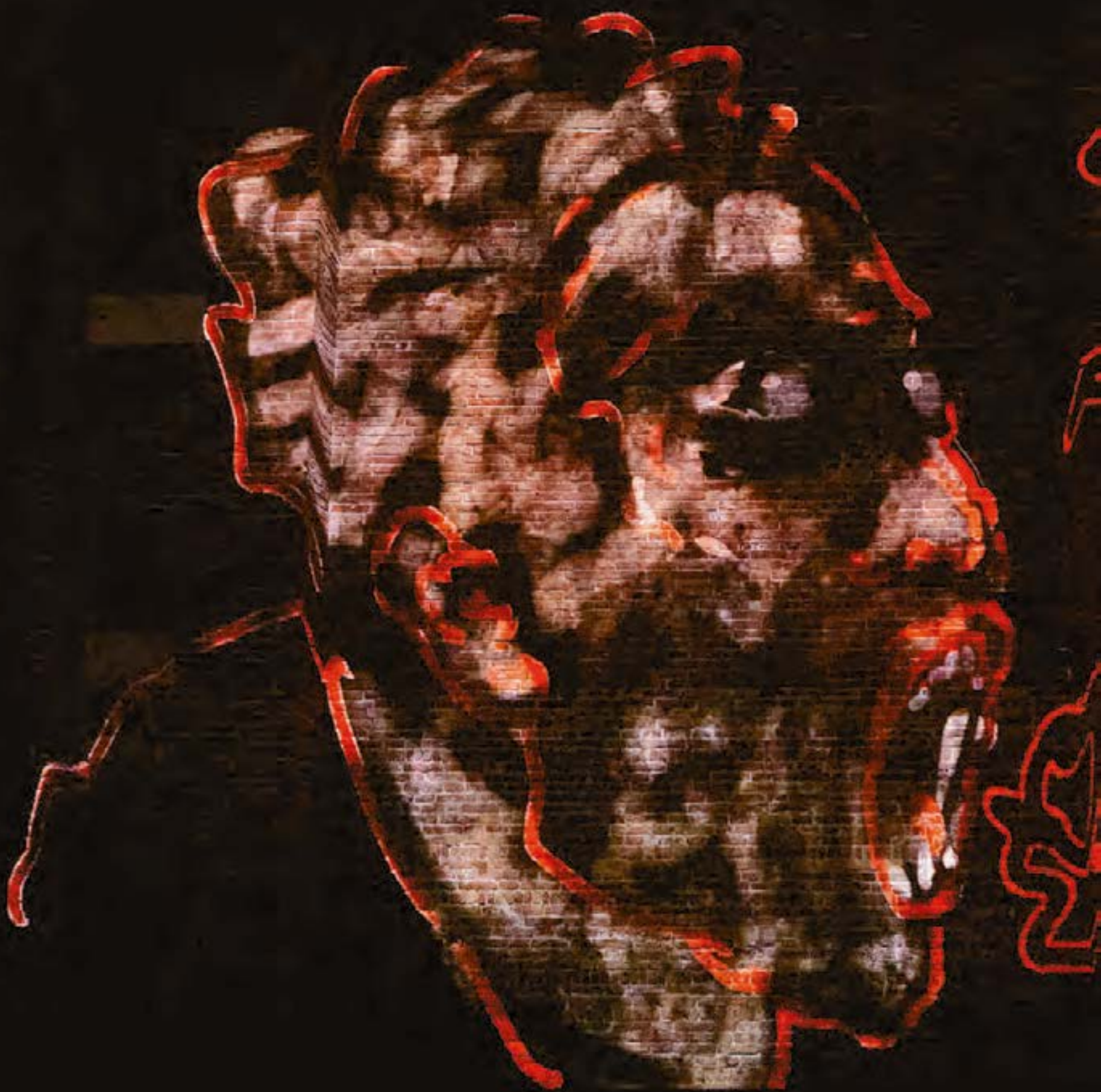


How quickly  
your heart  
is beating  
in me.

LISTEN









An abstract red line drawing on a dark background, featuring a complex, organic, and somewhat chaotic form that resembles a stylized figure or a series of interconnected loops and curves.

ROOBINA KARODE

The Oozing Body:  
Staging  
Superimpositions  
and Temporal  
Disruption

## Disruptions and temporal rupture

Spanning more than five decades, Nalini Malani's artistic practice represents a consistent engagement with what can be observed as a paradoxical experience of trauma. Trauma theorists write about the experience of trauma as the inability to understand it immediately at the moment of its occurrence. The immediacy, paradoxically, arrives belatedly.<sup>1</sup> Malani's artistic consciousness is structured around the persistence of a foundational wound: the Partition of Undivided India, resulting in violent aftermaths of displacement. It is a wound that recurs, refusing to be buried in history, making its brutal presence felt again in explosions of communal violence in 1992, 2002, and 2018. Malani's extended artistic journey, from drawings and paintings to Mylar cylinders and iPad animations, is not a linear development but a *discontinuum* of artistic forms, where each interrupts the apparent naturalness of the previous one, synthesising and reiterating that meaning emerges through rupture, rather than through seamless evolution. Even though her artistic practice culminates in animation chambers, it remains an ensemble of perpetual fracture, accumulating historical wreckage along with diverse artistic forms and expressions.

As a child, attentive to stories of a divided and despoiled land, Malani grew up with the awareness that the mourning of Partition overshadowed the celebration of the nation's Independence. Visiting refugee camps with her mother in Calcutta, where the family arrived from Karachi just before the mayhem, her young eyes witnessed the exodus, alongside complex, indecipherable emotions, and she grew up seeking ways to communicate these disquieting experiences. At the same time, as a child of three, she became the youngest member of the cine club at Dharmatala, where she saw films featuring Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, among others, as early as the 1950s, mesmerised by the moving image.<sup>2</sup>

In her Kyoto Prize Commemorative Lecture of 2024, Malani foregrounded another important moment in the development of her artistic consciousness when, as a schoolgirl in Bombay in 1956, she was introduced to both, systems of nature and systems of the body as part of her botany/biology lessons, and was taught to devote her attention to the dissected bodies of animals, plants, and small insects. Hence, drawing became her instrument of observation, but even more importantly, a means of communication. It empowered her to render external reality on paper, but also evolved into an intimate way of ordering an inner reality: its fears, anxieties, and uncertainties, which constitute the lived experience of those who do not hold power.<sup>3</sup> This double binding of drawing, which maps both external realities and internal experiences, would consistently reappear across the five decades of Malani's arduous artistic experimentation. From pencil to paintbrush, from brush to finger, from film to Mylar, from canvas to iPad screen, her drawing has constantly evolved across diverse media. Yet it has not abandoned its fundamental fidelity to the hand as the primary tool through which consciousness confronts the world.

Malani's formative years exposed her to diverse cultures, contradictory realities, disparate memories, and prevalent forms of discrimination, stimulating in her a radical vision and a rebellious spirit as she contemplated the meaning and purpose of art and of her life. The Bhulabhai Desai Memorial Institute facilitated a fertile ground for holistic learning, where Malani was exposed to painting, poetry, music, drama, and filmmaking, all at the same time.<sup>4</sup> These multidisciplinary conversations

<sup>1</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Roobina Karode in conversation with Nalini Malani at her studio, Mumbai, 4 Jan. 2026.

<sup>3</sup> Nalini Malani, 'My Reality is Different', The 2023 Kyoto Prize Commemorative Lecture, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Established in Bombay in 1946, the Bhulabhai Desai Memorial Institute (BDMI) was India's first dedicated multidisciplinary art centre and remains foundational to postcolonial South Asian modernism. It was founded by Madhuri Desai as a memorial to the nationalist leader Bhulabhai Desai. The Institute hosted important artists, including M. F. Husain, V. S. Gaitonde, Nasreen Mohamedi, Nalini Malani, and theatre director Ebrahim Alkazi, nurturing an ethos of creative collaboration where artists paid nominal rent and maintained open studios, radically departing from the isolated studio model.



instilled in Malani an integrated and open-ended approach to art-making, counter to institutional, academic learning that compartmentalised art into specialisations such as painting and sculpture. Her free-spiritedness was infused with an affective charge, with *riyaaz*/rehearsals interspersing rhythms and beats from painting and music. Equally responsive to the energy and cacophony on the streets, she drew her figures through visual recall, not with a line but with the direct stroke of a thick brush. Filling colours into a drawn contour felt too rigid to her, and a breakthrough came when she began to work in watercolours in the *Lohar Chawl* series, in the 1980s. Applying an amorphous blob of paint (mass) and drawing over partial details she shape into a living image, grotesque yet breathing, without definite body contours or an armature of bones. This approach gave her the freedom to float her figures in space. Marking a turning point in her practice, she formed her figures through direct use of finger or brush, plying and staining the surface with pigment for novel reconfigurations, disrupting male-dominated easel-painting conventions. She also found merit in the local Indian painting traditions and shifted to painting while sitting on the floor, using the ground as a base to spread out the paper and freely rotate it for easy access across all areas, enjoying an intimate connection with the medium. Gradually, she began to roll out Mylar sheets on the floor to paint on their transparent surface. Working in reverse allowed Malani to invent her own methodologies.<sup>5</sup>

In 2014, while curating Malani's major retrospective *You Can't Keep Acid in a Paper Bag* at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA), it became even more apparent to me that her highly nuanced layering of content could not possibly have been contained in any one medium.<sup>6</sup> In early oil paintings, where she brings in her observations of the city of Bombay and its congested spaces, its middle-class homes and chawls, her treatment of figures shifts from a reliance on observation to drawing from memory, etching characters with distorted bodies and awkward postures, animating the composition at times by suddenly inserting a girl child into the frozen frame (*Grieved Child*, 1981). Positioned in between the interior and the outside of the room, the girl disrupts the group of seated and reclining figures. In retrospect, I would contend that one can trace Nalini's interest in animation from her stop-motion animation film *Dream Houses*, made at the Vision Exchange Workshop in 1969, but also to her oil paintings of the 1980s, which also incorporated her budding knowledge of filmmaking, using cropping, foreshortening, and illumination to produce dramatic, shadowy effects. By temperament, Malani's art was not oriented towards the creation of a single masterpiece but revealed itself through a series of works, which expanded into a constellation of images – an ensemble of forms, media, and materials – amplifying her interest in scale and optimal spatialisation. Breaking out of the pictorial frame and using the entire gallery space, from floor to ceiling (see *City of Desires* at Gallery Chemould, Bombay), she began to create a multi-sensorial experience, interspersing sound, movement, text, objects, shadow play, and performance for the effective transmission of content. She ambitiously combined architecture and theatre to transform the passive gallery space into an interactive one, engulfing the viewer in her experiential multi-perspectival setting.

<sup>5</sup> The renowned artist Bhupen Khakhar introduced his friend Malani to painting on the reverse.

<sup>6</sup> Roobina Karode, *Nalini Malani: You Can't Keep Acid in Paper Bag 1969-2014* (Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, 2015).

Curatorially, Malani's practice, complex and challenging, offers itself to multiple possibilities, stretching its inter-generational reach. Both prolific and driven, Malani's painted as well as projected works in multiple formats and media spilled over in three chapters for her retrospective at KNMA, unfolding the emotional and intellectual breadth and depth of her practice that has consistently potentialized

art and technology. Equally empowering was her conviction and courage to problematize taboo subjects, female desire, sexuality and bleeding bodies that were considered 'unpalatable' and 'unpaintable'. Critiquing established social order along with the hegemony of patriarchal regimes, Malani, from her generation, pioneered representing the world and her concerns from a feminist perspective, focused on 'giving voice to the voiceless.'



*Transgressions*, 2001

Three-channel video/shadow play, sound

Four reverse painted Mylar cylinders

Installation view KNMA, New Delhi, 2014

The shrill screams in *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain* (2005) and the juvenile rant of the girl child in *Transgressions* (2001) made viewers first and foremost aware of the presence of a female voice as central to the complex narratives embedded in Malani's works. This desire was firmly instilled in her by the silenced voices of women in multiple histories that she has engaged with, time and again. In fact, Malani lends her voice to all her protagonists – Cassandra, Sita and Medea, to name a few –, women who were destined to suffer a similar fate in a world dominated by patriarchal control. The discourse, however, does not remain as a simplistic evocation of feminist issues but is layered with larger planetary concerns about the violent devastation of ecology and environment, of Mother Earth and nature.

If today the animation chamber represents the culmination of Malani's artistic journey, the hand still makes its phenomenal impact. From paper to wall, to canvas, and now to iPad, chronicling the open body to the fingertip's sensuous, raw directness on glass constitutes an important facet of this long artistic journey. Therefore, it is essential to understand the philosophical and formal principles of this culmination that have animated her work from the beginning, such as the method of superimposition, the experience of speed and acceleration, and the involvement of the viewer's body into a surface upon which memory, trauma and resistance inscribe themselves. But Malani does not articulate her practice in the sanitised language of form and composition. She expresses her visual world in the language of bodily distress and terror:



Body fluids, secretions, mucous, ooze, bubble and stain living tissue. These morph into humans that act ambiguously toward each other: loving, hating, and killing each other. Finally, the mass of bones that remain form a pair of bloody hands that seem to almost come together, but instead a bomb pops out from between the palms and explodes. The death ooze bubbles out and is evacuated.<sup>7</sup>

This is a literal expression where the watercolour becomes blood; Mylar's transparent surface transforms into a skin that can be stained, marked and violated. Her artistic practice is fundamentally visceral, not in the sense of being merely emotional, but in the sense of being deeply entrenched in the bodily material, making it extremely difficult to detach it from aesthetic contemplation.

Malani's entire artistic trajectory rests on this viscosity, the insistence that violence, trauma and memory are not abstract, but they lodge themselves, embodied, as stains that will not wash away. From wall drawings where visitors' feet are stained with red oxide powder in the 1990s, through the Mylar paintings where acrylic bleeds into enamel resulting in a porous flow, to the iPad animations where her fingertips trace violence onto glass, Malani's practice enacts a refusal to aestheticise suffering, or to permit the audience to distance themselves from its presence. The hand that draws, the eyes that witness, and the body that moves through her works are all implicated in the violence, insisting that art making and viewing are both forms of embodied engagement with historical trauma.

## The body anatomy: from dissection to animation

Malani's relationship to the body begins with the basic act of observation. As mentioned earlier, her biology classes at school made her dissect and draw, viewing both the inside and outside of insects and flowers simultaneously, and illustrating them by drawing organs with blood and other fluids. It was not just a technical skill that she imbibed, but it also established a philosophical position: the body is neither abstract nor a neutral subject. It is a corporeal entity with historical bearings, known through its vulnerabilities. Most importantly, observation and the subsequent act of drawing become a way of thinking about violence, exposure and the precariousness of embodied existence.

This anatomical consciousness recurs in Malani's later work and evolves into something more unsettling. For instance, her *Mutants* series, which she began in 1996, first emerged as a response to the undisclosed nuclear tests conducted by the United States in the Marshall Islands and also disasters like the Bikini Atoll in the 1950s and the 1984 Bhopal disaster in India. The citation of cataclysms are one facet of this series, yet it also opens up discussions on Malani's complex engagement with the body and figuration. The series showcases infants born without discernible human features, what the artist calls as 'jelly babies,' amorphous lives that existed briefly before perishing. It also visualises human figures with ambiguous genders. These mutants are not mere representations of these tragedies, but also renderings of what happens when history unmakes biological subjects and hence, the body starts distorting from its coherent form, taking on a spectral presence, losing its contours, leaking beyond its outlines and melting down the surface.<sup>8</sup> Deformation, dematerialization and dispersion characterise the mutating body into unrecognis-

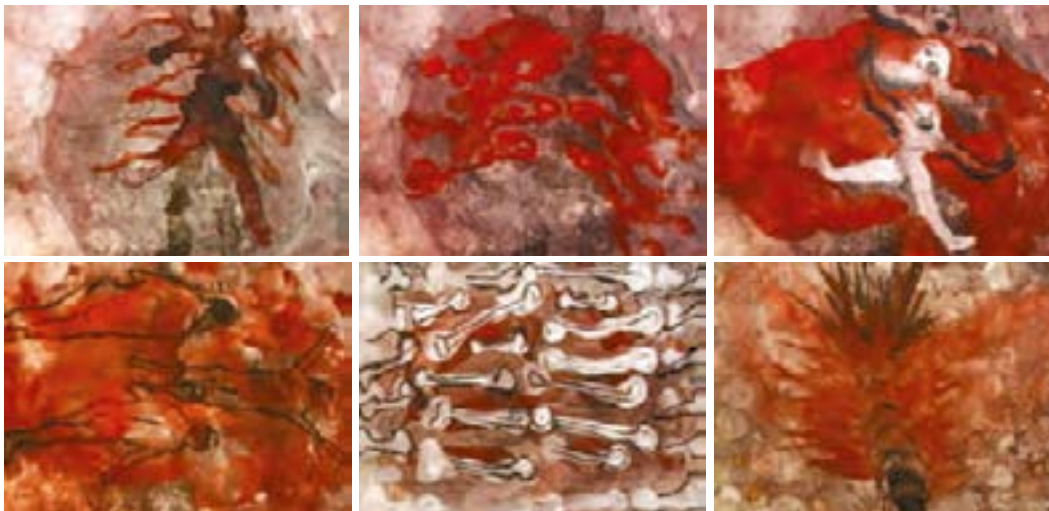
<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.nalinimalani.com/video/stains.htm> from Christine Vial Kayser, 'Nalini Malani, A Global Storyteller', *Studies in Visual Arts and Communications: An International Journal* 2, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>8</sup> Keya I. Patel, *Nalini Malani: Mythology, Memory, and Multiplicity in Contemporary Indian Art*, Plan II Honors thesis, Department of Art and Art History, University of Texas at Austin, 2019.

able, messy images. In Malani's *Stains* (2000), the watercolour animation extends beyond visual representation to become a temporal site of bodily disintegration. Watercolour forms represent blood, bones, internal fluids (lymphs, plasma, etc.) appear and disappear in washes of pigment. Malani's practice foregrounds the role of women in society as nurturers and as absorbers, or one could say, the ability of the female body to perform nourishment even as it absorbs violence.

Here, the stain is not only a visual amplifier, but it is fundamentally a narrative device. The temporal development of the animation from fluids to bones to explosive stages of trauma is a process of accumulation and discharge. The stain is a temporal form, an index of the past that remains subsumed even as new layers are added. This is like the process of itself, where each pigment activates prior layers, causing colours to bleed, stain, smudge and sometimes blotch in ways that are partially controllable but also open to chance. The stain also functions as a figure of the abject: what must be discharged to maintain social order, but which continually comes back at the peripheries. Malani's repeated use of bubbles, ooze, and innards is connected with this. She paints bodies that leak: they do not respect the contours set by the societal imaginations. This mirrors what psychoanalysts characterise trauma as an experience that cannot be fully contained, represented, or mastered through rational parameters. It emerges uninvited and refuses to resolve. Malani's insistence on the unfinished and the messy, rejecting clean contours in favour of traces and marks, retains the evidence of the process. The viewer undergoes the contradictory impulse of both disgust and fascination with the formal beauty. By creating this tension, Malani opens a space where the fear of the other can be reconfigured.

Let us extend the aesthetic logic of stains to Malani's later iPad animations and multi-channel animation chambers. It is generally understood that the digital screen is not an equivalent to the materiality of paper or Mylar. However, Malani reinforces the importance of tactility by drawing with her index finger rather than a stylus. She notes the distinct sensitivity of the fingertip, which she calls a raw and very direct process of drawing, rubbing, scratching and erasing on the glass surface. Here, fingers and hands continue their role: once they stained paper with watercolour and erased charcoal from the wall, now they act as a digital brush. The animations created in this format are a direct response to specific political events, such as the



*Stains*, 2000

Stop motion animation, stills



2018 rape and brutal murder of eight-year-old Asifa Bano in Kashmir, which are aggregated into an animation chamber. In *Can You Hear Me?* at the Whitechapel Gallery (2020), 88 such animations were projected on the yellow brick walls in an immersive environment, while in *My Reality is Different* (2022-23) at the National Gallery, London, 25 animations were collaged with canonical Western paintings. In both cases, the projections were asynchronous, generating infinite combinations of images and texts and refusing a single coherent narrative.

Malani's stain method is important in two ways. First, the animation uses digital equivalents of stains, washes of colour, bleeding edges, drips, and splatters that simulate fluidity and ooze. Despite being produced by fingertips, the lines behave like a watercolour, still building on decades of gestural memory. Second, the disorientation that is produced through pace and acceleration within the environment of the animation chamber. Images flash, vanish, reappear elsewhere; fragments of texts often from Chomsky, Baldwin or Arendt collide and overlap. Malani does not allow the viewer's eyes to settle. There is a sensory overload that mirrors the fragmented and accelerated experience of contemporary media, but it also echoes with the experience of trauma, where time is experienced as discontinuous, and images are insurgent. The chamber becomes the interior of the body, a container filled with moving fluids (light, sound, image) that are prone to sudden eruptions (cuts, jumps, shrieks). This offers an embodied approximation of what it means to live in a world where violence is both routine and spectacular, both intimate and mediated.

Across multiple modalities – wall, Mylar, watercolour, screen – Malani's practice transforms drawing into a cartography of trauma where erasure, stain, and shadow function as analytic tools mapping violence onto bodies, surfaces, and memories. The reverse paintings on Mylar cylinders of the video/shadow plays create a kinaesthetic archive where mythic and contemporary figures emerge continuously, merging their shadows with viewers, suggesting shared implication in violence. The rotating cylinders and their projections situate the viewer as if they are inside a skull or womb. The animation chamber intensifies this logic by rendering the viewer's body itself as a surface upon which light, sound, and accelerated images gather, collapsing linear time and allowing the past to viscerally enter the present.<sup>9</sup> This immersive experience is anchored in a material, gestural drawing practice of staining paper, smudging Mylar, and moving fingertips across glass that refuses to abstract trauma into spectacle. Instead of accumulating images of violence, Malani proposes an innovative methodology for representing postcolonial trauma: one requiring media that can bear stains and erasures, register fragmented memory's instability, and physically implicate viewers in the labour of looking, thereby rendering visible what official histories render invisible.

## The grammar of superimposition and decolonial vision

Malani's superimpositional layering is not a technical device, a mere overlay of one image or one medium over the other, but it is a fundamental epistemological position. It is a decolonial way of organising consciousness and historical knowledge. In a 2013 conversation with Ann McCoy for *The Brooklyn Rail*, Malani has stated this with clarity:

<sup>9</sup> Mia Dora Prvan, *Trauma and Memory in Visuality: The Art of Nalini Malani and the Politics of Memory*, vol. 1, PhD thesis, Faculty of Arts, University of Bonn, 2025.

The form that I use in my video and shadow plays are rotations or revolutions (of the Mylar drums) that don't repeat the superimpositions. The juxtaposition is always new, and it's almost as if you have to keep looking at them. It's not to mesmerise or to hypnotise, but to look afresh.<sup>10</sup>

McCoy also refers to Anekantavada, a Jain philosophical principle, articulating it as a philosophical premise influencing Nalini's layering practice. The principle states that reality can only be grasped through multiple, simultaneous perspectives. Unlike the linear perspective of the Western Renaissance, where the optical system positions the subject as the stable centre through which all meaning radiates, Anekantavada reaffirms that reality is inherently plural, perspectival and fragmented. In her reply, Malani, citing the scientific observations of Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud, and art movements like Cubism and Surrealism, states that her works are multi-perspectival in nature, especially in relation to violence.



*The Tables have Turned, 2008*

Shadow play, sound

Thirty-two reverse painted Mylar cylinders  
Installation view Castello di Rivoli Museo  
d'Arte Contemporanea, 2018

The emphasis on continuous variation against repetition seeks the perpetual innovation of juxtaposition. This pluralistic perspective becomes the ideal grammar for representing the postcolonial experience, where the subject is never singular, fixed, and is always entangled in the multiplicities of historical narratives and temporalities. This lived experience is projected upon our bodies as viewers. In the rotating Mylar cylinders that predated the animation chambers, cylinders are painted with figures and mounted on turntables that rotate at precisely four revolutions per minute, a pace configured in such a way as to prevent the eye from settling on any particular formation. When light projects through the cylinders, casting shadows onto walls, the viewer encounters what Malani calls 'ordered chaos'. The painted figures of saints, demons, soldiers, women, children, etc., do not appear in the same configuration twice. Our shadow merges with the projected images and becomes part of this landscape.<sup>11</sup> This is superimposition as material rupture. The video pro-

<sup>10</sup> 'Nalini Malani with Ann McCoy', *The Brooklyn Rail*, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Skye Arundhati Thomas, 'Understanding in Search of Vanished Blood', Tate, accessed 26 January 2026, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/nalini-malani-14670/understanding-in-search-of-vanished-blood>



jections pass through the reverse paintings on Mylar. They do not simply overlay, but they pass through layers of acrylic, enamel, dust, air, and the viewer's shadows. The projected image arrives at the screen, carrying with it materially everything the light source goes through.<sup>12</sup> The image is layered, not a perfect overlay but an accretion of traces. Each layer is visible and distinct, pressing against the others without blending.

By rejecting a singular perspective, Malani interrogates the institutional demand of comprehensive viewership. Instead, her works claim that the encounter with the work is partial and dependent on the viewer's individual embodied position in space and time. These are not spaces of reconciliation or closure where a single reading is stabilised. The superimposition operates across time, space, and media. In Malani's practice, sound is superimposed upon image, disembodied voices pierce through images, and quotes from various scholars collide with animated figures of the violated female body. Importantly, memory, whether personal, generational, national or collective, is superimposed across contemporary events. The Partition of 1947 was mirrored in the riots of 2002, and the violence in Kashmir in 2018. Greek myths superimpose themselves upon Hindu epics; the figure of Medea merges with the figure of Sita, not through harmonious synthesis, but through the processes of simultaneity, where each figure stains the other, changes it, forces it to speak about the circumstances it was never originally able to address. The visual field becomes a space where binaries collide, and the violence inherent in both traditions, and the mistreatment of women is made visible. Anekantavada is enacted here experientially and aesthetically as a lived experience. With meaning in constant flux, the viewer's body has to keep adjusting its position to the changing visual field. There is a perpetual renewal of attention, and the work refuses the comfort of an immediate political closure.

Malani's superimposition of mythologies is an integral part of the decolonial methodology. She does not develop a symbolic language but instead treats the body itself as a surface on which to superimpose, which is already inscribed by violence. The concept and practice of palimpsest offer an important theoretical value to the process of superimposition. Its origin in the medieval writing surface, where earlier texts persist beneath new inscriptions, leaving traces of prior markings to haunt the surface. In the postcolonial context, the idea of palimpsest has been a useful way of understanding the complexities of culture, when previous cultures are erased and overwritten, but they also remain as traces within present consciousness. When Malani represents Sita, the mythological figure who is abandoned and tested, she is not illustrating a stable narrative. Sita does not remain Sita anymore, she is stained by Medea, by the bodies of contemporary women, by archival violence, by Malani's own gestural marking. Each layer, whether it is mythological, historical, personal, or formal, persists and transforms, refusing synthesis or coherence while remaining materially present.

## Speed, acceleration and disruption: the pace of violence

If we consider superimposition as Malani's prime approach and method, then speed and acceleration constitute her formal strategy to materialise the temporal structure of traumatic experience. In her seminal work on trauma, *Unclaimed Experience*,

<sup>12</sup> 'Nalini Malani with Ann McCoy', *The Brooklyn Rail*, 2013.

Cathy Caruth, a leading theorist in trauma studies, observes that trauma is fundamentally a problem of temporality: trauma is a break in the mind's experience of time,

...that blocks the immediate assimilation of violence into consciousness. For example, the traumatised subject does not experience violence linearly; instead, the violent event returns later, intrusively, fragmenting temporal experience into what Caruth calls 'an impossible history within them.'<sup>13</sup>



*Can You Hear Me?*, 2020  
Nine-channel animation chamber, sound  
Installation view Whitechapel Gallery,  
London, 2020

Malani's most ambitious iteration of the animation chamber, *Can You Hear Me?* at Whitechapel Gallery, materially enacts this temporal rupture with eighty-eight animations, each one with a different duration, projected across nine separate channels, asynchronised, so they don't form any repetitive patterns. Malani's ordered chaos is a visual field whose temporal experience fragments across multiple simultaneous temporalities. Besides being overwhelming, it is configured to disorient and alert the viewer. When we inhabit the animation chamber, the linearity of time collapses, past and present overlap and collide, and our coherent consciousness fragments into competing registers of experience. The asynchronicity of the projections does not allow the viewers to anticipate the next juxtapositions. Retention fails; images vanish before memory can absorb them. The ambiguity of time creates a perceptual field where we embody both past and present simultaneously.

Malani's acceleration is not only focused on the level of viewing, but also on the level of artistic production. Malani's turn to the iPad in 2017, her rapid response to the 2018 Kashmir rape and murder case, and her use of Instagram as a distribution platform constitute an aesthetic urgency that stands in contrast to the slow and meditative procedures of established artistic processes. Using an easy app made for twelve-year-olds that helps her animate directly, she often creates several animations in a single session as a response to an exigent political issue. This acceleration of process is the logical coming together of her practice. The same hand that once spent months executing paintings on paper and Mylar now creates and erases animations in minutes. Portability of her equipment allows her access to making images at any time, and from any location. The exhibiting gallery does not simply

<sup>13</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).



remain a mediative space but becomes a field of perceptual struggle wherein the viewer's body gets drawn to the site of political contestation in the acceleration and disorientation of animation chambers. Malani oscillates between dualities: on the one hand, she makes us dizzy with an accelerated viewing impulse, and on the other, she encourages the viewer to slow down for a sustained, prolonged encounter. The animation chamber foregrounds a form of entrapment, alluring but haunting with its sensorial and temporal overload, testing our ethical capacity to witness violence without mastery or resolution.

## Repetition, exhaustion, and the question *Of Woman Born*

Malani's lingering question resurfaces with emphatic insistence across decades: 'Why woman, from whom we all are born, the one who produces the world and keeps it going, is being silenced, punished, raped, killed, vanished and sent underground? Why is the nurturer subjected to barbaric violence?'<sup>14</sup> This is not a theoretical question, but it is the core political, aesthetic, and ethical fulcrum of Malani's practice. Asking this refuses the comfortable fictions of nationalism, which stages the mother nation as both sacred and expendable. Instead, she reveals the materiality of women's labour – biological, domestic, emotional and creative – under the patriarchal and postcolonial regimes that constantly mask such labour as invisible, shameful, and sacrificial. In *Of Woman Born*, her immersive installation for the 2026 Venice Biennale at the heritage site Magazzini del Sale, Malani transforms this question into a sensory and temporal experience. The site takes on the form of a mysterious cave where haunting spectres emerge from the depths of darkness. This cave is not a space of refuge or protection, but it is a space of compelling witnessing. The viewer is surrounded by the shadows of flickering images, with an electrifying incandescence, appearing, disappearing and reappearing endlessly, stirring curiosity and anticipation in the continuous moment of becoming and unbecoming. Malani is never in search of a perfect image or definitive meaning; in a language of perpetual metamorphosis, she activates interstitial spaces, hovering between echoes and whispers, noise and silence, saturation and depletion, collation and disintegration, amplifying zones of in-betweenness, with her suspended images and soundscapes. The animation chamber stages itself as a space of collective perception and interrogation of gendered violence, historical trauma, and the possibility of artistic witness.

*Of Woman Born* bears with it a layered etymological and mythological weight that demands a close reading. It refers to Adrienne Rich's important work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, which interrogated the false unity between motherhood as an embodied reality and motherhood as a patriarchal apparatus designed to control and oppress women using their reproductive and nurturing abilities.<sup>15</sup> Maternity for Rich is a human and civilisational labour upon which the entire humanity rests, yet made invisible and disposable by patriarchy. Extending this crucial observation, Malani asks how the nurturer, who produces the world and sustains it, has been exploited into systematised violence. Similar to the complex layering of Malani's practice, this exhibition is also influenced by the Greek play *Oresteia*, Aeschylus' foundational tragedy, in which Orestes murders his mother Clytemnestra at Apollo's command to avenge his father Agamemnon's death. Later on, the goddess Athena absolves Orestes from the crime of matricide,

<sup>14</sup> Roobina Karode in conversation with Nalini Malani at her studio, Mumbai, 4 Jan. 2025.

<sup>15</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago Press, 1976).

arguing that the mother is only a nurse, but the father is the true parent. Malani revisits this myth to show us how contemporary law and politics perpetuate its patriarchal foundations.

The etymological context could also be connected to Sanskrit mythology and to the name Janani: the mother goddess, the generative principle and the one who births all existence. Incidentally, Janani is also the name of Sita, who emerges from the furrow, born of the earth itself. The Sanskrit root *jani* means ‘to give birth’, and Janani thus names the feminine principle of generation itself. Yet, this name also conceals a tragic history. Sita, despite being worshipped as the mother of the universe, was also subjected to tests of purity, to abandonment, to the suspicion that her body had been violated and thus that she is polluted. The burden is on her to prove her chastity by stepping into the flame. Sita must bear the weight of the patriarchal nation’s anxieties about sexuality and fidelity. She is forced to disappear into the earth, from where she had emerged. The myth of Janani thus contains within it the entire structure that Malani’s question exposes: the generative mother, the one from whom all existence flows, is rendered invisible, untrustworthy, and ultimately disposable by the very systems she sustains. *Of Woman Born* does not have any direct indexicality to Sita or Janani, but Malani stages a space where the universal question of violated mothers becomes materially visceral and temporally inescapable.



*The Landscape of my Death*  
iPad animation, still  
*Of Woman Born*, 2026

Texts have become an indispensable part of Malani’s works, not to simply caption or label the image, but as dynamic visual matter, blinking with an electrical charge at the threshold where language must be both read and seen. They appear as burning flames, as graffiti, or as scratchy handwriting that jitters and dissolves. Malani has described text in her installations as ‘annotations, through which we see our own situation in a larger perspective,’ foregrounding language as an interpretive machine folded into the image rather than hovering above it as exegesis.<sup>16</sup> In Malani’s animation

<sup>16</sup> ‘Untangling Identity Politics with Karachi-Born Nalini Malani and Huma Bhabha’, *Elephant*, 11 Nov. 2020.



17 Mieke Bal observes that, 'This effect can be of mutual support, supplementation or continuation; but it can also be dialogue, contradiction, temporal or spatial discrepancy, and metaphorical reinforcement'.

Mieke Bal, 'Linea Recta, Linea Perplexa: Moving through Entangled Time with Nalini Malani', in *Nalini Malani. The Rebellion of the Dead. Retrospective 1969-2018*. Part II, exhib. cat., curated by M. Beccaria, Castello di Rivoli, Rivoli, Turin (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2018).

chambers, texts flash, disappear, and reappear with alterations. They are misaligned, cropped, and half-erased, forcing viewers into unrelenting acts of decipherment. Phrases like 'I am exhausted', 'Can you hear me?', and 'Have you not had enough? / Of what? / Of this stink' circulate as an insistent sotto voce through the image-stream, functioning not as commentary but as disciplinary pressure that compels bodily repetition and reveals language itself as an instrument of state control. Her textual practice emerges as counter-speech: fragments from Langston Hughes ('Did you ever try livin' / On two-bits minus two?') operate simultaneously as poem, social condition, and haunting visual sign that creates what Mieke Bal terms a 'side-ways effect' of metonymy, where language and image lean into each other without fully coinciding.<sup>17</sup>

The nine simultaneous projections, the multiplicity of channels, voices, and gestural registers, constitute the formal apparatus of exhaustion itself. The withered walls of the heritage building with a bruised texture of cracks, gaps, and indents enhance a certain grittiness that Malani deliberately cultivates, evoking the sense of graffiti, the inscriptions of those who lack institutional voice or access. In this layered sensory experience, a single image repeats with obsessive intensity: a skipping girl shaped by the informal squiggles drawn by Malani's index finger. It is a deceptively simple image of a child at play, a gesture of innocence and freedom. But Malani forces it into repetition, again and again, until the viewer recognises that repetition for Malani is a trope for drawing sharp attention. The repeated action affirms retention but also exhaustion, on the part of the protagonist, the artist, as well as viewers. The skipping girl becomes an archive of weariness where the exhaustion of childhood is interrupted by violence, the exhaustion of the artist impelled her to animate this scene again and again, and the exhaustion of the viewer is compelled to witness its endless return.

*Skipping Girl*  
iPad animation, still  
*Of Woman Born*, 2026





*Is this what we were born for?*  
iPad animation, still  
*Of Woman Born, 2026*

Exploring bricolage as a possibility through the medium, Malani also resurrects Francisco Goya's *Disasters of War*, a nineteenth-century inventory of brutality and of the state's explicit power for barbarity, alongside these animations. It is not a simple referencing of Goya, but she reworks his imagery by animating the eyes that roll with fear, eyes that shut and open or bulge out peering at her own painted images from the past. The reanimation activates a temporal collapse. Spain's historical disaster becomes India's peril, or of every landscape where violence is enacted against its population. More radically, by animating Goya's eyes, by making them see and bear witness, Malani provides a historical continuity of horror that refuses to be forgotten. Violence is not contained in the past; it circulates and returns, compulsively, exhaustingly, across centuries.

The immense archive of images that Malani generates on her iPad, thousands of drawn images expressing satire and shame, despair and rage, madness and absurdity, compelled by political urgency generated in minutes, seizing a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger, interrupting the despotic erasure of violence. The acceleration of Malani's production is born not from productivity demands but from ethical necessity. Each frame is a response to a world on fire, a gesture of refusal to allow violence to disappear into the archives of the forgotten. This refusal of closure is the key to understanding repetition not as compulsion but as ethics. Here, exhaustion becomes the price of ethical witnessing in an age of perpetual crisis. To refuse to aestheticise, to resist the temptation to transform suffering into beautiful form, requires oneself to be in a state of discomfort, of sensory overload, of the inability to rest.

In her studio, Nalini Malani sits like a monk in a cave, in complete solitude, meditating on her thoughts. A voracious reader and a deep thinker, she is surrounded by her lifelines, her books and her artmaking tools, immersed in drawing her responses on the paper. Her sustained effort and commitment have taken on the dimensions



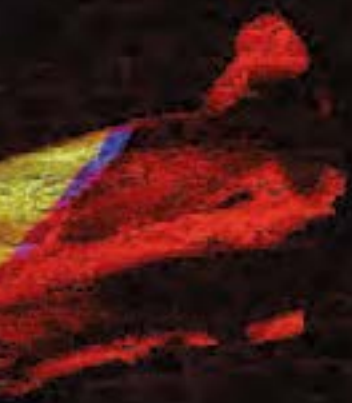
of a lifetime project. Quite persistently, she presents to us the unsettling spectacle of the world caught in its devastation and death, with the hope of its restoration and timely redemption. The dialectic between solitude and urgency, between the monk's cave and the animation chamber, between a quiet, solitary practice of drawing and the sensorial excess of nine channels of simultaneous projection, synthesises into a singular ethical commitment: to make visible what is rendered invisible. It is to ask, repeatedly and at the cost of exhaustion, why the woman from whom we are born is subjected to brutal acts of violence and death.

Malani compels us to understand that *Of Woman Born* is not a sentimental invocation, but it is a political demand, a demand that we recognise *Janani*, the generative mother. She is not just a figure to be worshipped in abstract but as the one whose labour, suffering, resistance and premonition must be foregrounded, centred, and honoured. Within *In Minor Keys*, Koyo Kouoh's curatorial vision of attunement to subtle frequencies and quiet, signals Malani's repetition, exhaustion, and refusal of closure finally find their proper frame. To listen to women, to hear the voices of the silenced, to witness the violence that patriarchy enacts against the nurturer, requires precisely this willingness to remain in exhaustion. It is to refuse premature catharsis, and to sit with the world's devastation until, perhaps, the possibility of redemption becomes legible.

The author acknowledges Premjish Achari for his critical research inputs which have deepened the scholarly dimensions of the essay.

facco

twis  
a grim



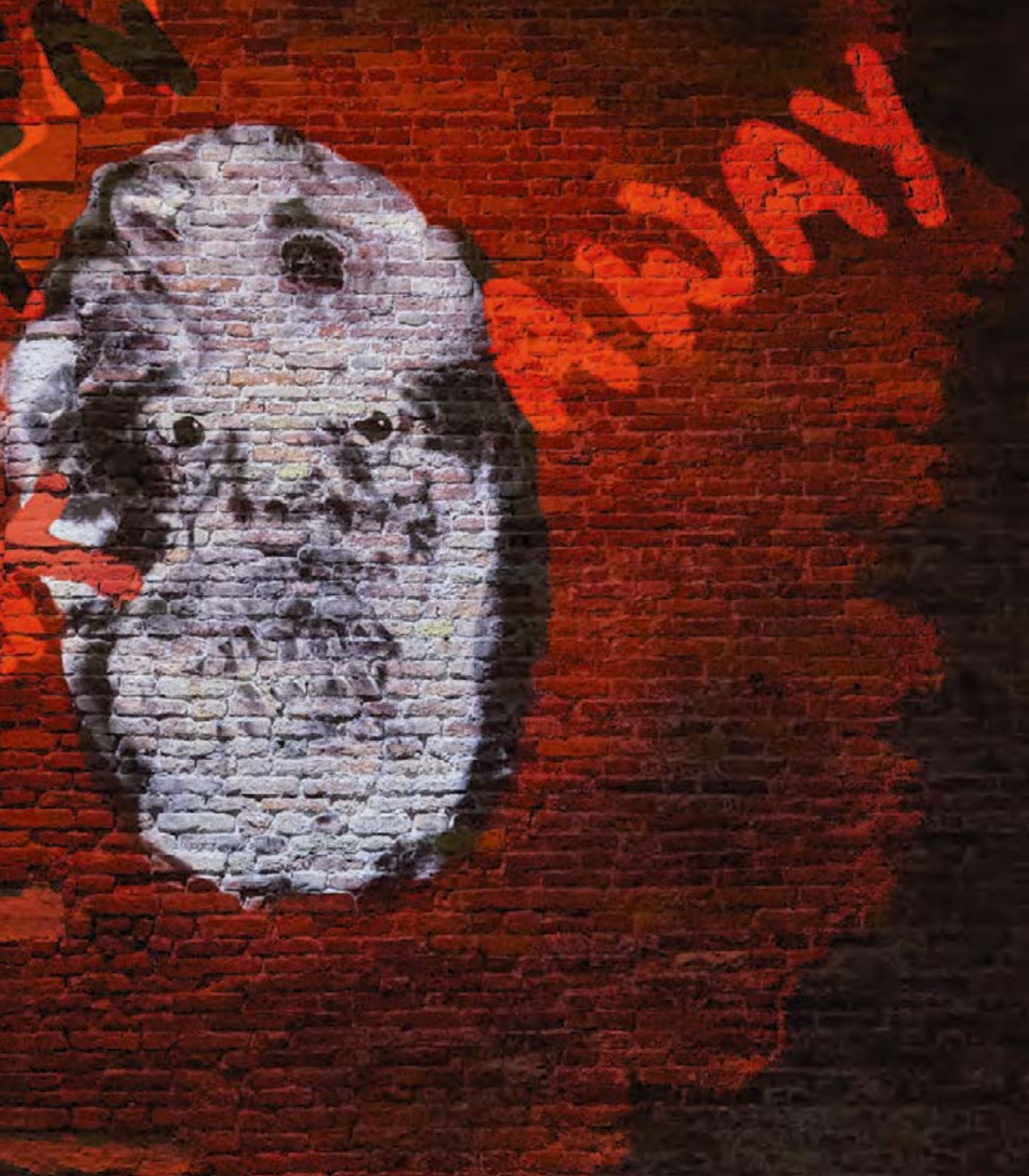
















me  
for  
me



last  
poor  
verdis





in the eyes of









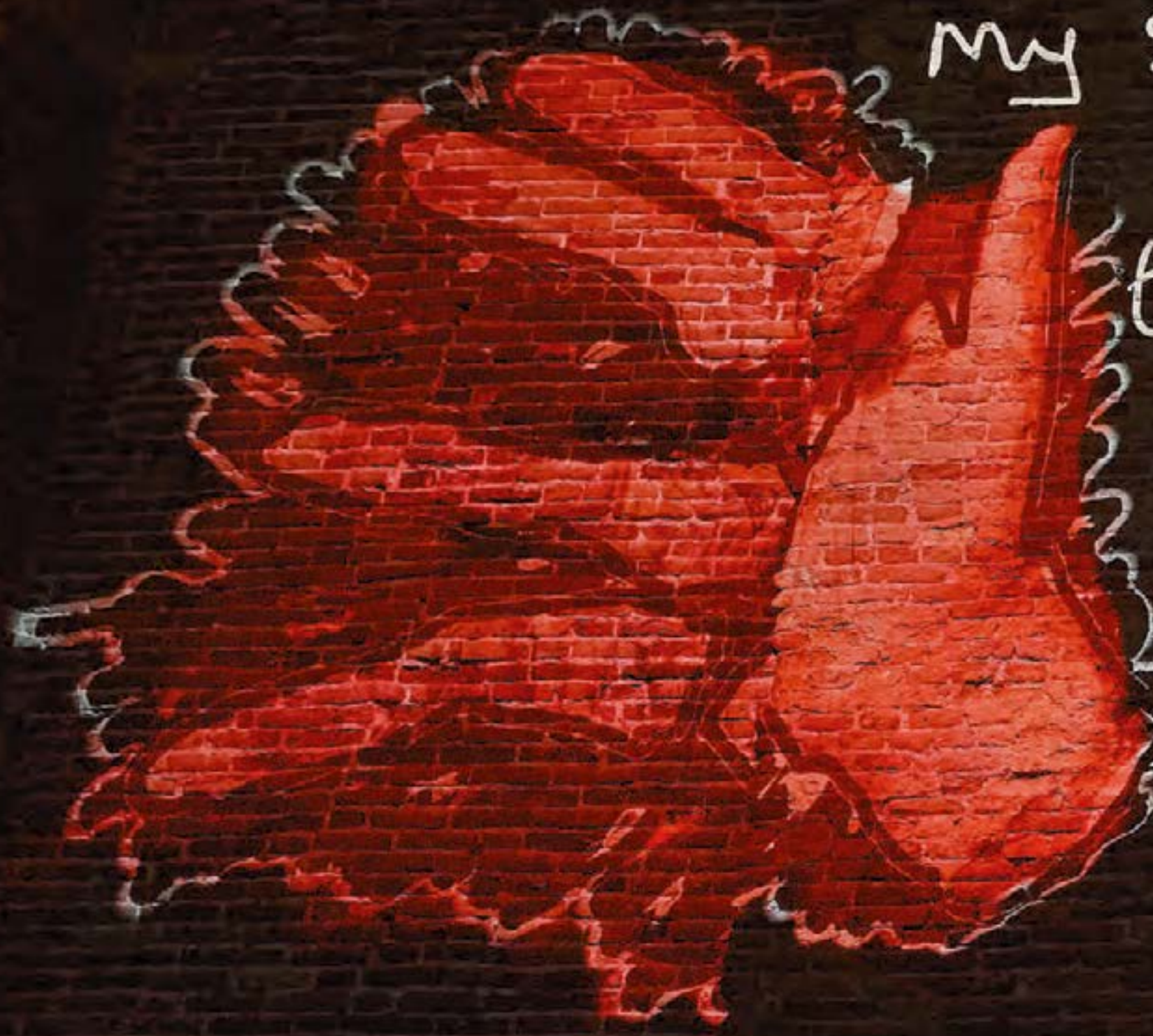




2  
To the Power







my son

th

s

1

5



may  
S  
E  
TEAM  
of  
ne  
DRLD





"The sheep of  
produced M

Goya.



6 robots  
monsters"

























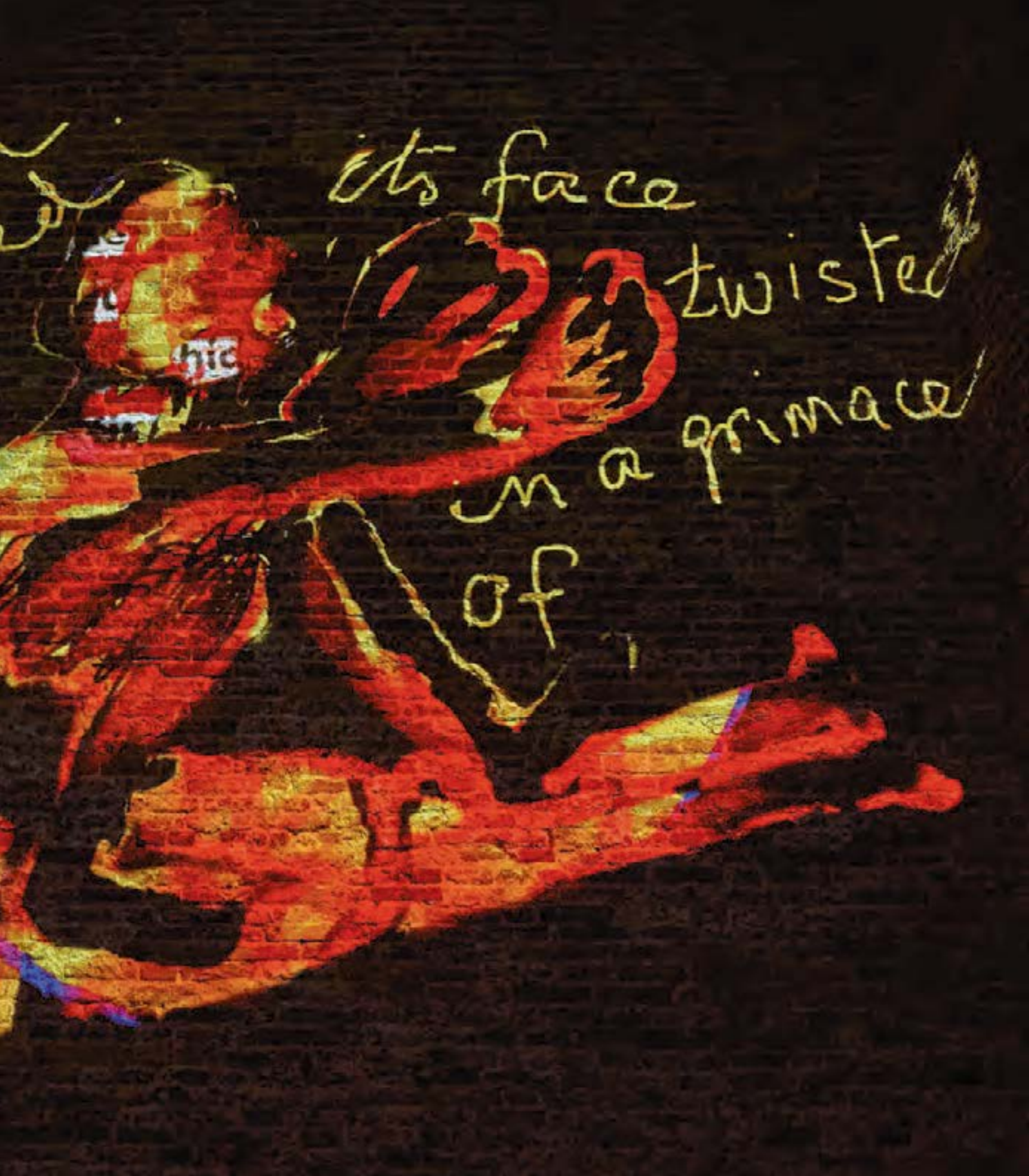






Halsey  
Hakno





its face

twisted

in a grimace

of







I will  
try  
the  
whole  
case













can't  
can  
can  
can

the  
comp  
the  
most  
a  
to



death of human  
athy is one of  
earliest and  
telling signs  
culture about  
into barbaric











why will ask  
women?







NALINI MALANI

# Of Woman Born: The Forgotten Gender



## Thinking through the body

... there are ways of thinking that we don't know about. Nothing could be more important or precious than that knowledge, however unborn. The sense of urgency, the spiritual restlessness it engenders, cannot be appeased...

Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*

Adrienne Rich opens her afterword in *Of Woman Born* (1976), which inspired the title of this iPad animation chamber, with this quotation from Susan Sontag.<sup>1</sup> Rich then explains her choice of Sontag's words:

... many women are even now thinking in ways which traditional intellection denies, decries, or is unable to grasp. Thinking is an active, fluid, expanding process: intellection, 'knowing' are recapitulations of past processes. In arguing that we have by no means yet explored or understood our biological grounding, the miracle and paradox of the female body and its spiritual and political meanings, I am really asking whether women cannot begin, at last, to think through the body, to connect what has been cruelly disorganised – our great mental capacities, hardly used; our highly developed tactile sense; our genius for close observation; our complicated, pain-enduring, multi-pleasured physicality.

As a female artist, the act of *thinking through the body* has been a natural guiding line for me since I started out in the mid-1960s. I have long wondered how we could get out of the predicament that patriarchal cultures have continued to create for us, the second sex.

How can we act as if we have collectively forgotten that we are all born of woman?

Could we as artists open ways of thinking that the first sex did not consider, so they could understand us and the world in a different way? Could we devise a new language that is more inclusive, across genders, generations, and man-made borders?

## Ovid

Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, part of the ancient Greek trilogy of tragedies from the fifth century BCE, explores how justice evolved from primitive blood feud to civic law and wisdom, albeit gained through suffering, which culminated in the establishment of the Athenian legal system and the pacification of the vengeful Furies. My new animation chamber is broadly based on the outcome of this new system and explores the women who suffered from it, their fantasies and revolts.

The work references the Furies in the *Oresteia*, also called the Eumenides, meaning the Gracious Ones. After Orestes murders his mother Clytemnestra, these women are silenced through a judgement by Athena in favour of the murderer.

Apollo declares: 'The mother is not parent of that which is called her child, but only nurse of the new planted seed that grows. The parent is he who mounts.'

<sup>1</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976), p. 281.





Nicolaas Hartsoeker  
'Essay de dioptrique', 1694

How could it be possible that the murder of one's mother is not a crime? By accepting the idea that the mother is only a vessel for growing the baby? In the seventeenth century, this theory was put forward by Nicolaas Hartsoeker, the inventor of a proto-microscope, who claimed in his drawings that semen perhaps contained the complete human being, labelling them *le petit animal* and *l'enfant*. Yet is this dehumanisation of women at the time of the *Oresteia* the basis for the evolution of justice?

Adrienne Rich ends her chapter entitled 'The Domestication of Motherhood' with the following paragraph:

The mother-child relationship is the essential human relationship. In the creation of the patriarchal family, violence is done to this fundamental human unit. It is not simply that woman in her full meaning and capacity is domesticated and confined within strictly defined limits. Even safely caged in a single aspect of her being – the maternal – she remains an object of mistrust, suspicion, misogyny in both overt and insidious forms. And the female generative organs, the matrix of human life, have become a prime target of patriarchal technology.<sup>2</sup>

As such, women are living on patriarchal terms, in a male-created universum, under male law.

The myth of the *Oresteia* is a metaphor for what is happening in the current scenario we inhabit. The paradoxes are gigantic, filled with destruction and brutality, where there is still no equal platform or place for women. It feels as if female existence is being cut off. At this point in the twenty-first century, when globalisation exudes a new form of colonisation, our way forward – more than ever – calls for a new interpretation of the *Oresteia*, which is no longer solely Western.

## Demons of the past

The purpose of art is to come to grips with the demons of the past, present, and future; to give form to chaos; to enable us to process fear; and to conceive of a different, more humane future.

Sale 5 of the Magazzini del Sale in Venice – the space for which my work is commissioned – is steeped in history, a man-made history, where salt was associated with power and politics. It is located along the Zattere promenade in the Dorsoduro district, where these fifteenth-century buildings were historically vital for storing salt. Salt was foundational to Venice's maritime empire, providing an early source of wealth through its production in local lagoons, which then expanded into a state-controlled monopoly. Profits from the sale of salt funded the city's shipbuilding, naval power, and the expansion of the *Stato da Mar* (maritime empire), securing trade routes and ports across the Mediterranean, and thus enabling dominance over other goods. The state created the *Ordo Salis* (Salt Office) to control salt, taxing and reselling it at profit throughout Italy, the Balkans, and the Levant, generating large revenues.

In India, the British understood the power of controlling salt and used it as part of their colonial exploitation, making this basic necessity unaffordable to many people.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 127.



This resulted in salt becoming a symbol of oppression. To enforce their control over salt, they created the Great Hedge of India, a living hedge, in some places almost 4 metres in height, and stretching more than 4000 km. The hedge served as a customs barrier to prevent the smuggling of salt from the coastal regions into the mainland, ensuring the collection of a substantial salt tax. It is impossible to know how many died from salt deprivation in India as a result of the salt tax, since salt deficiency was not recorded as a cause of death, although it no doubt worsened the effects of other diseases and hindered recovery.

The dehumanisation of Indians at the time of colonisation was the basis for the British Empire's wealth. The salt tax remained a controversial means of collecting revenue and became the subject of the 1930 Salt Satyagraha, a civil disobedience movement led by Gandhi against British rule. The salt tax would finally be abolished in 1946 during the Interim Government, just before Partition.



*Hamletmachine*, 2000  
Four-channel video play, sound  
Installation view Musée national d'art  
modern-Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2017

Salt as a demon of the past has been part of my work since 2000, when I referred to it in my four-channel video play *Hamletmachine*, made during a residency at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Based on the text of the German playwright Heiner Müller, my version of Hamlet resembles the state of India, a country in transition, undecided about its socio-political and economic stance. The video play starts with the birth of humankind from different body parts of the creator, as mentioned in the Purushasukta from the *Rigveda*. The Shudra, the lowest caste, is represented by the feet, which emerge out of a bed of salt, and remain there. The primary goal of Gandhi's Salt March was Indian independence, and while it helped to bridge social gaps during the struggle, it did not dismantle India's deeply entrenched caste system.

When I first entered this Venetian warehouse, my eyes had to adjust to the minimal lighting that filtered through the ceiling, as there were no windows. It is an ideal place for using video, although I was advised to project on canvases, as the old brick walls were porous and crumbling, still full of salt crystals. I touched the walls and licked my fingers, and, to my surprise, I could still taste salt. As my eyes adjusted, I saw thousands of light reflections creating a soft glow. Here, at Sala 5 of the Magazzini



del Sale, I was surrounded by a hall of salt crystals, still sparkling, and reminiscent of the power of salt, which has shaped history in all its brutality. The video experiments I conducted here in May 2025 showed that these salt-encrusted bricks would lend a unique skin, almost like a living membrane, to the projections.

To preserve the history of the building, I decided to keep the room intact, allowing the projections to manifest like a series of stained-glass windows, filling the space with illuminated narratives. The idea of bringing out a 'cathedral' in the exhibition space intrigued me. The projections directly onto the bare walls transform my iPad animations into living graffiti, like modern versions of stained-glass narratives. Rendered with my index finger, the work bears a tactile sensitivity; the gestures made with my fingertips in the process of making are almost erotic, raw, and they adopt a very direct method of drawing, rubbing, scratching, and erasing that parallels the activity of the mind. As such, the visual narrative in my animation chamber works like a stream of consciousness, recreating the complexity of thought, and the way time operates at any given moment. These iPad animations function as a vibrant medium, where the projections, like illuminated storyboards, reveal the demons of the past and present.

## Demons of the present

Here in Venice, after the first quarter of the twenty-first century, standing in Sala 5, I once again felt pressed against the wall, where subversion becomes the only way to critique the established social order. The democratic model has changed from a vehicle of hope into one of helplessness. I have previously said that my iPad animations capture the 'daily experiences that are happening in the world which make you want to clench your fists, grit your teeth, shout out – in a moment of hysteria – and feel that your back is against the wall when the tragedy of life takes the upper hand.'<sup>3</sup> In that sense, this animation chamber *Of Woman Born*, is a continuation of *Can You Hear Me?*, which I made between 2018 and 2021, in relation to the demons of the present.

*Can You Hear Me?*, 2020  
Nine-channel animation chamber, sound  
Installation view Whitechapel Gallery,  
London, 2020



<sup>3</sup> Nalini Malani, 'Back to the Wall', in Emily Butler et al., *Nalini Malani: Can You Hear Me?* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2020), p. 57.

The texts referenced in the animations from *Of Woman Born*, strike you right in the face. Hate speech has become so integrated into our global 'culture', with the rise of



the internet and social media amplifying its reach and impact. Here, the demons of the present are with us at all times, across the whole planet. They attack, vilify, and use discriminatory language against people's religious, ethnic, racial, gender-based, or sexual identity, or even on the basis of the slant of their eyes. Hate speech often involves dehumanising target groups, portraying them as animals, diseased, or criminals, as a precursor to hostility and violence, including mass atrocities such as genocide.

Hannah Arendt is alleged to have said: 'The death of human empathy is one of the earliest and most telling signs of a culture about to fall into barbarism.'

Demons of the present do not stand alone. They stand in the past. An enduring legacy in art history is Francisco Goya's satirical series of aquatints and etchings *Los Caprichos* (1797–1798) and *The Disasters of War* (1810–1820), where he explored hate, fanaticism, and the dark side of humanity. The latter serves as a brutal visual protest against the atrocities, political disillusionment, and horrors of the Peninsular War in Spain, including massacres, torture, rape, and famine. Far from the playful, light-hearted fantasy usually associated with the term *caprice*, these artworks forcefully and deliberately critiqued and shocked. Hate in Goya's time recalls the pervasive atmosphere of violence he witnessed. His art evolved into a bitter commentary, acting as a prophetic voice against inhumanity.

In *Of Woman Born*, several of my animations use details from Goya's etchings as an underlayer. While my reverse painting series *Stories Retold* reinterpret stories from a feminist perspective, in *Of Woman Born* I join hands in collaboration with artists and writers of the past, aligning their visions with the current scenario. Walter Benjamin so eloquently articulated the potency of quotations, when he tore historical objects and language from their original contexts. Like Benjamin, I believe that quotations, used in a method similar to montage, can force a new consciousness of the present moment, disrupting conventional narratives.

In the same line of thought, I selected quotations from the *Oresteia* that form the main textual field of this animation chamber. Although these words are over 2500 years old, they feel so pertinent to the present. In the soundscape *Of Woman Born*, which I perform, the demons of the present show no sign of pluralism. With ethnic cleansing persisting over centuries, the ghosts of the past feed the tempest that threatens to ruin us all.

Aeschylus writes: 'But the lust for power never dies – men cannot have enough. No one will lift a hand to send it from his door, to give it warning, "Power, never come again!"'

## Ouroboros

*Of Woman Born* marks my fourth presentation in Venice on the occasion of different Biennials over the past two decades. The works evoke an ouroboros, reflecting humanity at a moment of cyclical renewal. Each project corresponds to a different state – life, death, rebirth – based on female transitions, from the past into a new present.



*Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain*, 2005  
 Five-channel video play, sound  
 Installation view Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 2018



In 2005, at the 51st Biennial, I exhibited the five-channel video play, *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain* as part of the collateral event *iCon: Contemporary India*, presented in the refectory of the former Convent SS. Cosma e Damiano in Giudecca. This installation comprised three projections onto the bare walls, and two onto salt beds. I engaged a text by Veena Das, in which she asks: 'How is it that the imaging of the project of nationalism in India came to include the appropriation of bodies of women as objects on which the desire for nationalism could be brutally inscribed and a memory for the future made?' For 50 years following Partition, female perspectives were silenced. It is only now that this generation of women is beginning to give voice to those experiences.

In 2007, I presented the 14-panel reverse painting *Splitting the Other* in an octagonal room in the Italian Pavilion, relevant to the Biennial's title *Think with the Senses – Feel with the Mind: Art in the Present Tense*, curated by Robert Storr. Striding across the earth, the work's main female protagonist carries two babies attached to her back, still with their umbilical cords. It is about a character who is situated within the current travesty of a global community but is treated as deviant. What is happening around her is a landscape of perversion. Covering six walls, it felt as though she inhabited a circular, looped story.

In 2019, the video play *In Search of Vanished Blood* was presented as part of the exhibition *Rothko in Lampedusa*, organised by the United Nations Refugee Agency at Palazzo Querini, Dorsoduro. In this work, Cassandra tells the story of our future, offering a way out from current brutalities if one listens and learns from the female voice that lives in all of us. In the soundscape, the choir describes how Cassandra was gang raped, while in her last line, she says: 'Between the thighs, death still has hope.'

With *Of Woman Born*, we storm further into the twenty-first century, in the future of our past, which we created ourselves. It feels as if there is no way out, with all roads leading to staggering global catastrophes, pushing the planet towards critical tipping points. How will the snake bite its own tail this time and form a new beginning?



What once secured the wealth of Venice now endangers it. The serious problem of salt damage (the process of salinisation) affects historic buildings due to rising sea levels, humidity, and saltwater intrusion, causing bricks and mortar to crumble – a major hazard to Venice’s unique architecture. More widely, salinisation constitutes a systemic risk to food security, ecosystems, and economies: it renders farmland infertile, reduces crop yields, contaminates freshwater, and forces farmers into poverty or migration, with effects worsened by climate change. This unfolding ecological collapse has been described by scientists and global organisations as the single biggest threat facing humanity in the twenty-first century. It feels as though millions of us are going to face the loss of security and home, as in *Salt Houses*, the novel by Hala Alyan, which houses become metaphors fragile places eroded by conflict – washed away like salt structures by the tide – reflecting themes of memory, belonging, and resilience.

The utopian novel *Suntana’s Dream*, written by Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain (1880–1932), a pioneering Bengali Muslim feminist and educator, now seems so far away. In her *Ladyland*, men, having lost their power through endless warfare, perform daily labour, while the women, drawing on their intellectual resources, govern the country with a welfare-oriented spirit. More than a century after it was written in 1905, we remain unable to realise a fraction of this sensitive, humane, and pragmatic dream – a non-sectarian vision, one without religious or gender-related barriers.

A high-pitched voice in *Of Woman Born* sings like an angel:

This is the way the world ends  
 This is the way the world ends  
 This is the way the world ends  
 Not with a bang  
 but a whimper.

At the age of 80, what can I expect from the few years that remain?  
 One wants to cry softly, out of the fear and pain that surrounds us.

Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up?

The Furies protest against the judgement of Orestes – the mockery of it, how unbearable it is for them, the daughters of the night. Their power stripped. Cast off.

*Ladyland* looks further away than ever.

What will the next cycle of wholeness and continuous transformation bring?

If humankind would only remember, next time, that we are all born of woman.



## Afterword

Koyo Kouoh<sup>4</sup>

I am quite frankly,  
I am tired,  
people are tired,  
we are all tired,  
the world is tired,  
even art itself is tired.

Perhaps the time has come.  
We need something else.  
We need to heal.  
We need to laugh.  
We need to be with beauty.  
And lots of it  
We need to play.  
We need to be with poetry.  
We need to be with love again.  
We need to dance.  
We need to make and give food.  
We need to rest and restore.  
We need to breathe.  
We need the radicality of joy.  
The time has come.

<sup>4</sup> Verses composed by Koyo Kouoh, Curator of the Biennale Arte 2026, November 2024; transcribed from the presentation by Rory Tsapayi at the press conference of the 61st International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, 27 May 2025.



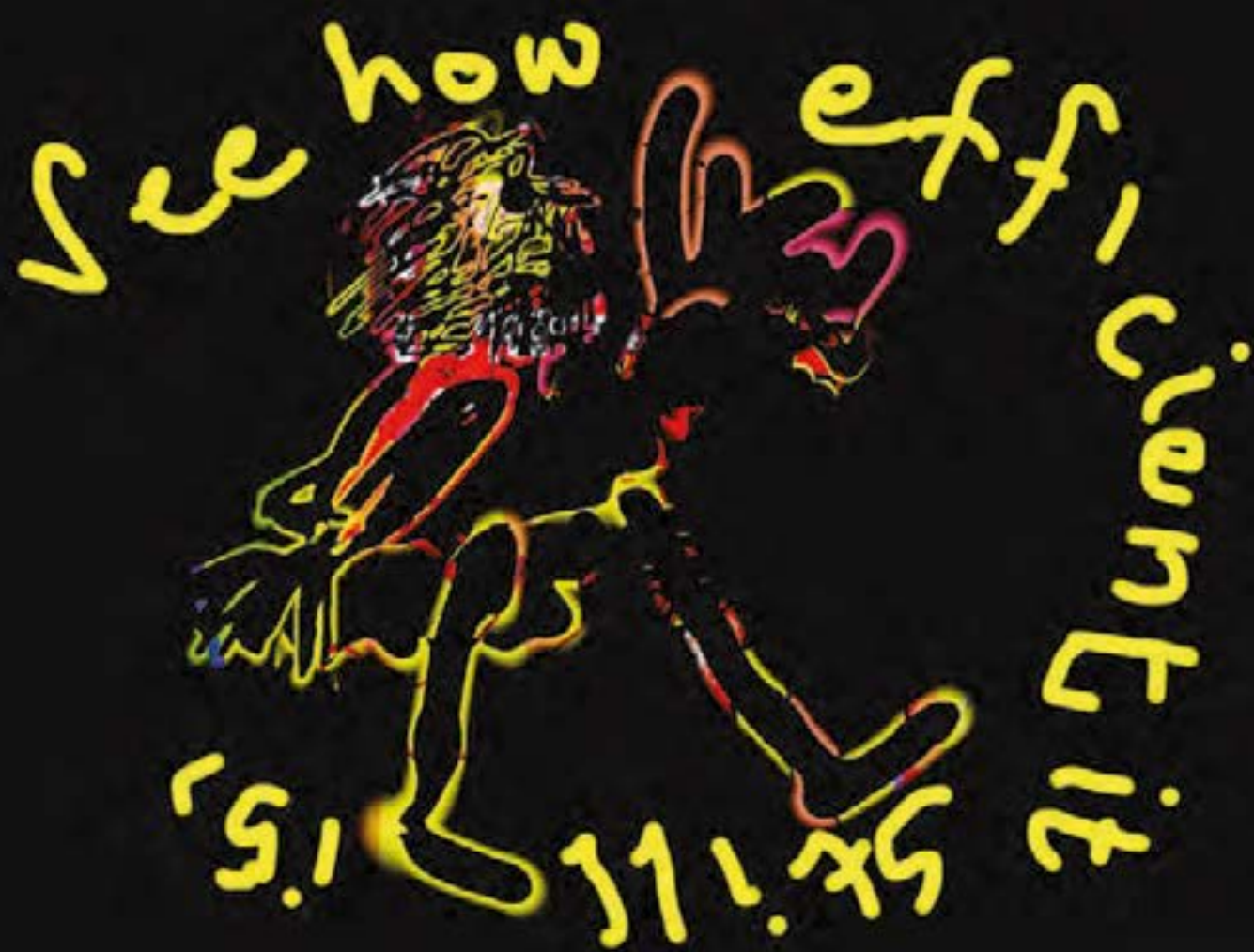




"The sleep of reason  
produces monsters"  
Goya.



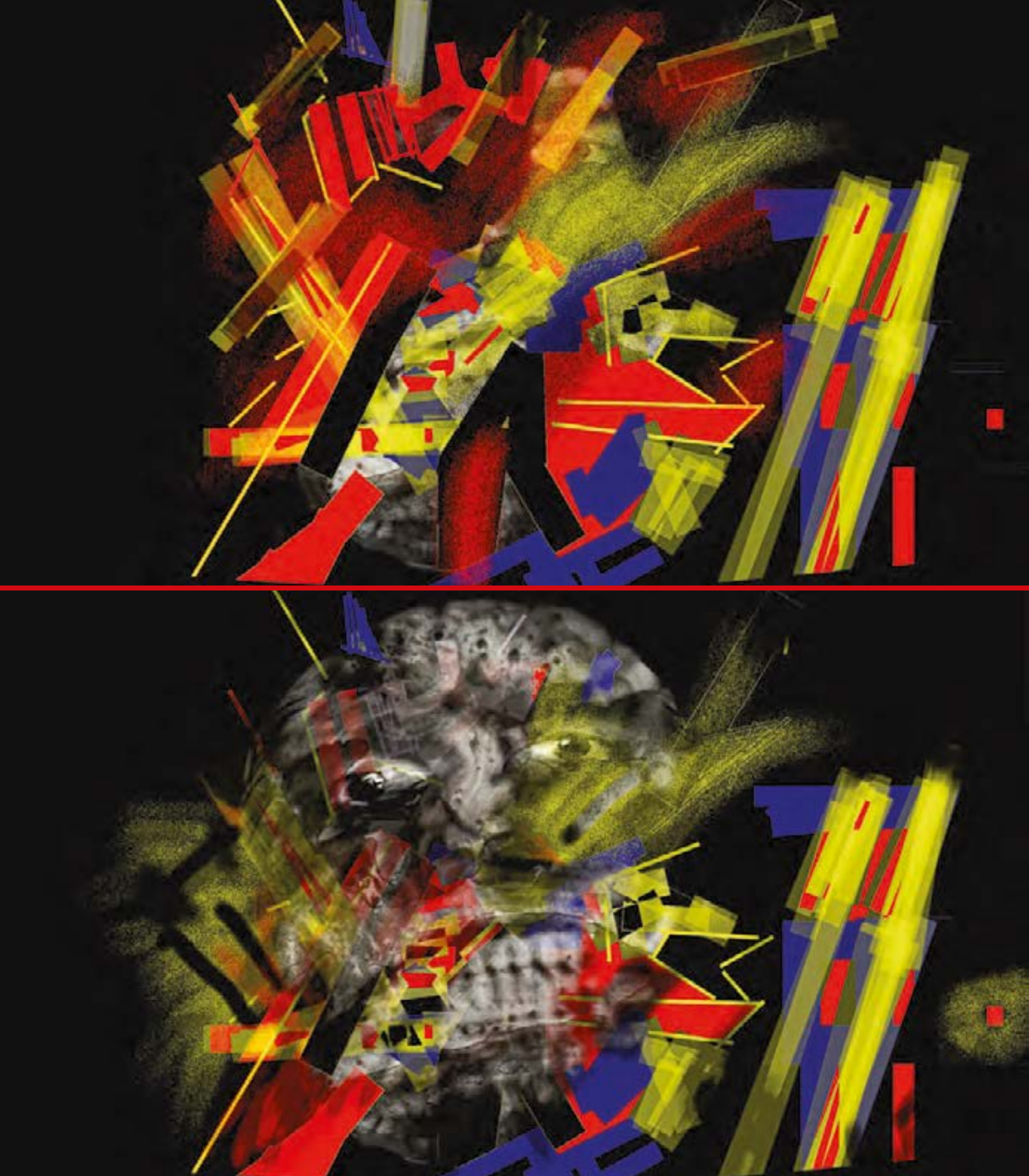














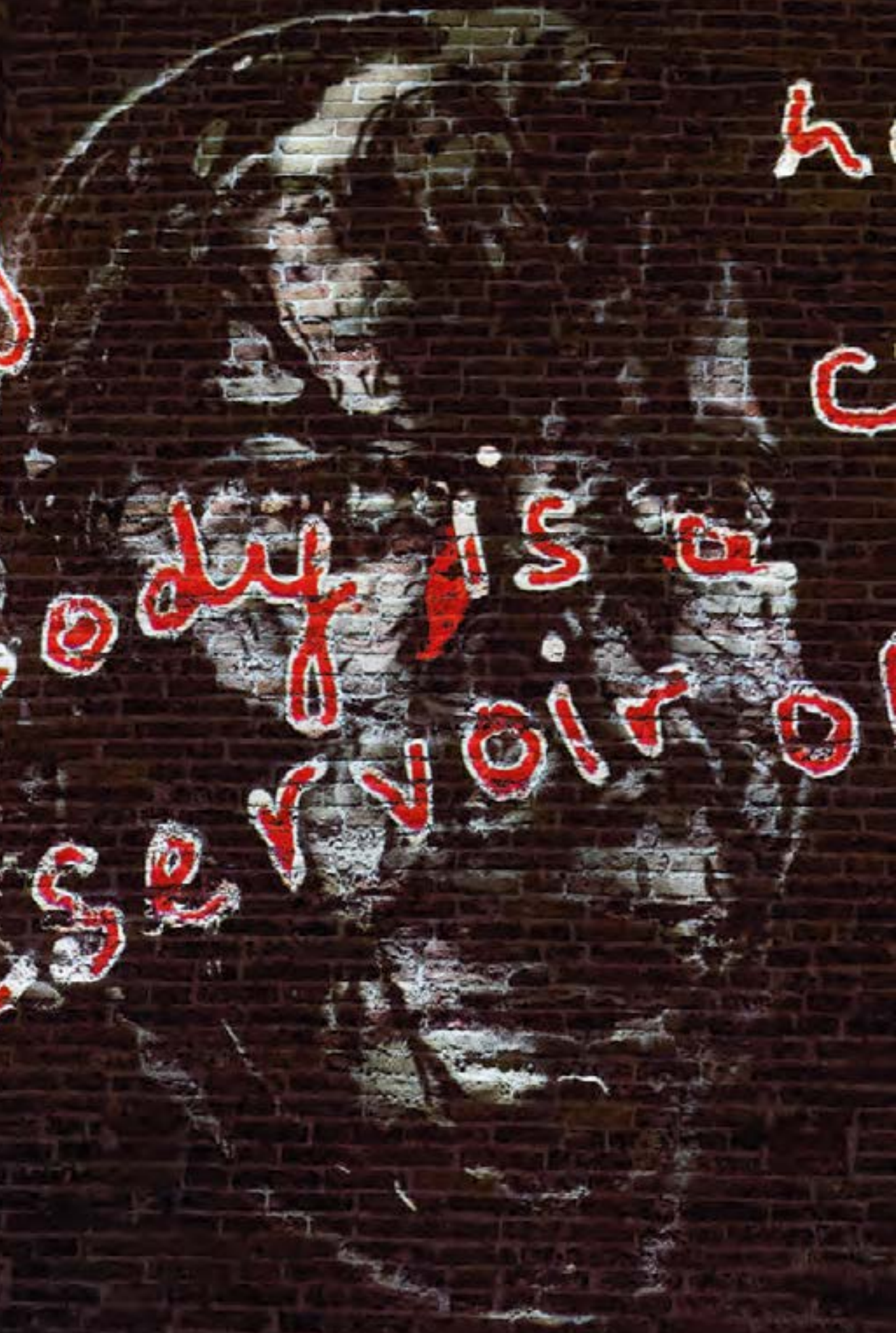


"The death of human empathy is one of the earliest and most telling signs of a culture about to fall into barbarism."



the  
xwin

body is a  
reservoir of







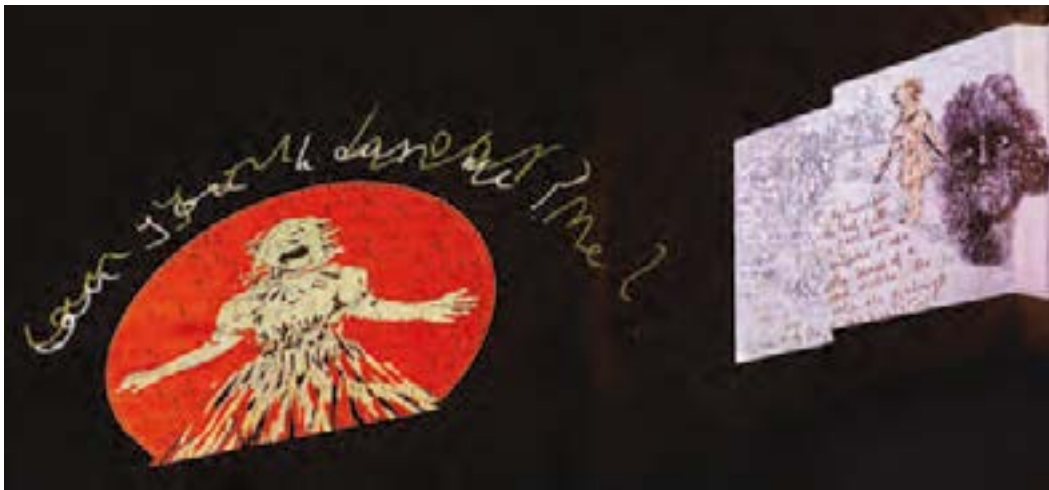
EMILY BUTLER

Through Salt,  
Shadows and  
Echoes:  
Translating the  
Untranslatables



Over the centuries, as people and goods have moved around the globe, so too have their languages, cultures and worldviews been translated. Across empires, languages, beliefs, and power have been inextricably entwined. During the Venetian maritime empire between the ninth and seventeenth centuries, its navy, diplomats, and merchants extended the city's influence from the Adriatic to the eastern Mediterranean. Its wealth was due in large part to its near monopoly over salt throughout the region. The fifteenth century warehouses, the Magazzini del Sale, that now host artist Nalini Malani's work *Of Woman Born* (2026) once stored this vital resource: a preservative, a currency, and a symbol of Venice's control over trade.

Malani brings her animation chamber, *Of Woman Born* into this geopolitically charged space, reflecting on the relationship between language, power, and history. Across nine video projections, she animates the marked, centuries old brick walls with an orchestration of light, images and sound, representing a chorus of colourful figures, which she offers as new resources to fill the space. Watercolours flow into moving images, and quotes, drawings, and voices are juxtaposed, creating richly layered animations that amplify the poetics and politics of their sources. Malani's references range from tragedian Aeschylus to writer Adrienne Rich, from artist Francisco Goya to poet Wisława Szymborska.



*Can You Hear Me?*, 2020  
Nine-channel animation chamber, sound  
Installation view Whitechapel Gallery,  
London, 2020

Malani's practice has been framed through the lens of translation as a movement between voices, languages, cultures, and media. In 2020, as the curator of her first animation chamber *Can You Hear Me?* shown at Whitechapel Gallery, London, I described how she rendered overlooked news stories and suppressed histories newly legible through translation. By carrying fragments of myth, literature, and current affairs across forms and contexts, I argued that Malani creates new juxtapositions that reimagine the past and deepen our understanding of recurrent socio-political issues.<sup>1</sup>

In Venice, with the unveiling of *Of Woman Born*, it becomes even clearer that the act of translation is far more than a simple crossing between time, place, or culture. These transfers are complex, multidirectional, and deeply affected by context. Malani's work meditates on the dilemmas of this process: the *impossibility* of carrying meaning over perfectly, and the *necessity* of grappling with what resists translation, such as repression, loss, and silence.

<sup>1</sup> Emily Butler et al. (eds), *Nalini Malani: Can You Hear Me?* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2020).



Malani is not a translator in the conventional sense but rather a *(mis)translator*, not one who translates incorrectly, but one who, while holding a deep love for her sources, creatively interprets them and exposes the losses, shifts, and transformations that occur in their transfer. Her work embraces movement, but also the poetics of the space in-between cultures and forms, where the *untranslatables* reside. These appear in the installation as fragmented, repeated choruses and ghostly, emotive figures that emerge from the shadows to gather against violence and injustice.

## The call to translate

The term ‘translate’ derives from the Latin *translatio*, meaning ‘transferring’.<sup>2</sup> In Romance languages, including in the Venetian dialect (*tradure*), it comes from *traducere*, which means to lead or carry something across. While often seen as a linguistic operation, translation originally had a practical sense, referring to the movement of goods, people, or knowledge between places, such as the salt trade during the Venetian Empire.

Today, translation can be understood through three intertwined concepts: as *transfer* or transmission between places; *interpretation* in new terms; and *transformation* into new forms, across signs and media. This transformative dimension can be deeply inventive and emotive – this is what makes translation such a powerful tool for writers, artists, curators and other creatives.

In her practice, Malani transfers, interprets and transforms an array of inspiring source materials into new forms and contexts. She replicates, fragments, erases, juxtaposes, layers and re-interprets her sources. These range from the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus, Goya’s *Disasters of War* etchings (1810–1820), poems by Szymborska and T. S. Eliot, to sociological critiques by Hannah Arendt and Adrienne Rich, whose influential book *Of Woman Born* (1976) lends its title to Malani’s show. Through a process of *transmediation*, moving between art forms, she amplifies their shared concern for social justice, while offering multiple modes of audience engagement. This gathering of ideas and forms resonates with Venice, a city historically shaped by the convergence of goods, cultures and beliefs.

Malani works across media and sources, but also across time and place, bridging cultural and epistemological divides. She frequently brings ancient stories such as the *Oresteia* or Hindu myths into dialogue with contemporary socio-political realities, drawing out violence and the injustices faced by women across history. By juxtaposing shared stories of discrimination, she highlights their ubiquity and their sad repetition. In this way, Malani transforms local experiences, whether from India or Palestine, into planetary concerns, in the hope that this might also encourage us to learn from past mistakes and to break these cycles.

A central story in *Of Woman Born* is drawn from Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* trilogy (fifth century BCE), which is recounted through selected quotations woven into the audio track. The tragedy reflects on violence and the repression of women across several generations. Malani revisits the account of Clytemnestra’s murder by her son Orestes, avenging his father Agamemnon’s death. This act unleashes the Furies, goddesses of vengeance and darkness, who confront Orestes for matricide. When Athena rules

<sup>2</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. translation, accessed 18 Sept. 2025, [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/translation\\_n](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/translation_n).



in Orestes' favour, Aeschylus' tragedy marks an epistemological shift in Greek history from cycles of blood vengeance to the establishment of civic law. Yet Malani draws attention to the flipside of this transition: as patriarchal justice is implemented, women's rights are suppressed. The Furies, speaking on their behalf, lament: 'Oh unbearable, we the daughters of the night, our power stripped, cast off'.

In her adaptation, *An Oresteia* (2010), poet and translator Anne Carson combines Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides' versions of the myth. She revisits the story through a feminist lens, emphasising, for instance, the perspective of Electra, Orestes' sister. After Clytemnestra's murder, Electra observes: 'There ought to be a law against a mother like that. Turns out there is: Apollo'. Later, Apollo himself admits complicity: 'It was me made him [Orestes] murder his mother after all'.<sup>3</sup> Carson's translation gives the characters a contemporary, colloquial voice, and underlines Apollo and Orestes' alliance, revealing how patriarchal authority shapes laws that suppress women's rights to justice and retribution.

Through their translations of the *Oresteia*, both Carson and Malani reveal how myth is constructed and reshaped across periods, authors, and worldviews. They demonstrate that stories are not fixed or universal, but collectively produced. This allows them to retain their relevance today, reflecting for instance on shifting attitudes towards family, ethics and justice. Malani highlights the unequal distribution of law across society. Orestes is pardoned for murdering his mother Clytemnestra, while she is condemned for murdering her violent husband Agamemnon, who had initially sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia. 'Guilt both ways, and who can call it justice?' can be overheard in the accompanying soundtrack drawn from the tragedy.

Malani also challenges conventional readings of madness and violence, exposing trauma as a product of repeated oppression. She emphasises the cyclical nature of violence, quoting the Furies' lament: 'The bleeding none can staunch. The grief. Unbearable curse'. Malani repeats the phrase by erasing it and making it reappear, like an unresolved trauma. By magnifying its recurrence, from ancient Greece to the present day, she urges us to address the root cause of violence and the persistent discrimination against women.

At the heart of Malani's practice is a love for language, both as material and as medium. Her work is informed by a deep understanding of comparative literature and intertextuality. She brings together multiple literary traditions (Ancient Greek, English, French, Polish...), and spans genres (tragedy, epic, lyric, satire...), as well as forms (myth, poetry, experimental literature, critical theory...). In her first animation chamber, *Can You Hear Me?* at Whitechapel Gallery she identified five recurring typologies in her work: socio-political, satirical, feminine/masculine ideologies, abstract, and personal.<sup>4</sup> By weaving together traditions, Malani draws on points of correspondence that translate into planetary experiences. This approach resonates powerfully in the context of the Venice Biennale, a major transnational arts platform bringing together works of art, architecture, music, dance, theatre, film and more.

Linked to Malani's intertextual interest is her experimentation with the seemingly infinite combinations signs and media. In literature, *ekphrasis* or vivid descriptions of artworks stimulate mental images within a narrative. Conversely, in the visual arts, quotations bring mental ideas in conversation with visual ones, creating *trans-*

<sup>3</sup> Anne Conover Carson et al., *An Oresteia: Agamemnon by Aiskhylos: Elektra by Sophokles: Orestes by Euripides* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), pp. 184, 254.

<sup>4</sup> Nalini Malani, 'Back to the Wall', in Butler et al., *Nalini Malani*, p. 57.



*Can You Hear Me?*, 2020  
 Nine-channel animation chamber, sound  
 Installation view Whitechapel Gallery,  
 London, 2020



*mediations*, or ‘texts’ in their broader semiotic sense, that are translated into other forms. For example, Malani translates the lyrics for Ryuichi Sakamoto’s song *War and Peace* (2004) into an animation featuring a precariously balanced figure that collapses alongside surrounding structures, which asks: ‘Is war as old as gravity?’ Here, a lyrical text amplifies the animation’s commentary on the destructive effect of war on people and their environments, and it repeats like a refrain.

Malani navigates semiotic codes across media – moving from a watercolour, a drawing, American Sign Language, or a text into an animation – layering hand-drawn images, writing and sound, and projecting the result into the exhibition space. Each new juxtaposition within and between the different animations generates a potentially infinite array of meanings. She pushes the conventions of each genre, creating compositions that go beyond the possibilities of each medium.<sup>5</sup>

This fluid movement between media has been central to Malani’s practice since her formative years. Initially trained in painting and drawing, two pivotal experiences shaped her approach. In 1969, she participated in the Vision Exchange Workshop (VIEW) led by pioneering artist Akbar Padamsee, where she experimented with new technologies and moving images. Shortly after, during a residency in France from 1970 to 1972, she engaged with the literary scene in Paris and was introduced to intertextuality. These experiences opened pathways for her *transmediations* across drawing, film, and installation, which she expanded through theatre projects such *Medeamaterial* (1993) and *The Job* (1997) and ambitious video plays like *Hamletmachine* (2000) and *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain* (2005). These laid the groundwork for her signature video/shadow plays, such as the monumental *In Search of Vanished Blood* (2012) produced for DOCUMENTA (13).

<sup>5</sup> See Mieke Bal’s various essays discussing Malani’s intertextual, interdiscursive, intermedial movements; for example, ‘Inter-  
 ships with Nalini Malani: The Foreshortening  
 of Time’, in National Gallery (ed.), *Nalini  
 Malani: My Reality is Different* (London:  
 National Gallery Company Ltd, 2022).

Malani’s video/shadow plays later evolved into her animation chambers, where she further amplified her translations between forms of sensory experiences, from textual to visual, intellectual to sensorial. Using time-based media, these immersive installations engage our mind as much as our different senses (sound, sight, haptic). At first, the flitting images and snippets of sound can feel overwhelming; however, through continual looping, motifs reappear across different channels and the piece becomes legible and comprehensible.



By projecting text and images directly onto the exhibition walls, Malani translates a visual experience into one that is embodied and spatial. As we move through the animation chamber, we become enveloped in a procession of images unfolding along the warehouse's long walls, and, at times, cast shadows onto the bricks. It is also as though we were wandering through the artist's mind; ideas, words, and images become palpable, emerging out of darkness, taking shape on the surface of the bricks. Sometimes, figures with questioning eyes pop up across different walls with a sense of *déjà-vu*. In this interplay, we become participants in Malani's unfolding thought, rather than passive witnesses to it. The site itself also comes to life, revealing its layers of history whose traces, such as the salt crystals, glisten as they are animated.

Malani holds deep empathy with her source material, creating a form of affective translation that resonates with viewers. Her typologies mentioned earlier – the socio-political, satirical, feminine/masculine ideologies, abstract, and personal – each elicit different reactions and emotional responses: solidarity, reflection, empathy and urgency. Audiences may experience hope, joy, urgency, exhaustion, melancholy, despair, and even rage. By juxtaposing lines from Elizabeth Browning's poem 'The Cry of the Children' (1843), a critique of child labour in Victorian times, with hands holding a child's weary face, the author's care yet distress at their fate is magnified: 'How long, O cruel nation, Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's heart'. This quote in turn drives home Malani's despair at the impact of violence on children which can be seen across the installation.

Rage is a powerful emotion that Malani explores purposefully. In previous works, figures such as Medea and Cassandra expressed forms of anger historically dismissed as hysteria or madness. Here, the Furies cry: 'The mockery of it, Oh unbearable'. They also lament that they have had their 'power stripped' and they have been 'cast off'. These eruptions of anger create moments of catharsis or emotional release, enabling a deep connection with the viewer. At the end of each cycle of animations, the stuttering image of a dismembered hand recurs, a haunting reminder of the depths of human depravity that Jean Genet described after visiting the site of the refugee camp massacre in 'Four Hours in Shatila' (1982). After each cycle, we begin a new emotional journey.



*The Furies*  
iPad animation, still  
*Of Woman Born*, 2026



Malani engages our senses much like ancient, immersive forms of storytelling such as shadow puppets, stained glass windows, magic lanterns, theatre and opera. By using new media, she maximises the work's duration and visual fluidity: her videos loop indefinitely, without beginning or end. Visitors are invited to linger, to navigate the work at their own pace enveloped in mind and body as participants in the space.<sup>6</sup> What may initially feel disorienting gradually reveals its structure, as we come to recognise loops of images and sounds, allowing us to engage intellectually, sensorily, physically, and emotionally with the layered narrative, which mirrors the way our memories are built.

As I have argued, Malani translates her source materials across time, place, cultural, and epistemological contexts, navigating languages, sign systems, media, as well as sensory and emotional registers. She also translates her work across institutions and sites, from Barcelona and London to Venice, literally 'carrying over' her installations, in the original sense of the word translation, and adapting them to new architectural, cultural, and historical settings. In doing so, the work responds to and reshapes the perception of each space – in Venice, a historic salt warehouse. In this way, Malani emphasises the fluidity of meaning, demonstrating that translation is not only a linguistic or artistic act but also a negotiation between place, audience, and institution. Her work resists closure, embodying translation as an ongoing process of reinterpretation, and much like history, cumulatively built over time.

## Translation is necessary but impossible

In addition to exploring the continual reformation of knowledge and meaning in translation, Malani's work engages with its ethics and politics. She demonstrates that translation is never a neutral act, it is deeply shaped by ideologies and socio-political contexts. Assuming the role of a feminist translator, she disrupts dominant narratives, allowing alternative voices to emerge. Her work creates a polyphonic space where multiple perspectives coexist, recentring overlooked figures and re-empowering the silenced.

<sup>6</sup> See Mieke Bal, *Nalini Malani: In Medias Res: Inside Nalini Malani's Shadow Plays* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 104.

<sup>8</sup> Spivak, 'Translation as Culture' (2000), in *Living Translation* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2022), p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Spivak, *Ibid.*, Spivak, *Living Translation*, p. 85.

<sup>10</sup> Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation' (1992), in *Living Translation*, p. 38.

Malani frequently gives a platform to the oppressed, those whom Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identifies as the subaltern, particularly those marginalized by race, class, and gender. In her seminal essay, Spivak argues that 'The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read... The subaltern cannot speak'. She explains that their histories and experiences are systematically marginalized and as a result, they lack political agency.<sup>7</sup> For Spivak, the subaltern need to be able to speak on their own terms.

In later writings, Spivak extended her reflections to the politics of translation, concluding that 'translation is necessary but impossible'.<sup>8</sup> She writes, 'No speech is speech if it is not heard. It is this act of hearing-to-respond that may be called the imperative to translate'.<sup>9</sup> Spivak sees the translator as an activist. Translation is *necessary* as it is a vital tool for amplifying marginalized voices. It also demands care, responsibility, and a deep love and respect for texts and cultures it draws from as 'the most intimate act of reading'.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, translation is *impossible*: semantic, rhetorical and cultural losses are inevitable. Translators also risk being too subjective and therefore misrepresenting their sources, since they may not understand their perspectives nor hold the same worldviews. Moreover, they run the risk



of speaking on behalf of others, without their permission, which Spivak likens to the misuse of a 'native informant'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, translation is never a neutral activity.

Malani understands this double bind of the activist-translator, negotiating between her source material, installation and audience. For her, translation is *necessary* to allow ideas, texts and histories to travel across media, offering multiple points of entry and an 'intimate' engagement with marginalized perspectives. Yet she also acknowledges that it is *impossible*: languages such as English and Ancient Greek carry different syntaxes, ideologies, and cultural nuances that resist perfect equivalence.

Theorist Walter Benjamin argued that a translator's task is not so much to convey an author's intended meaning but to reveal its 'afterlife, ensuring a text's continued relevance in the present moment'.<sup>12</sup> By quoting iconic artworks and seminal texts such as the *Oresteia*, Malani does not replicate them or look for an elusive inherent meaning, but extends their 'afterlife'. In doing so, she situates her practice within a continuum of cultural transmission.

Although she draws on materials rooted in specific historical contexts, Malani does not embrace them uncritically; she does not privilege a single language, ideology, or medium. Instead, she works across multiple signs systems reveals how meaning is built through correspondence and exchange. She has previously argued for the artist's right to work between ideologies and cultures without being accused of being derivative or of misappropriation.<sup>13</sup> She looks to Thomas McEvilley's writings on intercultural dialogue, which assert that exchanges between East and West flow in both directions, opening the possibility of facing the future and its unknown languages, together.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, Malani's work makes visible the collusion of power and language by questioning historical truth. In her interpretation of the *Oresteia* across the installation, she emphasises that there is no singular narrative: voices overlap, stories collide, generating chance encounters as well as contradictions. Texts are overlaid, scrubbed away, and re-written like a palimpsest; the impermanence of moving images leave meaning fluid. By layering multiple perspectives, Malani reveals the constructed nature and the instability of historical memory.

In line with Spivak, for Malani, translation's impossibility is in fact generative: while semantic loss and transformation inevitably occur, this opens space for continuous re-interpretation. Since no translation can ever be definitive, her moving image installations unfold as layered, ever-changing compositions or 'temporary constellations' as I described them at Whitechapel Gallery, where ideas, images, and voices are continuously melded together.<sup>15</sup> These constellations sustain the afterlife of texts, myths, and histories, allowing them to resonate beyond their original contexts. Rather than simply transferring the original, Malani embraces translation as a process of re-reading, reinterpretation, and reanimation of works such as the *Oresteia* to reflect their continued relevance.

Malani's re-interpretations are also introspective, translating the personal into the public sphere. The animation chamber mirrors her own thought processes and imperfect memories through provisional, constantly shifting forms. She describes

<sup>11</sup> Spivak, 'Scattered Speculations on Translation Studies' (2012), in *Living Translation*, p. 197.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin et al., 'The Task of the Translator' (1923), in *Illuminations* (London: Cape, 1970).

<sup>13</sup> 'Interview with Nalini Malani by Johan Pijnappel', in Seán Kissane and Johan Pijnappel (eds), *Nalini Malani* (Milan: Charta, 2007), p. 40.

<sup>14</sup> Nalini Malani, 'My Reality is Different', in National Gallery (ed.), *Nalini Malani: My Reality is Different*: (London: National Gallery Company Ltd, 2022), p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> Emily Butler, 'How Can We Listen Better', in Butler et al., *Nalini Malani*, p. 64.



this continuous unfolding of thought in space as a visual ‘stream of consciousness’, an attempt to access unconscious possibilities.<sup>16</sup> In the soundtrack, a line from the *Oresteia* recurs: ‘The sleeping brain has eyes that give us light; we can never see our destiny by day’.

While Malani experiments with her own thought processes, she is careful not to appropriate the voices of others. In line with Spivak, she resists the temptation to speak on behalf of the subaltern. In her installations, marginalised figures rarely speak; instead, they stare at us with mournful eyes, from faces that sometimes lack mouths. Meanwhile, children play in the rubble, processing trauma through the means available to them. Malani speaks up instead in her own voice: ‘I am tired’, or ‘Who has the right to take away the vision of a child?’ In the soundtrack, the Furies’ chorus is channelled by Malani. Other perspectives, from political writers such as Hannah Arendt, are clearly cited. This polyphony prevents any single viewpoint from dominating. As these fragmented voices appear and recede, we are reminded of their provisionality; while they resist any claim to universality, they nonetheless affirm a planetary resonance.

In short, Malani embraces translation as both ethically necessary and politically, semantically impossible. In her work, myths shift shape, voices multiply, and new meanings emerge through continual reinterpretation. Through this process, which can in fact be called *(mis)translation*, she embraces both the creative opportunities and challenges of translating.

## The poetics of the untranslatables

A more challenging dimension of translation’s impossibility, as Spivak argues, is what cannot be carried across, and what remains unrepresented or silenced: the *untranslatable*. Philosopher Barbara Cassin defines the untranslatable not as something that cannot be translated, but rather as ‘something that one never stops (not) translating’.<sup>17</sup> If translation, is an endless activity of re-interpretation, then the untranslatables are its ghostly residues. These dwell in the gaps between contexts, perspectives, between the comprehensible and incomprehensible.

The untranslatables arise through the control of discourse by those in power, through censorship, repression, loss of the original, and resistance to translation. The Furies from the *Oresteia* cry out against erasure: ‘Nothing speaks the truth, Nothing tells us how things really are, Nothing forces us to know, What we do not want to know, Except pain’. Malani’s approach however turns these challenges to transmission into generative opportunities. She bypasses censorship by quoting texts from other cultures. For instance, she comments on issues of the repression of women’s rights in South Asia or the violence against children in Gaza through the intermediary of Ancient Greek tragedy, giving visibility to issues that remain absent from mainstream media. Through myth, repressed stories gain visibility, albeit indirectly, through other texts, analogies and metaphors.

Where the original has been repressed or erased, Malani highlights absence itself. In her animations, the black screen visualises historical amnesia and archival loss, and erasure and re-erasure become tools to address them. Testimonies appear through

<sup>16</sup> Nalini Malani, ‘Back to the Wall’, in Butler et al., *Nalini Malani*, p. 57.

<sup>17</sup> Barbara Cassin et al. (eds), *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 217. Cassin and Emily Apter draw on Jacques Derrida’s notion that nothing is untranslatable, because we can communicate between languages, whilst at the same time everything is untranslatable, since perfect equivalence is impossible.

shadows and echoes: ghostly, fragmentary figures emerge as darkness is wiped away. These mournful apparitions are often re-erased by being blacked out again almost immediately. In this way, Malani magnifies the cyclical nature of oppression. A sombre line from the *Oresteia* underlines these repeated erasures: ‘Darkness hovers over man, dark guilt, ... legend tells the story through her tears’.



*Who will ask the Women?*  
iPad animation, still  
*Of Woman Born*, 2026

Throughout the installation, physical expressions such as screams, fist-banging and inquisitive eyes embody what remains unsaid. Malani fills in gaps with her own annotations, enquiring: ‘Who will ask the women?’ She also voices the recurring laments drawn from the *Oresteia* in the soundtrack. Nevertheless, we cannot hear the oppressed, nor do we see the goddesses of darkness, who mourn being ‘cast off’. Through these gestures, Malani reanimates absence as a mode of remembrance.

Moreover, Malani draws attention to the fact that some communities actively resist translation, to speak, rather, on their own terms, asserting their *right to opacity*. Édouard Glissant’s concept offers a mode of refusal of being fully known, reduced or misrepresented, to reclaim agency in the run of discourse, as well as complexity and multiplicity.<sup>18</sup> Malani respects this principle through her strategic use of darkness and silence, refusing to speak for others while exposing the politics of speaking about them. In this sense, the mournful figures confronting us in *Of Woman Born* may also be choosing not to speak to us.

The untranslatables in Malani’s work are manifest as linguistic, visual, sonic, and also material traces. In her Venice installation, centuries of salt sediments on the warehouse walls bears witness to colonial trade. She overlays her projections over these remnants, allowing the site’s untranslatable memories to surface and coexist with present day narratives of systemic oppression and violence, from South Asia to Palestine. Adapting to the oblique buttresses that cast shadows and the uneven surface of the brick walls that sometimes interrupt the image, Malani produces a spatial choreography of visibility and loss, memory and absence.

Amid censorship, archival gaps, and withheld information, Malani gives form to the untranslatable through shadows, ghostly, fragmented apparitions and echoes,

<sup>18</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), p. 208.



19 Spivak, 'Scattered Speculations on Translation Studies', in *Living Translation*, p. 208.

20 Author's conversation with the artist, August 2025.

that join her cast of characters. These untranslatables can be found in gaps between contexts, experiences, and worldviews. Malani inhabits this dialectical *in-between* space of translation, offering multiple perspectives through citation, fragmentation and polyphony. She embraces forms of non-hierarchical and non-reductive relations between her characters in this in-between space, which becomes a space of freedom unbounded by notions of original and translation, being and 'otherness'.

Malani sees it as an ethical and political imperative to address the untranslatable. Echoing Spivak's warning that 'civil war may be the allegoric name for an extreme form of untranslatability',<sup>19</sup> Malani states that 'war is the end of imagination'.<sup>20</sup> If the end of imagination is the end of translation, and if suppressing its leftovers fuels violence and conflict, then Malani is compelled to grapple with what resists interpretation. In her animations, violent apparitions appear and dissolve, punctuated with Joseph Conrad's stark refrain from the *Heart of Darkness* (1899): 'The horror, the horror...' Yet, following Goya's advice in 'The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters' from *Los Caprichos* (1797) series, she addresses the untranslatable through reason and imagination, 'the mother of the arts and source of their wonder.' Through these acts of translation, Malani continually addresses impossible situations to generate new interpretations.

Faced with both the necessity and impossibility of translation, in *Of Woman Born* Malani embraces *(mis)translation*, not as a form of poor translation, but as an ethical and creative strategy to address the untranslatables. She re-reads and re-writes across signs, media and cultures to amplify what has been oppressed and to unpick the entanglement between language, history and authority. Above all, her work illuminates what remains in between: the unspeakable violences that haunt geopolitical conflict and the persistent injustices that go unheard, manifest as residual traces lingering between words, images, and sounds. Here, Malani asks us to listen, look and feel otherwise.















AND  
THE  
TANKS  
FOLLOWED







I am tired



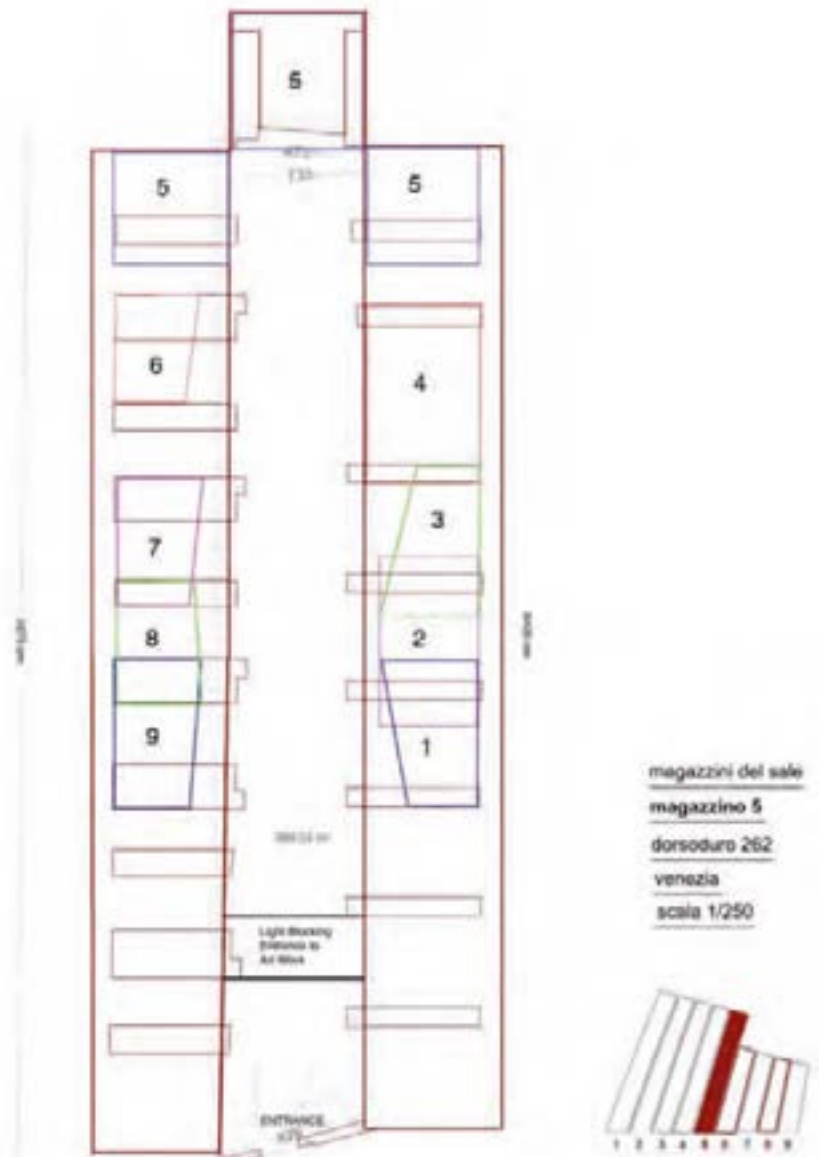
# Exhibited Artwork

## *Of Woman Born*

2026

67 iPad animation  
31 minutes and 57 seconds

Audio poem  
20 minutes and 20 seconds



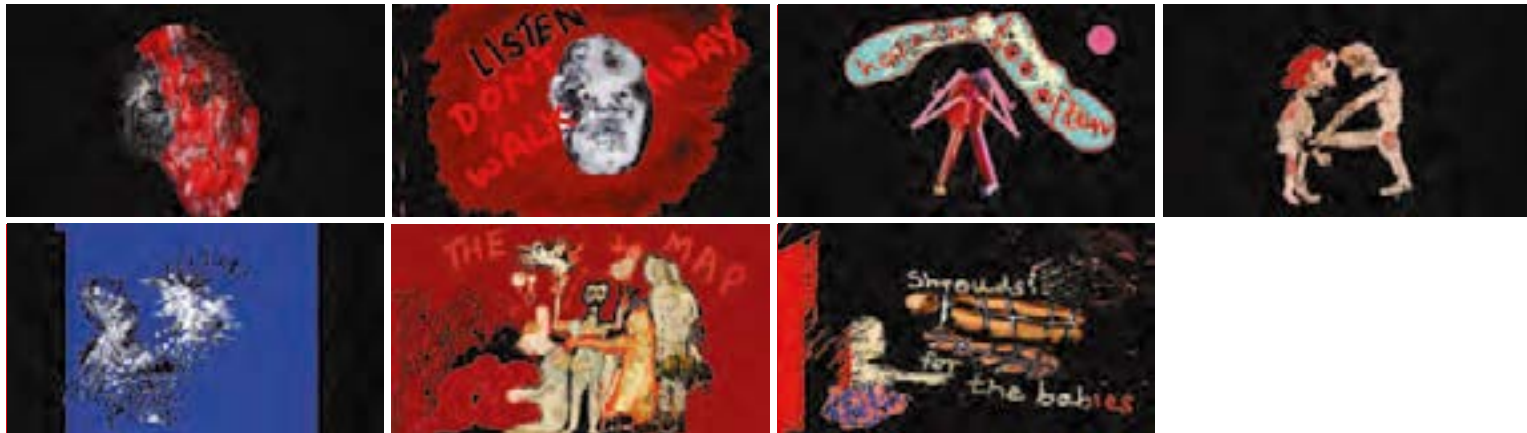




**Channel 4, 2:56 mins**

Mutant IV / Listen, Look / My Head! My Head! / Provocation

Aggression / And Humour is Gone / Shrouds for the Babies

**Channel 5, 4:31 mins**

Mutant V / The Furies / No Mothers, Only Vessels / Hatred

The Horror, the Horror / The Rise and Fall / Cassandra / Skipping Girl

**Channel 6, 3:16 mins**

Mutant VI / Divide and Rule / The Furies / How Did You Die Child?

Drones / The Lullaby of Drones / The Landscape of my Death

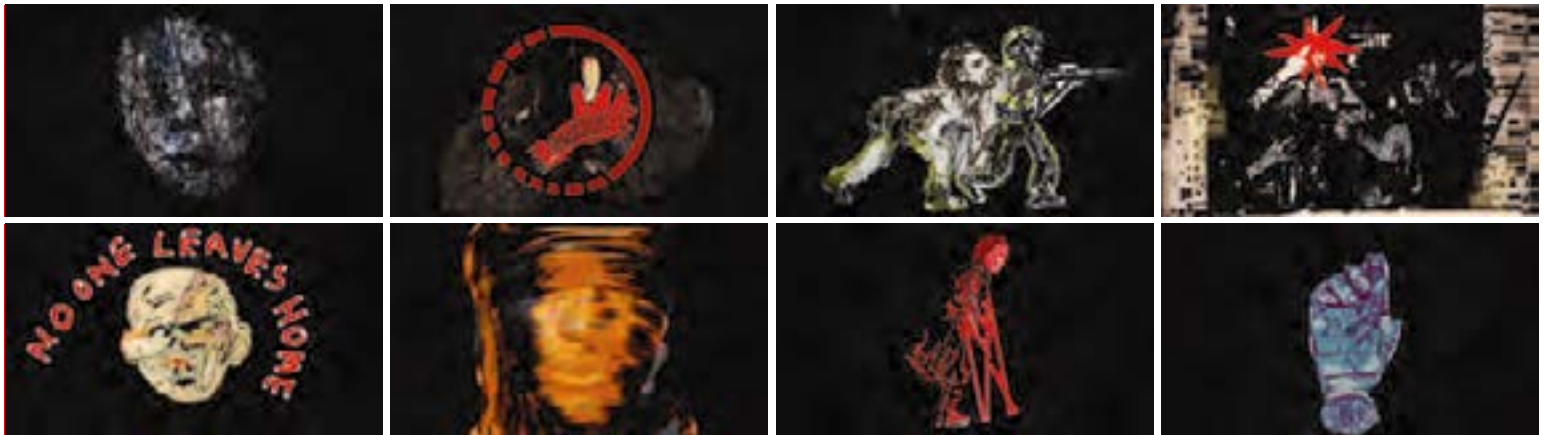




**Channel 7, 4:09 mins**

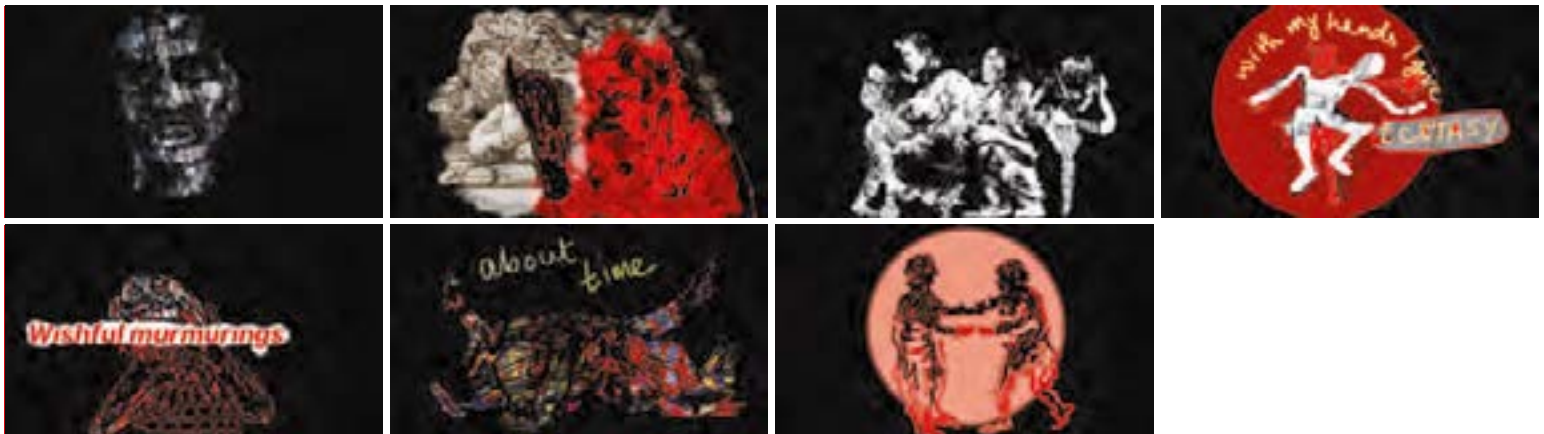
Mutant VII / Hold Your Tongue / Kill, Kill, Kill / Remembering Guernica

The Trauma of Man-Made Borders / Facing the Squad / Will My Leg Grow Back? / Mutilation

**Channel 8, 3:13 mins**

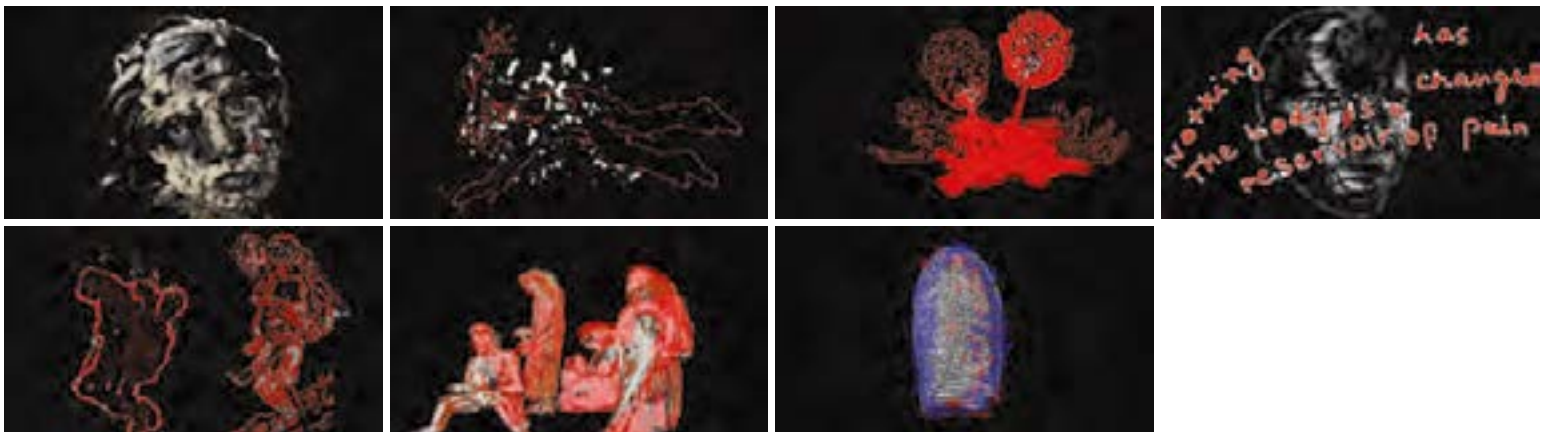
Mutant VIII / The Sleep of Reason / Vietnam / Angel of Despair

Democracy / Ubu Roi / Friendship in Dark Times

**Channel 9, 2:44 mins**

Mutant IX / Burning Man / Bloodsuckers / Nothing has Changed

Escape / Who will ask the Women? / ID



## Audio Transcription

Woman, what's your name?  
I don't know.  
How old are you? Where are you from?  
I don't know.  
How long have you been hiding?  
I don't know.  
Why did you bite my finger?  
I don't know.  
Don't you know that we won't hurt you?  
I don't know.  
Whose side are you on?  
I don't know.  
This is war, you've got to choose.  
I don't know.  
Does your village still exist?  
I don't know.  
Are those your children?  
Yes!

Write what I tell you in your book of memory.

In visions of the night, like dropping rain,  
descend the many memories of pain.

They sent forth men to battle,  
but no such men return.  
They came back  
to widows,  
to fatherless children,  
to screams,  
to sobbing.  
The men came back  
as little clay jars,  
ashes in an urn.

But the lust for power never dies – men cannot have enough.  
No one will lift a hand to send it from his door, to give it warning.  
Power, never come again!

The sleeping brain has eyes that give us light,  
we can never see our destiny by day.



Look – can't you see?  
The more you kick  
the more you suffer.

In war, truth is the first casualty.

Unanimous hatred is the greatest medicine for a human community.

Rumours voiced by women come to nothing.  
Come to nothing  
Come to nothing  
Come to nothing  
To nothing  
To nothing...

You wish to be called righteous rather than act right.  
I say, wrong must not win by technicalities.

Alas, poor men, their destiny,  
when all goes well a shadow will overthrow it.  
If it be unkind, one stroke of a wet sponge wipes all the picture out.

This was always going to happen.  
She's been dead since the beginning.

She looked like a painting dying to speak.

Death is softer by far than tyranny.

For tyranny, it seems, is never free  
from this distemper – faithlessness to friends.

I will speak on defence of reason:  
for the very child of vanity is violence.

Radiant dreams are passing in the night,  
the memories throb with sorrow, joy with pain.  
It is pain to dream and see desires  
slip through the arms.  
A vision lost for ever  
winging down the moving drifts of sleep.

Nothing speaks the truth.  
Nothing!  
Nothing tells us how things really are.  
Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing.  
Nothing forces us to know  
what we do not want to know,  
except pain.  
Nothing...

And life beats on,  
 and we nurse our lives with tears,  
 to the sound of ripping linen beat our robes in sorrow,  
 close to the breast the beats throb,  
 and laughter's gone and fortune throbs, and throbs.

Yet again, isn't there something terrible in randomness,  
 the idea that at the very bottom of calculations,  
 real depravity has no master plan of any kind,  
 it's just a dreamy whim that slides out of people  
 when they are trapped or bored.

You have used me strangely.

Grant me a vision greater than all my embarkations past!  
 It is the custom here. I will tell the future!  
 Terrors to tell, terrors all can see.  
 The strength drains, it's very hard to stand.  
 Crawling on all fours, no spring in the legs.  
 An old woman, gripped by fear, is nothing,  
 a child, nothing more.

You – how can you sleep?  
 Awake! Awake!

What use are sleepers now?  
 I go stripped of honour, thanks to you,  
 alone among the dead.  
 And for those I killed  
 the charges of the dead will never cease, never.  
 I wander in disgrace, I feel the guilt, I tell you,  
 withering guilt from all the outraged dead!

I was slaughtered by his matricidal hand.

The sleeping brain has eyes that give us light;  
 we can never see our destiny by day.

Mocking laughter, twists across his face.

The miles of pain, the pain I suffer...  
 and all for nothing, all for pain, more pain,  
 the anguish, oh, the grief too much to bear!

Guilt both ways, and who can call it justice?

Your throne is streaming blood!  
 Blood at the foot, blood at the crowning head.



You are no mere accomplice in this crime.  
 You did it all, and all the guilt is yours.  
 You commanded to kill his mother.

And the dead find little freedom in the end.

And all men's dreams of grandeur  
 tempting the heavens,  
 all melt down, under earth their pride goes down –  
 lost in our onslaught, black robes swarming.  
 For all his power black him out.  
 For the blood still fresh from slaughter on his hands.

Darkness hovers over men, dark guilt,  
 and a dense pall overhangs his house;  
 legend tells the story through her tears.

Destroyers of Life! We drive them from their houses.

Here is the truth, I tell you – see how right I am.  
 The woman you call the mother of the child  
 is not the parent, just a nurse to the seed,  
 the new-sown seed that grows and swells inside her.  
 The man is the source of life – the one who mounts.  
 She, like a stranger for a stranger, keeps  
 the shoot alive, unless God hurts the roots.  
 I give you proof that all I say is true.  
 The father can father forth without a mother.  
 Athena, here she stands, our living witness.  
 Look! Look at Athena!

Child sprung full-blown from Olympian Zeus,  
 never bred in the darkness of the womb  
 but such a stock no goddess could conceive.

The mockery of it!  
 Oh unbearable!  
 We the daughters of the night  
 our power stripped.  
 Cast off.

*This is the way the world ends  
 This is the way the world ends  
 This is the way the world ends  
 Not with a bang but a whimper.*

Is that you... Cassandra?





## Artist's Biography

Nalini Malani (b. 1946 in Karachi, Undivided India; lives and works in Bombay, now Mumbai) is a pioneering Indian artist whose multi-disciplinary practice spans six decades. Born a year before Indian Independence and the violent Partition, her family's forced migration to Bombay shaped her early upbringing. Malani's coming of age and artistic journey have since engaged with pivotal moments and key developments in postcolonial South Asia. Reflecting a deep disenchantment with the repressive powers of the state, her art confronts issues of cultural identity and socio-economic inequality.

Malani's career began in Bombay, where she spent six formative years at the Bhulabhai Desai Memorial Institute while continuing to work towards a Diploma in Fine Art at the J. J. School of Art, which she completed in 1969. She subsequently became a key member of the legendary Vision Exchange Workshop. Thanks to a prestigious scholarship, she undertook further study in Paris (1970–1972), broadening her engagement with philosophy and critical theory, which would profoundly influence her art upon returning to India.

In the late 1980s, Malani transitioned from a painterly, filmic, and photography-based practice to creating immersive installations, allowing audiences to experience themes more viscerally. She adopted the potent expressions of collaborative theatre plays, ephemeral wall drawings, and video/shadow plays to craft evocative stories that would reach a wider public. Drawing on classical mythology, history, postcolonial and feminist theory, and literature, her protagonists – often female – reimagine inherited narratives in the context of contemporary crises. Across her works, Malani subverts established iconographies to unsettle dominant modes of seeing and remembering, giving voice to those who are silenced and marginalised.

Recognised for her sustained commitment to art as a form of resistance, Malani's practice continues to inspire new generations. In 2010, she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate in Fine Arts by the San Francisco Art Institute. She received the Fukuoka Prize in Arts & Culture (2013), followed by the St. Moritz Art Masters Lifetime Achievement Award (2014), and the Asian Art Game Changers Award (2016). In 2019, she received the Joan Miró Prize, previously awarded to Mona Hatoum, Pipilotti Rist, and Olafur Eliasson. In 2021, she became the first recipient of the London National Gallery International Fellowship. Most recently, she received the CAA Distinguished Feminist Award (2023), and the Kyoto Prize in Arts and Philosophy (2023), often described as an Asian equivalent of the Nobel Prize; previous recipients include Joan Jonas, Nam June Paik, and Isamu Noguchi.

Malani has presented 29 solo museum exhibitions, including 4 retrospectives, participated in 22 biennales, and featured in over 200 museum group presentations. In 2014, the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA) organised her year-long retrospective in three parts, *You Can't Keep Acid in a Paper Bag*, curated by Roobina Karode and accompanied by an extensive catalogue. KNMA, New Delhi has the largest collection of art from Nalini Malani spanning six decades. Besides KNMA her works are held in more than 50 institutional collections worldwide, including M+, Hong Kong; Tate Modern, London; the Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Guggenheim, New York and the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. Tate Modern will present a major survey of her oeuvre in 2027.

# Colophon

This catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition:

Nalini Malani: *Of Woman Born*  
Kiran Nadar Museum of Art  
Collateral Event  
61st International Art Exhibition  
La Biennale di Venezia  
9 May – 22 November 2026  
Magazzini del Sale n. 5, Dorsoduro, Venice  
Curated by Roobina Karode

## Artwork

iPad Animations: Nalini Malani  
Video edit: Rikhav Desai and Nalini Malani  
Sound design: Nalini Malani and Stuart DaCosta  
Vocals: Neha Karode and Nalini Malani

## Exhibition

Project management: VeniceArtFactory  
Video/Audio: Eidotech  
Construction: Green Spin

## Publication

Editor: Roobina Karode  
Text edit: Emily Butler, Kist & Kilian  
Image edit: Johan Pijnappel and Nalini Malani  
Design: Willem Morelis and North Design  
Typeface: Zubtrak Stencil and Arnhem Pro  
Paper: GardaPat Klassica, 150 gsm  
Printing: Grafiche Veneziane  
Binding: Legatoria Berto

First published in 2026 by the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

© Kiran Nadar Museum of Art and the authors, for the reproduced art works by Nalini Malani, the artist

## Photo credits

Timothy Casten: 138-139  
Ranabir Das: 99  
Gireesh GV: 50  
Stephane Lemouton: 96  
Nalini Malani: 16-21, 31, 33, 35, 37, 38, 40-45, 52, 54, 58, 59, 60, 102-107, 114, 118, 120-125, 127-129  
Vivan Sundaram: 24  
Luke Walker: 1-8, 10, 22, 26, 28, 46, 56, 62-92, 97, 108, 110, 113, 134, 140-144

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any other information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission from the publisher.

The editor and publisher gratefully acknowledge the permission granted to reproduce the copyright material in this book. Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and to obtain permission for the use of copyright material. The publisher apologises for any errors or omissions and would be grateful if notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in future reprints or editions of this book.



## Acknowledgement

This publication and the presentation of Nalini Malani's *Of Woman Born* at the 61st International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia would not have been possible without the vision and steadfast support of Kiran Nadar, Founder and Chairperson of the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art. Her commitment to championing Indian contemporary art on the global stage has been foundational to this endeavour. I am deeply grateful to the Shiv Nadar Foundation for their generous support, which has enabled KNMA to realise this critical project.

My profound gratitude to Nalini Malani, whose extraordinary practice continues to challenge, provoke, and expand the boundaries of contemporary art. Her generosity in sharing her insights, process, and vision has been invaluable. I am equally thankful to Johan Pijnappel for his thoughtful engagement, extensive support and collaboration throughout this project.

I extend my gratitude to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev for the brilliant lead essay, Emily Butler and Nalini Malani for their insightful writing and editing that has enriched the publication.

My sincere appreciation to Premjish Achari and Srinivas Aditya Mopidevi, curators at KNMA who worked closely with me on this project: their rigorous research, smooth coordination, and sustained intellectual engagement have hugely contributed to the exhibition and this publication.

Finally, I acknowledge the invaluable contributions of our partners, VeniceArtFactory, Eidotech and Green Spin as well as the entire KNMA team, especially Deepanjana Klein, Apurva Kackar, Silpi Das, Radha Mahendru, Amrita Kapoor and the collective efforts of all who have brought this project to fruition.

**Roobina Karode**

# Kiran Nadar Museum of Art

The Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA) is India's pioneering private museum for modern and contemporary art, located in New Delhi and oriented to South Asia and the world. Established in 2010 by collector and philanthropist Kiran Nadar, KNMA stewards a growing collection of over 16,000 works and is a catalyst for critical engagement with art and its multiple histories.

Through research-driven exhibitions, publications, residencies, and a dense ecology of public programmes, the institution seeks to unsettle the idea of the museum as a mere container, imagining it instead as a changing infrastructure of care, interpretation, and collective thinking. The upcoming museum complex in New Delhi will transform KNMA into one of South Asia's most significant cultural institutions.







Architectural model by Adjaye Associates for Kiran Nadar Museum of Art  
at 18th Biennale Architettura, Venice 2023.





When Will the  
American  
People



THE ONLY WAY TO MORE















