

AiRCAST #7

PRIYAGEETHA DIA

NTU CENTRE FOR
CONTEMPORARY
ART SINGAPORE



Priyageetha Dia and Anca Rujoiu recording AiRCAST, 9 June 2022. Courtesy NTU CCA Singapore.

Anna Lovecchio: Welcome to the second season of AiRCAST. On this podcast, we visit the Residencies Studios of NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore nestled on the fringe of a vibrant rainforest in Gillman Barracks. In this series of open-ended conversations, we invite different guests to probe the mind of our Artists-in-Residence and unfold some of the ideas, materials, processes, influences, and research methodologies behind their practice. My name is Anna Lovecchio. I am a curator, Assistant Director of Programmes at NTU CCA, and the editor of this podcast.

In this episode, we hand over the microphone to curator and writer Anca Rujoiu to interview our Artist-in-Residence Priyageetha Dia. Priyageetha and Anca are fresh out of a year-long collaboration that culminated in *Forget Me, Forget Me Not* (2022), Priyageetha's solo exhibition curated by Anca which just opened last month. In this conversation they share about the background research, interests, and aesthetic strategies behind the new body of work presented in the exhibition and they will expand upon the significance of colonial histories and marginalised communities, agency and empowerment, media and materials in Priyageetha's practice.

Just a few words to introduce them.

Spanning moving image, sculpture, performance, and installation, the artistic practice of Priyageetha Dia revolves around histories of exploitation and identity politics. In recent years, she is experimenting with storytelling as a world-making strategy to address and redress the flaws of colonial narratives and breed the potential for future agencies.

Anca Rujoiu is a Romanian curator and editor working in Singapore since 2013. She was a member of the founding team of NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore. The numerous exhibitions, public programs, and publications she has curated speak of her strong artist-centric approach and commitment to creative practices beyond the West. She is currently pursuing a Ph.D. at Monash University with a research on institutional building, artists-led institutions, and transnational exchanges.

[Audio excerpt from *WE.REMAIN.IN.MULTIPLE.MOTIONS_MALAYA*, 2022. Courtesy the artist.]

Anca Rujoiu: Hi, Priya.

Priyageetha Dia: Hi, Anca.

Anca Rujoiu: It's really a pleasure to be in conversation with you today. We have been in dialogue for the past one year and I hope this conversation will wrap up many things that we have discussed while also raising new questions and placing your work within a bigger picture. Before I dig into my first question, I wanted to wish you happy birthday!

Priyageetha Dia: Thank you!

Anca Rujoiu: We are conducting this conversation at a very special moment. It's a turning point for you, age-wise. It's a nice coincidence, as it happens with anniversaries, to look back into the past so we understand where we are in the present. Also, two weeks ago, you opened a solo exhibition at Yeo Workshop, Forget me, Forget me not, and we will talk more in detail about it. With this solo exhibition in the background, while also carrying this conversation at a turning point for you age-wise, I wanted to start with a very broad question: how do you see your practice and your journey as a woman artist at this particular moment in time?

Priyageetha Dia: Thanks for starting with that question. It was definitely a pleasure working with you for the past one year on this exhibition. There was a lot of back and forth, exchanging, testing, and figuring things out together. I actually see that process as part of my practice as well. It forms a rhizome. It never really concludes. It's always blooming and extending. And, you know, my journey as a woman artist is not just me being a woman but also being someone who is Singaporean Tamil. I think a lot about my identity throughout my journey as an artist. And this is definitely challenging. There are discussions and discourses that have yet to happen within the Singapore arts scene and I think about bringing these up by highlighting specific lived experiences in my work. They form a part of me through this journey. I find myself sometimes struggling, sometimes embracing parts of myself throughout the process, but it is definitely an empowering journey for me so far. I see myself looking at identity politics not just on a local level, but also on an international level, such as what it means to be a Tamil artist not just here, but also outside of this [Singaporean] context. I see myself looking at identity politics not just on a local level, but also on an

international level, such as what it means to be a Tamil artist not just here, but also outside of this [Singaporean] context.

Anca Rujoiu: Compared to six years ago, where do you see yourself now as an artist?

Priyageetha Dia: Within my practice, in the last six years, I have touched on many important topics that I find have yet to be discussed. One being my identity—from where I started to where I am now. Thinking about identity is not just about the personal but also the historical, the biographical, and the social. How there are many, how do I put it, many things that I have yet to speak about. About the last six years, I guess I don't have one concrete answer because it's still developing. It's still changing. But there has definitely been a lot of growth from where I started five or six years ago.

Anca Rujoiu: I just want to pick up on what you mentioned just now, that you started to look at identity from a broader historical perspective, if that's the right way to put it, going beyond the personal. I believe that is also at the core of the exhibition that we worked on together, Forget me, Forget me not, where you have been looking into the history of migration of Indian communities from South India to Malaya to work in rubber plantations. Maybe we can start by talking a bit about this history. Do you want to elaborate on what drove your interest into this specific narrative? How did your research start?

Priyageetha Dia: For me, it's a question of being in this part of the world. My positionality within Singapore. raised a few questions and got me to think about my roots, my ancestors, and their journey to Southeast Asia. I guess it was a new way of thinking about the histories of Tamil labourers coming into Southeast Asia, to reflect back into my own family and personal histories. And that started from a conversation with my cousin, looking back at how labour has been so diverse within our own family.

Anca Rujoiu: We should mention that your cousin is in Malaysia?

Priyageetha Dia: Yes. I would say I have very limited family here [in Singapore] and most of my family is based in Malaysia. I don't have other relations elsewhere. So it's within the context of Singapore, and Malaysia, where part of my identity

forms. To think about these histories is to think it through tracing back into Malaysia itself and then thinking about, you know, the colonial period of Malaya. Having these conversations with my cousin was quite enriching because there were certain narratives that I didn't know were part of our family history. And, then, understanding my aunt's role in the plantation, and the sort of routine and practices that she did, or performed, as a plantation labourer. These were things that formed part of my research for *Forget Me, Forget Me Not*. And then it kind of developed into reading accounts of plantation labourers that were being recorded or documented by the colonial subjects. There were definitely a lot of emotions that arose from reading these accounts; partly because the information that was presented had a lot of trauma and pain, and there was the lack of agencies to give voice to the plantation laborers. Apart from reading the accounts, there were a lot of colonial archives that documented the plantation estates as well as of the labourers performing the labour. Looking at that, I wanted to devise a new form of thinking, or even playing as a storyteller in retelling these narratives in a newer form that gave more agency, or respect, to the labourers who are skilled workers. They knew the trade of running a plantation and even the ropes of tapping rubber.

Anca Rujoiu: Maybe to give a bit more context to this specific historical narrative, we should mention that the history you looked at was a time when Malaya became the largest rubber exporter. It also became the most profitable industry for the British Empire. This type of economy, as you mentioned, relied extensively on migrant workers coming from parts of present-day South India. From the research you did, and the documentation that we shared together, one contradiction that we noticed, first of all, was that these workers were considered unskilled, which is ridiculous because there was so much skill involved in the tapping of rubber. It really required mathematical precision to cut the bark in a way that does not damage, or minimise damage, to the tree. We also became more aware of how the system of what at the time was called 'indentured labour' was more or less disguised slavery. It relied on forms of control across all aspects of life, from the [labour] the workers did, the food they ate, the clothes they wore, and so on. That's a bit of the background of the research that you conducted. I think what has been so distinct in your work for this exhibition is that you not only looked into these archives, but you really confronted them. You were trying to speak back to them...

Priyageetha Dia: Yeah, working with these materials, these histories, and narratives, while thinking about how these histories were presented by non-Tamil people... I thought, you know, these stories are being told by outsiders. So what is my role as a Tamil woman? What is my role here? [How] to provide or give a sense of agency back to the labourers? I mentioned before about being overwhelmed with reading the accounts and, at some point, angry because there was just so much violence that was being recorded on how they [labourers] were being treated. For me, it was important to bring a sense of empowerment to these laborers and I took on the role as a storyteller. I thought about retelling the story in a way that I could give a sense of agency [to the labourers]. I don't know if I'm repeating myself but being a storyteller was definitely a challenging process for me because when histories have been recorded with so much violence and trauma, how can I form a new way of telling them? That's what I struggled the most with— to form a narrative around it. For me, the way I went about this was to think of how I used language to describe and form experiences. Be it about the human and its relation to the environment, or about the nonhuman as well. So thinking about the body in its environment, about Malaya as a person itself, and how it houses these stories. Not just to talk about, you know, plantation life, but how they have been part of a landscape... to think about the travels through waters to different routes. To think about the journey into Malaya. To think about how they looked at land through a different sort of gaze. And to think about a sense of care, and of being gentle in a way like with the rubber tapping leaving the scars on the tree bark. To think about approaching it in a very caring manner. To think about the life of the nonhumans as well, that were basically endangered because of the plantation systems. Bringing back their memories was a way to strategise the narrative for me.

[Audio excerpt from *WE.REMAIN.IN.MULTIPLE.MOTIONS_MALAYA*, 2022. Courtesy the artist.]

Anca Rujoiu: You made this storytelling manifest in an animation that you created specifically for this exhibition. We'll talk more in detail about the animation but, as part of it, you constructed a narrative, a poem, or rather, a body of writing that is made out of a shared vocabulary across the Tamil and Malay languages. This poem, I would say, really conjures the voices of the labourers and it guides the viewers into the journey of migration and labour. Before we talk more specifically about your interest in language, do you want to share the poem that you wrote for this exhibition which is integrated into the animation itself?

Priyageetha Dia: Okay. Do you want me to read it out?

Anca Rujoiu: Yes.

[Audio excerpt from *WE.REMAIN.IN.MULTIPLE.MOTIONS_MALAYA*, 2022. Courtesy the artist.]

Priyageetha Dia: Okay...



Priyageetha Dia, *Forget Me, Forget Me Not*, 2022, installation view, Yeo Workshop. Courtesy Ahmad Iskandar.

Our Labour
was wanted
in the பூமி [Bumi]
of the
Sea People

Sayang,
the சமுத்திரம் [semudera]
remembers
the calling

for us to be
on the edges
of far-shy
constellations
and flattering
currents

the monsoon
breaths
and migratory
flows

exiled melanin-rich souls
from active chambers
of the கப்பல் [kapal]

Sayang,
the winds remember
the cosmic chants
of Our Descendants

and பக்தி [bhakti]
for Bodies
and Land

while we memorised
the faint சரித்திரம் [cerita]
of those Free
and Unfree

bellied deep
into the
unknown archives,

We remember
these tender hands

circuiting
in bloodlines
that stretched
across
the ends
of other channels

into an
infinite abyss

[break]

Sayang,
power was
never
peculiar
to மனிதன் [manusia]

the demands
for Us

yielded the raging force
into a common kin

who resisted
in whispers of
insolent tongues

living in
chronic
motions
on reddened,
rusting
lands

seeking
tenderness of
restful order

within these
Nusantara
worlds

Sayang,
these grounds
Remember

the ஜீவன் [Jiwa]
of other
Beings
exiled into
a thing
of the past

rooted in
primal
reminders

etched
between
the folds

and creases
of calloused hands

Sayang,
as the பூமி [Bumi]
withers
so has
Our Labour

buried beneath
like blooming
rhizomes of

flesh
and blood

Echoing, seeping
in between steel
and stone

and the smells
of camphor,
gingelly and
சந்தனம் [cendana]

still drifts
across
the Kalinga Seas

Sayang,
we remember
those of us
seen
or unseen

everywhere
yet
nowhere

murmuring in
Old and New
futures
under the
ancient
சூரியன் [Surya]

gathering,
locating in
spectral forces
amongst
the breathing,
living
in the
பூமி [Bumi] of the
Sea People

Anca Rujoiu: Thank you Priya. Do you want to talk about the process of writing this text and why it was important for you to create connections across the Tamil and Malay vocabularies?

Priyageetha Dia: For me, to think about creating this narrative or to build these visual languages of rethinking the plantation, the stories, and the labourers, was to also use language as a form to re-envision the other side of the story. The use of 'english' was very intentional; english with the small, lower-cap 'e'. I thought about the historical connection of language by thinking through its similarities between Tamil and Malay vocabularies. In a way, the narrative becomes complete for those who understand or speak the languages. The way that I approached it was to... write back. To think about how I am producing forms of knowledge through this language and it doesn't become easy for someone who only speaks or understands english. The meaning, then, becomes almost foreign in a way. Initially, throughout the process of thinking about the language that I was forming for the narrative, we thought about inserting the English translation of these words into the video work. I was thinking about how to not give it away easily if someone were to watch the video, and about positioning the English translation at the end of the video. That was definitely an intentional way of prioritising those who speak and understand the language.

Anca Rujoiu: At what point, or how did you, become aware about this shared vocabulary? And what did this signal to you?

Priyageetha Dia: I think about language through my ancestors, especially the way my grandma speaks. The language which is both a combination of Tamil and Malay, and sometimes English. To think about that mixture through that narrative [of migration and plantation labour] was something unique in its positionality. How certain words in Malay almost become part of everyday speech in Tamil households here is a very unique thing, because you do not find that outside of Southeast Asia. I thought of bringing that kind of structure into the narrative.

Anca Rujoiu: Going back into the animation itself, we mentioned that this text was integrated into the video, which I would say is really the core piece in the exhibition. This is all computer-generated imagery (CGI). It's not also the first time you are working with this medium but I believe that this 12-minute animation is perhaps your most developed video. It combines, as you already described, tropical landscape imagery with more apocalyptic scenes of destruction, sea waves, rubber trees, and we are guided through this landscape through the lens and the body of a protagonist with female bodily attributes as well as a hybrid entity. So before we dig deeper into the animation itself, let's talk about the choice of medium. I think it's important to highlight that you are self-taught in CGI. I wanted to ask you: what drove you towards this specific medium? And how did you see CGI as an appropriate language to transpose this historical content?

Priyageetha Dia: For me, the last few years have been a way to reconsider the way I approach my practice. Partly because I didn't have a studio space, this lack of space drove me to think about my practice digitally. I spent the last few years learning CGI through YouTube tutorials. It was definitely a steep learning curve. One thing that fascinated me was that I could build these worlds and have a sense of control over how I wanted to form the narrative, or to form the way an object or a subject move. To think about how that materiality could mimic reality and bring about new forms of looking at a subject, or even a landscape... I really liked it. World-building is definitely something that I found myself really interested in, as a way of thinking about things in a very speculative manner. Working with CGI opened up all these possibilities. The way I started working with CGI was to look at free 3D assets or models, and to just play around with them. Through that process, I understood the very different technicalities that come into play using or

just making things with CGI. That was very enriching for me. Yeah, and I definitely love the process of building things while sitting down.

Anca Rujoiu: Does it give you a certain freedom?

Priyageetha Dia: Yes, definitely. Because I have that sense of control where I am able to project my visions through a specific visual language. I like that a lot.

Anca Rujoiu: Can you talk more about this process of world building? What is distinct about it? What informs your own vision about the world?

Priyageetha Dia: It's almost like... in the digital world you can construct your own environment, or landscape, and you just basically put things together. Then you have this entirely new world to yourself! In a way, you also take on a role as a filmmaker, because you control how you want to envision your perspectives of the landscape, of the environment, or of how your subject moves. As part of the process of learning CGI, in a way you also learn about becoming a filmmaker, through having that sense of control with how you create your own moving-image works. Yeah, and with animation... I am still learning a lot about CGI. I would definitely say I am still an amateur. I haven't yet developed to be a professional. But this work for *Forget Me, Forget Me Not*, it's a starting point to think about animation and film, as well as thinking about feminist perspectives through making moving-image works. I definitely see that developing over the course of the next few years.

Anca Rujoiu: To make it a bit more visual for the listeners—do you want to pick up a specific scene from the animation in *Forget Me, Forget Me Not*, describe it, and give some details on how you crafted it?

Priyageetha Dia: It usually starts with storyboarding. By imagining the retelling of these histories and narratives, you have to go through that whole phase of imagining. In becoming a storyteller, I take on the role of envisioning how I see different scenes, and these are almost very basic in themselves. Thinking about the breathing body: do I want to capture the entire body or do I want to capture a specific part of the body that encapsulates the breathing movement? So zooming in, have the camera focus just on the neck and chest area to capture that movement of breathing. To think about the sound of labour and then to

embody the being itself as Malaya... I thought about all of that throughout the storyboarding process.

[Audio excerpt from *WE.REMAIN.IN.MULTIPLE.MOTIONS_MALAYA*, 2022. Courtesy the artist.]

And throughout this animation process, thinking about the style of how I position the visuals was also to think about the absence of the horizon. I took on the vertical perspective as a way to create a sense of timelessness in body and in space. The horizon which is a very Western way of thinking about how land and time are separated. I wanted to move away from that and think about the entire animation in a vertical perspective, thinking about the landscape in a vertical perspective... Even the body, and the nonhuman, everything was captured vertically.

Anca Rujoiu: Yes, there is very little sense of depth in this animation, which I think really amplifies its texture and sense of tactility. But let's do an exercise and think of a specific scene. I have in mind one where you zoomed in and you get really close to the metallic skin of the protagonist. You can see the piece of jewellery with the name 'Malaya' and you become aware of the materiality of the body. Do you want to talk about how you thought that specific scene through?

Priyageetha Dia: I think I didn't really have a specific way of going about it. I just thought of looking at the details and the movement, and thinking of what would best capture that. The materiality of the skin, you know, it could be read in so many layers. I was thinking of the spectral figure, almost like a glowing body with a glowing skin, or hardened skin. To think about labour and industrial materials, and how it sort of manifests as a bodily thing. So, initially, when I was planning out for that scene, it started off as something glowing and shiny, and then it became skin-like throughout that whole process. Yeah, it never made, or mimics, a sense of hyperrealism of an actual body or skin.

Anca Rujoiu: As I mentioned, this animation is really at the core of the exhibition. There are many elements that extend in the show itself. One important component are the labouring hands that are featured in the animation which also takes a material form in the space of the exhibition. Someone who enters the exhibition is confronted with these hands that are blown out and glued on

the wall guiding the viewer through the space. Do you want to talk about your interest in this movement, or of the performativity of hands that you have also explored in the past?

Priyageetha Dia: I think about the figure of the hand as a metaphor for labour, and I emphasise or amplify the hand throughout the exhibition space. I don't think about the hand just for its potential use for labour, but how it acts or becomes part of a gesture of care, of embrace within that space. For me, the hand was an integral part of forming the entire narrative for the video work. And then to also think about how it doesn't necessarily have to be the figure of the hand, but also with the placement of the soil just beneath the hands on the walls, to think about movement through other materials. Even with the hammock, it captures the figures of the plantation labourers performing and working on the estates so as to think about how the hand doesn't necessarily take on a very large scale, but it also exists on a very micro level. When you look into the works, the hands are repeated throughout the entire exhibition. But when we were planning for the show and we were doing the rendering for the space, I was initially looking at how the hands come together as a way of emulating a hug in that space, or



Priyageetha Dia, *Forget Me, Forget Me Not*, 2022, installation view, Yeo Workshop. Courtesy Ahmad Iskandar.

as a way of acting as a wayfinder within the space. Someone actually mentioned about how the TV, or the screen, acts like the body in the space and the hands sort of extend from the screen. So, in a way, they look at the entire space as a body situated within the exhibition space.

Anca Rujoiu: That's a very interesting observation because we were thinking through the exhibition design as a way of creating a unified environment, even if the space itself has partitions. In the architecture of the exhibition, the hands became a bounding element and a way to create connections from one space to another. I am also glad you mentioned the hammock which is another important part of the exhibition. You improvised a hammock out of latex sheets on which you imprinted edited stock photographs of workers in the plantations. You talk about this hammock as a way to put these bodies at rest, if I recall correctly.



Priyageetha Dia, *Forget Me, Forget Me Not*, 2022, installation view, Yeo Workshop. Courtesy Ahmad Iskandar.

Priyageetha Dia: At the beginning of the research, while looking at colonial archives and imagery, the ones you see resting in the armchairs or hammocks were the colonizers. So to think about that in contrast with sites of rest and bodies performing labour was a way to build something [new]. I actually bought a lot of latex in the beginning of my research and I was thinking of what I could make out of this material. The interesting thing about getting the material, which I got from the UK, was also how it...

Anca Rujoiu: Although the rubber was produced in Malaysia!

Priyageetha Dia: Exactly. It's quite funny because on their website, the company mentioned about how they sourced the materials from Malaysia. The process of buying back the rubber to talk about these issues was also part of that process. Latex as material... it's an interesting one because within the Western context, rubber has been manipulated in a way that it becomes a material of fetishization. I decided to look away from that context and to think about latex as just a rubber material. It was a way of reclaiming that material back and to think about the imagery of plantation labourers as well as how I could put those two things together. So for me to build a hammock was to think about that specific site of rest and to contrast it with the imagery of plantation labourers performing the labour. In that hammock itself, the images are actually screen printed on the latex. And in a way, the image becomes part of the material; it's almost like it's ingrained within the material. It's an act of, you know, bringing it all back together, or reclaiming directly in the material.

Anca Rujoiu: We should mention that [the stock images] are screen printed with white ink on a white latex sheet. So the photographs become quite spectral.

Priyageetha Dia: The choice of white ink was to think about invisibility, or even just visibility. At a distance, the image comes out in its entirety, but up close, the image becomes obscure, vague. You can't really tell what the image actually is. And I thought that was sort of an interesting dynamic in looking at the image itself.

Anca Rujoiu: And these are the images that you sourced online. If anyone googles 'Malaya rubber', they will find these colonial photographs that are now owned by corporations, the largest being Getty Images. You appropriated these images and processed them...

Priyageetha Dia: It's a way to think about how colonial archives have been distributed online and profited off by corporations and, also, think about my role as a Tamil person working on this research. Do I then participate in the act of profiting off the image by purchasing the image? Or do I just then use the image with the watermark that is still explicitly shown on the image itself? For me, my intention was to reclaim the imagery as a way of almost giving it a second life, not to think about it as just being stored away online. So I went about removing the colonial photographer's name, and just retained the watermark of the corporations who own the images as a way to think about the ownership of the image, and the issues of consent in colonial photography, the power behind the colonial gaze... I was thinking about all that using the archival imagery in the hammock.

Anca Rujoiu: This is a very spontaneous question, Priya, but since you mentioned your interest in latex as material... there is certain tradition of using latex in the arts. I wonder if you looked at artists like Eva Hesse and thought about latex as a sculptural material, but from a woman's standpoint.

Priyageetha Dia: When I was an undergraduate, I actually worked on latex. Unknowingly, it came about again. So working with this material almost forms a cycle in my practice. But yes, I actually worked with latex as a material before. I thought about it as a very sculptural material then, much in the same way as Eva Hesse employed latex... I used it to create casts out of spaces within the HDB home. So I approached latex to capture the space and the architectural structures of a HDB house, be it the window grills, the gates, or the doors. And that's how I came about employing latex as a way to kind of create a sense of memory.

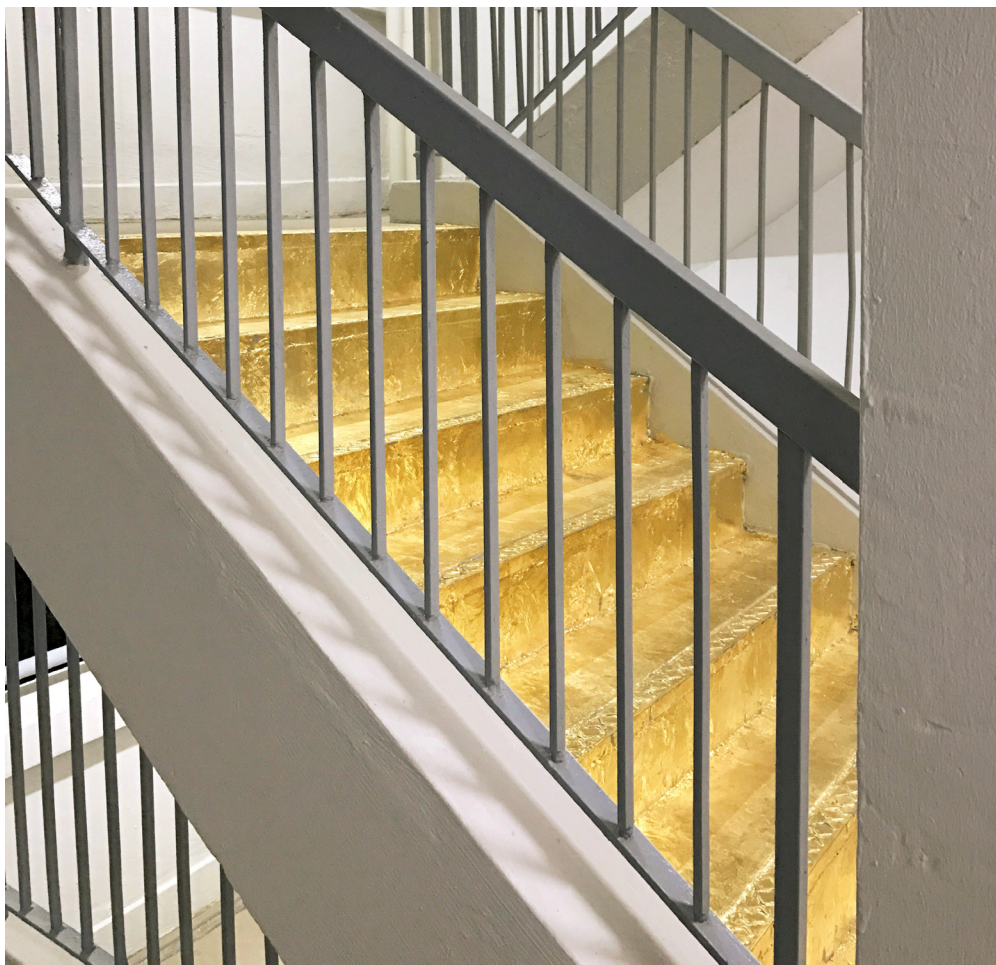
Anca Rujoiu: After talking about the use of latex in your work, let's move the discussion to another recurrent material in your practice: gold. At some point, you mentioned to me that your forefathers were goldsmiths and part of the reason that gold became such an important material for you was to reconnect with a lost family tradition, but this time from a women's perspective. Your graduation work, *Golden Staircase* (2017), received a lot of attention. We don't need to go into the meaning and reception of this specific work, but would you mind talking about the meaning of gold in your practice and also in relation to your other past works.



Priyageetha Dia, *Forget Me, Forget Me Not*, 2022, installation view, Yeo Workshop.

Courtesy Ahmad Iskandar.

Priyageetha Dia: For me, the materiality of gold takes form as a sort of ancestral material, and I use it in a way to potentially transform space, or even take up space in a way. That's how the Golden Staircase happened. To think about transformation, or to think about the experience of space, especially living in public housing my entire life. To think about that materiality within that setting was sort of transformative. In fact, that particular flight of stairs... I hold a very personal relationship to that space. As a way of honouring, or creating a sense of memory within that space, I gilded the entire flight of stairs in gold. It was meant as a form of documentation before it actually got hyped up online and offline. The work existed there for about a week, and I eventually took it down. Just to think about the transformation of space through a specific material and to think about taking up space, and honouring space, it was very important in the production of that work for me. I also think about my family tradition, of being part of a goldsmiths or even blacksmiths [family], and then part of it was also about plantation labourers. It's a mix. And I see these materials as a way to think about my practice.



Priyageetha Dia, *Golden Staircase*, 2017, installation view. Courtesy the artist.

Anca Rujoiu: So one year after *Golden Staircase*, you made a continuation to it, if that's a correct way to put it. This was *ABSENT-PRESENT (GOLDEN FLAGS)* [2018] where you hung golden flags on every floor in the same [apartment] block where you had *Golden Staircase*, a block where you've been living for over 20 years. You hung these flags on hooks which are typically used for hanging the Singapore flag during the National Day celebrations and the work was later removed and destroyed by the authorities. Apart from the obvious connections, what made you continue with this work?

Priyageetha Dia: The work was definitely a play on identity... to think about space or taking up space was to also think about the entire building, since I had been living in that space for a very long time. Then, I thought about how I could potentially create these flags and hang them on each floor. It was a way to look at the entire architecture of the HDB block as a body itself. And yes, it was a continuation of *Golden Staircase*. It was also the year I actually left that HDB block and moved to another neighbourhood. So it acts as a way of remembering the space, as well as my position within public housing.

Anca Rujoiu: You also showed these flags in a new work within a gallery space where you marked each golden flag with a word written in red; the words were selected from criticism that you received on *Golden Staircase*. I have not seen these works, only in documentation, but I was a bit surprised that you made the choice to expose and amplify that criticism. Why was that important for you?



Priyageetha Dia, *ABSENT-PRESENT*, 2018, installation view. Courtesy the artist.

Priyageetha Dia: For me, *ABSENT-PRESENT* somehow formed an integral dialogue with *Golden Staircase*. As a society, we see artworks, specifically public artworks, being formed within the environment, as reflection of society and of how society looks at that material. Initially, when it was removed, I was told it reminded [people] of Chinese joss papers and it was inauspicious. There were also other comments about it being an act of vandalism and even a hazard for public safety for those who are living in that block. All of these words were selected based on, I guess, how people reacted to the work and they just became part of the work as a stencil in red.

Anca Rujoiu: Maybe to think in the big picture about your practice... I think it's fascinating that your work started with such a material basis with these site-specific works. You also did a series of performance works, using your own body or working in collaboration with peers. And now, you are starting to integrate CGI and digital technology into your work. How do you make these transitions between the material and the digital? And how do you see yourself balancing these relations in the future?

Priyageetha Dia: I guess my practice takes on a rather shapeshifting approach. It's never really concrete in one form. I like to be as fluid and malleable as possible in my practice, for instance the materiality of gold is translated digitally where it takes the form of an alter ego, or avatar, and it shapeshifts throughout. It's not just necessarily about gold. Now, I am more interested in the historical narratives of Southeast Asia, how that could be portrayed as a material, and if it could potentially take another form by using CGI. So it's definitely a transformation from where I started to where I am now. I might potentially go back to thinking about site-specific works in the future. I'm just going to be as fluid as possible.

Anca Rujoiu: This will be my last question as we are running out of time. We are doing this conversation in the context of you being an Artist-in-Residence at NTU CCA Singapore, in the beautiful landscape of Gillman Barracks. If I'm not wrong, it is the first time you have a studio for yourself, right?

Priyageetha Dia: Yes, yes, it's such a nice feeling to have an entire studio space to yourself to just sit, reflect, think, read, sleep! It's a privilege to have a space as big as the NTU CCA Singapore's studio. I'm really looking forward to thinking about potentially opening up the studio and showing my research to the public.

Anca Rujoiu: That was going to be my question: what does it mean for you to have a studio space and if it will influence your practice in any way?

Priyageetha Dia: Definitely. Now that I've been provided a screen and some speakers... I am even thinking about producing electronic music because I've always been using found music in my work. To think about producing [my own music] with the given equipment in the space, I'm definitely looking forward to that, as well as to potentially create newer world-building scenes using CGI and just testing it out on the screens. That's what I'm looking forward to for the next two to three months.

Anca Rujoiu: Great. I'm looking forward to it too!

Priyageetha Dia: Thank you Anca.

Anca Rujoiu: I think we can end here, no?

Priyageetha Dia: Yes!

Anna Lovecchio: You listened to AiRCAST, a podcast of NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, a national research centre for contemporary art of Nanyang Technological University. To find out more about our programmes, visit our website at www.ntu.ccasingapore.org, you can sign up to our newsletter, or follow us on your favourite social media platforms. And of course, if you'd like to hear the voices and thoughts of our other Artists-in-Residence, do subscribe to this podcast. AiRCAST is produced by NTU CCA Singapore with the support of National Arts Council Singapore.

This episode featured artist Priyageetha Dia in conversation with Anca Rujoiu. I am Anna Lovecchio, the editor of this podcast. The Programme Manager is Nadia Amalina. The Audio Engineer, Ashwin Menon.

The intro and the outro were composed by our previous Artist-in-Residence Yuen Chee Wai with field recordings of our non-human neighbours in the beautiful forest around us. Thank you for listening.