



Suchitra Mattai

she walked in reverse and found their songs

Exhibition Guide

June 6 – September 15, 2024

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Suchitra Mattai was born in Georgetown, Guyana, and immigrated to Canada as a young child. The history of her ancestors—brought from India to work as indentured laborers in Guyana—deeply influences her practice. Using techniques passed down through generations, she weaves materials marked by the past into a collective story of migration and gendered labor. In this exhibition Mattai turns inward, examining the power of memory in the creation of her own stories: sometimes factual, sometimes fantastical, with divergent pieces collapsing and combining into something new.

At the center of the exhibition, Mattai reimagines her grandparents' home in Guyana, the core of her migration story. Elsewhere, the imagined interior of that home spills into the gallery, where sculptures and characters help guide us along a memory journey. The title of the exhibition, *she walked in reverse and found their songs*, points to the ways in which peering back can help us find our place in the world. But it also points to slippages between past and present, reminding us that memory is subjective and that histories can—and should—be rewritten. Mattai invites us to create space for ourselves where there was none before, engage legacies of the past while rupturing with tradition, and mobilize memory toward new futures.

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Photography by Paul Salveson, Heather Rasmussen, and Nicholas Lea Bruno.



the guide, 2023

Worn saris, fabric, fringe, beaded trim, and vintage relief plaque

Courtesy the artist and Roberts Projects

This work acts as our portal—inviting yet impenetrable—into Mattai’s memory. The artist built it from found furniture and worn saris (a traditional Indian women’s garment) to summon their collective aura into the exhibition. The doorway recalls an Indian palace, offering entry into Mattai’s cultural heritage. At the center of the tapestry rests a gold plated medallion with the first of many female characters (often goddesses, nymphs or celestial beings that Mattai transforms into brown heroines) who will guide us on our journey.



she walked in reverse and found their songs, 2024

Found tapestry, embroidery floss, beads, bindis, sari, and faux gems

Courtesy the artist and Roberts Projects

Mattai intervened here in a found tapestry inspired by French Rococo painter François Boucher. Drawing from classical mythology, the original scene showed the Roman goddess Diana resting after a hunt, attended by adoring nymphs and cherubs. Diana’s double appears as a marble statue in the temple behind them, a captured stag in one hand and arrows in the other.

Adding a third layer of interpretation, Mattai covered, altered, and embellished elements of the tableau in an act of “brown reclamation.” Diana—patron and protector of the enslaved—is adorned with sari fabric and crowned with rays of bright embroidery floss. The artist has carefully darkened the goddess’ skin and hair. Mattai also added streams of glittering blue beads, garlands of colorful flowers, and the kind of rich purple sunset you might see during hurricanes or wildfires. The angelic cherubs around her are partially obscured with beads, bindis, and gems. At her feet, two nymphs are blurred by threads pulled taut across their skin—a sort of pixelation.



the sea wall, 2024

Fabric, table runners from the artist's wedding, sari borders, worn South Asian clothing, embroidery floss, antique servant bell pull, tassels, faux pearls, bindis, and trim

Courtesy the artist and Roberts Projects

the sea wall imagines the emotional impact of the transatlantic forced migration Mattai's ancestors endured. Women with their backs to us gaze out at the Atlantic Ocean through a crack in Guyana's coastline sea wall. This wall acted as a physical and psychological barrier preventing enslaved people and indentured laborers from seeing, or even dreaming of, freedom. In her imagination here, Mattai breaks the wall. Groupings of women, adorned with halos and other elements of religious iconography borrowed from Christianity and Hinduism, can now envision the distant horizon and imagine unknown futures.



to love in silence, 2024

Fabric, bindis, pearl appliqué, embroidery floss, tassels, braids, and two wedding saris

Courtesy the artist and Roberts Projects

Mattai's family legacy of gendered domestic labor appears in her use of embroidery, weaving, braiding, crochet, and appliqué. She learned to sew from her mother, and continues to incorporate a deeply relational element of craft into her practice. Mattai highlights the domestic nature of this scene by including her own family wedding saris and table runners. To detail the twin girl figures, she used a specific technique of gapping the embroidery to make them seem simultaneously present and absent, slipping in and out of focus. Mattai frequently employs symmetry and then intentionally disrupts it—just as she engages with tradition while breaking it, making space to repair and rebuild.



Pappy's house, 2024
Worn saris, aluminum,
beaded trim, and tinsel
Courtesy the artist and
Roberts Projects

Pappy's house reimagines Mattai's grandparents' home in Guyana. Working only from distant childhood memories, she crafted her own version that captures the essence of the original house. Tropical colors from the Caribbean landscape blend with elements of South Asian architecture, honoring the artist's cultural background. Wooden stilts—a building element common throughout Guyana to avoid flood damage—are transformed into thick hair-like braids, which appear frequently throughout Mattai's work. What would ordinarily be plain panel siding becomes fluid tapestries of woven saris, sourced from Mattai's family and friends across Guyana, India, and the United States.

As with all of the artist's repurposed sari tapestries, traces of the women who wore each garment saturate the sculpture with diasporic history. Importantly, this structure cannot be entered. Like many memories, it is an elusive amalgam of glimpsed imagery, histories, and imaginings: emotionally accurate, but not fully accessible.



Image of Suchitra Mattai's familial home in Guyana. Courtesy the artist.



memory palace, 2024
Found South Asian processional umbrella, found furniture,
braided saris, woven saris, tassels, beaded trim, and gold rope
Courtesy the artist and Roberts Projects

This installation takes its name, *memory palace*, from the well-known mnemonic device used to remember details by storing them in an imagined location. Here, Mattai imagines the interior of *Pappy's house*, the nearby sculpture, spilling out into the gallery. Striped sari tapestries serve as cozy domestic wallpaper. Furniture sculptures appear as anthropomorphic inhabitants of this world. Tight, body-sized bundles of braided sari fabric sit on vintage chairs, erupt from tables, and spill out of cabinets. Each fantastical object is startlingly animated, marked by the lingering presence of the people who once lived with and loved them.

Mattai extends this installation beyond her own family into broader narratives of migration. Cutouts in the textile “wallpaper” act as windows into the Atlantic Ocean beyond, drawing us back in time to experience glimpses of the migration so many made from India to Guyana.



to touch the sky, 2024
Worn saris, found furniture,
rope, and beaded trim
Courtesy the artist and Roberts Projects



beholden, 2023
Worn saris, found furniture, feathers, replica
Guyanese hand-made pointer broom
Courtesy the artist and Roberts Projects



and the world swallowed us whole, 2023

Mixed media

Collection of Ethan Beard and Wayee Chu
Courtesy the artist and Roberts Projects

This tapestry captures the lush, tropical landscape of Guyana. With her back to us (like many figures in this exhibition), the central woman looks out into the distance, or perhaps back into history. Mattai fragments this tapestry, with pieces of the whole broken off and grounded in a new space—the floor rather than the wall. For Mattai, this fragmentation and reorientation is a powerful metaphor for diaspora.



a self portrait, 2024

Worn saris, dried grass, found pendant, ribbon,
beaded trim, and synthetic hair

Courtesy the artist and Roberts Projects

Mattai turns to the geographies and materials of Guyana and India in this abstracted self portrait, which combines dried grasses and vibrant colors from the Caribbean landscape with South Asian clothing and hairstyles. She points to the intimacy of maternal lineage, remembering her own mother regularly braiding her hair into plaits, and adorns the braids here with girlish ribbons. Each element becomes an important signifier for a larger narrative, expanding Mattai's personal identity and lived reality into a broader Indo-Caribbean cultural experience.

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