

SHRINE EMPIRE

Shrine Empire

presents

I Grant You My Freedom

Jithinlal NR
Kirtika Kain
Renuka Rajiv
Sajan Mani
Vinu VV

Preview on September 05, 2023 | 6 - 9 PM
On View till October 05, 2023

Curatorial text by Akhil Katyal and Vikramaditya Sahai

I Grant You My Freedom

How do you wield the fullness of interiority when it is withheld from you? How do you inhabit the ecstasy of transcendence in a world which would rather keep you stuck? Within imaginations that deny you the rightful locus of rage, the surrender to grief and the possibility of pleasure, how is freedom made possible?

The five artists in this show suggest that freedom can be claimed in many ways, whether in the quiet of the studio (Kirtika), in the abundance of the archive (Sajan), through the weight and valence of the medium (Vinu VV), in the satisfactions of patterns and anti-patterns (Renuka), and in skirting the constraints of the physical body and entering the spectral (Jithinlal NR).

In these works, the artists turn caste society on its head. Their provocations lay bare the terror of how caste seeps into the innermost corners of our psyche, into everyday relations and is stitched to all our spaces. They resist this intimate invasion with new methods, unlikely mediums and inventive strategies. Their scripts are not of the tried-and-tested political. Their speech is not exhausted by the identitarian. Their work seeks no permissions from the nation state.

Each of these pieces enable the resonant gesture in the title of this show *I Grant You My Freedom* — drawn from the short-story 'Spectral Speech' by C. Ayyappan (tr. V.C. Harris, 1998). As the artists show us, freedom is not simply a point of arrival or a thing we have. Instead, it is the constant, unfinished movement between the ancestral and the interior, prayer and the people, the archival and the aesthetic, and the evental and the everyday.

Jithinlal NR turns to dreams, myths, delirium and spectres to transcend the limits of the social, particularly upon the body. His works seek freedom unencumbered by history and speak from that which is lost to violence. In these fantastical drawings, Jithinlal NR crafts other-worldly experiences and speculates into being a consciousness unviolated by caste.

Kirtika Kain turns to the sensuality of familiar materials of religious significance to access a knowledge that has been conditioned out of her body through caste-based ritual censure. Staying with them in both wayward and intentional ways, she transgresses into an interior and another spiritual. These works explore a quiet away from religion's majoritarian charge and violence.

Renuka Rajiv works with abstraction, mining its capacity to map the interiority of an artist at a visual loss. The embroidered grid yields a provisional framework where Rajiv explores a loose geometry. Its repetitions and dissonances, its wavering plans allow Rajiv the quiet of *working without knowing* as a method through which images can emerge.

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In European museums, Sajan Mani discovers colonial archives of photographs of Dalit and indigenous workers from Kerala. Working with these photographs, staying with how his ancestors look upon him, remaking these images on rubber—an object implicated in his family’s labouring history—Mani unfreezes time and restores a forgotten and distant people to their unalienable dignity.

In his very choice of medium, Vinu V’s wooden sculptures evoke a difficult history. ‘Odallam’ is the ‘suicide tree’ which bears a poisonous fruit. Vinu uses this resonant medium—simultaneously horrific and confrontational—to create a sculptural record of the lives and motivations of the abjected, thus introducing disruptions in Kerala’s dominant caste imaginary.

In *I Grant You My Freedom*, we encounter works, both beautiful and difficult, that offer strikingly new and meditative relationships to our present in times of routinized caste violence and everyday erasure.

About the artists:

Jithinlal NR

Based in Kochi, Kerala, Jithinlal NR’s work focuses on visually representing the complexity of caste identity, drawing from the social/ cultural experiences of marginalisation. Through an investigative gaze on material processes, NR attempts to explore how societal structures deeply impact ideas about the self and visual cultures. currently working as lecturer (painting) in RLV College of music and fine arts in Kochi, Kerala. His work was exhibited as part of the Kochi Muziris Biennale 2023.

Kirtika Kain

Kirtika Kain is an artist practising on Darug Country, NSW Australia. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2016 and was awarded the Bird Holcomb Scholarship to complete her Master in Fine Art in 2018 at National Art School, Sydney. She was a recipient of the Lloyd Rees Memorial Youth Art Award in 2017, the Art Incubator Grant and Dyason Bequest, Art Gallery of New South Wales, and a finalist in the Churchill Fellowship and numerous art prizes including Blacktown Art Prize (2017, 2019). In 2020, Kirtika received the Paramatta Artist Studio Program and was a finalist in the Create NSW Emerging Artist Fellowship. She has been an artist in residence at the British School at Rome and the Amant Siena Summer Residency. Kirtika has recently exhibited in the projects Wake Up Call for my Ancestors, Oyoum, Berlin and Plea to the Foreigner, African Biennale of Photography, Mali, collaborating with Dalit artists and thinkers within India and the diaspora.

Renuka Rajiv

Renuka has had an interest in making things since childhood, exploring drawing, paper mache, tie-dye and stitching. They studied digital video production in Bangalore and a BFA in printmaking at Melbourne. Since then, their work has reconnected with the childhood interests of playing with fabric and paper. Themes and content in their work is personal, with a compulsion towards the hand-made. Since 2012 they have been exhibiting regularly in group and solo shows.

Sajan Mani

Sajan Mani is an intersectional artist and curator hailing from a family of rubber tappers in a remote village in the northern part of Keralam, South India. His work voices the issues of marginalised and oppressed peoples of India, via the “Black Dalit body” of the artist. Mani’s performance practice insists upon embodied presence, confronting pain, shame, fear, and power. His personal tryst with his body as a meeting point of history and present opens onto “body” as socio-political metaphor. Several of Mani’s performances employ the element of water to address ecological issues particularly

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related to the backwaters of Kerala, as well as to the common theme of migration. His recent works consider the correspondence between animals and humans, and the politics of space from the perspective of an indigenous cosmology. *Unlearning Lessons from my Father* (2018), made with the support of the Asia Art Archive, excavates the artist's biography in relation to colonial history, botany, and material relations.

Sajan was the first Indian to be awarded the Berlin Art Prize in 2021. He has participated in international biennales, festivals, exhibitions and residencies, including The INHABIT, Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, DE (2022), Galerie Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, CA (2021-22) Lokame Tharavadu Kochi Biennale Foundation, IN (2021), Times Art Center Berlin, DE (2021) Nome Gallery, Berlin (2021) CODA Oslo International Dance Festival, NO (2019); Ord & Bild, SE (2019); India Art Fair (2019); "Spectres of Communism", Haus der Kunst, Munich (2017); Dhaka Art Summit, Bangladesh (2016); Kampala Art Biennale, Uganda (2016); Kolkata International Performance Arts Festival (2014-16); and Vancouver Biennale, CA (2014). In 2022 he was awarded the Prince Claus Mentorship Award and Breakthrough Artist of The Year from Hello India Art Awards. Between 2019 – 2022 he received an artistic research grant from the Berlin Senate, Fine Arts Scholarship from Braunschweig Projects, and the Akademie Schloss Solitude Fellowship, Germany.

Vinu VV

Vinu V.V. (b. 1974) is an artist based in Kochi, India. Vinu received a Diploma in Fine Arts (Sculpture) from the R.L.V College of Fine Arts, Tripunithura, Kochi in 1998. His works often take the form of sculptural installations and paintings. Vinu has had a longstanding engagement with Marginal Histories from the subcontinent, such as alternative knowledge traditions, and histories of social and political struggles. His work deploys the transgressive potential of languages which resist conventional categorisations such as Secular and Religious, Mythic and Historical, and Reason and Faith. Vinu held his first solo show titled *Parting the Sea of Hell*, which consisted of works in painting and sculptural installations, held at Buddha Art Gallery, Fort Kochi. In 2016, he was invited to participate in the 14th Shanghai Biennale by curators Raqs Media Collective. Here, he presented the sculptural installation *Noon Rest*. This work subsequently entered the collection of Power Station of Art, Shanghai (2017). More recently, he was invited by curator Anita Dube to participate in the fourth edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (2018-19).

About Shrine Empire:

Shrine Empire was created in December 2008 from a merger of two existing entities. Prior to this, both had worked together on exhibitions in India and Singapore separately, known then as The Shrine Gallery and Empire Art. Shrine Empire is based in New Delhi and its directors, Anahita Taneja and Shefali Somani have envisioned the gallery as a platform for presenting and promoting contemporary visual art practices. Since its inception, Shrine Empire has consistently focused on encouraging a dialogic approach with a range of emerging and eminent artists with sustained, innovative and engaging practices, and curators in order to produce exhibitions and special commissioned projects. The mission of Shrine Empire is to promote artists, curators and art-writers who are invested in redefining the boundaries of contemporary art practice. The various curatorial narratives that have emerged from the space over the years have made Shrine Empire known for its critical engagement with political and social concerns of the contemporary.

Enquiries: info@shrineempiregallery.com | Ph: +91 11 41327630 | +91 9911202342