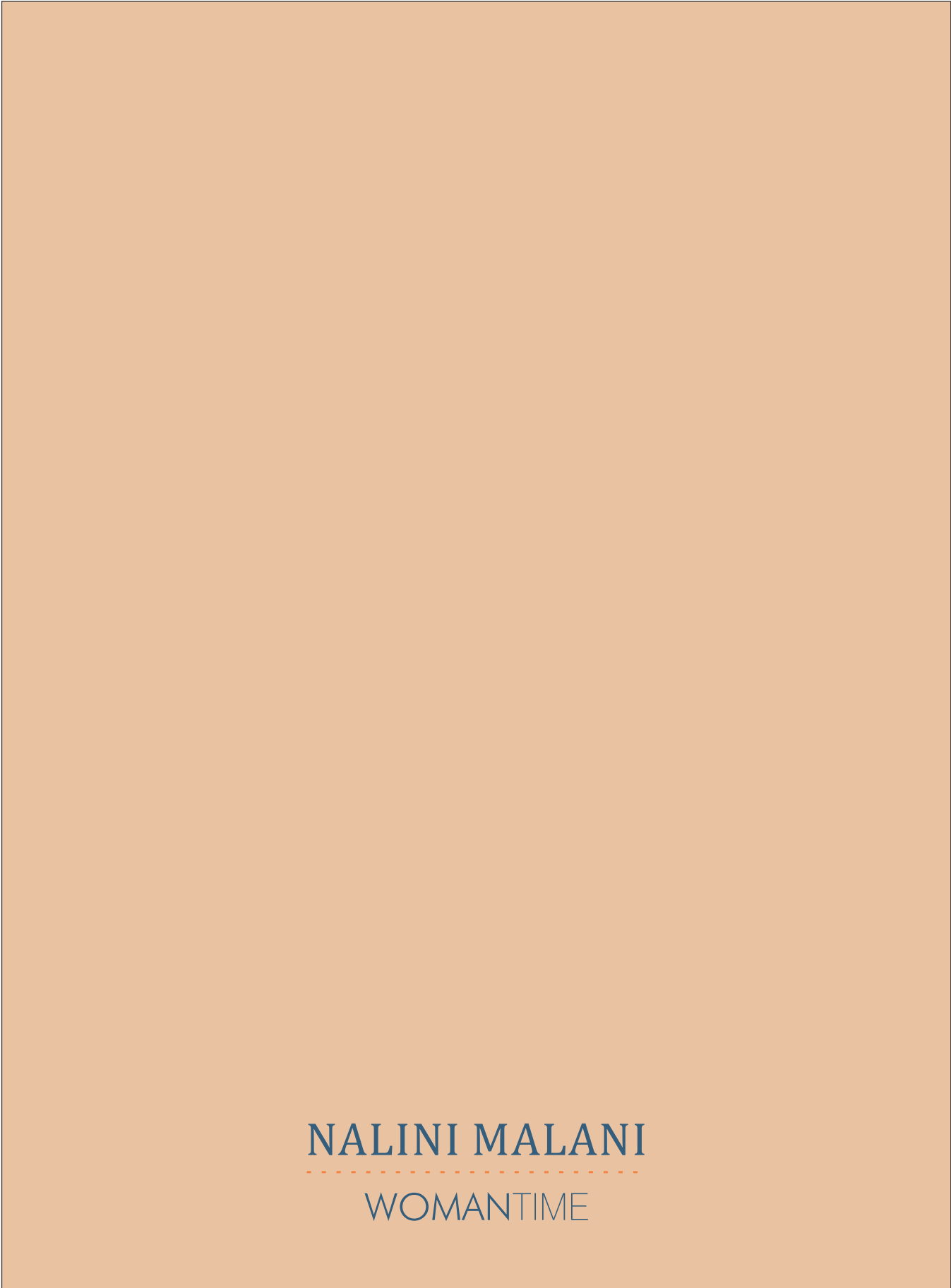
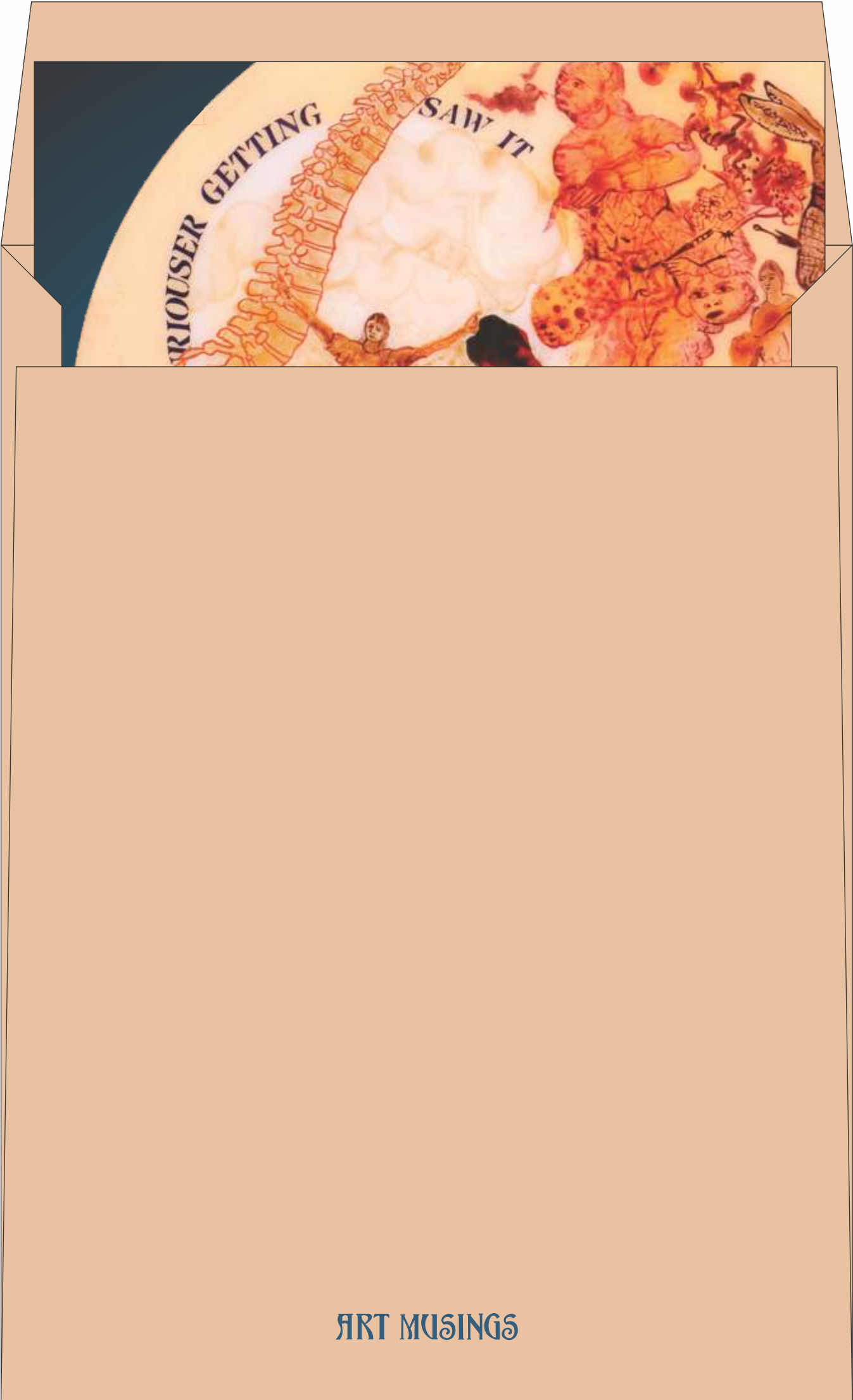


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WOMANVOICE

- Avni Doshi

Within the space of “womantime,” for more than forty years Malani has engaged contemporary problematic situations in her art through the exploration of the archetypal roles of women throughout various mythological, historical and fictional texts; uncovering the various attitudes and perspectives that they contain, exposing oppression and violence as a hidden subtext in a poetic verse or seemingly innocuous tale. Building her own narrative forms, which defy simple beginnings and ends, Malani invokes various cultural characters to draw parallels to our daily experiences, finding voices and motivations for action from the past, which still speak today. These different articulations, by turn passionate, engaged or schizophrenic, add up to a sum that does not equal its parts, but creates an exultant excess of utterance, which might be referred to as “womanvoice”, a particular reckoning of language and subjective invocation specific to the characters/creatures that Malani creates.

Malani draws from texts as diverse as Greek and Indian myths, the 19th century so called 'literary nonsense genre' or the early 20th century experimental poetry, considering the codified versions of these stories, the stifled origins and as well their multiple retellings. Drawing on these diverse sources, she reveals a literary legacy of revenge and anguish that imbibes our stories, thus extending our cultural reference points freely and readily. Malani's stories are not thematically tied to a specific region, religion or country, but move fluidly, through the foundations of language and image, taking on various guises and names.

How does this “womanvoice,” so thoroughly absorbed into Malani's body of work, shift and challenge patriarchic positions? By explicating the texts that are referenced in her work, we may begin to navigate our way through the dynamics of Malani's art. From the wide range my choice fell on two female personas, on which she has worked for many years, being Cassandra as conceived by Christa Wolf and Lewis Carroll's Alice. Investigating Christa Wolf's Cassandra, which she wrote while experiencing the suppression of basic freedoms in the former dictatorship of the DDR, uncovers a series of qualitative concepts that move throughout Malani's works. The character of Alice, from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, likewise emerges in Malani's work beyond the usual as a figure at the edge of becoming. Through decoding these stories and characters, we may chart their development in the context of Malani's works as reflecting specific subject-voices, where particular questions of visibility and identity are at stake.

Cassandra and the Disembodied Voice

Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* from 1984 delves deeply into the ancient Homeric myth of the *Iliad*, choosing as its heroine one of the epic's most maligned characters. Cassandra, a seer who could predict the future, stood in opposition to the heroics and valiance of war, instead predicting the terrible doom and inevitable fall in store for her people and city. For this she was deemed a lunatic and imprisoned by her father, the King. In the case of the *Iliad*, Cassandra illuminates an often-ignored thread of the story, where the activities of the state and horrors of military law are questioned. Through Cassandra Wolf questions the narrative's ability to solidify the structures of the state by placing war at the center, as she explains:

“Only in the advent of property, hierarchy, and patriarchy extracts a blood-red thread from the fabric of human life, which the three ancient crones, the Moirae, had in hand; and this thread is amplified at the expense of the web as a

whole, at the expense of its uniformity. The blood-red thread is the narrative of the struggle and victory of the heroes of their doom. The plot is born. The epic, born of the struggles of patriarchy, becomes by its structure an instrument by which to elaborate and fortify patriarchy. The hero is made to serve as a model, and still does so down to the present day. The chorus of female speakers has vanished, swallowed up by the earth. The woman can now become the object of masculine narrative, in the role of the heroine.”¹

The idea of the warrior corroborates a notion of heroism, which becomes currency for patriarchal hegemony in Wolf's estimation. Structurally these elements are built upon each other, held in place by the epic narrative and disseminated in ways that are psychologically bound to memory. The counterpoint to this idea begs the question: Whose hero is this? Who built the plinth for this kind of heroism, and on whose backs do these heroic statues stand? Perhaps most importantly, what does it mean for the narrator of the story to be a woman, particularly for a story about the ideologies of patriarchy and the manufacture of war? Both Wolf and Malani allocate a space of dissidence as they distinguish their own stories from heroized understandings of violence implicit in war.

The story of *Cassandra* has appeared in various forms in Malani's work, as it did in the painting with the same name from 2009. Malani playfully creates a corollary between macro and microcosm, by composing an image that references both outer space and cellular microbes. An array of orbs circle around each other, inhabited by characters, depicted as blood cells or planetary forms. This is particularly apt for figures from mythology whose names are used to recognize constellations. Malani's figures however, corroborate in a series of dark exchanges, where they are pulled into violence as they interact. Mutilated limbs and pebbled surfaces mark many of the characters in this painting, anticipating the inevitable destruction of war. A small Trojan horse is visible in the lower corner of the work, a vessel for the end of Troy. Curving worms are dotted through the painting, signaling the parasitic rotting disease that has taken hold. Figures touch, overlap, or are fused together in an uncomfortable and unwanted camaraderie, unable to maintain a distance from the devastation. There are no individual subjects, neatly intact, in Malani's understanding of this battle. All will bleed, all will suffer, and none will know themselves in the end.



Cassandra, 2009. 30 panel reverse painting. Collection Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi.

The notion of the disembodied self as it appears in Malani's work is deeply embedded in the Christa Wolf's narrative. But what is this self, and what are the qualities that she possesses which emerge so purposefully in Malani's paintings? Wolf's Cassandra begins to express this notion of selfhood by explaining

that she contains parts of others within herself, and that she is capable of knowing the feelings and motivations of others, even if they hold her in contempt or directly injure her. She says, "There is something of everyone in me, so I have belonged completely to no one and I have even understood their hatred for me."² This understanding of herself as a container, or a vessel that retains parts of many, but no complete whole, is in exact opposition to a totalizing conception of selfhood, where the container of the self is solid and bound, and in a sense, unchanging. Cassandra's own explanation places her within a context that is slippery, and by its nature difficult to comprehend.

When Cassandra describes that for her lover, Aeneas, it was, "not just that [she] understood Aeneas; that [she] *knew* him. As if [she] were he. As if [she] were crouching inside him, feeling in thought on his traitorous resolves."³ What does Cassandra share with us here, but her all-consuming empathy that verges on an empathic tendency to quite literally absorb and consume the feelings of others? Does not this veer on madness? Does it not entail that to so completely and profoundly engage with the feelings of others is, in Cassandra's description, to inhabit them in some sense, and to be privy to a set of thoughts and intimations otherwise unknown and unspoken?

Cassandra speaks of her own dissolution that allows her to take habitation in the minds and motives of others, elevating her position of 'seeress' to not just a prophet of the future but a mirror of men's private desires. These private desires, often in contradiction with one another, expose the inconsistencies of those that surround her, and she describes the compassion she feels at their inner turmoil as in the case of Aeneas. Cassandra is therefore, by her ability to reflect these contradictions, an indicator of the conflicted subjectivities of those around her. Her own unregulated self, which "has something of everyone," and therefore no *single one* at all, explains that she represents the ultimate displacement. Dispossessed of her own body so much so that she experiences the woes of others, and yet herself a mirror of their incomplete imperfections, Cassandra signals a double dislocation within the story, denying her own selfhood while defying the selfhood of others simultaneously.⁴

I would argue that it is for this very reason, for the uncontainable nature of her gift, that moves fluidly between bodies and minds, never resting, and unhinging the solidity of time and space, that Cassandra is placed in a basket, and imprisoned in a confined, solitary space. The basket offers a physical and psychological barrier for her gift of sight, so that her literal vision is limited and her ability to connect with the mental processes of others cannot spread unhampered. If Cassandra's non-normative existence is as profoundly rooted in a psychic space as it is in a material one, the basket forms an antidote for both.

The image of Cassandra trapped thus, with her arms and legs incapacitated was particularly significant for Malani, who explains that "[Cassandra] has no control anymore because somebody else has the control." Malani started with Cassandra in



The Tables have Turned, 2008. Shadow play, 30 turntables, reverse painted cylinders, sound. Cockatoo Island, Sydney Biennale.



In Search of Vanished Blood, 2012. Single channel video play, sound, 11 minutes. Kochi-Muziris Biennale, 2012.

2008 with *The Tables Have Turned*, a shadow play where Mylar cylinders rotated on turntables, projecting painted images on the walls of the bunker on Cockatoo Island in the harbor of Sydney. The space reverberated with the sound of spoken words. Cassandra narrates her story, while scenes float before her eyes. The dogs in the composition, inspired by Muybridge's photography, follow the other characters in errant circles around the walls. The projected scenes, like the visions that appear before Cassandra's own eyes, are both

fleeting and haunting, like impressions that cannot be captured but exist in one's memory, or as incomplete as what can be afforded from the captivity of a basket.

Parallel to what we see throughout Malani's complex narrative, time moves back and forth in unusual sequences, following an order that exists in Cassandra's mind. The duration and sequence of events follows a tangential order, following a logic that is completely intrinsic to the seer. In a similar sense, Cassandra weaves in and out of her desires and actions, sometimes claiming responsibility for her gifts of prophecy, while sometimes understanding them as completely extrinsic to herself, only becoming manifest when the god Apollo spat in her mouth. Although she has the power to know the future and human motivation, she riles against her own visions, feeling powerful negative emotions like regret, envy and angry frustration rather than resignation or acceptance from the fate that awaits her and her people. Through these complex set of contradictions, Cassandra also navigates the changing status of her own citizenship, negotiating herself as a Trojan and not depending on the discontinuity of certain rights and freedoms she possesses. More and more, as one moves through the story, it is difficult to position Cassandra as a narrator with her ever-changing voice and tone.

It is in this manifestation that we see Cassandra reappear in Malani's work *In Search of Vanished Blood* (2012). Malani addressed the persistent savagery of violence that keeps circulating throughout the pages of Cassandra's narrative, where she describes the way in which the other women of Troy begin to fear the barbarism of their own warring husbands and men, perhaps at times more than the enemy.⁵ What is critical to note about this revelation is something at the heart of Christa Wolf's retelling, and also distinctly tied to the rhizomatic fluidity of Malani's shadow plays and paintings. This is namely that violence is not a still-standing contained entity, and that war of any kind must penetrate to every layer of experience. *In Search of Vanished Blood* was composed of five painted Mylar cylinders, circulating from the ceiling. On the walls were projections of drawings and pictures, including dogs running, and a woman with a piece of fabric covering her face. This faceless woman, a prisoner or a non-citizen, is imprinted upon with text, as the words of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry move over her. In the poem, whose title Malani used for the video/shadow play, Faiz laments the vastness of the bloodshed he bears witness to, which when washed a way so cleverly leaves no trace and no hope of finding its origins.⁶

Malani's video/shadow play achieved something similar, as shadows on the wall are layered upon other projections, bleeding into one another, colliding with each other, and finally dissolving in a pool of blood red. The painted images that rotate on the cylinders were of various kinds, both fantastical and banal. A large monster held a person in its claws, ready to devour it. One could find a pair of autopsy scissors and a butterfly included among the

painted portion. There was even a ferocious-looking Kali that resembled images found in Kalighat paintings, which is a source of inspiration for Malani. Drawings of hands create letters in American sign language, alluding to the unspoken but nonetheless communicable idea of words. Whose mouth speaks, and whose is smothered?

Sound and atmospheric light and projections played a central role to the work, creating a sense of mood and intonation that gave gravity to the shadows and carried them in a changing narrative. Time elapses, and moment to moment, the room shifts from light to dark, from confrontational to brooding. Day turns to nights in a matter of seconds. A voice recites lines from Heiner Mueller's *Hamletmachine*, lines that a devastated Ophelia speaks, no longer as herself, but channeling the vengeful specter of Elektra. Malani adapts the text for Cassandra, finding parallels between the two characters:

This is Cassandra speaking. In the heart of darkness. Under the sun of torture. To the capitals of the world. In the name of the victims. I eject all the sperm I have received. I turn the milk of my breasts into lethal poison. I take back the world I gave birth to. Down with the happiness of submission. Long live hate, rebellion and death.

Through the voice of Cassandra, the victims of the world are invoked in a call for justice in the face of inequity. In Wolf's story, Cassandra is not only "other" in terms of her gender, but is also decidedly unfeminine because of her Sapphic preferences, implied in her admiration and desire for the Amazon, Myrine, who also lives outside of the normative social order. Cassandra is therefore compulsively foreign, constantly on the verge of dispossession and disenfranchisement. Wolf, not only invokes a subject in Cassandra which subverts the paternalistic structure of the story, but also one that claims to freely adopt a masculine subjectivity at will, able to flit back and forth between one and the other with able dispersal. Malani on the other hand, regards Cassandra as distinctly life protecting, though disillusioned and devastated by the carnage and oppression she witnesses. She is transformed within the work from life-giver to death-dealer, also in keeping with Medea⁷, another mythological figure that features time and again in Malani's oeuvre.



In Search of Vanished Blood, 2012. Six channel video/shadow play, sound, 11 minutes. Documenta 13, 2012. Burger Collection, Hong Kong.

Alice and the Lobster Quadrille

Malani's preoccupation in the last decade with Lewis Carroll's *Alice* is not limited to the fantastical tale of a young girl disappearing down a rabbit hole. She draws from details of Carroll's life and his fascination with Alice Liddell, the real girl who inspired the stories. In 2005 Malani created for the first time around Alice an entire series entitled "Living in Alicetime," where different characters under which Alice, were reimagined in totally different situations in alternate universes, from the languishing urban landscape of Mumbai to the mythic sphere of the Nation as Goddess. In *Broken Alice II*, at the center of the composition stands Alice with her entrails and insides poured out of her body. Her hands are either encouraging this spillage or trying to contain it, as the white rabbit looks on. In *Mother India / Courage I and II*, the protagonist is situated in an "Alicetime", in a place of hardship and struggle, where her unborn fetuses hover outside her body, still connected by the umbilical cords. In image I, Mother India holds a sickle in her hand, and prepares to cut the cord or perhaps even to abort her pregnancy. In the second, she stands over her own blood. Malani explains: in "Alicetime" anything can happen from the most violent to the most bizarre. In Carroll's vision Alice would never grow up and keeps the story sanitized. He just plays with the idea of her size, shrinking her down and expanding her at a whim, but maintaining her status as a child. In Malani's "Alicetime" the protagonists often experience a variety of cruel events that are incongruous with Carroll's infantilized Alice.

In the original story the age of Alice is directly linked to the way time functions within the story. The passing of time as a subjective concept, based on the experiential rather than metered duration, is suggested by the Mad Hatter when he explains that if "it were nine o'clock in the morning, just time to begin lessons: you'd only have to whisper a hint to Time, and round goes the clock in a twinkling! Half-past one, time for dinner." In this instance, time is personified and capricious, easily unsettled by whim. Time is the subject of desire, and Carroll's clock positions Alice as a child through the story.



Broken Alice II, 2005. Reverse painting on acrylic. Private collection.

The question of desire becomes divisive when considering Malani's appropriation of Alice with regards to the young girl in Carroll's story. Malani not only locates Alice as a grown woman in her paintings, but also draws on aspects of Carroll's story which suggest the inevitability of her maturity and sexualization. The Lobster Quadrille, a bizarre waltz described and enacted by the Griffin and Mock Turtle for Alice, is one such a moment, where the act of the dance insinuates her entrance into the realm of adulthood. While the dance itself capitalizes on the absurd within the children's story⁸, it points to certain social norms associated with courtship rituals and marriage. Even within the text itself, as the Mock Turtle and the Griffin teach her the dance, "they began solemnly dancing round and round Alice, every now and then treading on her toes when they passed too close, and waving their fore-paws to mark the time." While marking the

moments of physical contact, Carroll also alludes to Alice's discomfort at learning this new dance, remarking that Alice, "[felt] very glad that it was over at last." A line is drawn at Alice's desire to learn and to be thought knowledgeable, and her want to be "natural," and to act in a particular fashion.

In the keeping with Malani's "Alicetime" series, the artist painted a series of tondi titled *Alice and the Creature*, where Alice is placed in a circular space with various imaginary animals. The creatures and Alice square off within the composition, leering at each other and engaging in a battle or "dance". The bulbous, red, and at times, phallic monsters are a foil for the childlike innocence that Carroll attributes to Alice. The sexualization of Alice's tale is also called into question in *Balancing Act I* (2005), from "Living in Alicetime", where the center of the triptych shows Alice balancing the entire narrative of the story upon a phallus. Although the nature of the exchange is not overtly erotic, Malani plays with inference, suggesting the possibility of engagement with these phallic beings, opening up a path for Alice that is not only fantastical but also transgressive. By giving her access to her desire, Malani frees Alice from the chains of permanent infancy, placing her within a context of evolution and the dangers that follow it. Growth, in this sense, is a double-edged sword.



Mother India: Courage I and II, 2005. Reverse painting on acrylic. Private collections.



Balancing Act I, 2005. Triptych, reverse painting on Mylar. Private collection.

Womanvoice

Alice and Cassandra are remarkably different as literary figures, but for Malani they offer an opportunity to counteract familiar stories, that evoke a traditional patriarchal society, with the progressive female voice. This invocation of well-known characters is a powerful gesture in its ability to recast moulds, and give shape to unformed aspects of the story. In this sense, Malani's works are dynamic pieces of theatre and tableau, and she, the storyteller, in reworking the narrative offers insight into the particularity of female subjectivity.

– Avni Doshi

Avni Doshi is an independent art historian living between Mumbai and New York. After a BA in Art History at Columbia University in New York, she did her Masters in the History of Art from University College London. Avni writes for several publications including *Art Asia Pacific*, *Art India* and *Take on Art* as well as the website *ArtSlant.com*. Avni curated a group exhibition 'Loss for Words' at Art Musings in January 2012.

ENDNOTES

¹ Christa Wolf, *Cassandra* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux; First Edition, 1988) p. 296.

² Wolf, p. 4.

³ Wolf, p. 5.

⁴ “My old forgotten malady: inner division, so that I watch myself, see myself sitting in this accursed Greek Chariot trembling with fear beneath my shawl? Will I split myself in two until the end before the ax splits me, for the sake of consciousness?” (Wolf, p. 21)

⁵ Wolf, p. 17.

⁶ Wolf’s *Cassandra* mirrors this idea as she mourns, “...we had believed the terror could not increase, but now we had to recognize that there are no limits to the atrocities people can inflict on one another; that we are capable of rummaging through someone else’s entrails and of cracking his skull, trying to find out what causes the most pain.” (Wolf, p. 119)

⁷ Medea betrays her country for the love of Jason, but when Jason takes another wife, Medea becomes enraged and poisons the princess and kills her own children as revenge. While she the act of killing her own young is often read as her madness, the killing of her own children is symbolically a castration of Jason. By murdering his progeny and his new wife, she denies him of heirs for his throne. It is the surest way to eradicate his line and his name, the most definable and significant signs of his paternalistic potency. Medea’s children therefore symbolically are no longer her own. In their annihilation, they become symbols of the rule of the father. See Heiner Mueller, *Medeamaterial* (New York: PAJ, 1984).

⁸ “You can really have no notion how delightful it will be/When they take us up and throw us, with the lobsters, out to sea!”/But the snail replied, “Too far, too far!” and gave a look/askance—...” (Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Signet Classics, 2012)



Getting Curiouser, 2011

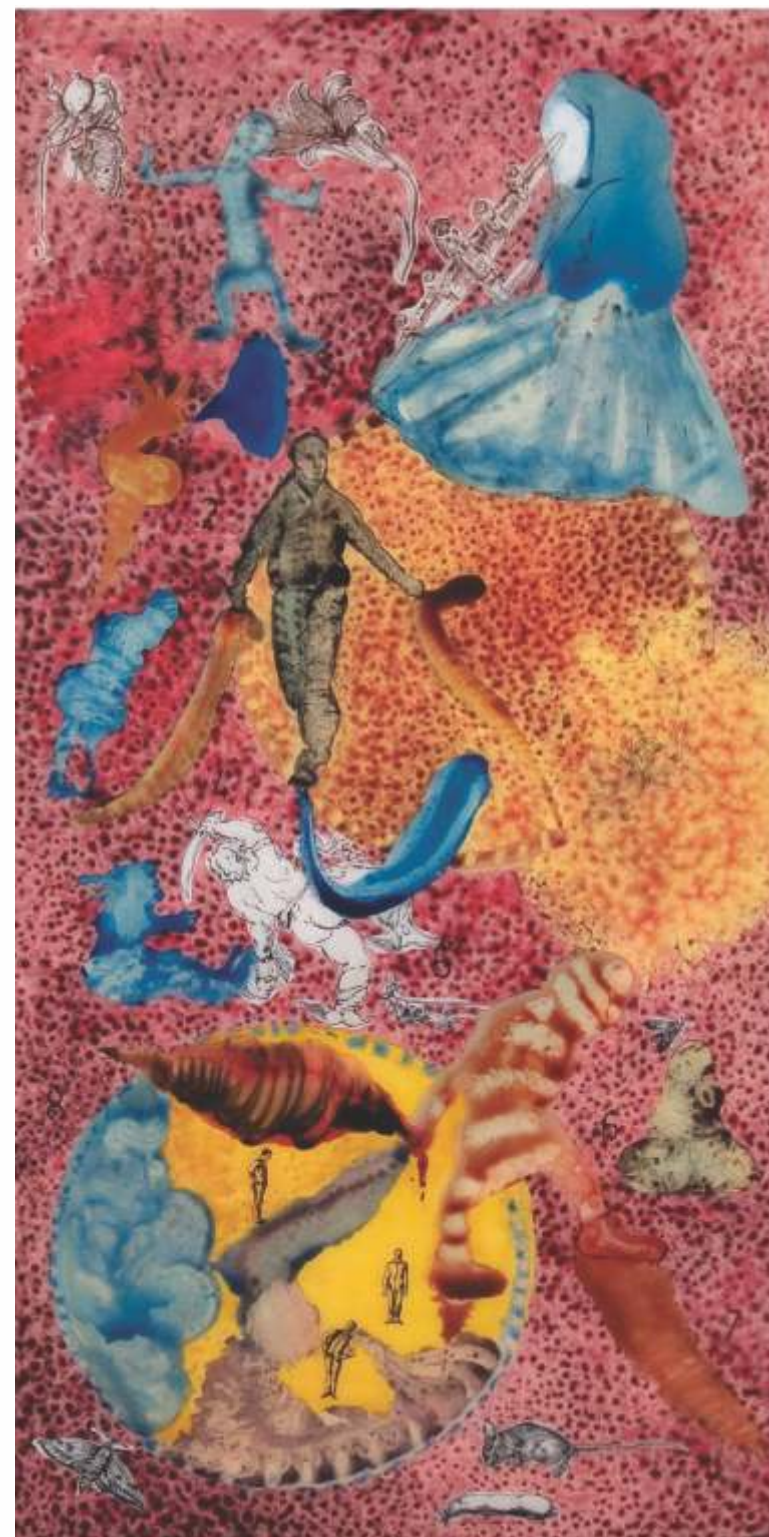
Diptych, acrylic, ink and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet, 10 inches and 47 inches diameter.



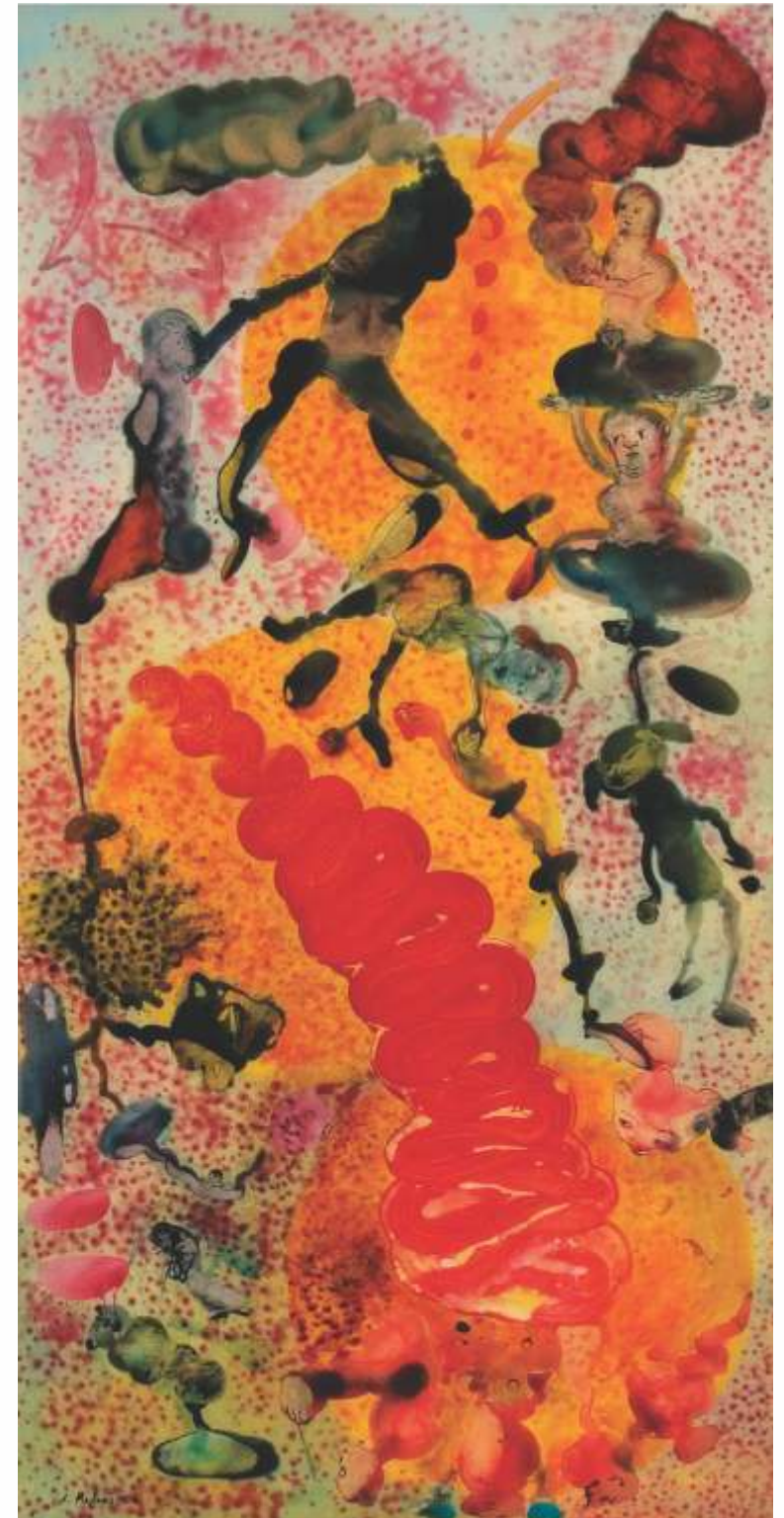


Nursery Tales, 2008

acrylic, ink and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet, 60 x 30 inches.



Stories Retold Red Cloud, 2007
acrylic, ink and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet, 60 x 30 inches.



Murmur of Maternal Lamentations, 2010
 acrylic, ink and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet, 72 x 36 inches.



Nursery Tales-2, 2007

acrylic, ink and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet, 72 x 40 inches.



Nursery Tales-6, 2008

acrylic, ink and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet, 60 x 30 inches.





VI

Alice and the Creature - III, 2011

acrylic, ink and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet, 10 inches diameter.

Alice and the Creature - VI, 2011

acrylic, ink and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet, 10 inches diameter.





Alice and the Creature - I, 2011
acrylic, ink and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet, 10 inches diameter.

Alice and the Creature - IV, 2011
acrylic, ink and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet, 10 inches diameter.



Alice and the Creature - V, 2011

acrylic, ink and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet, 10 inches diameter

Alice and the Creature - II, 2011

acrylic, ink and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet, 10 inches diameter





Alice and the Creature - VIII, 2011
acrylic, ink and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet, 10 inches diameter.

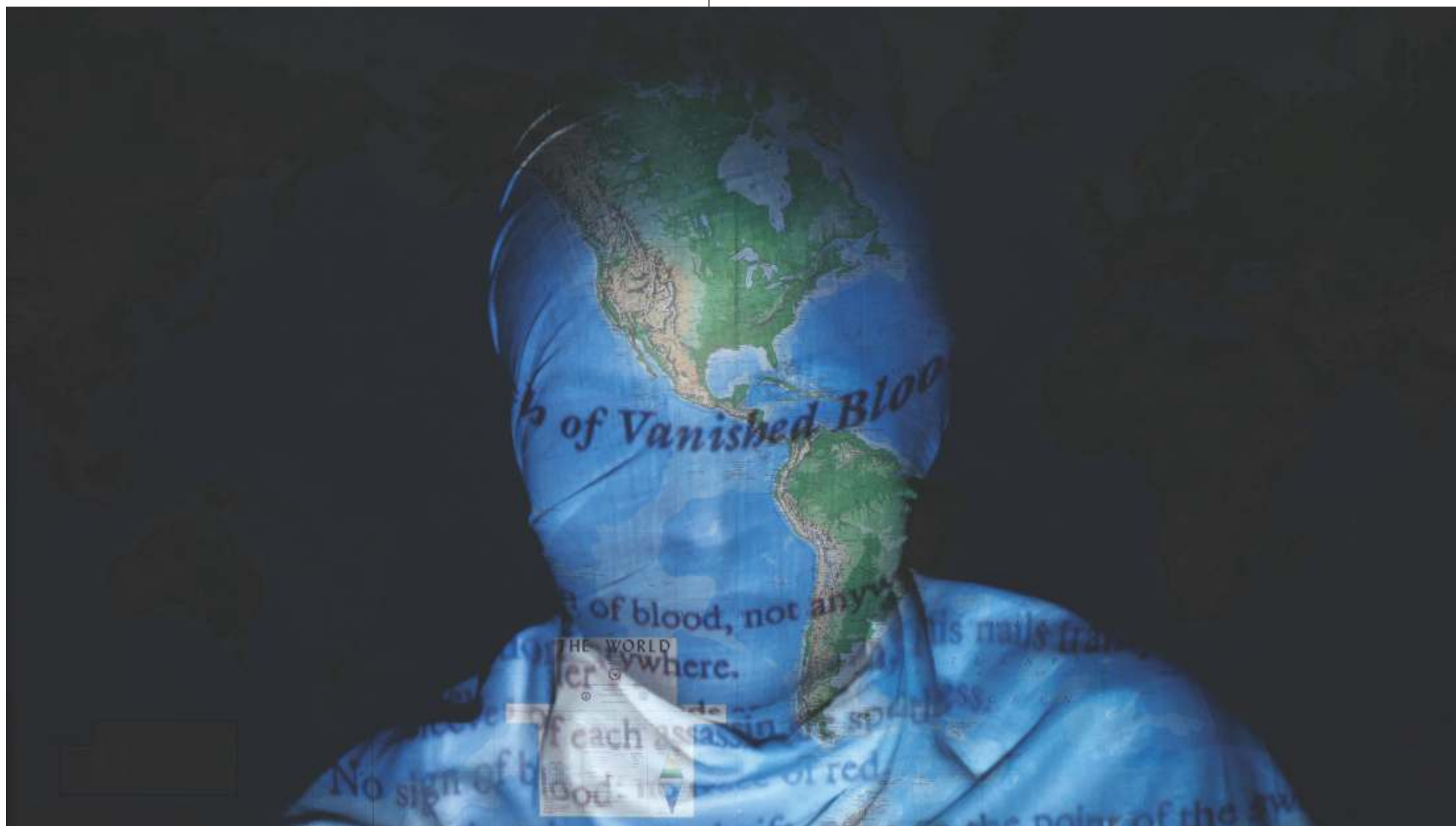
Alice and the Creature - IX, 2011
acrylic, ink and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet, 10 inches diameter.





The Tables have Turned, 2008

Shadow play, 30 turntables and reverse painted cylinders, sound. Cockatoo Island, Sydney Biennale.



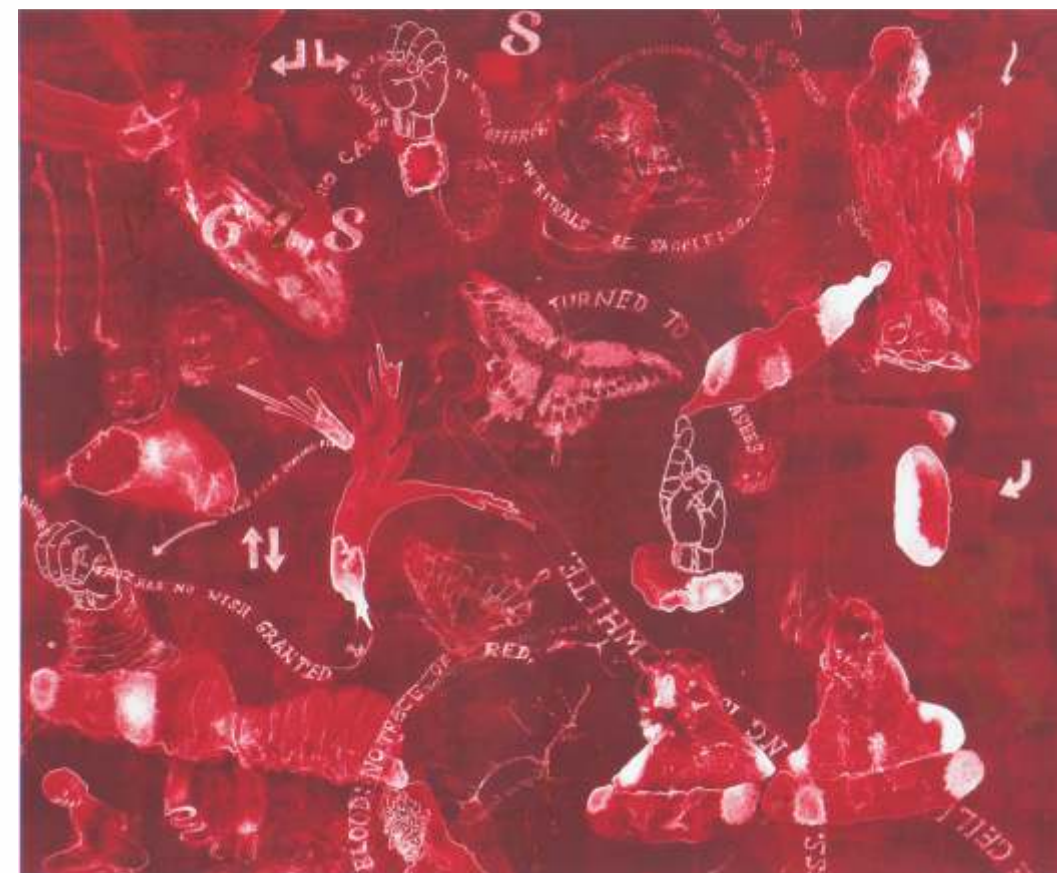
In Search of Vanished Blood, 2012
Single channel video play, sound, 11 minutes. Kochi-Muziris Biennale.

In Search of Vanished Blood





II



III

In Search of Vanished Blood, 2012
multiple print # I/II/III, 33 x 40 inches.

NALINI MALANI
1946, Karachi



SELECT LANDMARK EXHIBITIONS & PARTICIPATIONS

- 2013 *Artist File*, National Art Centre, Tokyo.
- 2012 Documenta 13, Kassel. Participates with a new, site specific, six channel video/shadowplay *In Search of Vanished Blood*, at the Documenta Halle, curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev.
- 2011 *Paris-New Delhi-Bombay...*, Centre Pompidou, Paris.
- 2010 *Nalini Malani: Splitting the Other*, Lausanne. First European retrospective exhibition at Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, curated by Bernard Fibicher.
- 2007 52nd Venice Biennale. Participates with a new 14 panel painting environment *Splitting the Other*, at the Italian pavilion, curated by Robert Storr.
- *Nalini Malani*, Dublin. First European museum solo exhibition at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, curated by Enrique Juncosa.
- 2005 51st Venice Biennale. Participates with a new 5 channel videoplay, *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain*, that addresses the issue of women victims of Partition.
- 2004 3th Seoul International Media Art Biennale.
- 2002 *Hamletmachine*, New York. Malani's first USA solo museum exhibition at New Museum of Contemporary Art, curated by Dan Cameron.
- 2001 *Century City*, Tate Modern, London.
- 2000 *Gwanju Biennale and Havana Biennial*.
- 1998 *Remembering Toba Tek Singh*, Amsterdam/Bombay. Makes India's first multi projection video installation in protest of the Indian government's nuclear tests on the birthday of the Buddha.
- 1996 2nd *Asia Pacific Triennial*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane.
- 1995 1th *Africus Biennale*, Johannesburg.
- 1993 *Medeamaterial*, Bombay. To reach a wider audience for her engaged art Malani collaborates with Alaknanda Samarth creating an experimental theatreplay.
- 1992 *City of Desires*, Bombay. Opposing the growing Saffron politics Malani makes her first ephemeral wall drawing installation, that at the end is washed with an *Erasure Performance* after which the work finds a new format in a video art documentary.
- 1991 *Hieroglyphs of Lohar Chawl*, Bombay. Breaks again out of the painting frame and makes a participatory shadow play to engage the audience in political engaged subject.
- 1986 2nd *Havana Biennial*, Cuba. Malani's first participation in an international biennial.
- 1986 *Through the Looking Glass*, Bhopal/Bangalore/New Delhi/Bombay. To give voice to women artists in India in a male dominated milieu, Malani initiates and organizes this three year traveling exhibition.
- 1981 *Place for People*, Bombay/New Delhi. To give the local and the indigenous a voice opposing the Bombay Progressive Group, Malani organizes along with Vivan Sundaram this landmark exhibition.
- 1969/70 Starting out at the *Vision Exchange Workshop* Malani makes a series of experimental films/documentaries and photograms.
- 1969 5th *International Young Artists Exhibition*, Tokyo. Malani's first international exhibition.

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