

## WSJ

October 2014

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### A Retrospective of the Works of Nalini Malani Who Paints in Reverse



A detail from eleven panel reverse painting *Twice Upon a Time*, 2014. NALINI MALANI/PHOTO COURTESY KIRAN NADAR MUSEUM OF ART

When artist Nalini Malani first started walking to her studio in Lohar Chawl, a wholesale market for electronic goods in Mumbai, she averted her gaze as she passed the homes without walls of the city's poor.

Although Ms. Malani wanted to record their lives, she knew that the traditional method of drawing by observation would not work there -- it would be too voyeuristic to stand outside and sketch the pavement dwellers and laborers.

Instead, she committed their postures and facial expressions to memory and over 20 years created a series of drawings, paintings and installations called "Hieroglyphs of Lohar Chawl."

Despite being done from memory, Ms. Malani's images viscerally evoke the hardships of life on the street -- the back-breaking labor and lack of clean water -- often overlooked by India's art gallery-visiting classes.

Some of her sketches from this series and other selected works from a five-decade career are on display at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in New Delhi in the final show of a three-part retrospective titled "You Can't Keep Acid in a Paper Bag."

The intriguing name is taken from an entry she made in her diary in 1970. "It had to do with the turbulent times we were experiencing politically and socially. One had to find a form for one's art that addressed these issues -- and these were not such that could be contained in a paper bag," said Ms. Malani.

"It is my desire to make the invisible visible," Ms. Malani said in an interview at the gallery, where three rooms are brought alive with videos, paintings, wall-drawings and what the artist refers to as a video-shadow play called "Transgressions III."



Three channel video-shadow play with four rotating, reverse-painted cylinders, sound, Transgressions III, 2001/2014. NALINI MALANI/PHOTO COURTESY KIRAN NADAR MUSEUM OF ART

In this installation, Ms. Malani uses the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese technique of reverse painting to create images of moving deities and animals on the inner side of four revolving cylinders made with Mylar, a clear, durable plastic. The technique entails applying layers of paint in reverse (starting with the finishing touches) on a see-through surface and flipping it over to view the final product.

The shadows of these paintings fall on the walls in an elaborate light sequence and, along with video projections and a seven-minute sound recording, create an ever-shifting and overwhelming environment for the viewer.

“Mama, I want to speak English,” a child’s voice in the recording says as a video depicts the scripts of Indian languages falling into the ground, reflecting the crisis of identity spurred in part by the rise of business process outsourcing in India in the late 1990s and 2000s.

Globalization, religious conflict, gender-based violence and the marginalization of vulnerable groups are [pervasive themes in the 68-year-old artist’s work](#).

Born in Karachi before the creation of Pakistan, Ms. Malani moved to the eastern Indian city of Calcutta, now known as Kolkata, shortly before partition. Her family’s experience of leaving behind their home and becoming refugees during that time informs much of her art.

Ms. Malani studied Fine Arts in Mumbai -- against her father’s wishes -- and went on to become one of India’s foremost contemporary artists. She was amongst the earliest to transition from traditional painting to installation and multimedia work -- in her path-breaking installation “City of Desires,” she drew directly on the walls of [Chemould Gallery in Mumbai](#) in 1992.



Single channel artist documentary of site-specific installation City of Desires, 1992. NALINI MALANI/PHOTO COURTESY KIRAN NADAR MUSEUM OF ART

Greek and Hindu mythology are strong influences in her work: In 1993, she created a theater installation of the Greek tragedy of Medea, a woman so struck with grief when her husband betrayed her that she killed her own children. The theme of destroyed women continues to inform her art. In the show in Delhi, the painting “Twice Upon a Time” tells the story of the Hindu goddess Sita who undertook a trial by fire to prove that she had been faithful to her husband, lord Rama, while held captive by the demon Ravana. Although she passed the test, Sita -- when she was pregnant with twins -- was forced into exile by Rama because he could not

bear the local gossip that he had taken back his wife after she had lived with another man, according to the Hindu myth.

“Sita has been an obsession -- the violation of a woman, and the idea that she’s then blamed for it” portrays the plight of many women in contemporary India, Ms. Malani said.

The 11-paneled work done in her hallmark reverse-painting style is an explosion of color. Neon orange and turquoise are held together with dark browns and crisp black lines.

A smug, 21<sup>st</sup>-century Rama in a western-style men’s suit appears next to a sad but dignified Sita in a long dress, and other scenes are woven -- out of chronological order -- into the artist’s rendition of the epic. Once her twins grow up, Sita “walks into the earth, and her murmurs [of protest] disappear,” said Ms. Malani.



*“You Can’t Keep Acid in a Paper Bag” is on display 10.30 a.m. to 6.30 p.m., Tuesday to Sunday at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, 145, DLF South Court Mall, Saket, New Delhi. The show ends December 20<sup>th</sup>. It is curated by Roobina Karode, director and chief curator at the museum.*

Artist Nalini Malani with her painting *Twice Upon a Time* in the background. PHOTO COURTESY KIRAN NADAR MUSEUM OF ART