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Nalini Malani at the National Gallery, review — acts of creative desecration

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by Maya Jaggi



A still image from Nalini Malani's 'My Reality is Different' © Nalini Malani

What goes through our minds when we look at a painting? Where does the eye travel when guided by the will of an Old Master — or when resisting it, as we stare quizzically from our era at what we were not meant to see, our own experience disrupting and colouring our perception of the work?

“My Reality is Different”, an immersive installation by Nalini Malani, a leading Indian video artist, is a complex, visceral response to well-known oil paintings spanning the Renaissance to Romanticism. In a darkened room at the National Gallery in London, a nine-channel animation series is projected over four walls, 40 metres long in total. The flickering panorama affords glimpses of paintings by the likes of Rubens and Caravaggio, while appearing to reveal Malani’s mind as she beholds them, animating in rapid-fire “thought bubbles” the connections and contradictions they spark along with seduction, awe and outrage. Stepping into this explosive “Animation Chamber”, the artist writes in a catalogue essay, “is as if one has entered my brain”.

A self-styled *flâneuse* strolling through the western canon, Malani chose 22 paintings from the National Gallery, where she is the inaugural “contemporary fellow” (a two-year programme for invited artists), and three from the Holburne Museum in Bath — where this work premiered. Selecting close-ups, rather as a master painter directs the onlooker’s gaze, she overlaid animations drawn with her finger on an iPad.



Nalini Malani in front of her new work © Nalini Malani. Photo: Luke Walker

Born in Karachi in pre-Partition India, and now 77, Malani invented this form five years ago out of her anger at surging “ethnic cleansing” in India, beginning with an animation, “Can You Hear Me?”, giving voice to Asifa Bano, an eight-year-old Muslim girl in Kashmir who was gang-raped and murdered in sectarian violence in 2018. Malani posted on social media her visual response to such assaults on democracy, so as to reach a wider public than visit galleries. “Painting is very elite in India,” she told me in London, so “what better agora than Instagram?”

For this installation, as on a scratchcard, her fingertip scratched away a black digital overlay from high-resolution images, then drew over them in colour. In Caravaggio’s “The Supper at Emmaus” (1601), circles linking the figures’ hands lay bare the grammar of the painting, while Christ’s head is feminised with longer hair. Blood-red marks — such as jagged slashes on the nude in Guido Reni’s “Susannah and the Elders” (c1622-23) — make explicit the violence and misogyny of many images, from beheadings and incest to men’s eyes devouring vulnerable naked women.



Circles and lines link the figures in Caravaggio's 'The Supper at Emmaus' © Nalini Malani

Nodding to John Berger's book and TV series *Ways of Seeing*, Malani has serious fun subverting narratives of these exclusively male painters. In the German-school "The Judgement of Paris", the youth ogling three nudes morphs into a skeleton stripped of armour. Could those be his entrails being pulled from his mouth? Under Malani's corrective finger, a blue-eyed Madonna in Zanobi Strozzi's "The Annunciation" (c1440-45) is transformed into a dark-skinned Middle Eastern person, while in Bruegel the Elder's "The Adoration of the Kings" (1564), the African monarch with his back to us is brought into the spotlight.

This virtual graffitiing on masterpieces is both critique and homage. Malani retains her thrill at the "aura and aesthetic" of the originals — which she visited often thanks to her father's job with Air India, before art school in Mumbai and a scholarship to Paris. Her book *Dreamings and Defilings* (1991) — whose concertina pages are now in *Artists Making Books* at the British Museum — gave a critical overlay to reproductions of such paintings as Goya's "The Naked Maja" (c1797-1800).

Her admiration for Caravaggio and some religious painters contrasts with scorn for 18th-century "conversation pieces" such as Johan Zoffany's "The Auriol and Dashwood Families" (c1783-87), at the Holburne. Reinforcing racial hierarchies, such paintings served as visual propaganda. In Zoffany's scene of 1780s Bengal, Malani deflects the focus from the preening sitters made wealthy by the East India Company to their five servants, including the bonded child worker holding a silver teapot. As David Dabydeen's seminal book *Hogarth's Blacks* (1987) made clear, such children were often owned as status symbols akin to pets.



Malani's book 'Dreamings and Defilings' (1991) is on show at the British Museum © The Trustees of the British Museum



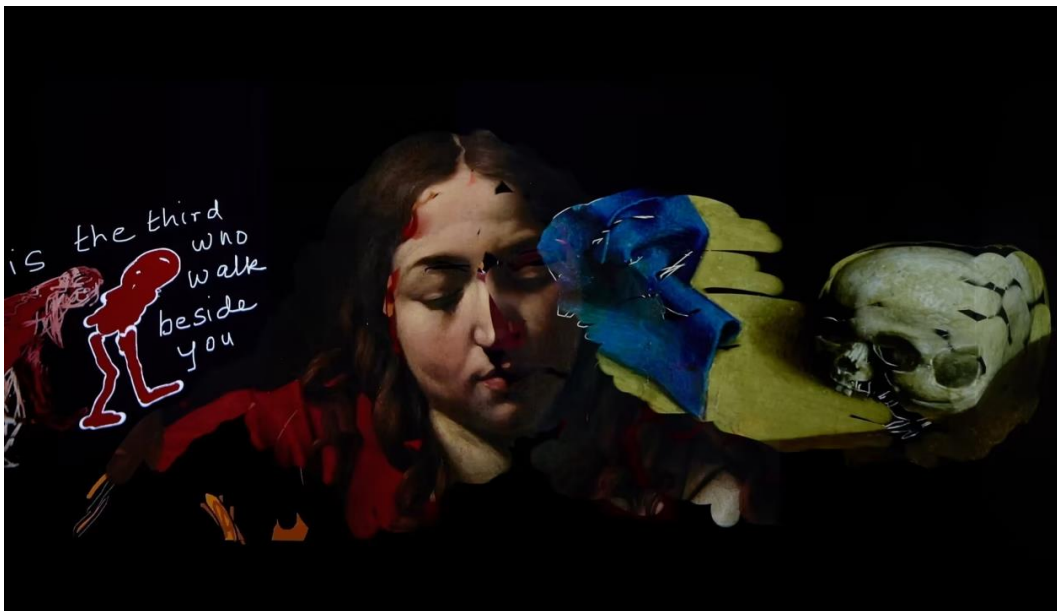
The book gives a critical overlay to reproductions of paintings such as Goya's 'The Naked Maja'

Malani claims mischievously in the catalogue to be "despoiling or desecrating these works". Yet the whole history of art, says the director of the National Gallery, Gabriele Finaldi, is "reaction and counter-reaction to what's gone before . . . There's a constant destroying and rediscovering." Such robust critique "keeps the collection alive".

An engaging "Greek chorus" of red cartoon-like figures romp through the animations or spectate in open-mouthed horror; they include winged angels and Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*. (The work's title alludes to the Cheshire Cat's "I'm not crazy, my reality is just different from yours.") In Holbein's "The Ambassadors" (1533), these figures puzzle and dance over a music score and globe — contradictory totems of western civilisation and colonial expansion. An ominous soundtrack referencing the Trojan wars and the nationalist song *Rule, Britannia!* uses Christa

Wolf's rewriting of the myth of Cassandra — the disregarded seer — as voiced by the actor Alaknanda Samarth. For the artist, we are all Cassandra, possessed of unheeded intuition. Interspersed in the animations are Malani's nine full-screen portraits of fictional African and Asian labourers, the wretched of the earth, whose faces disappear — their mouths stopped — behind stock market graphs.

Above all, this work is a response to the history of these art collections. As surely as the nascent mercantile banking system in Florence funded Renaissance art, these Old Masters were amassed in great part in the 19th century with capital accumulated through plantation slavery and indenture. (The National Gallery acknowledged as much in a research project it published in 2021, Malani notes in the catalogue.) Sir William Holburne's great-grandfather owned West Indian plantations — witness a ledger from 1720s Barbados in the museum. Making these links visible, Malani has in her sights, she says, “not the artists, but the merchants who bought these paintings, and how the bourgeoisie in Britain looked at the dark races”. Her mind connects the erstwhile “patrons of the National Gallery who paid for these paintings” and the “self-aggrandisement of their donations” with patterns of exploitation that persist today.



Still image from 'My Reality is Different' © Nalini Malani

The unsynched projections create inexhaustible juxtapositions at sometimes bewildering speed. Yet what lingers on the retina are the ruined faces, imprisoned behind financial graphs, whose eyes meet ours in silent reproach and a plea not to be forgotten.

'My Reality is Different', National Gallery, London, to June 11, nationalgallery.org.uk. 'Artists Making Books: Poetry to Politics', British Museum to September 17, britishmuseum.org