





## Wing Po So HONG KONG

In an era that prizes Western standards in technological advancements, Chinese medicine has been labeled as pseudoscience—magical

potions with untestable claims. For artist Wing Po So, however, Chinese medicine formulas are a synthesis of science and poetics.

As a child, So learned the functions of the different ingredients in her family's traditional Chinese medicine shop in Hong Kong's Central district. What continues to fascinate her is the physicality of the often oddly-shaped objects, which range from herbs to bones and volcanic rocks. Her multimedia installations make use of these materials to address different aspects of existence. At her 2018 solo exhibition, "Six-Part Practice," at Tai Kwun, for example, she presented *Part One: Connection* (2017-18), a three-meter wide, two-and-a-half-meter tall sculpture of tiny sappanwood sticks that were conjoined together with clay to form thousands of delicate, stacked cubes. The structure hints at the vulnerability

and tenacity of human connections. *Part Four: Suspension* (2017-18) utilizes lava stones, which are suspended from the ceiling with strings, visually interpreting the Chinese medicine term for the ingredient, 浮海石 (rocks floating on the sea). The stones naturally repel each other and gently swing back and forth, evoking the fluctuating dynamics in societal relationships.

With a meticulous attentiveness to the properties of her materials, So delves into the subtle

Detailed installation view of WING PO SO's *Sea ear hi hat*, 2020, abalone shells, motors, brass, dimensions variable, at "The Palm at the End of the Mind," Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong, 2020-21. Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery.

connections between the bodies of humans and other organisms. Encapsulating this is *Sea ear hi hat* (2020), an installation of more than 15 abalone shells with tiny motors fitted inside each of them. In the 2020 group exhibition "The Palm at the End of the Mind" at Hong Kong's Blindspot Gallery, the shells were spread across the floor, automatically opening and closing like hi-hats in a drum set. Toying with the abalone's common names—"ear shells" and "sea ears"—So draws attention to the similarities between the outline of the mollusk's casing and the shape of human ears, highlighting one of the many forms that recur throughout the natural world. In this way, she positions us as a single part in Earth's complex system—the wondrous design of which we have yet to totally grasp.

PAMELA WONG

## Shivanjani Lal SYDNEY/LONDON

Between 1879 and 1916, the British Empire shipped more than 60,000 *girmitiyas*—indentured Indian laborers—to toil on sugarcane

plantations in Fiji. Among them was Shivanjani Lal's great grandmother, whose forced uprooting changed the fate of Lal's family forever. As an artist, Lal dedicates her ritualistic videos, photographs, performances, and installations to her ancestor, exploring ways to heal the traumas of displacement and to surface the histories that inform her Indo-Fijian heritage.

An important material for Lal is turmeric, which is commonly used in Hindu ceremonies for purification. In the video *Kala Pani* (2017), the spice cascades down the open palms of Lal's mother, Shakuntala Lal, and into a bowl, where it dyes a pool of black liquid into a gold hue. Incense ash and sand are then added to the mixture, in which Shakuntala cleanses her hands. The work alludes to the "black waters" that the *girmitiyas* traversed on their way from India to other British colonies, and to the taboo of traveling across seas, which was believed to wash away one's caste. In transforming the basin of inky fluid into an elixir for ablutions, Lal imagines the possibilities of finding remediation from the same site that inflicted suffering.

*Palwaar* (2019) likewise tests the idea of the "black waters" as, in Lal's words, "a place of removal and renewal." The watercolor installation comprises 13 strips of fibrous, Fijian *masi* cloth that the artist had painted with turmeric and then pulled through water, creating shades of ochre. The process and the work's arrangement in a gradient, with the darkest *masi* at the center and white pieces flanking the edges, metaphorically convey the dissolution and creation of Lal's cultural identity.



SHIVANJANI LAL, *Baaro (The Light)*, 2020, still from single-channel video: 30 min 15 sec. Courtesy the artist.

Another use for turmeric in Hindu households is burning. In *Baaro* (2020), Lal lights a circle of 100 turmeric candles, restaging a ritual that is passed along matrilineal lines, while gesturing to how *girmitiyas* set fires to sugarcane fields to prepare the stalks for harvesting. In 2021, as a Georges Mora fellow in London, Lal will continue to uncover histories of indentured labor and its ties to bodies of water that at once separate, connect, and cure.

CHLOE CHU