Meandering Gestures, Infiltrating Language

Areez Katki at Colomboscope, Sri Lanka

by Imaad Majeed

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Areez Katki, *Words are pilgrims*, 2021. Installation view at Colomboscope 2022, Barefoot Gallery. Supported by Creative New Zealand and TARQ. Photo: Shehan Obeysekara. Courtesy Colomboscope.



Areez Katki, *Dio Dispersion* (detail), 2018. Cotton embroidery and antique mul (19th century) on Bombay Dyeing tea towel (c. 1940). Photo: Shehan Obeysekara. Courtesy Colomboscope.



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We Are From Here, *Ashray*, 2020-21. Sound recordings, drawings, maps, photographs and objects. Installation view at Colomboscope 2022, Colombo Public Library. Supported by EUNIC. Photo: Lojithan Ram. Courtesy Colomboscope.



Liz Fernando, *One Last Night*, 2021. Site specific installation, large scale photographic prints. Installation view at Colomboscope 2022, Colombo Public Library. Supported by Chobi Mela International Festival of Photography and Goethe-Institut Sri Lanka. Photo: Lojithan Ram. Courtesy Colomboscope.

Artist, curator and writer Imaad Majeed talks with Aotearoa artist Areez Katki about his participation in Language is Migrant*, the latest edition of the international arts festival Colomboscope, in Sri Lanka, and about using embroidery and textiles to explore ideas of displacement, trajectories of violence, and the colonial legacy of his own Parsi heritage.*

Two years into the pandemic, Colombo, Sri Lanka, reopened its doors to the art world through the interdisciplinary arts festival Colomboscope, with its latest edition *Language is Migrant*. Since its inception, the festival has brought together artists from communities across the island, placing their work in conversation with each other, as well as artists from overseas. *Sea Change*, its previous edition in 2019, meditated upon the waves, the histories of migration, contemporary issues of asylum, and what it means to be 'oceanic'. As a natural evolution of this exploration, *Language is*

Migrant was a carefully sewn tapestry of delicate gestures. Which brings us to the work of Areez Katki, the Aotearoa New Zealand-based artist whose roots extend as far as India and Persia.

While the 2022 festival at large comprised various mediums, including publications, performance and, of course, visual art, across its six venues, most of the textile art was to be found in the rustic Barefoot Gallery. Featuring the work of Sri Lankan artists T. Vinoja, Hema Shironi and Abdul Halik Azeez, alongside that of Katki, the presentation reflected themes of internal displacement, aspirational movement, memory-keeping, the losing and making of homes, and the domestic abode as a site of affect, with a focus on documenting personal histories through textile and collage, thread and pixel. While the work of Vinoja and Shironi was connected to Sri Lanka's 30-year civil war between the state and Tamil separatists, Azeez's work focused on the aspirational migration of his uncle to Dubai. Katki's work found amicable resonances among these explorations, given his own experiences of migration and hybridity. I was particularly drawn to his series *Words are pilgrims*, which hovered ever so delicately within the space.



Areez Katki, *Words are pilgrims*, 2021. Cotton thread hand embroidery on khadi handkerchief. Installation view at Colomboscope 2022, Barefoot Gallery. Supported by Creative New Zealand and TARQ. Photo: Shehan Obeysekara. Courtesy Colomboscope.



Hema Shironi, *A Bundle of Joy*, 2020. Stitching on fabric. Installation view at Colomboscope 2022, Barefoot Gallery. Supported by Foundation for Arts Initiatives. Photo: Lojithan Ram. Courtesy Colomboscope.



Abdul Halik Azeez, *Desert Dreaming*, 2021. Inkjet prints on paper. Single channel video with colour and sound, 65 min 14 sec. Installation view at Colomboscope 2022, Barefoot Gallery. Supported by Foundation for Arts Initiatives. Photo: Lojithan Ram. Courtesy Colomboscope.



T. Krishnapriya, *Series I, TREASURE BOX II*, 2021. 11.45 x 16.5 in. Wooden box with Wooden box with archival letterpress prints. Installation view at Colomboscope 2022, WA Silva Museum and Printing Press. Photo: Shehan Obeysekara. Courtesy Colomboscope.



Cecilia Vicuna, *Palabrarmas*, 2021. Cloth Hangings recreated from photos of lost works. Installation view at Colomboscope 2022, Lakmahal Community Library. Supported by Ishara Art Foundation. Photo: Shehan Obeysekara. Courtesy Colomboscope.



Sister Library, *Aqui Thami*. Bombay Underground zines. Installation view at Colomboscope 2022, Lakmahal Community Library. Supported by Ishara Art Foundation. Photo: Shehan Obeysekara. Courtesy Colomboscope.

When Katki's initial conversation began with Curator Anushka Rajendran and Artistic Director Natasha Ginwala about *Language is Migrant*, he saw that there was a narrative being constructed around migration. "There was also the context of hybridity," he tells me. "To have notions of identity framed by the context of being a migrant in Aotearoa was, by now, not unfamiliar. Colomboscope, however, felt like an opportunity to explore deeper the pluralities within this framework and bring these conversations closer to my South Asian birthplace (Mumbai)."[01]

Katki thought about language as a vehicle to communicate the dislodging of singular or binary forms of identity. That is, to look at the plurality of what languages could be thought of when it comes to the migrant psyche. "When I looked at the work of some of the artists I was so honoured to be exhibiting with, I found that it was so rooted in land specificity, connections to a place and the

traumas faced within that setting, and the displacement and trajectories of violence," he shares. And thus, he chose to speak from his own experiences with hybridity, migration and language, which didn't necessarily directly correlate with those particular themes that were so specifically tied to Sri Lanka's history of violence. "To introduce a complex and very different trajectory of, say, migratory disillusionment beside [other artists'] work that's so charged, just didn't feel right," he says. "I thought about boats. I thought about language. And I thought about the ways in which certain cosmologies, in my case, the Zoroastrian cosmology … could be interwoven and interrelated with how language allowed it to operate and how it transmuted with language."

Careful and considered conversations with the festival curator allowed each artist to hold their own space while also having a clear relational quality in terms of the material and the processes with which the works were made. Katki set out to navigate this opportunity without stealing too much attention away from the narratives that are so rooted in Sri Lanka. He selected the work in a long process of dialogue with the curators, thinking about how it would share the exhibition space with other artists. "I think that my narrative had to be uprooted and suspended, both physically and metaphorically, mid-air. It had to be left in that liminality," he tells me, "and abstraction is a great way to achieve that, visually, and also in terms of the way languages operate inside us, liminality is particularly powerful when you talk about migration."



Areez Katki, *Dio Dispersion*, 2018. Cotton embroidery and antique mul (19th century) on Bombay Dyeing tea towel (c. 1940). Photo: Shehan Obeysekara. Courtesy Colomboscope.



Areez Katki, *Udvada*, 2018. Cotton embroidery and antique mul (19th century) on Bombay Dyeing tea towel (c. 1940). Photo: Shehan Obeysekara. Courtesy Colomboscope.



Areez Katki, *Words are pilgrims* (detail), 2021. Installation view at Colomboscope 2022, Barefoot Gallery. Supported by Creative New Zealand and TARQ. Photo: Shehan Obeysekara. Courtesy Colomboscope.



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Areez Katki, *Udvada* (detail), 2018. Cotton embroidery and antique mul (19th century) on Bombay Dyeing tea towel (c. 1940). Photo: Shehan Obeysekara. Courtesy Colomboscope.



Areez Katki, *Words are pilgrims* (detail), 2021. Installation view at Colomboscope 2022, Barefoot Gallery. Supported by Creative New Zealand and TARQ. Photo: Shehan Obeysekara. Courtesy Colomboscope.

It has only been in recent years that the Sri Lankan art world has taken an interest in women's traditions, particularly those of embroidery and use of fabrics. This can be seen in the recent

representation of such artists, like Hema Shironi, by commercial galleries such as Saskia Fernando Gallery and, of course, past editions of Colomboscope. Shironi and fellow textile artist Sabeen Omar have hosted sewing and embroidery workshops at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka, following a well-received stitching circle that took place during the House of Kal event in Colombo. For Katki, it was a meandering route by which he arrived at these forms. “It began probably from around age six to seven, when my grandmother would notice how I wasn't directly drawn to acts of intensity and boisterousness. My mannerisms were softer. She told me that she had noticed very early on that I was drawn to tender surfaces, details and textures as a child,” he reminisces. “It was very perceptive of my grandmother, my mother, my aunt Dolly and my sister, to let me in and allow me to just experience from a distance that network of women's traditions.”

This soft indoctrination came from activities such as cooking complex Parsi dishes with his mother. “The domestic cocoon was one in which I thrived,” he confides, with a smile. This led him to learn certain techniques and appreciate certain traditional methodologies, which he then married with his art-historical and storytelling penchant, thus arriving at textiles. “Everything, if you look at it closely enough, is a textile.” Paper is a textile, he tells me, on which we have narratives unfolding, throughout history. Textiles are a broader tableau upon which mark making and storytelling can be performed. “Embroidery felt like a particularly tender gesture because it was both permanent and impermanent. It was mark making through the act of puncturing a textile surface, but also realising that the materiality is going to change the moment you place an ornamental layer upon an otherwise clean slate, so to say.”

It felt like a natural progression of the ideas that he had explored in more formal academic settings. He found his way into embroidering repurposed textiles, or textiles with historical significance, personal and political. He used textiles such as those of his family, stored away in a familial house in Mumbai, as well as textiles with clear correlations to spirituality, adding layers of his own interpretation and storytelling onto these artefacts.

“When you paint on canvas, you're painting on a textile. When people say ‘textile art’, I say, ‘Oh, yeah, like a painting, a manuscript. Those are textile arts.’” Katki finds that the term ‘craft’ is used to both celebrate and also to annex material-based work that has otherwise, in his opinion, just as much if not more contemporary and conceptual rigour. “But because it’s deeply material-based and it’s not formally academicised as painting or sculpture have been, it has a different audience, or perhaps a different way of being discussed. The act of challenging such hegemonies feels like a way to operate both within but also beyond dominant narratives, and it provides one with the opportunity to research, respond and operate within paradigms that sit beyond colonial structures.”



Installation view at Colomboscope 2022, Barefoot Gallery. Photo: Shehan Obeysekara. Courtesy Colomboscope.



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Areez Katki, *Words are pilgrims*, 2021. Cotton thread hand embroidery on khadi handkerchief. Installation view at Colomboscope 2022, Barefoot Gallery. Supported by Creative New Zealand and TARQ. Photo: Shehan Obeysekara. Courtesy Colomboscope.

Our conversation invariably circles around Katki’s heritage, coming from the Parsi community, and the heavy weight that this identity carries. He does not feel that it is his duty to take on the task of conserving these traditions and cultures. Actually, he’d like to challenge this heritage, particularly its colonial legacy, as his community was once very much a part of the British Raj, serving as peacekeepers—a fact that many Parsis take pride in. “One thing that stopped that pride from growing into a legacy of nationalism or colonial acceptance [for me] was migrating to Aotearoa as a child. The Parsi community was nothing. There are only 2,000 Parsis in the whole country. And most of them have flocked around the same suburb in the same city in Eastern Auckland.” He saw

how diminutive the influence and scale of their so-called heritage—in which they once took so much pride, in places like Mumbai—was when it was dislocated and displaced and put it in a place like Aotearoa, which has its own deep, dark colonial history. “Whatever pride or connection that I was supposed to feel with the surviving members of this little Parsi community that all flocked together, that pride started to really disappear. Being within proximity of a very Eurocentric worldview also helped with that,” he reflects. “Language starts to disappear.”

His first perceptible language, orally, was Gujarati. Though born in Mumbai, Katki never actually lived there, until recently. “I was born there because my mother wanted to leave me with my grandparents when she had to go back to work. My family lived in the Middle East, first Muscat, and then when I was three we migrated to Dubai,” he tells me. “You start speaking and language starts to take its form within the domestic space, and it was always Gujarati. When we migrated to Dubai, I had to go to kindergarten, and my mother was so nervous. ‘We haven't spoken a word of English with our son. How is he going to go to kindergarten at his school where no one speaks Gujarati?’ I went to an international school with kids from all over the world in Dubai. So, with much trepidation, she dropped me off for my first day. The teacher said, ‘He speaks perfect English.’ It was there. It's inescapable. The colonial tongue somehow found its way in spite of interventions made by the domestic space. It infiltrated the space, because there was always the radio, a song, the television, a cartoon, that was passively teaching me this language that my mother didn't even know her son knew. She was shocked, but also delighted.”

Once acquainted, I begin to inquire about a particular series of works exhibited at Colomboscope. Suspended within the Barefoot Gallery, one of the six venues of the festival, is the series *Words are pilgrims*, a quartet created specifically for Colomboscope after Katki’s early conversations with the curator. Returning to the need for liminality, the series asks that you turn your gaze upward. Handkerchief cloths hang high above, catching the light coming through little windows in the gallery. They are hoisted in such a way that there are contours that bring depth, highlight and shadow into play. There are threads in yellow, orange, shades of blue, light green. They cast shapes that are almost calligraphic, elliptical,

often circling in on themselves. The eye makes out figures, some birds, some masculine bodies. A flower here, what looks like a suggestion of a typographic face. A right eye. Floating phalluses, an open hand, grapes. They allow the viewer to string together a narrative, or simply meditate on each abstraction. There is movement. A fluidity. And this is achieved as much by the gestures of the embroidery as it is by the manner in which the work is presented.



Vijitharan Maryathevathas, *Existence, Loss and Reconstruction*, 2021-22. Installation with found objects. Installation view at Colomboscope 2022, Colombo Public Library. Supported by Warehouse421 Project Revival Fund. Photo: Shehan Obeysekara. Courtesy Colomboscope.



Imaad Majeed, *Testimony of the Disappeared*, 2021. Digital print on uncoated paper. Edition of 3, 148 x 210 mm. Installation view at Colomboscope 2022, WA Silva. Museum and Printing Press. Photo: Shehan Obeysekara. Courtesy Colomboscope.



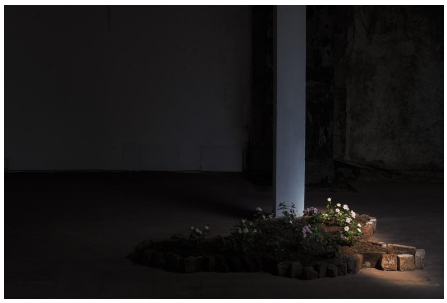
Aziz Hazara, *Takbir*, 2021. Single channel video with sound and colour, 7 min 24 sec. Installation view at Colomboscope 2022, Rio Complex. Produced and commissioned by Between Art and Film Foundation with generous support from Künstlerhaus Bethanien, KFW Stiftung, EUNIC, Goethe-Institut Sri Lanka, and Kälam. Photo: Shehan Obeysekara. Courtesy Colomboscope.



Sundharam Anojan, *Hidden Path*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas. Installation view at Colomboscope 2022, Rio Complex. Supported by Foundation for Arts Initiatives. Photo: Shehan Obeysekara. Courtesy Colomboscope.



Thisath Thoradeniya, *Below the Salt*, 2022. Temperature controlled glass cabinet, sea salt, leaves. Installation view at Colomboscope 2022, Rio Complex. Supported by EUNIC and Goethe-Institut Sri Lanka. Photo: Shehan Obeysekara. Courtesy Colomboscope.



Omer Wasim, *Spectral Remains*, 2020-22. Jasmine, soil, wood, bricks. Installation view at Colomboscope 2022, Rio Complex. Supported by EUNIC and Goethe-Institut. Photo: Shehan Obeysekara. Courtesy Colomboscope.

“I chose four words that have either Persian or Arabic roots and that have made their way into the English tongue,” Katki explains. He chose these words—musk, khaki, alcohol and algebra—from a larger poetic piece that he wrote for his Master in Creative Writing,

a piece called *Loot* in two parts. Katki tells me that the word 'loot' itself comes from Sanskrit, and was, ironically, one of the first words to be appropriated by the English tongue, via an Indo-European route.

"To go further back, there was a point in this hybrid prose poem when I was riding a bus and I kept hearing these words, a conversation I was privy to, not eavesdropping but just happening to overhear on the bus, and it made me think that Persian and Arabic languages were like spies," he recalls. These words had somehow made it to places where the bodies of the descendants who speak these languages had not yet infiltrated. Words, like bodies, have learned how to survive by assimilating and mutating, and finding new contexts and new meanings, both verbally and also in a visual sense.

"The poem led me to select these four words, which I then corresponded with four different elements that are very important to the Zoroastrian cosmology," he explains. "For example, musk is air, khaki is earth, algebra is fire, and alcohol is water. I've corresponded those elemental relationships with those words and it's allowed me to expand on what I wanted to explore visually for my more abstract mark-making inquests. It has made me look at written script, but also respond to sound; how those words, when broken down, and when you look at the history of some of them, for example, musk mutates into mushkil, and you think of sweat when you think of mushkil, mushkil means trouble. There are these interspersed narratives that I have somehow been able to create and write about in that piece *Loot* that are then visually manifested in each of those four panels."

I ask about his gestures, and how they find their way into the work. "I begin with a study on found paper. Early on, in this process, after the poem was written, a lot of conversations, a lot of discourse and readings were shared with Anushka and Natasha." It was lockdown for two and a half months in Aotearoa. All Katki had access to was scrap paper because at that time he did not have his fancy paints and paper with him, and he could not go to an art-supply store. There were a lot of studies that he shared with the curators. The mark making stemmed from mutating the script of Arabic and Persian, seeing its interrelationships with the Roman script, and

how he could create hybrids, in order to somehow communicate the migrant experience of speaking or being multilingual, how language operates within the bilingual or multilingual brain.



Areez Katki, *Dio Dispersion* (detail), 2018. Cotton embroidery and antique mul (19th century) on Bombay Dyeing tea towel (c. 1940). Photo: Shehan Obeysekara. Courtesy Colomboscope.



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Lockdown was lifted. Colomboscope was postponed. He did a few more studies on nicer paper. The choice of colours and material was also based on his desire to stray from literal interpretations that would otherwise be too didactic, “because you could easily associate a colour with a word”. He wanted to challenge that, question “the authority that colour has with a word. I wanted to divorce it from its literal sense, visually. I wanted to allow them to be these objects that were still very much found, and not yet located and made sense of. They were remnants. Two of them are handkerchiefs, and the other two are khadi cloth remnants that I didn't really cut, I just found them as they were at a khadi weaver’s in Mumbai. They let me purchase these remnants. I would frame the edges and use them as a shape, as they are, without too much intervention. Because I really enjoy the process of using diagonal shapes and nonlinear shapes, because of their Queer connotations.”

I inquire about the manner in which the handkerchiefs have been folded. “That was a conversation with Anushka. We started discussing this in 2020 and here we are in 2022. For me, they had to have this quality of levitation but, also, the corner that I was given had a round window and a vent-like window, both high up. I've suspended works in the same kind of modality of installation before, but they've usually been lower. I almost asked Anushka to

release them from that proximity with the ceiling. But seeing those windows, it made me want to allow the works this possibility of escape, that they could just fly out, that they could be swept away and once again lost in the ether. The way they are folded and draped very much has to do with the quality of the cloth itself. Unfortunately, I wasn't there to do that in person. We decided to use really poetic angles that had mostly diagonal lines that lead the eye towards those two escape points, so that they looked yearningly towards emancipation from that white cube space."

What is it that is escaping? Is it this idea of fugitive language? "They are fugitive gestures. They have stopped being just language and they've stopped just being words. In spite of the title of the series, a pilgrimage is usually about a trajectory that's not static. It's going from place to place to place. Much like the quest narrative that's explored in poet Farid ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*. The Simurgh, the Valley of Quest, the Valley of Wonderment, and this idea that these words, like the birds, were in their pursuit of enlightenment but also the Simurgh," he tells me. "They are looking to escape their state of dissatisfaction with the status quo or just being static."

I note that our conversation, too, has been meandering, to which he responds, "The meander pattern in Greek pottery is such that it never ends. It's a square that repeats itself, representing the four elements. They say the Greeks got the meander motif from the Persians. There's a lot of that cultural exchange happening, and there's a lot more to being 'a contemporary Parsi or Persian', to me, and that has been realised through a process of unlearning, learning, relearning, and that's never been static. Because language isn't static, it's constantly shifting, and being multilingual is both a blessing and a curse."

Footnotes

01. All quotes from Areez Katki are in conversation with the author, 31 January, 2022.

Biographies



Areez Katki (b.1989, Mumbai, India) has a practice that dwells between the textual and material-based intersections where the phenomenology of a postcolonial identity is examined through modalities of (de)languaging and (re)framing cultural affects. He uses traditional processes of mark making—embroidery, weaving, printmaking, staining—to destabilise the expressionistic hierarchies established by a dominant culture.

Katki's work has been exhibited across Oceania, Asia, North America and Europe; recent solo exhibitions include *All My Books Have Faded Spines*, McLeavey Gallery, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, NZ (2022); *There Is No Other Home But This* [with Khadim Ali], Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Ngāmotu New Plymouth, NZ (2022); *Fruit Cubab*, Te Tuhi, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, NZ (2022); and *Bildungsroman* [*& Other Stories*], Tarq Gallery, Mumbai, India (2021). Selections of his writing have been published with Matters, Art News (NZ), The Pantograph Punch, Elle Magazine (India), Consider Journal, Waist, Saltwater Love, Turbine Kapohau and Lieu Journal. Katki's work is held internationally in private and public collections.



Imaad Majeed is a multidisciplinary artist, curator and writer, based in Colombo, Sri Lanka. They are Director and Curator of the trilingual performance platform KACHA KACHA. They are Project Coordinator and Co-Curator of Thattu Pattu, a platform for music from the fringes of Sri Lanka. They are one part of the artist collective The Packet and VJ/DJ of Packet Radio (SUPR FM). They enjoy making playlists, and writing about musicians from Sri Lanka for the international music blog *beehype*.

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