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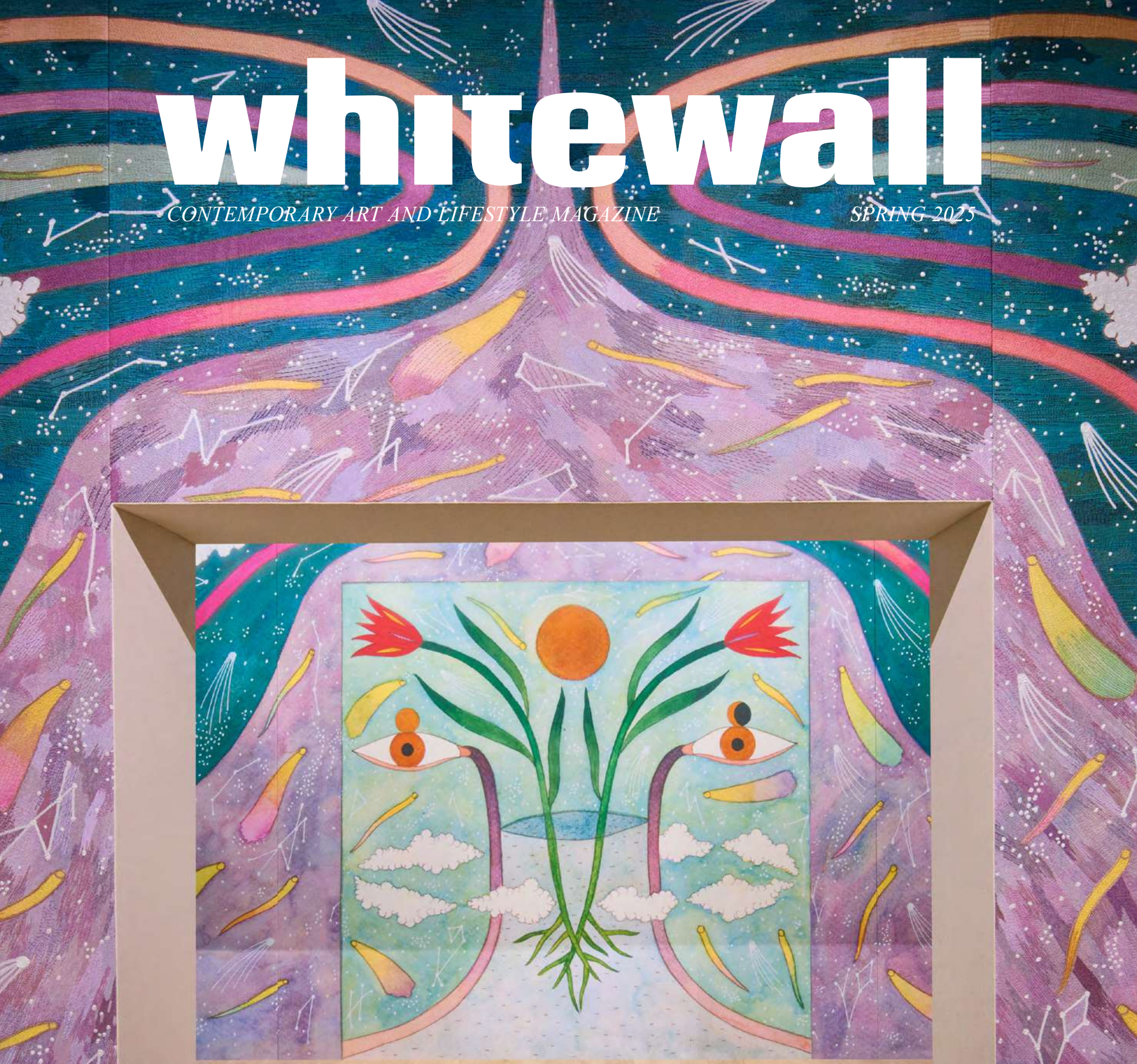


THE ARTIST ISSUE

CHANAKYA SCHOOL OF CRAFT - ASIM WAQIF - JAIPUR CENTRE FOR ART - STUDIO RAW MATERIAL - SOSA JOSEPH - RADHIKA CHOPRA - GAURAV GUPTA - STUDIO LOTUS

Sosa
JOSEPH

Abandoning herself to the anarchy of instincts in her paintings that grapple with challenging themes, rendered in ethereal scenes.

Portrait by John Mathew.

By Andrew Huff

Profoundly inquisitive and intellectual in her approach to making art, artist Sosa Joseph creates fantastically figurative paintings that provide great insight into her deeply personal and conceptually rooted practice.

Growing up in Parumala, a small village and island on the Pampa River in Thiruvalla Taluk, India, Joseph's dynamic, vibrant, and sometimes challenging compositions are born from experiences and early memories of time spent in this singular environment. Figures traverse a river. A nude woman is groomed on a table. Women and girls congregate in a lively public setting. Two people avoid a rainstorm with makeshift umbrellas. These quotidian scenes depict familiar moments, but alludes to deeper conversations about the human condition on a global scale.

There is an undeniable confidence and ease with which Joseph paints. Often framed or connected through the inclusion of a river, Joseph's works mine her thoughts to capture narratives that feel both imagined and incredibly real, brimming with palpable human emotion.

In the last few years, Joseph has had a residency and subsequent exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Bureau, Amsterdam, as well as gallery exhibitions with a mix of international museums and acclaimed galleries, including David Zwirner and Stevenson. With no signs of slowing, it seems inevitable that her work will continue to gain interest from an even wider global audience in coming years.

Whitewall asked Joseph about her practice, artistic process, and what she has coming up this year.

WHITEWALL: *You have mentioned that Parumala, the place where you are from, serves as a source of inspiration that manifests in different ways in your paintings. Can you describe the landscape and some of your earliest memories of this area?*

SOSA JOSEPH: Parumala, where I was born and raised, is an island village on the River Pamba in Kerala. In that sense, I am an islander; from an island roughly one-tenth the size of—I looked it up—Manhattan. Until around the time I was born, there wasn't a bridge connecting us to the mainland of Kerala. We were surrounded on all sides by the River Pamba, and everything—and everyone—had to reach our little island by crossing the river on country boats, propelled with poles. Both my father and grandfather were boatmen, ferrying people to and from the island.

On these boats, crossing the river, perhaps a thousand years before I was born, Christianity—the Eastern Orthodox kind—arrived on the island, followed later, in the early 20th century, by Communism, the kind that hoped to bring about a revolution by organizing peasants and workers before Indian Independence but settled for "democratic, electoral communism" afterward. Together, they created a fascinating cultural ecosystem that was both deeply Christian and intensely left-wing at the same time. At home, Marx and Lenin were revered alongside Jesus and the apostles. My father, a senior local leader of the Communist Party, and my grandmother, a devout Christian, represented the two poles of this Christian-Communist spectrum, with my mother caught somewhere in the middle. To avoid upsetting my father, I steered clear of attending church, though my grandmother often bribed me with candy to accompany her.

Parumala is part of the Kuttanad region, the lowest-lying land in India and one of the few places in the world where farming is done below sea level. This vast river delta is criss-crossed by four rivers and bordered by Vembanad Lake—the longest lake in India. As if that wasn't enough water, we also had six months of heavy rain every year. On our island, most families, including mine, were poor. The landscape was dominated by paddies, sugarcane fields, and swamps, all defined by the river. The bustle of daily life came from Party marches and church processions, while wetland birds, animals, and vegetation made up the backdrop.

As for early memories: aren't they also the most enduring? In One Hundred Years of Solitude—Gabriel García Márquez is practically a demi-god in Kerala—Colonel Aureliano Buendía, facing the firing squad, recalled the afternoon when he went with his father to discover ice. As for me, when I die—hopefully under more agreeable circumstances—I think I'll recall going to the riverbank with my brother to collect luffas, as depicted in Luffa Gatherers, painted a few years ago. We, children of the river, also picked up many things that washed ashore daily—odds and ends that we turned into playthings. These included defunct bicycle and automobile tyres, which were popular among boys, and, surprisingly, entire bunches of new glass bangles, discarded by peddlers for reasons we never understood. I might also remember the Party marches, which formed a red river running alongside the actual river, and the church processions that took the same route. And the birds along the river: coots, swamphens, jacanas, and other wetland birds. The moon rising over the sugarcane fields. The rain falling over the river. And yes, staying alert for the bodies of girls who had gone missing from the island, hoping they wouldn't wash ashore.

One of my most lasting memories is of being displaced by frequent floods. During the monsoons, the river often rose and swallowed our homes. As a child, I recall being evacuated to shelters run either by the Church or by local authorities, usually schools converted into makeshift refuges. Strangely, far from being traumatic, I look back on these experiences fondly—even wistfully. As children, we thoroughly enjoyed the communal living that these shelters offered. Dozens of displaced families would live together in a church hall or school building. We were too young to grasp the devastation the floods caused for others, so, for us, these gatherings were festive occasions, and we never stopped frolicking.

WW: *What about this place has made it such an integral setting for you compositionally?*

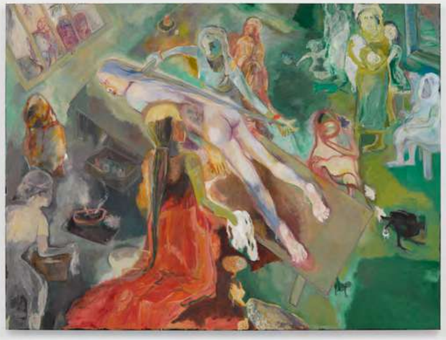
SJ: Parumala becomes an integral setting in my work only when I'm painting life in the context of the village where I grew up.

A number of my paintings are set elsewhere, particularly in Mattancherry, in the neighbourhood of my studio in Kochi. As I've discussed elsewhere, I paint what inspires, moves, or preoccupies me. Recently, I painted two dozen canvases—exhibited at Stevenson, Cape Town, and elsewhere—depicting the victims of Indian Ocean slavery. Many of these people were originally from parts of Kerala that I know intimately, particularly Kochi and Kuttanad. They were painted as I imagined their lives in far-flung places where they were sold as slaves—Manila, Cape Town, and various towns in present-day Mexico. So, the setting is not always my island village in Kerala.

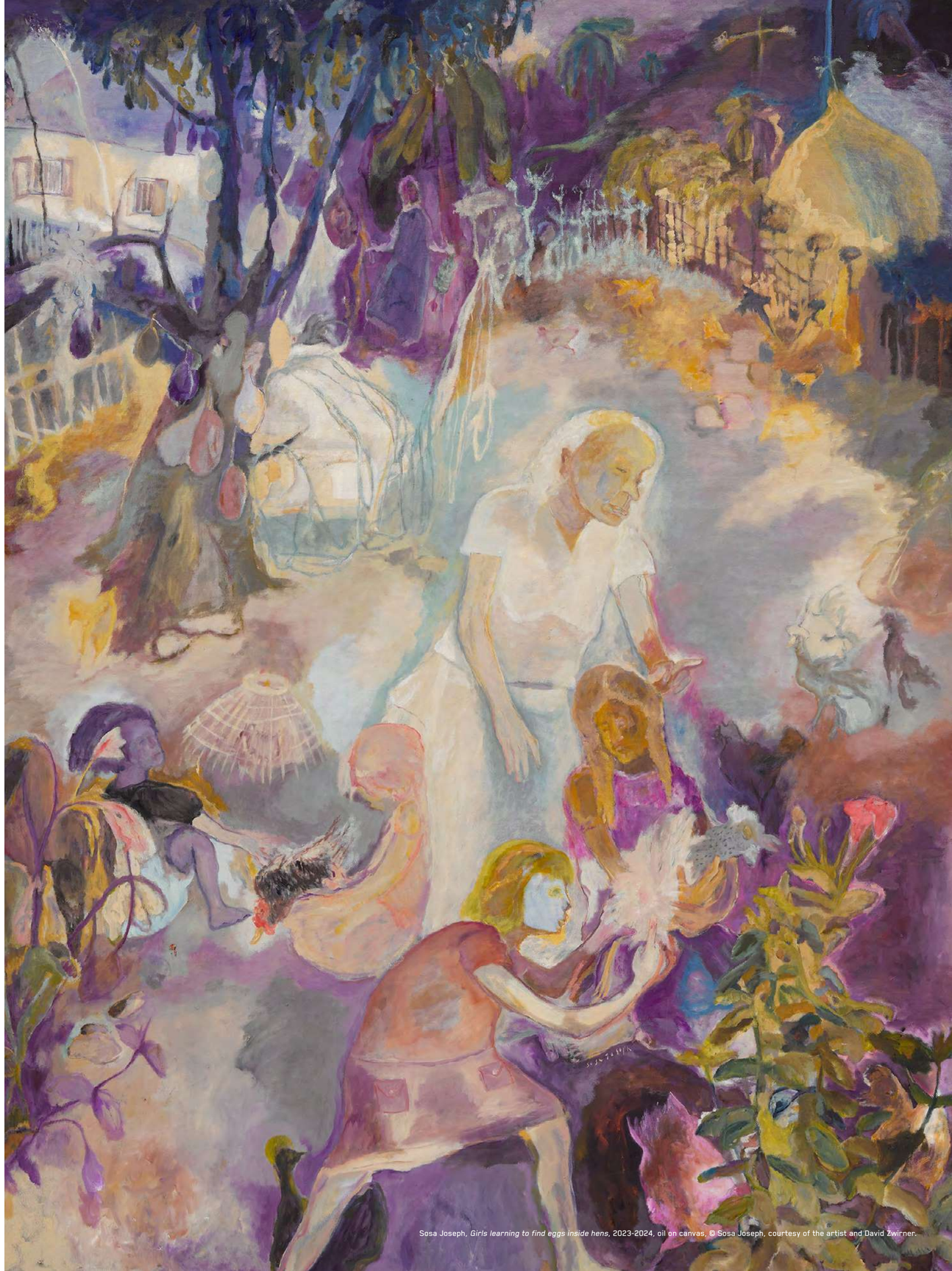
That said, I do keep returning to the riverine, island ecosystem of my childhood, where my memories began and my visual vocabulary was formed. As the youngest child in my family, I spent much of my early life at home while both my parents worked and my siblings attended school. Only the river and my grandmother were always home, besides the calves—seen in Girl Reading to Her Buffaloes.

The river remains my teacher, philosopher, and inspiration. It taught me that flux is everything. Not flowing is death. No matter what obstacles lie in its way, the river always finds a way to flow—whether around, over, or by carving out a new course. And I don't think the river had any proof of the existence of the ocean, or knew where to find it, when it left the hills and started flowing. The river just had faith—that it would find the big, mighty ocean at the end of its difficult journey, to become one with it. At times, I think of myself as a river. And I strive to keep up the flux. So, yes, I keep going back to my riverbank.

WW: *In your paintings, you utilize such a specific palette of colors, which cohere in ways that feel totally organic. How do you approach the process of beginning each new painting?*



Sosa Joseph, *Śarada*, 2023-2024, oil on canvas, © Sosa Joseph, courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner.



Sosa Joseph, *Girls learning to find eggs inside hens*, 2023-2024, oil on canvas, © Sosa Joseph, courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner.

SJ: The phrase “such a specific palette” seems to imply a palette that is rather original or unique, and “cohering organically” seems to suggest the colors work together to create some semblance of harmony. So, thank you! However, regardless of the specificity of my palette, it’s not static. When I look back over the years, I can see the palette has definitely been evolving. From very somber and almost monochromatic, to bold and colorful, I have painted with all kinds of colors. As I have said before, color can be a state of mind, a mood.

I often think of color as a kind of music. But then, one can create music by being a musicologist full of technical knowledge, or by simply playing by ear. I am the latter kind. I do not have a definitive color theory, nor do I know much about it. In fact, I have always resisted such learning and theorization. Instead, on a daily basis, guided purely by instinct, I go looking for my shades on my large palettes—almost large enough for me to curl up in—with a lot of squeezed-out paint on them. I move mounds of pigments around, pushing on until I find the nameless shades I am looking for. That’s how I find my shades, by looking for them actively, sometimes even violently, purely by instinct. So no, I’m not the sort of painter who meticulously plans her color schemes or follows a formula for mixing certain hues or shades. In fact, if you ask me how I mixed a specific shade, I wouldn’t know.

WW: *Some of your compositions grapple with rather intense or challenging subject matter, but are captured with such a delicate, almost ethereal touch. Is this something you are thinking about when creating your works?*

SJ: “Grapple” is exactly the right word because, yes, at times, I paint to work through things. So yes, in some of my compositions, the subject matter might be intense. However, the subject matter is not art; I have always believed art is in the “how,” and not the “what.” As for the aesthetic effect on the canvas, be it called “delicate,” “ethereal,” or termed “dreamlike,” “fluid,” “otherworldly,” and so on, as it’s been previously, it’s not something I work toward. It’s the only way I can paint.

See, as a person, I am rather careful, cautious, guarded, even circumspect. Recently, a journalist I met in London wrote that I “come at things like a deer, weighing my words cautiously.” Perhaps I do. But as a painter, I’m nothing like that. I’m not the type of artist who plans meticulously, thinks things through, or works toward a pre-planned result or effect. I simply can’t work that way. This is so because painting is something I do to let go, setting myself completely free, abandoning myself to the anarchy of instincts. In life, I overthink, I think, or do I? I’m not sure. I guess, maybe. But when I paint, I don’t think at all. And I certainly don’t care about a thing.

I paint spontaneously, like the rain falls, the wind blows, or the river flows. So, obviously, whatever the character of my brushwork that evokes responses like ‘ethereal’, ‘delicate’ and so on—it’s not something I consciously work towards. In fact, I don’t think one can be too ‘careful’ in art. The only way to approach art, at least for me, is with disregard for the results. If one is totally focused on the outcome, I think, one can’t create. At least I can’t.

WW: *Can you tell us about the experience of opening your recent exhibition at David Zwirner's London gallery? As it was your first solo show in the EU and U.K. region, it seems like it must have been a significant moment for you.*

SJ: It was indeed a very significant moment, and I’m pleased to say the show was rather well received. Although I’ve exhibited in Europe before—in Paris and Amsterdam—the solo presentation at David Zwirner London was something else, a remarkably different experience, to say the least. Apart from it being a well-produced show, what really set the experience apart was the quality of the viewership. In fact, my work has always been better appreciated in Europe than in India. Through direct interactions and by sharing on social media, personal blogs, and so on, the people of London really came through as a generously appreciative and inspiring audience. Besides, there were quite a few practicing painters among the viewers who had kind things to say. It left me feeling incredibly thankful—and genuinely humbled.

WW: *Are there any other highlights you felt were particularly significant moments throughout your artistic career?*

SJ: Among the many, one of the most significant would be my residency and subsequent exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Bureau, Amsterdam. That was the first time I’d ever been to Amsterdam, to Europe, and even outside India. During that time, I visited various museums—the Stedelijk, the Rijksmuseum, and, of course, the Van Gogh Museum. As I worked at the space where I eventually exhibited, but stayed a short distance away, I used to pass by the Van Gogh Museum every day on my commute and would often notice the long queues of visitors.

When I finally found myself in the queue, though, it happened to be a rainy day. Holding an umbrella, I stood in line for over two hours just to get inside. Back then, I’d only just started selling my works, but I was barely scraping by. It was still a constant struggle to pay the rent, put food on the table, keep my daughter in school, and somehow keep working. That day, standing in front of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, waiting in the pouring rain with people who were willing to queue for hours just to see the work of a painter whose life had been one of struggle—that too, a century and a half after his time—it really moved me. I felt proud of having chosen to live on the edge and risk it all to become a professional artist. Not just proud, though—I felt validated, confident, and strangely reassured. Inside the museum, I was completely overwhelmed and humbled.

Another momentous occasion would be my first encounter with several Post-Impressionists and Expressionists at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, where I was fortunate enough to exhibit in 2017. It might sound silly—and definitely sentimental—but I was overwhelmed by the realization that my works, even if just for a while, shared the walls of the same museum as those of Kirchner, Chagall, Matisse, and others.

Not too bad, I thought, for a working-class girl from an island village in a remote corner of India, who had barely managed to get into the fine arts college near her home—I was rejected twice. In any case, Matisse’s use of red did something to me. In place of the somber, earthy palette that I had been using those days, I then went on to paint bold reds, especially in many works that would later be shown at the Biennale of Sydney the next year.

WW: *What is your studio space like? How do you keep it organized, and what sort of environment do you work best in?*

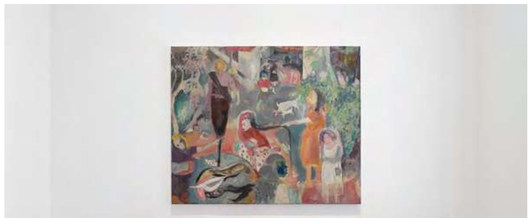
SJ: I have two spaces where I work. One is in Kochi, in the old neighborhood of Mattancherry, right in the middle of an old bazaar that’s falling apart but still buzzing with chaos. The other is in Bangalore, in a quiet, wooded neighborhood just off a high street, which keeps everything I might need within walking distance. Since my primary residence is in Bangalore, I find myself working here more and more these days.

Purpose-built or converted studio spaces available for rent aren’t really a thing in India, especially in Bangalore. I work on a separate floor of a detached house, just above where we live. This setup means I can put in long hours—sometimes right up until bedtime. It also comes with the added bonus of balconies and a rooftop, where, during the dry months, I occasionally paint under the shade of an avocado tree.

How do I keep it all organized? Well, I sort of don’t! Honestly, I’m the most disorganized and the messiest person I know; I seem to thrive in the chaos.

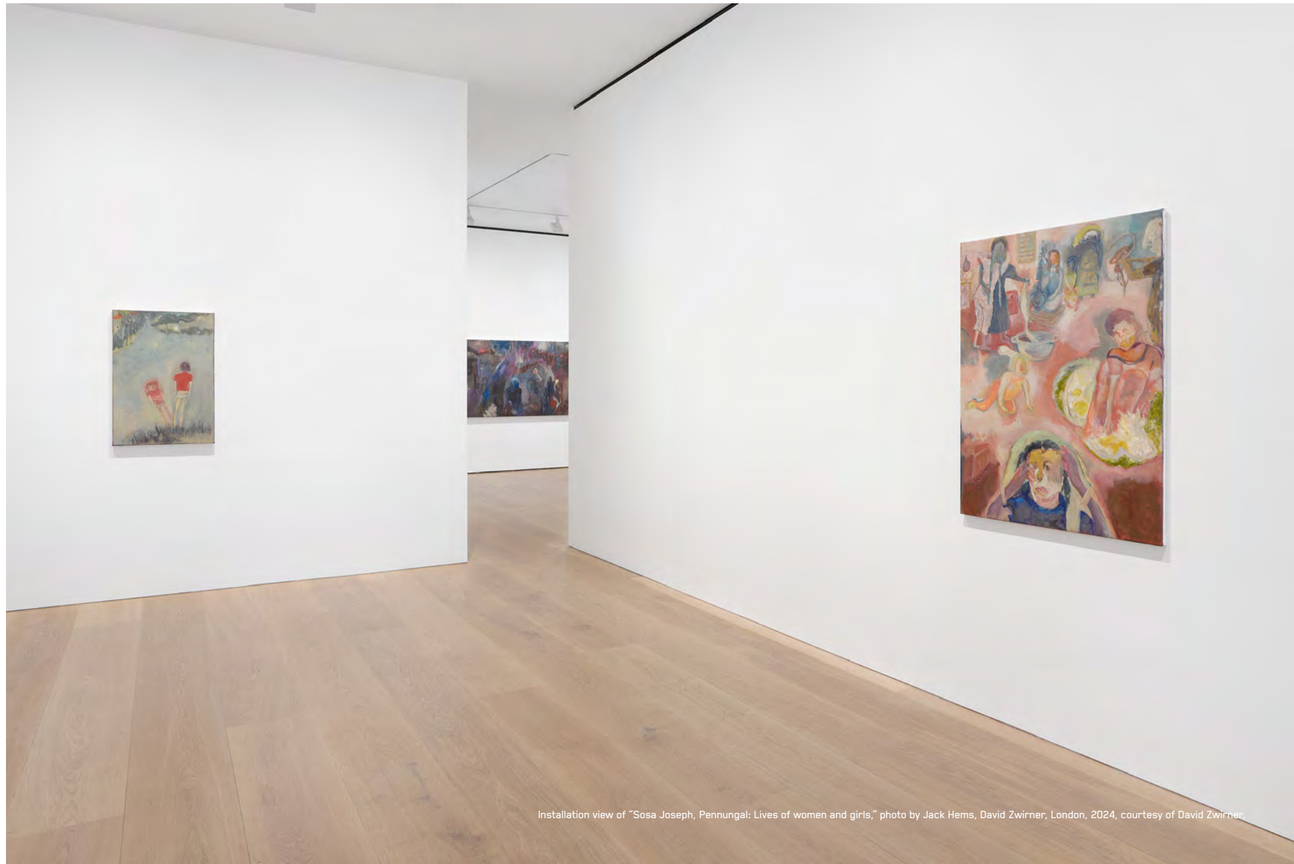
WW: *Can you share any information about what your next plans are for upcoming exhibitions in the year ahead?*

SJ: Indeed, I have two scheduled exhibitions, both set to be on the walls this year—2025. The first will take place at Stevenson’s Amsterdam space, and the second will be in New York, at David Zwirner, toward the end of the year. Between the two, they should keep me quite busy.



Installation view of “Sosa Joseph, Pennungal: Lives of women and girls,” photo by Jack Hems, David Zwirner, London, 2024, courtesy of David Zwirner.

“Painting is something I do to let go, setting myself completely free”



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