

REREADING

REENA KALLAT

Quddus Mirza

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Though it is difficult to determine, a good piece of poetry can usually be described as a verse that cannot be translated. Because unlike prose, words in a poem are embedded with unique cultural histories and meanings that cannot be fully explained without compromising its rhythm and arrangement, which also hold meaning. Simon Leys discusses this in his essay “The Experience of Literary Translation” in the 2011 book *The Hall of Uselessness: Collected Essays*: “The ‘idea’ of a poem is present only as it takes form in words; a poem doesn’t exist outside its verbal incarnation, any more than an individual exists outside his skin.”

Similarly, some works of art synthesize idea and form, or subject and material. Here, the matter used by the artist is not merely a means to fabricate an image, but also a contributing factor in creating and conveying meaning in the work of art. One cannot separate the choice of material from an artist’s concerns, because—like the ideal combination of body and soul—both turn into a single, seamless entity, without revealing the boundaries of one or the other.

The art of Reena Kallat is an example of this blend, in which a range of substances—such as salt, sand, stamps and fabric, thread and electric wires—become potent parts of her work, which

deals with power, past, heritage and the history of ideas. In her installations and mixed-media works, Kallat examines the constructs of national boundaries and questions historic truths. However, these issues are addressed through a language that is poetic and formal and invites a range of interpretations. For instance, salt is an important element of



her imagery. In *Saline Notations* (2014), salt is spread on the shore of the Arabian sea in Mumbai, in the form of a text that provokes a person to walk, read, stumble, erase and engage with it in various ways. Several other works, too, include natural materials or substances. This preference for certain matter intrigues viewers and raises some questions about Kallat’s conceptual and aesthetic choices.

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Quddus Mirza: Can you please share your inspiration for using multiple materials, such as salt arranged in the form of text on the seashore? Is it connected to political history—the Salt March of Gandhi (1930–31), for instance—or treated as other metaphors?

(Previous page)
SALINE NOTATIONS (detail), 2014, digital prints on Hahnemühle Photo Rag archival paper, 58 x 84 cm each. Courtesy Abhinith Khanna.

(This page, top)
UNTITLED (detail), 2014, digital prints on Hahnemühle Photo Rag archival paper, 30 x 46 cm each. Courtesy Abhinith Khanna.

(This page, bottom)
CYCLES OF ETERNAL RECURRENCE, 2013, fiber-reinforced plastic, metal and Styrofoam, 178 x 330 x 183 cm. Courtesy Reena Kallat studio, Mumbai.

Reena Kallat: Salt, an essential ingredient of sustenance and life itself, is intimately linked with its capacity to preserve. In my works, it perhaps serves as a reminder of our fragile relationship with the natural environment. The conditions under which these works are made are constantly changing, where momentarily an idea is made manifest and shared, but after which it is lost (photographs serve as evidence of these salt texts, before they dissipate or dissolve back into the sea). *Saline Notations* has an element of surrender; their submission to the variables of nature incorporates time as a crucial element in their making. On the beach I work with tidal calendars; sunsets (and their timing) become my collaborators, as I have to coincide the laying of the salt to when the waves recede during low tide. The waves will come in and gently carry back the salt, which originally belongs to the sea. I often think of human's relationship to the sea in terms of the salinity levels of the body and how we evolved from the Precambrian seas. However, to answer your question about salt's connection with the political history of the Indian subcontinent, I do think of how, through an act of resistance, a pinch of salt helped bring down an empire. In these works, perhaps salt as a preservative serves as resistance to forgetting, by symbolically extending the life of the washed-away texts.

Mirza: In works such as *Synapse* (2011), *Untitled (Cobweb/Crossings)* (2013), *Measurement from Evaporating Oceans* (2013) and *Cycles of Eternal Recurrence* (2013), one feels that you are investigating the institution of a nation-state, whether that be through the text of the (Indian) Constitution, scrambled and recreated as an eye chart, or in the shape of administrative rubber stamps presented with their imprints. These represent and reinforce the power of the state. Do you think your work addresses notions of authority or is a critique on the hegemony of governments?

Kallat: The rubber stamp, very much a governmental apparatus, has the power to endorse and legitimize agendas, but also prohibit that which does not get sanctioned by the state. In *Cycles of Eternal Recurrence*, I think of our relationship to the government as citizens, and how it plays out in our everyday lives through our inclusions and exclusions in the democratic process. The preamble to the Constitution of India, a bill I've referenced a few times in my works, serves to remind us of the disparity between promises of democracy and the infringements of rights. In *Cycles of Eternal Recurrence*, an oversized rubber stamp leaves a fragile imprint made using salt, creating a mark on the ground that is highly susceptible to erasure.

Synapse was conceived when I was getting my son's eyes tested a few years ago, and the doctor kept prodding him to read the alphabet while changing lenses. Studies, as we know, indicate that the eyes see an object in the manner that the mind interprets it. As a result, no two people see anything exactly alike, and we generate meaning through a mental bridge that the mind forms to complete this gap. The video *Synapse* probes the citizens' relationship with the preamble to the Constitution of India—which commences with the line "We, the people of India"—through an ironic play on legibility. The traditional Snellen eye chart, meant to measure visual acuity, in this case has been recreated using the scrambled letters of the preamble to the Constitution of India. The video was filmed at an optometry clinic, and the patients' hesitations, uncertainties, anxieties and misreadings of the chart lead to a distortion of the seminal text—a development that is central to this piece.

In *Measurement from Evaporating Oceans*, a tool used for measuring the physical world attempts to calculate the intangible. A series of concentric rings, which announce the dates of wars fought for independence in various corners of the world, refer to the circularity of time.

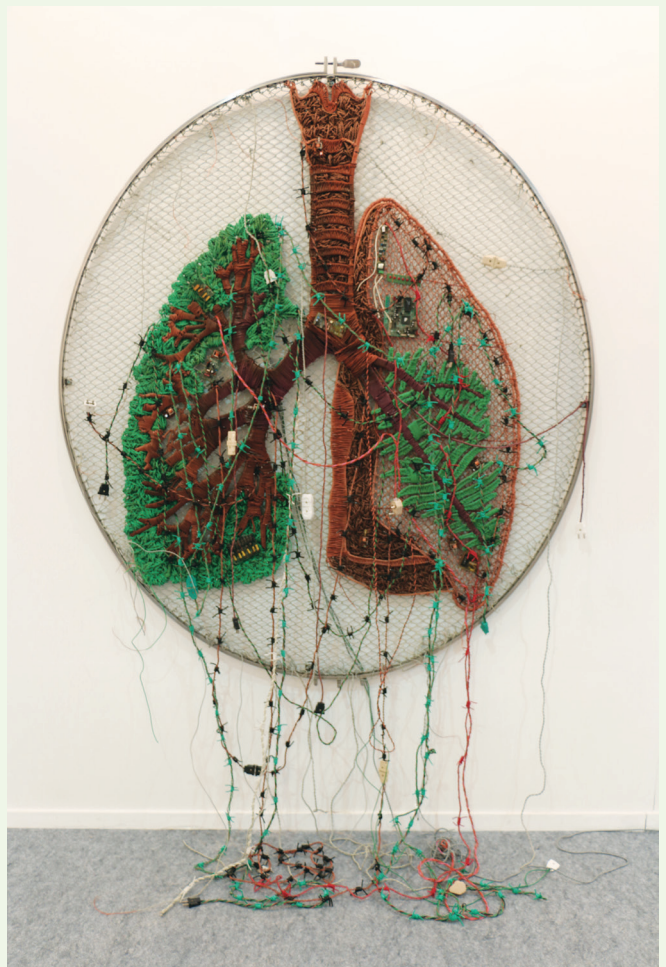




(Top)
CYCLES OF ETERNAL RECURRENCE, 2013,
 fiber-reinforced plastic, metal and Styrofoam,
 178 x 330 x 183 cm. Courtesy Reena Kallat
 studio, Mumbai.

(Bottom, left)
SYNAPSE, 2011, still from single-channel
 video projection: 9 min 32 sec. Courtesy Reena
 Kallat studio, Mumbai.

(Bottom, right)
**MEASUREMENT FROM EVAPORATING
 OCEANS**, 2013, fiber-reinforced plastic, steel,
 and salt, 236 x 178 x 152 cm. Courtesy Chemould
 Prescott Road, Mumbai.



Mirza: Taking the concept of power further, you have created maps in your works. In today's world, maps have become intriguing entities. Traditionally, maps endeavor to define areas that share a language, race, religion, geography, political system or economic activities. Maps also represent a world dissected and divided by colonial powers, but with the advent of the internet and other electronic means of communication, national boundaries are becoming less visible or effective. Do you think your works invoke the brittleness of boundaries, whether they be imaginary or real? Or can they be read as markings of a temporary arrangement, subject to change with the passage of time and changes in the market economy? I'm thinking of *Woven Chronicle* (2015) and your other recent project *Porous Passages* (2014).

Kallat: The accelerated flow of people, currency and information across the world has produced new forms of cultural exchange and has made us all entwined in a symbolic web. In *Woven Chronicle*, electric wires form the outlines of countries, and trace global migration routes, where a multitude of actors interact without knowledge of the overall situation. While technology and commerce are blurring geographic boundaries, there are inherent contradictions that the electric barbed wires seem to suggest, both as conduit and barrier—on the one hand serving as channels of transmission and on the other as a form of fencing. By changing the instrument of this quasi-cartographic drawing from a pencil line to a wire, I'm interested in rendering the map as a dynamic form animated by the streaming of data, energy, currency and people. The work's audio component resonates with high-voltage electric current sounds drowned within deep-sea ambient sounds, slow electric pulses, the hum of engaged tones from telecommunications, mechanical-sounding drones, factory sirens and ship horns intermingled with migratory birdcalls.

My more recent body of work, *Porous Passages*, builds on ideas of unison and estrangement, as well as confluence and conflict in politically partitioned countries that often have to share their natural world and resources. While national symbols are intended to unite people, they often become points of contestation and conflict when countries try and monopolize them by claiming ownership; on occasion they even become the root cause of separation. (The Indus Waters Treaty, for example, is a water-sharing treaty between India and Pakistan, but it has resulted in the partitioning of rivers rather than the sharing of the countries' waters.)

The "Hyphenated Lives" series (2014) features new, hybridized species of animals, trees and flowers. Each is a combination of animals or plants that individually represent national symbols of countries that have been partitioned, including a hybrid of the chukar and the peacock in the case of Pakistan and India, respectively; or a mixture of the Palestinian sunbird and the hoopoe bird from Israel. (There have been attempts to change the name of the Palestinian sunbird, which has appeared on an Israeli postage stamp.) The olive tree, the national tree of Israel, holds a central place in both Israel and Palestine. National flowers such as the magnolia and the hibiscus for North and South Korea, respectively, or the lotus and the jasmine for India and Pakistan, also form new hybrids. Being native to the same lands, these hybrids seem to symbolically unify the nations they represent, offering a peek into such a moment of unison, in what appear to be either artifacts from the past or propositions for an imaginary future.

In *Siamese Trees* (2014) and *Half Oxygen* (2015), I closely weave together electric wires to form trees, where one half is like the Banyan and the other like the Deodar; both are designated as national trees of India and Pakistan, respectively. In *Half Oxygen* these trees take the shape of lungs. I often think of this conjoined form as an allusion to nature's defiance of the artificially imposed, man-made divisions of

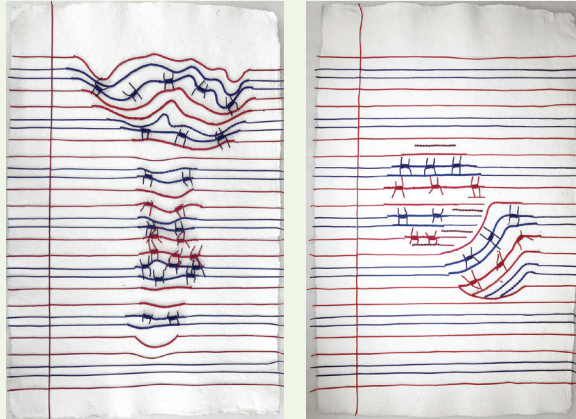
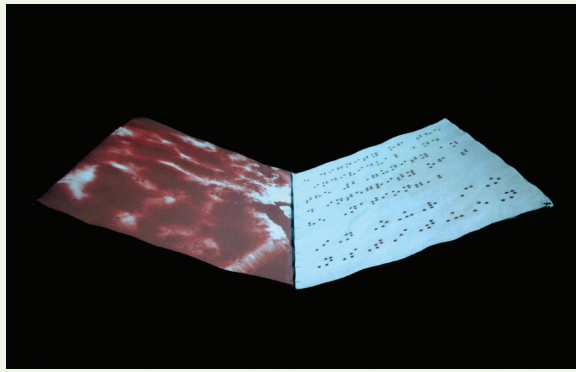
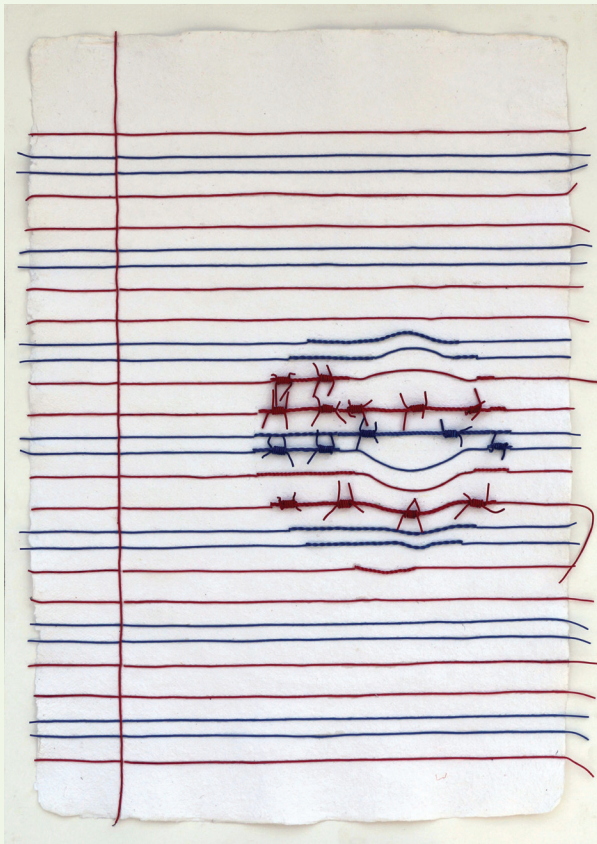
(Opposite page, top left)
HYPHENATED LIVES (INDUS), 2014, charcoal on paper and electric wire, 60 x 43 cm. Courtesy Reena Kallat Studio, Mumbai.

(Opposite page, top right)
HALF OXYGEN, 2014, electric wire, metal ring, motion sensor and LED assembling rope light, dimensions variable. Courtesy Reena Kallat Studio, Mumbai.

(Opposite page, bottom)
Installation view of **HYPHENATED LIVES**, 2014, mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy Reena Kallat Studio, Mumbai.

(This page)
WOVEN CHRONICLE, 2015, electric wires and fittings, 10 min audio loop, 411 x 1036 cm. Site-specific project at Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite. Courtesy Rachel Topham.





the ground. In *Anatomy of Distance* (2013), the woven wires become a spinal column, taking the contorted shape of the “Line of Control” that is drawn between the two warring nations of India and Pakistan.

Mirza: Your works entitled *Preface* (2010) and *Ruled Paper (red, blue, white)* (2014) denote how vocabulary, instead of being a tool to express truth, can become an instrument to impose certain ideologies. The use of language is an integral part of your art. Do you think your audience can enter your work through words, or do words also have their significance as images?

Kallat: While words have the capacity to create images in the mind and generate an experience, everyone has a different visual association with a word or concept, even when we share a common language. The video *Preface* consists of an oversized book, presented like a sacred or religious object on a prayer stand. A two-channel video projection over the book displays the preamble to the Constitution of India rendered in Braille, and thus reduced to various dots that are unreadable to the average person, which spell out the fundamental principles, procedures, powers and responsibilities of the government, as well as the fundamental rights and duties of citizens. What you see is a series of images that evoke neutral patterns, constantly changing

and transforming as the dots and words break open, blot, clot, smudge and stain the pages.

The *Ruled Paper (red, blue, white)* drawings are modeled on the red- and blue-lined sheets used by children as aids to learn handwriting. The electric wires, woven as barbed wires, interrupt and animate these empty sheets even before they receive an inscription.

Not only the language of words, but the language of art as well seems to be a crucial concern for Reena Kallat, as she fabricates her visuals and ideas through her interventions into systems of regularity and conditioning. Her work, in one way, presents a distinct example of a creative person’s interaction with the public, mainly for two factors. First and foremost, it does not employ a vocabulary that is market-oriented, gallery-dependent or object-specific. Due to its formal reverberations, her work breaks the barriers between art and its audience (something that can be viewed through the artist’s constant questioning of language as the bearer of official truths), but it also deals with the concept of identity. As Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen writes in *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (2006), a human being can have multiple and conflicting identities at the same time. Kallat examines, questions and critiques this practice of creating (and defending) singular identities for racial, regional and religious purposes in her art.

(Left)
RULED PAPER (RED, BLUE, WHITE), 2014,
electric wire on paper, 109 x 79 cm. Courtesy
Reena Kallat Studio, Mumbai.

(Right, top)
PREFACE, 2010, wooden stand, handmade
paper book, two-channel looped video
projection, 71 x 190 x 142 cm. Courtesy Reena
Kallat Studio, Mumbai.

(Right, bottom)
RULED PAPER (RED, BLUE, WHITE), 2014,
electric wire on paper, 109 x 79 cm each.
Courtesy Reena Kallat Studio, Mumbai.