

(UN)LAYERING THE FUTURE PAST: SPOTLIGHTING SOUTH ASIAN VOICES

SOAS Gallery, London



*Detail of The Longest Revolution II Embroidery,
Varunika Saraf, 2024. Image courtesy of the Artist &
Chemould Prescott Road, India*

Curated by Salima Hashmi and Manmeet K. Walia, *(Un)Layering the Future Past of South Asia: Young Artists' Voices* brings together 26 artists from six countries—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Afghanistan, whose works explore urgent themes such as ecological fragility, gender

justice, displacement, and political unrest. Through painting, sculpture, textiles, photography, video work and installation, the artists invite viewers to reflect on the region's shared experiences and challenges. Having opened on 11th April at SOAS Gallery, many of the featured artists are exhibiting in London for the first time, this exhibition providing a global platform for a new generation of South Asian artists spotlighting shared histories and resilience in the region. This is the first exhibition in London supported by The Ravi Jain Memorial Foundation, a beacon to promote emerging art and nurture young talent in India established by Dhoomimal Gallery, India.

(Un)Layering the Future Past celebrates the creative alliances and solidarity that persist across the region despite geopolitical divisions. Featuring several new works created for the exhibition and pieces never before shown in London, the exhibition highlights the power of personal and collective memories, storytelling, and material culture in navigating the complexities and urgent issues of South Asia and its diasporas.

Curator Salima Hashmi said: “As a curator and an art practitioner from South Asia, I find it essential to explore how the past continues to shape contemporary art practices. The art emerging from the region is diverse in its sensibilities—thoughtful yet deeply engaged, critically examining collective memory across cultures. It carries a profound sense of history while embracing new vocabularies that address pressing concerns in South Asia today. Bringing this dialogue to London feels like coming full circle, offering a regional perspective on decolonization and the evolving artistic discourse.”

Curator Manmeet K Walia said: “This exhibition has been a journey of collaborations, connections, and discovery. Over the past three years, we’ve travelled across South Asia, meeting artists, listening to their stories, and tracing the threads that tie their work to a shared history and interconnected sensibility in contemporary art. Along the way, the process itself became just as important—filled with moments of insight and reflection on how art bridges histories, places, and people.”

Highlight works from Afghanistan include pieces by Kubra Khademi, the Hazara artist and performer forced to flee Afghanistan after her 2015 performance *Armor*. Khademi will present a series of gouaches depicting the country's precious resources, whilst Hadi Rahnaward will showcase works addressing Afghanistan's cyclical history of violence, including *Fragile Balance* (2023), made with matchsticks. *Screen Weaves II* (2024–2025), a new work by Sher Ali, specially commissioned for the exhibition and made in collaboration with women embroiderers in Kabul, calls for the right to live free from the shadows of war. Another Afghan artist featured is Hanifa Alizada.

Two Bangladeshi artists will present mixed-media works addressing the struggles of marginalised communities under violent oppression. Ashfika Rahman, winner of the Future Generation Art Prize 2024, will show *Redeem* (2021–22), a collaborative project with the indigenous Orao community in northern Bangladesh. Ayesha Sultana will present a new series of glass sculptures connecting folk tales to contemporary political struggles. Also presenting work are Bangladeshi artists Dinar Sultana and Palash Bhattacharjee.

From India, Kashmiri artist Moonis Ahmad will present *Echographies of the Invisible* (2023), a video work that takes viewers on a surreal journey through space and time, whilst New Delhi-based Aban Raza will present oil on canvas pieces linking themes of protest and violent repression, referring to caste oppression and the ongoing crisis of farmers' suicides.

A new embroidery work by Varunika Saraf, *The longest revolution II* (2024), presents women as empowered, united figures resisting state oppression. This piece, along with *Jugni* (2023), features tiny hand-embroidered figures based on the wasli technique of Mughal miniature painting. Other Indian artists include Soumya Sankar Bose, Prarthna Singh and Sangita Maity.

From Nepal, visual and performance artist Amrit Karki will exhibit *Whisper* (2021), a sound installation featuring whispered words in 50 languages. The artist's voice urges the audience to listen and understand, but the multitude of languages create mystery rather than comprehension.

From Pakistan, research-based artist Aisha Abid Hussain will present *Lived Realities* (2023), a work composed of archival nikahnamas (marriage contracts) overlaid with intricate miniature paintings and coded marks, questioning the sanctity of these documents. Other Pakistani artists include Suleman Khilji, Aiman Amin – the youngest artist in the exhibition and recently graduated from BNU Lahore – and Jameel Art Prize winner Ghulam Mohammad.

From Sri Lanka, Hema Shiron will present *My Family Is Not In The List* (2024), an embroidered work tracing local histories of colonisation and civil war through tales of migration and nostalgic references to lost homes. Other artists from Sri Lanka are Pradeep Thalawatta, Rinoshan Susiman and the artist and activist working with the Non Violent Living Collective, T Vinoja.

Mirroring the curatorial cross-border collaboration of the exhibition, Indian artist Purvai Rai and Pakistani designer Maheen Kazim present their first collaboration, *Hum bhi dekhein ge* (“We too shall see”) (2024–25). The project revisits the Partition through the loss of khes textiles. Working with local communities, the artists pay homage to the unity once shared in Punjab, exploring collective memory.

Uday Jain, Director, Dhoomimal Gallery and Trustee, Ravi Jain Memorial Foundation, said: "It is fascinating to see how young artists across South Asia are grappling with similar issues of politics, collective memory, history and identity. Many of these artists, born in one region but practicing globally, explore this complexity in their artistic journeys and we are proud to support these varied stories in our first major exhibition in London as we build upon the legacy of Ravi Jain, former director of Dhoomimal Gallery and a passionate promoter of Indian art."

(Un)Layering the Future Past of South Asia: Young Artists' Voices is open for view from 11th April 2025 to 21st June 2025, at SOAS Gallery, London. The exhibition will be supported by a programme of talks and tours at SOAS.