

Sangeeta Sandrasegar: flowers & forgotten histories at Fed Square

Inspired by Italy's Millefiori Tapestry, Sangeeta Sandrasegar's hand-dyed organza panels explore the forgotten lives of Flinders Street's Italian flowerboys.

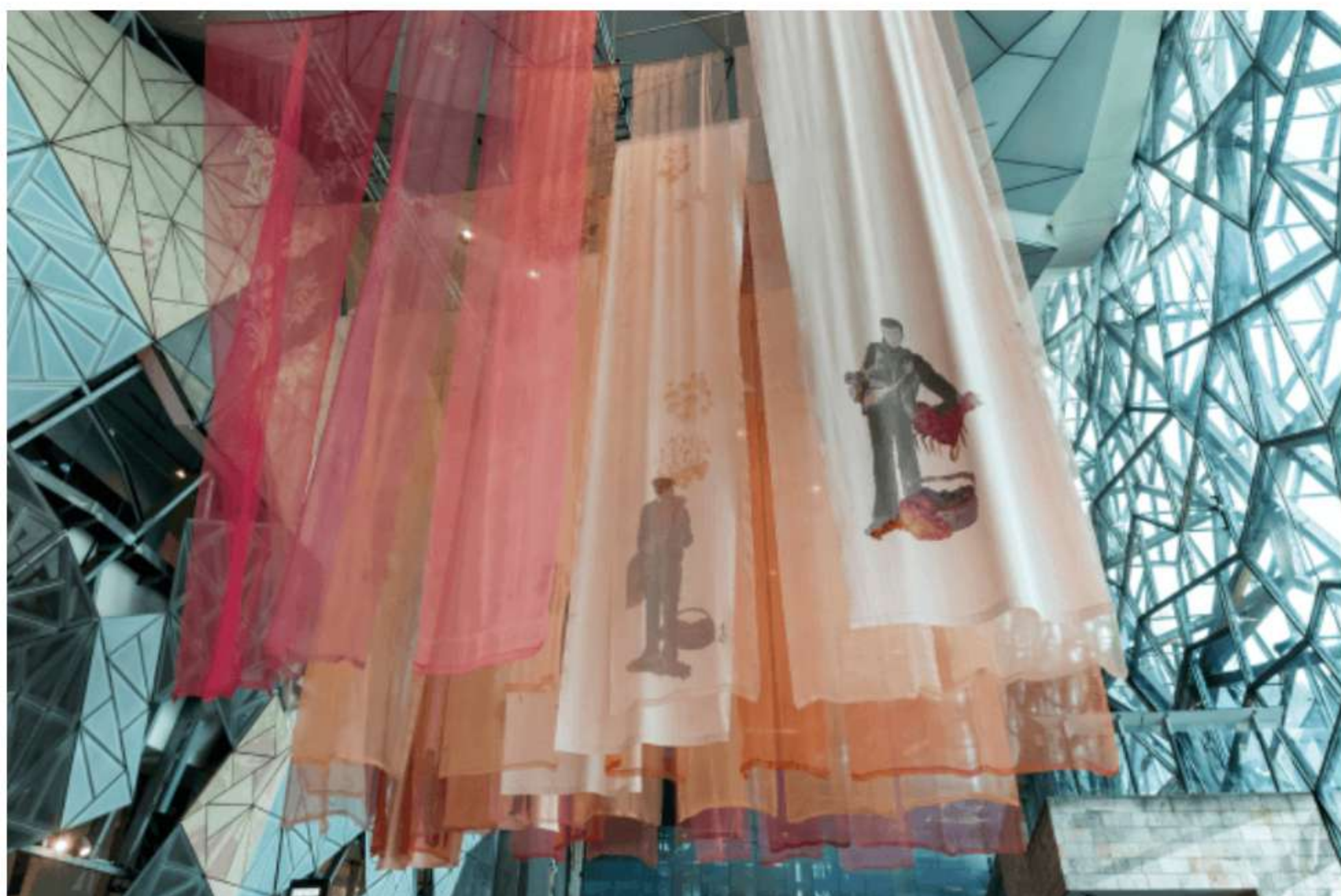


Photo by Tobias Titz

As far as canvases go, Melbourne's Federation Square Atrium is a massive one to fill. Textile artist Sangeeta Sandrasegar, whose commission for the venue is currently suspended from its ceiling, says [holding space in the atrium](#) is a logistical and artistic challenge.

“The actual realisation of the piece is something that I'm really happy with, maybe even proud of – that we managed to deal with scale and fill such a big space,” she reflects.

Sangeeta Sandrasegar's piece *I ragazzi dei millefiori: the flow'rs of song and story* features seven-metre-long Italian cotton and silk organza panels coloured in warm pinks and yellows, dyed using natural materials like Indian madder root, eucalyptus leaves, and weld and marigold flowers. The work references a piece Sandrasegar encountered on her trip to Prato in Italy, the Millefiori Tapestry of Pistoia, which she describes as ‘profuse with mythical and real flora’.



The piece was unveiled as part of Fed Square's RESET Festival. (Photo by Tobias Titz)

Printed with sepia toned 19th century boys clutching bundles of flowers, the panels drift and sail with each gust of wind.

These boys were Italian migrant flower vendors who would line the nearby Flinders Street Station Princes Bridge in the early 1900s; the piece's title references these 'boys of the thousand flowers', who lead itinerant, difficult lives.

"I imagined that the silk would have movement, and you get a sense of the transparency of time and the idea that they're perhaps even floating among the flowers that they're selling. The movement of the fabrics would help you try and navigate the path through these boys in a way," she says.

“I make work where the actual materials that I use are embedded with a lot of that cultural underlay.”

Their existence in Melbourne has been largely forgotten, to the point where Sandrasegar was unable to locate an original copy of the black and white photo which inspired her.



*Illustrations are based on a photo of some flowerboys on Princes Bridge.
(Photo by Tobias Titz)*

“When we tried to find the original, it seems that it had been lost somewhere between an association and a museum,” she recounts.

“The photographs were so small, so the act of trying to blow them up was also difficult – you lose information in the image itself.”

“All those ideas of how we lose information, how knowledge is passed on, I’ve just found really endearing and poignant.”

Sangeeta Sandrasegar’s works primarily explore the migration of labour and material, an interest which she says stems from her upbringing between Malaysia and Australia, and reconnecting with Indian textiles.

“I suppose that’s my two lynchpins, the movement of labour and the movement of the associated commodities that came with that labour. They have such strong everlasting political and economic effects that we’re still unearthing today,” Sandrasegar says. “Those stories that get forgotten, that’s what I’m interested in drawing out.”

She hopes the work will inspire reflection over these forgotten lives.

“I want people to ask who these boys were... they’re boys and then [have] all of this flora around them, perhaps that would trigger people to understand what they might have done,” Sandrasegar says.

Sangeeta Sandrasegar says creating *I ragazzi dei millefiori: the flow'rs of song and story* has prompted her to contemplate our current circumstances.



The seven metre long fabric pieces were hand-dyed and painted.
(Source: Supplied)

“Working with the images of young boys has had me thinking of all the political turbulence that’s happening around the world at the moment, and all the young lives that are in forced movement or trapped or lost, that we won’t hear the stories of,” she reflects.

“With all my work I’m always dealing with presences or places that are ellipsed or marginalised and how we honour them, find them again, but also find some hope in that. I suppose the flowers and the beautiful overlay is the sense of trying to find a way forward.”