

DRAWING ROOM

Press Release: The Land Sings Back

Exhibition dates: 25 September – 14 December 2025

Press preview: 5pm, Wed 24 September 2025

Private view: 6 – 8pm, Wed 24 September 2025

‘The land knows you, even when you are lost.’

— Robin Wall Kimmerer, Potawatomi botanist and author

The Land Sings Back reimagines our relationship to our breathing planet through the work of thirteen artists with ancestries across South Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. Engaging with these cultural vocabularies through a lens of environmental justice, the exhibition approaches drawing as an active agent of social history, indigenous knowledge and ecofeminist philosophy, rather than as a tool of illustration, classification and conquest. Exposing entanglements between the human, vegetal and animal, the works explore how botanical consciousness can reshape relationships among multitudinous life-forms, making room for regeneration amidst indebtedness, infrastructural collapse and neocolonial inheritance. *The Land Sings Back* encourages a connection with ancestral wisdom and ecosophy through reciprocal rather than extractive relationships with land during these times of war and accelerated toxicity.

The exhibition and its associated public programme engage with a range of pressing questions with research-led approaches around multispecies ecologies, coloniality and environmental justice. It brings attention to networked extractive systems that spread toxicity and polarisation, sparking climate emergencies and mass displacements. Growing from some of the artworks that were initiated at *Way of the Forest*, Colomboscope 2023-24 - an interdisciplinary arts festival in Colombo, Sri Lanka - it builds new and broader alliances with creative practitioners in the UK and African heritage practitioners. The recent and newly produced works engage site-led recordings, archival research, communal learning and expanded forms of drawing that incorporate sound work, zines, ceramics, and posters.

The exhibition is curated by Natasha Ginwala, Artistic Director of Colomboscope, co-curator of Sharjah Biennial 16 and one of Frieze's Five Curators to Watch in 2025. It is produced as a collaboration between Colomboscope, Sri Lanka and Drawing Room, London, UK.

Participating Artists

A constellation of inter-generational practices of drawing attest to the role of imperial histories, the plantation system, and indenture in erasure of fauna, threatened wildlife, and other enduring challenges to environmental custodianship.

The exhibition opens with rarely seen works from the 1980s and 90s by Indigenous elder of the Bhil community in India and knowledge holder, **Lado Bai**, who creates 'plural lifeworlds', connecting daily human experiences with animal beings and flora, speaking to sacred principles of conservation.

Observing British and French colonial legacies from the plantation plot to the botanical garden, **Shiraz Bayjoo's** *Botanical Shrines* (2024-5) relay networks of extractivism, familial memory-keeping, taxonomy, and survival strategies of maroonage linking the island geographies of Mauritius and Madagascar to the United Kingdom.

Lavkant Chaudhary, a cultural organiser from the conflicted Terai region of Nepal, reveals the deep interdependence between humans and animals within the Tharu community, where lives are shaped by the devotional protection of this daily coexistence. Keeper of unofficial archives and inspired by matrilineal Godana (tattoo) traditions, his stippled drawings on handmade paper scrolls recall Indigenous rites and environmental movements.

Cognizant of the medicinal properties and spiritual charge of botanicals such as ginger, sage, castor and burdock, London-based artist **Charmaine Watkiss' Plant Warriors** (2021-ongoing) is a series of empowered portraits foregrounding African-Caribbean women as holders of nourishment and ferocity; having borne the traumas of the transatlantic slave trade, they transmit seeds of future healing.

The dramaturgy in **Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum's** compositions connect facets of mythology, remembered topographies, and non-linear dream worlds. Her suite of characters involve strong feminine presences while often referencing elements of African

literature, auteur cinema, and biographical experience. *The Dream II (mae)* (2023), on loan from the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, is a sensitive projection of black womanhood via a double portrait of the artist's alter ego Asme amid lush foliage.

Several artists develop personal narratives embroiled in land rights movements, migrant labour within agricultural and plantation ecosystems, as well as the impact of community rituals on conservation, political autonomy, and food politics.

On large-scale tarpaulins, **Anupam Roy** uses protest imagery that is simultaneously satirical and surreal to document the urgent realities of land grabbing and the civic movements against mining and dam projects in rural Bengal and other parts of India. A selection of his posters and zines will be on display in the Drawing Room library.

U. Arulraj's suite of works is plotted with ink and tea stains on brown paper, commenting on the land dispossession of the Malaiyaga Tamil community, who were originally displaced from their ancestral homes in Southern India by the British to be housed and labour on tea plantations in Sri Lanka's central highlands. This recent series represents conversion of wild forest cover into green hill slopes of tea estates, the impact of railroad development, whilst revisiting stories told by his foremothers and village elders to celebrate their ongoing ancestral guardianship.

Joydeb Roaja is a Bangladeshi artist of the Tripura community who intersects figurative painting, ink drawing and performance to convey how the Jumma people in his homeland harness Indigenous principles of dignity, sustenance, and conservation. Amid the brute force of daily threats to their traditional homes and lands, as the Chittagong Hill Tracts become militarised, his drawings in this exhibition evolve from symbiotic connection to mountain and forest systems as well as community guardianship.

Given the complex ecological aftermath of the long drawn-out civil war in Sri Lanka, *The Land Sings Back* invites practitioners of the island who examine the unequal impact of climate change, resource ownership and infrastructural agency.

Jasmine Nilani Joseph, who first participated in Colomboscope in 2019, leads community-focused field research in the Northern peninsula. Her installation *DS Waiting Room* (2024), commissioned by the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka, comprises 18 folders of pen-on-paper drawings of stories associated with displaced families she met in her home district of Vavuniya, chronicles of dispossession through war time as well as the impact of ill-conceived government policies on minority rights. The

installation mimics government-issued folders and property deeds conveying both the malice of bureaucratic violence as well as the necessity of archiving socio-economic relations to territory.

Based in Eastern Sri Lanka, **Rupaneethan Pakkiyarajah** attends to tiny living organisms, and to native plant species of the Batticaoloo lagoon. These are braided with abstract notations that reference landscapes scarred by war and adverse climate phenomena and are realised as small-scale drawings as well as ceramic forms. The playing card format of his drawings connects human experience and violent upheavals that have—a geologic timescale.

Prismatic explorations of ecofeminist thought and representation are evident in other practices on view. The new series *Chthonic Beings* (2025) by **Manjot Kaur** embraces queer ecologies and a radical proliferation of interspecies hybridity shaping the next great migration(s) in the face of climate disasters and extinction. The artist de-centres the human while referring to treatises of painted manuscripts and deities located in antiquity across the undivided Indian subcontinent; her new work plots entities that camouflage the femme protagonist as companion, protector, caregiver with endangered species such as Blackbuck, the Great Indian Bustard, and the Steppe Eagle.

Engaging with legends of origin and a broad pantheon of fertility goddesses across Asian civilizations, **Anushka Rustomji's** *Flesh and Foliage* (2023-24) in monochromatic graphite renditions retell ancient arboreal stories as manifestations of the sacred and earthly. Her drawings centre matrilineal healing traditions and the plant species they incorporate, which have been transmitted from one generation to the next and across borderlines, despite ethnic division and rising nationalism in Pakistan.

Otobong Nkanga has been a key inspiration for this exhibition and its title. Addressing care and repair, Nkanga sculpts, performs, weaves, and draws while cultivating regenerative systems beyond the creative economy. Relating to networks of consumption and global circulation, her practice gives voice and momentum to minerals, metals, stones, and energy sources as protagonists of the earth. Herbs and plants traded across civilisations as elders that are inseparable from human futures.

Inevitably, the works of Nkanga and other artists communicate how wide scale environmental destruction as well as extinction causes ecological grief, alienation, and mass anxiety amidst us as temporary planetary residents.

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