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Apnavi Makanji's work traces faulty lines of modernity through botanical diversity

Geneva-based artist Apnavi Makanji's body of work, spread across the mediums of drawings, installations and videos, is an investigation of the ideas on home and memory.

by [Dilpreet Bhullar](#) | Published on : Jul 07, 2021

Dab watercolour on a wet sheet of paper and it bleeds and drips onto the surface to create a pattern with a hint of feathery touch. Not a long shot, if the parallel between the viscosity of the watercolour realised on the piece of paper and the memory of a human mind were drawn. Akin to the ebb and flow nature of the memory, the fluidity of watercolours traverse within the (un)charted boundaries to bring to life a slice of lived reality, lost to time. Taking this as the starting point to introduce the work of [Geneva](#)-based artist, Apnavi Makanji, is an attempt to underline how the two contrasting materials - watercolour and found objects - frequented in their art practice carry the traces of memory about human history. Makanji prefers to be addressed as 'they' - a gender-neutral pronoun. It is the fluidity of the creative imagination, manifested in the watercolour, and firmness of human errors, witnessed by found objects, that visually capture the kernel of the artist's thought. Informed by the exercise to navigate through memory, botanical diversity and geopolitical effects on ecology, the work of [Mumbai](#)-born [visual artist](#) is a journey back into the time to identify the lopsided impact of [colonialism](#) and neoliberalism on the [Global South](#).

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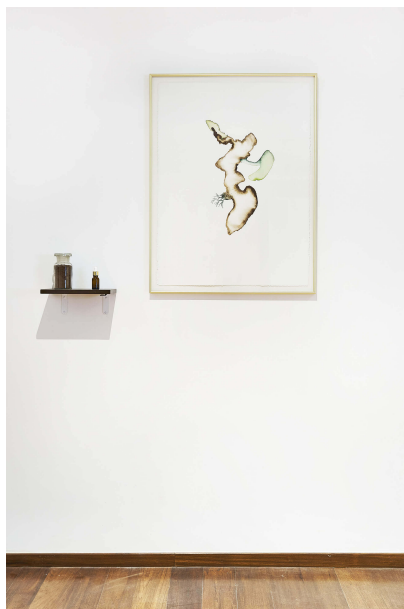
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From the exhibition *Soil as Witness / Memory as Wound*
Image: Courtesy of Tarq

During the second lockdown that **Switzerland** experienced to mitigate the spread of **COVID-19**, Makanji made an installation called *Styx* of found objects and based it on blueprints made by the Elf petroleum company in the 1980s. The title of the work refers to one of the rivers of the underworld from **Greek mythology**. The term Styx could be literally translated into English as shuddering, an act to defy death. In the words of Makanji, "Styx is the first finished work of a new series that comprises six other blueprints that are currently working in progress." Besides Indian subcontinent, the dynamics between **Europe** and the nations of West Africa perpetuate the practice of neocolonialism. The **installation**, particularly, represents the sites of crude oil extraction through Angola, Congo and the Republic of Chad. The work draws on the acts of extractivism, slave labour and the civil wars that Elf influenced to have a monetary advantage.



Styx 1
Image: Courtesy of Xavier Ripolles Arasa

The installation *Appropriation, Disinformation - Nature and the Body Politic*, displayed at the last edition of **Dhaka Art Summit**, as part of the exhibition **Seismic Movements** curated by **Diana Campbell Betancourt**, takes into account the process of excavation of the resources from the colonial lands – an opportunity was undertaken by imperialists to pursue commercial gain. The extraction of the material resources as an extension of the uneven power-play derailed the ecological harmony. For instance, Indian subcontinent, like many more colonial states, served as a fecund site for the imperial pragmatism to

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anchor experiments on the art of land conquest and trade. The impetus to achieve the success of empirical knowledge, in the hands of the enlightened, turned blind to the consequential scars on the environment and the indigenous communities.



Geneva-based artist Apnavi Makanji
 Image: Courtesy of Apnavi Makanji

To visually represent the difference between the acts of the Global North and its repercussion on the Global South in the installation, Makanji sourced the material from the *Atlas International Larousse Politique et Économique* (1950). In an interview with STIR, the artist says, "I chose the *Larousse Atlas International Politique et Économique* (1950) because I felt that it indicated a post-war utopian ideal of progress, a reflection of the modern condition. However, the atlas was written in French, English and Spanish, all three being colonial languages. It also contains maps indicating locations of extraction, air and communication routes between the Global South and the West. I couldn't look at it any other way than as a tool of capitalism." The collages made of the maps and images of plant and insect species are an "attempt to trigger a visceral memory of a situated environment that existed before it was reduced to highly mobile commodities".



Appropriation, Disinformation - Nature and the Body Politic
 Image: Courtesy of Apnavi Makanji

Makanji's art practice is a sharp enquiry on the role of geopolitics to indicate the unequal distribution of economic resources. As the works *Appropriation, Disinformation - Nature and the Body Politic and Styx* highlight, this pattern, since the colonial times, has not changed but slips into a novel idea to widen the lines of disparity. To elaborate on this, the artist states, "Both of the works reflect the extraction of resources from the Global South and the countries and corporations that profited from it. My practice examines environmental destruction through the lens of botany. So, with botany as my point of departure, I elaborate on how environmental destruction isn't a recent phenomenon and how colonial practices have been responsible for aggravating it and for the unequal distribution of resources. The ideas of environmental justice and social justice are inextricably linked and we cannot consider one without the other."

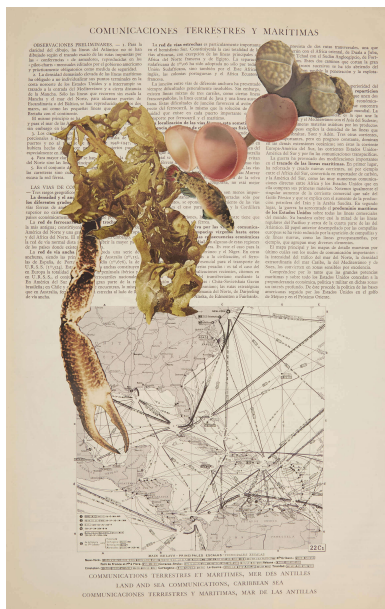


Styx 1

Image: Courtesy of Xavier Ripolles Arasa

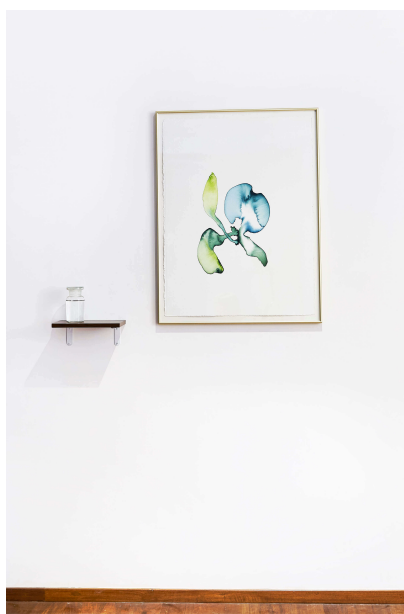
As soon as the strictness of lockdown to combat the pandemic was relaxed, the work *Appropriation, Disinformation - Nature* was showcased at **TARO**, Mumbai in September 2020. A year back, Makanji had displayed her drawings made out of watercolours, and the jars of soil were placed next to them in an exhibition *Soil as Witness / Memory as Wound*. The exhibition relooked at the concepts of home and memory to understand what determines the relationship between human and nature. The olfactory and visceral senses trigger a bout of memory for the viewers as soon as the soil is applied with a drop of water. The clinical affair at once evokes a sense of nostalgia – the past lost to the corner of the mind breathes a fresh life. The **watercolour drawings** reassert the inevitability of impermanence in life. If soil is about the rootedness, then the fluidity of watercolours hints at the transience quality of human existence.

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Appropriation, Disinformation - Nature and the Body Politic
 Image: Courtesy of Apnavi Makanji

Makanji talks about the significance of water in their work, "Watercolour is such a versatile medium, it allows me to convey an abstract idea of memory (which in itself is intangible), through the sharp application as well as a more nebulous, soft application of paint to paper. Just as memory shape shifts within us, so do the traces of paint. I use it as a metaphorical repository that contains memory."



From the exhibition *Soil as Witness / Memory as Wound*
 Image: Courtesy of Tarq gallery

The art of welding the past with the present in order to hope for a secured future is the practice followed by many. The use of materials in moderation, yet rich enough to lead the ways to draw analogies with and stand as a metaphor for the troubled history, is what engages the viewers with Makanji's work. When they excavate the found objects to go back into the time, it nudges the viewers to relook at the events, both personal and political, to locate the sign of human error. The work recognises the faulty lines of modernity to inaugurate a thought to repair it, lest it turns into a recurrent necessity.

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About Author



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Dilpreet is a writer-researcher based in New Delhi. She has been co-editor of the books *Third Eye: Photography and Ways of Seeing* and *Voices and Images*. Her essays on visual sociology and identity politics are frequently published in leading books, journals and magazines. She is the associate editor of a theme-based journal dedicated to visual arts, published by India Habitat Centre.

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