

List of works

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|---|--|--|
| <p>1. Linda Sok
<i>Salt Water Deluge (Tucoerah River)</i>, 2021
H 260 x W 330 x D 80cm
Cambodian Silk, water collected from the Tucoerah River, salt, rattan, metal</p> | <p>6. Kirtika Kain
<i>veil gold</i>, 2022
183 x 78 cm
Religious cotton wicks, gold leaf, rangoli pigment, tar on disused silk screen</p> | <p>11. Kay Abude
<i>Men's shirt</i>, 2022
Silk screen on light weight cotton drill, rasant thread, buttons, garment label</p> |
| <p>2. Kirtika Kain
<i>beast</i>, 2022
116 x 72 cm
Coir rope, tar, sindoor pigment on disused silk screen</p> | <p>7. James Nguyen with <u>Công Ái Nguyễn</u>
<i>On The Border Of Things (Part 3, gloves)</i>, 2018
Installation
Dimensions variable</p> | <p>12. Kay Abude
<i>Smock apron</i>, 2022
83 x 54.2cm
Silk screen on cotton denim, rasant thread, metal buckles, garment label</p> |
| <p>3. Kirtika Kain
<i>gold</i>, 2022
114 x 71 cm
Religious cotton thread, tar, wax, gold leaf on disused silk screen</p> | <p>8. James Nguyen with <u>Nguyễn Thị Kim Dung</u>
<i>Flatbed Knit Polo Collars</i>, 2015
Installation
Dimensions variable</p> | <p>13. Kay Abude
<i>Full length apron</i>, 2022
84 x 69cm
Silk screen on cotton denim, rasant thread, metal buckles, garment label</p> |
| <p>4. Kirtika Kain
<i>mixed black</i>, 2021
125 x 77cm
Rose petals, sindoor pigment, gold leaf, wax, tar on disused silkscreen</p> | <p>9. Kay Abude
<i>(DON'T) BE AN ARTIST</i> limited edition artworks, 2022
Installation
Dimensions variable</p> | <p>14. Kay Abude
<i>Bucket hat</i>, 2022
Silk screen on heavy weight cotton drill, rasant thread, garment label</p> |
| <p>5. Kirtika Kain
<i>veil black</i>, 2021
183 x 78 cm
Religious cotton wicks, gold leaf, rangoli pigment, tar on disused silk screen</p> | <p>10. Kay Abude
<i>Women's coat</i>, 2022
Silk screen on heavy weight cotton drill, rasant thread, cotton bias binding, garment label</p> | <p>15. Kay Abude
<i>(DON'T) BE AN ARTIST scrunchie</i>, 2022
One size
Silk screen on light weight cotton drill, rasant thread
One size</p> |

All artworks hand silk screen printed, cut and sewn in Melbourne. Courtesy of the artist.

Empty Pockets

Kay Abude, Kirtika Kain, James Nguyen, Linda Sok Curated by Sineenart Meena

Gertrude Glasshouse
Friday 18 November - Saturday 17 December 2022

Since the early 2000s the Gertrude Emerging Curator Program has supported early practice curators through a mentorship program to develop a new exhibition and is presented in alternate years. The program is Gertrude's mechanism to support early practice curators as a means to provide professional development and present a project within a public outcome. Over the years, many of Australia's most interesting young curators have participated in the program and gone on to forge significant careers in the arts working in major public institutions in Australia and internationally.

In 2022, the Gertrude Emerging Curator Program exhibition Empty Pockets will be developed by Sineenart Meena and held at Gertrude Glasshouse.

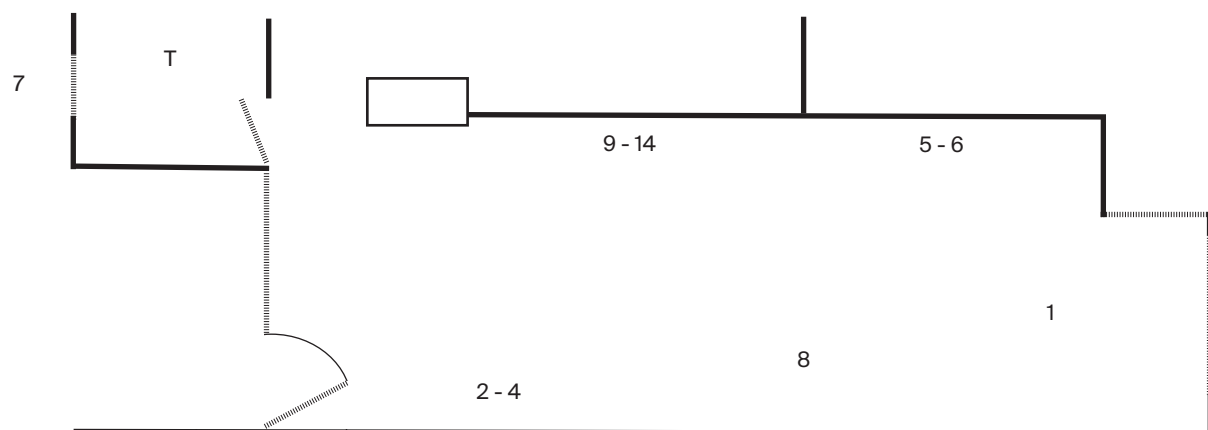
The narrative of migrant labour identifies Australia within the image of the land of hope and dreams. Melbourne, with its deep connection to the history of Australia's labour movement, is an ideal location from which to reflect on labour tied to waves of migration historically and currently. In Empty Pockets, artists with migrant backgrounds living in Australia, come together to contest hierarchical power, developing a conversation around how their works intertwine with histories of labour. Across various outcomes, including installation, textile and sculpture, the artists' 'work' is revisited through a new dialogue connecting personal experiences with a broader conversation and questions on labour, particularly within the art 'industry'.

Acknowledgements

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The Monthly The Saturday Paper 7am

Empty Pockets, curatorial essay by Sineenart Meena

by Sineenart Meena

The title of the exhibition, *Empty Pockets*, reflects on the painful history of migration, underpayment, and cheap labour experienced by many Asian migrant workers living in Australia. There are many reasons why people relocate. Some families and individuals migrate by choice, while others leave out of necessity. Geographically, Australia has become one of the most common destinations for Asian people searching for new fortunes. It casts Australia as a land of hope and dreams. Migration has become a significant contribution to Australia’s economy. In 1901, the establishment of the White Australia policy was designed to control non-British migration to Australia and supported the ideal of a ‘pure white nation’ (1). This policy was overtly racist and supported cheap labour of non-white workers. In 1973 the White Australia policy was renounced and transitioned towards mechanisms of multiculturalism (2). Multiculturalism has shaped many political campaigns, promoting unprecedented levels of personal liberty, diversity and social equality.

In the art industry, we often see statements by institutions, such as in job descriptions stating ‘... we support and are committed to diversity, and inclusivity, and strongly encourage applications from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and people with ‘disability’. However, there seem to be enormous gaps and barriers in cultural organisations and employment opportunities for those from migrant backgrounds. According to the research of Diversity Arts Australia, Shifting-the-Balance, there is a minority of CALD representation in cultural institution: only 9% of the 1,980 leaders’ positions (3). This is a significant indictment on the prevailing structures of art institutions. As migrant workers, are we still left with empty pockets?

by Sineenart Meena

Empty Pockets examines the idea of labour through the history of migration and the food and textile industries connected to many Asian workers. It brings together the work of James Nguyen (Vietnam-Australian), Kay Abude (Philippines-Australia), Linda Sok (Cambodia-Australia) and Kirtika Kain (India-Australia) - whose works develop from their personal experiences and family histories, as first and second-generation Asian migrants. Through their practices, the exhibition creates the opportunity to consider labour from an Asian migrant perspective. *Empty Pockets* presents existing works by each artist, which are revisited through a new dialogue, perspective and understanding of Asian migrant labour particularly within the art industry. The exhibition aims to engage with ‘Asia’ as a complex and shifting paradigm that generates voices in a bold diverse lived experience

by Sineenart Meena

Migrant labour has contributed to our daily lives yet often remains invisible. James’ work *On The Border Of Things (Part 3, gloves)* (2018) centres on the invisible labour of migrant workers behind the vegetable and fruit shelves in supermarkets. The artist holds onto everyday objects from his family to record and document acts of labour. The many cotton gloves have been accumulated by his uncle Công Ái. Công’s small-scale market garden has such low profit margins that they have to reuse and regularly rewash the gloves as this saves substantial costs over time. Through this work, James also infers the unseen labour of the art world; in curatorial and install work, we use cotton gloves as art-handlers and James speculates on ‘how regularly these white cotton gloves are washed and reused in the gallery space’. Through his work, we experience some of the stories behind these invisible hands and the labour they perform.

by Sineenart Meena

The relationship between family stories is core to James’ practice. *Flatbed Knit Polo Collars* (2015) documents the experience of living in a textile factory. Hundreds of polo-shirt collars that his parents kept from their failed textile company in the 1990s were sewn together by the artist with his mother. ‘Their business could not compete with the deregulation of the footwear and textile industries in Australia, and cheap clothing imports from Asia. The leftovers of a failed business, when retained and reprocessed becomes an alternative narrative of existence beyond the processes of globalisation’, James comments (4).

by Sineenart Meena

The large-scale patchwork blanket connects and pieces together fragments of familial stories tied to the crisis in the Australian textile industry. The family laboured to earn a living during the crisis, similar to many migrant families who sought stability and opportunity in their adopted country. This sculpture is ultimately connected to the effort of Kim Dung, the artist’s mother. Kim is the seamstress attending to the labour and economic survival of the migrant family. We can connect to the effort of motherhood, healing, family economics, and the dual pull of devotion and responsibility.

by Sineenart Meena

Ideas of family labour and heritage as a repository of memories are an important part of Linda Sok’s installation, *Salt Water Deluge (Tucoerah River)* (2021). Stories from her grandmother, who fled the Khmer Rouge genocidal regime, have influenced her practice. Using traditional Cambodian silk fabrics, this work centres on the idea of healing and preservation of her culture post the brutal regime of the Khmer Rouge. This silk sculpture, made in collaboration with her sister Solina Sok, invokes the idea of her ancestors’ knowledge through the silks submerged in a saline solution. This process derives from observations of her parents making pickled vegetables. This work is created through using salt and water collected from Tucoerah River (Georges River) with permission from Darug Elders. Preservation is a crucial part of survival. Salt is an important ingredient to preserve and maintain food, countering starvation. Linda states that ‘the art of silk weaving, a matrilineally handed-down tradition, was one of many art forms targeted and came close to being erased by the Khmer Rouge perpetrators’ (5). This gentle and seemingly fleeting work brings to life and memorialises the narrative her family stories.

by Sineenart Meena

The relationship between materials and ancestral memory is continually present in Kirtika Kain’s work. The exploration of her experience of the Indian caste system, as a woman born in Delhi, now living in Australia, has become central to her artwork. Her materially rich practice focuses on screen-printing and explores power structures, language and labour through the Dalit experience. The works in this exhibition are inspired by *When I Hid My Caste* by Dalit writer Baburao Bagul. In these works, Kain imagines the material landscape of Bagul’s literary world. Religious materials including cotton wicks and sindoor pigment have been layered with tar and gold leaf upon recycled silkscreen frames. In her practice, Kain collects raw materials such as cow dung, sindoor, human hair, charcoal, gold and tar, that materially attempt to imagine an ancient Dalit culture, imbuing them with a sense of veneration. Kain explores the possibility of re-imagining a new personal and collective identity through migration and the role of the diaspora in actively challenging inherited and societal narratives of caste and patriarchy.

by Sineenart Meena

Kay Abude’s practice examines conceptions and conditions of work, labour and systems of production. Her work presents a pictorial timeline of her personal and family history. Like many migrant workers, her parents had to swap professional jobs in the Philippines, from white collar to blue collar jobs. In 1986, her family migrated to Australia from the Philippines, with her mother working in an electrical factory. When Kay chose her career path, she told her parents she wanted to go to art school, and while her parents initially refused, they capitulated on proviso that she take dressmaking class at night as this would give her a valuable trade as back-up plan. In *(DON’T) BE AN ARTIST* (2021), Kay reflects a sense of precarity experienced as a consequence of the pandemic. During this time, many artists and artistic workers lost their income, studio spaces and opportunity to continue their work.

The idea of a career as an artist is often thought of as fanciful – driven by passion, dreams and hope but not realistic. Simultaneously, artworks represent luxury items, indicating social status for those who collect art. However, working as an artist in Australia might not be an ideal way to survive. In 2014–2015, data showed that artists receive an annual income around \$28,000; a level of relative poverty in this society (6).

by Sineenart Meena

‘Art is making something out of nothing and selling it. ~ Frank Zappa’ – Kay Abude, 2022

by Sineenart Meena

An iteration of screen-printing on textile by the artist, *(DON’T) BE AN ARTIST* (2022) highlights questions of value, labour, and the marketplace. Through turning the gallery space into a kind of shop, Kay directly confronts the issue of the value of art, positioning the work as imminently sellable and proposing an exchange in the gallery based on commercial terms. *(DON’T) BE AN ARTIST* brings textiles and the raw materials of production usually associated with the workforce, social status and economies, into the gallery sphere.

by Sineenart Meena

Empty Pockets proposes a call to act in solidarity with Asian communities through artistic expression. The curator’s and the artists’ personal experiences drive a desire to achieve equality in today’s cultural and labour environment, including in the Australian art community.

by Sineenart Meena

Curator and writer: Sineenart Meena
Editor: Consuelo Cavaniglia
Advisors: James Nguyen, Kay Abude, Linda Sok, Kirtika Kain, Gertrude Artistic Director Mark Feary and Executive Director Tracy Burgess
Gertrude Curator in Residence: Tim Rilley Walsh
Exhibition and Studios Coordinator: Ian Bunyi
Technician: Joshua Heilbuth
Engagement Coordinator: Brigit Ryan
Gallery and Education Manager: Sharon Flynn

Empty Pockets, by Neha Kale

by Neha Kale

To be a migrant in this place we call Australia is to be an eternal worker. It’s to forever embody a ‘work ethic.’ It’s to strive faster, longer, harder. It’s to submit to the silent understanding that the shiny things you were promised – a house, a job, the ground on which you stand – demand your endless labour.

by Neha Kale

That, in a settler colony that was unlawfully taken, you will pay tiny pieces of your life to ensure that you belong.

by Neha Kale

To be a migrant in this place we call Australia is to be haunted by the ghost of the White Australia Policy. The officer who only let you in because they needed bodies to build a country. The bureaucrat in the visa queue who denies your permanent residency. In the streets around this gallery, you can hear the voices of men who, by day, toiled in factories and by night, watered their lemon trees. Women who put their daughters through school by sewing clothes for strangers. But among daily slights and sacrifice, there’s beauty and power too.

Empty Pockets brings together work about work from artists who are acquainted with the ways that histories of migration are bound up with stories of labour.

by Neha Kale

For James Nguyen, a string of gloves, like clothes on a washing line, recalls the toil of fruit-picking in Adelaide market gardens. They resemble those worn by underpaid art-handlers. The fate of artists is also shaped by the currents of capital. These conditions are made material, rendered in screen print on textile, by Kay Abude.

by Neha Kale

Kirtika Kain conjures Dalit writer Baburao Bagul in objects – combs, vessels, copper plates – she imagines belong to him. The artist gives mundane items a sheen of reverence. Cambodian-Australian artist Linda Sok foregrounds silk weaving – a matrilineal tradition stamped out by the Khmer Rouge regime. It also references her parents’ efforts at pickling vegetables.

by Neha Kale

The work of being a migrant is relentless. Too often, your labour dictates your value.

by Neha Kale

We can pay attention to unseen efforts. But when can we heal and rest and renew?

by Neha Kale

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Like all such endeavours, this exhibition could not have been achieved without the participation of many. Thanks firstly to Gertrude Emerging Curator Program for the opportunity to allow a voiceless and non-Australian citizen like me to follow my dream as a curator through this exhibition. Thanks to Gertrude’s team, Mark Feary, Tracy Burgess, Tim Riley Walsh, Ian Bunyi, Brigit Ryan, Sharon Flynn and Joshua Heilbuth, for being amazingly supportive.

by Neha Kale

A massive thanks to all artists, Linda Sok, Kirtika Kain, James Nguyen, and Kay Abude – whose works are the core and main subject of this show, for your knowledge, patience, dedication, trust, support and efforts toward this undertaking. Thank you, thank you, thank you very much! A huge thanks to Sophia Cai and Neha Kale for contributing in this project – your voices are important – thank you very much. A big thank you for the emotional support from my family and friends even though we live far away.

by Neha Kale

A thank you to my partner who always understands and supports me in everything. A thank you to my friends (N&L) in Australia who are as supportive and back-up as always. A special appreciation and gratitude to Consuelo Cavaniglia and Brendan Van Hek who supported, encouraged, accompanied and helped me through many situations. Without you, I might not be sure which direction I should go.

by Neha Kale

A thank you for all invisible labour, I don’t know you all, but you are always existing. Lastly, thank you for all stories that are shared and allow me to bring these voices to speak out.

by Neha Kale

Empty Pockets acknowledges and pays respect to the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and the traditional custodians of the land which I work and create my work, the Wurundjeri people of Kulin Nations and the traditional custodians of the land and waters on which this exhibition is presented. The exhibition is indebted to the opportunity, knowledge, research, and labour of thinking, making and working from past till present.

– Sineenart Meena