

THE JOSLYN



Suchitra Mattai on "The Fall"



Suchitra Mattai (Indo-Caribbean, b. Guyana, 1973), The Fall, 2025, worn saris, broken glass from an attempted studio break-in, installation dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles. Photo by Paul Salveson.

By JONATHAN OROZCO July, 2025

A waterfall of braids is how **Suchitra Mattai**, an Los Angeles based Guyanese-American artist, covered the walls of the **Joslyn Art Museum's Riley CAP Gallery**. Each rope-like band is made with used saris, simulating Kaieteur Falls, a waterfall in Guyana, with a pool of shattered glimmering glass on the floor. The exhibition is a collapse of time and speaks to the geographical and cultural ruptures of indentured labor in the Americas. Mattai and I spoke about this, and how she uses fiber arts not only as a method to represent the past, but speaks to its lingering effects in the present.

Jonathan Orozco: I want to start by asking you how this all started...

Suchitra Mattai: I had a studio visit with Karin [Campbell, curator of contemporary art at the Joslyn] a couple years ago. She had mentioned this cool project space and how it's very intimate and experimental, and I could do whatever I wanted in there, and so I accepted that as a challenge. I went through a number of different ideas as the years progressed, but I had this idea a few months ago, and Karin and I talked about it, and there was some concern about the glass being in the space, but we reconciled those kinds of problems.

JO: I'm really interested to know more about the materials. I see the braids that you make as very tactile. Can you walk me through the process of making those braids?

SM: Let me start with the materials. There's something about using worn clothing that evokes the body, and that's a very important aspect of the work. I'm part of the South Asian diaspora, but my family is from the Caribbean, from Guyana, which is actually in Latin America. So there's all these layers and layers. I think for many people who migrate from place to place, there's this connection to a homeland, or a finding of home that one is always searching for. In using the saris, I felt this of connection.

I grew up wearing them for special occasions and whatnot. But I realized using the everyday saris that women would wear doing domestic labor; those were important for me to focus on. The braids become a reference to both the braiding of hair that many South Asian women, and women all over the world do... Mothers braid their daughter's hair, and there's always that sense of ritual that's embedded within it.

I grew up learning how to embroider and crochet and sew and all those things. One of my grandmothers was a professional seamstress in Guyana, and my other grandmother sewed her own clothes. In a way, using fiber and embroidering, they're a nod to them and their labor.

JO: It literally looks like a waterfall. Can you tell me more about how that ties into the form, the shape of the way you assembled this?

SM: In my work, I often allude to a lot of myths, whether it's related Hindu mythology or Greek mythology and folklore. I think that the Kaieteur Falls and Guyana are, in a way, a site of El Dorado.

Growing up, everybody would talk about them: “hh, if you go back to Guyana, you've got to go see the Kaieteur Falls!” It's like Guyana's claim to fame, other than a really terrible incident that happened cult wise a long time ago. It's like a physical site, but one that's ethereal as well and holds that sense of mythology. So I wanted to recreate it, thinking about my own past.

JO: When I walked into the gallery, I wasn't expecting the glimmering of the glass. The way I'm reading the glass is that it's like a pool. Is that how you want people to interpret it?

SM: I wanted that installation to feel like a site of healing and have the saris envelop the space. There's a warmth through the color and the texture. For me, the pool is more of a reference to a violent past, or something that we don't want to deal with. Because it's surrounded by the braid, there's a sense of nurturing or healing that's happening.

Those shards refer also to a colonial past and the kind of violence of colonialism. That's how I was thinking about it. Less about the personal experience of how I collected the glass, but more about using that personal experience to think about feelings of vulnerability.

JO: Anything else you want people to know?

SM: This myth of El Dorado is really about finding the fountain of youth. There are many sites in Latin America and the Caribbean, where they were thought to be. And Guyana was one of those. There's something very transformational, of course, with water. There's so many stories where the water, the ocean, allows for this sense of transformation. And in that work, I feel there's an emotional transformation that I'm interested in - a metamorphosis - and that the waterfall itself is the morphological structure that allows for that to happen.

In Hinduism, when you leave India, when you basically are crossing what they call the Kala Pani, the Black Ocean. There are purity laws that are related to rituals, but once you cross the ocean, you break with the caste system. And because you are no longer pure, you've left the land of where all the purity laws are. It's an interesting way to view oneself. **WM**