

SINGULAR MOMENTS

MAHALAKSHMI KANNAPPAN

GAJAH GALLERY 

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FOREWORD

We first exhibited Mahalakshmi Kannappan at the 2019 edition of *New Now*, our annual showcase of young, promising regional artists. Her three works on display captivated collectors with their singularity—focusing solely on the raw, organic forms made from charcoal. Faithful to the pure and stark black of charcoal, Maha's pieces drew attention to the medium's earthy textures, turning paintings into evocative sculptural visions with tactile surfaces; dramatic shadows; and shapes and lines that resemble enigmatic patterns across nature. The darkness of the charcoal at once evokes silence, inviting audiences to navigate the hidden and overlooked details found in both our external and internal landscapes.

Born in India and based in Singapore for the past 11 years, Maha visually articulates the vulnerability, uncertainty and contrasting emotions that come with the diasporic experience, and the reality of being between two worlds. After gaining her formal art education from Singapore's Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), she established her signature works that are often marked with cracks and ruptures, making exterior surfaces at times appear fragile and crumbling. As she allows her material to naturally reveal itself, every work is a bold confrontation with the unknown. Her openness to the unpredictable qualities of her medium significantly contribute to the organic

nature of her work—yet, it also communicates her maturity as an artist, who chooses to embrace all the unexpected realities that come with navigating the early stages of one's career.

This solo exhibition, *Singular Moments*, which contains 14 works of art, reveals Maha expanding her investigations into these distinctive moments in fascinating new ways, showcasing her explorations with three-dimensional forms for the first time. As they unpack the phrase 'singular moments', the works on display convey an attempt to slow down and freeze time as she makes conscious progressions in her practice. Making visible both the spontaneous gestures and long periods of stillness that inform her evolving relationship with her material, Maha invites us to see not just at the final product, but also the accidents and transient moments during her process as objects of beauty, worthy of being recorded into permanence.

To end, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to our guest writer, Prof. Tessa Maria Guazon, for her insightful essay; the National Arts Council for their generous, invaluable support especially for emerging artists; and of course, Maha for her consistent hard work and inimitable artistic vision.

JASDEEP SANDHU



BRINGING THINGS BACK TO LIFE

TESSA MARIA GUAZON

In one of our interviews, artist Mahalakshmi Kannappan mentioned a delay in procuring charcoal powder for her works. It was caused by the lockdown on travel not only between India and Singapore but for the rest of the world. This mundane fragment from our conversation came to mind while perusing images of works for her solo exhibition. Charcoal speaks to various aspects of Mahalakshmi's practice not only because it is her medium of choice but that it also references the flows and currents in the act of making. While the pandemic brought the world's frenetic rhythm to a pause, making in all ways and forms did not cease. It is through creation that we intervene in the world, and through the act of making that we can render in tangible form our imagination of how else it can be.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2013) describes making "as a process of growth", that "places the maker from the outset as a participant in amongst a world of active materials."¹ There are "worldly processes that are going on, give-[-ing] rise to the forms of the living world" and to these living forces, one's "impetus is added to the forces and strategies in play."² Making is further regarded as a "manner of correspondence," a series of exchange between maker, material and the forces that generate forms in the world.³ Form is "generated in [this] force field", a "drawing out or bringing forth of potentials immanent in a world of becoming."⁴ Form is not dormant within materials but is generated through forces already at play in the world. Mahalakshmi shares this view when she wrote an artist statement for a 2019 group exhibition: "when left on their own...[material] behaves and responds to stimuli in various ways. Some responses are unpredictable and uncontrollable. My works seek to identify, stimulate, amalgamate and distort materials to explore their responses."⁵ This encapsulates her intimate relationship with her primary medium that is charcoal, taken as she is with both its unpredictability and the latitude of experimentation it allows.



Her *De-Cipher* series from 2019 evinced a layering technique that produced tactile surfaces of furrows and folds. Edges and surfaces were not demarcated or contained, but were instead marked by ridges and creases. She works charcoal powder with combined precision and intuition, without using formulas for mixing her base materials. She transforms charcoal into various viscosities: gleaming liquid that flows, grainy lumps that mass, and thin layered sheets that are compressed with portions that can be broken off and assembled into different configurations. This transmutation from fine granules into smooth liquid is guided by the artist's hand, a process shaped by the tension between material that moves or flows and a ground that is fixed or set. The surfaces of her works receive light in curious ways, reflecting a subtle range of grays from industrial tints like slate, iron, and metal grey to a softer palette like feather or dove grey. These references to hues and tonal values evoke cycles inherent to materials, encompassing transformation and synthesis from nature to industry, from growth to death, from raw to refuse, then back again. These cycles make us discern that the states and properties of materials are not fixed but are mutable.

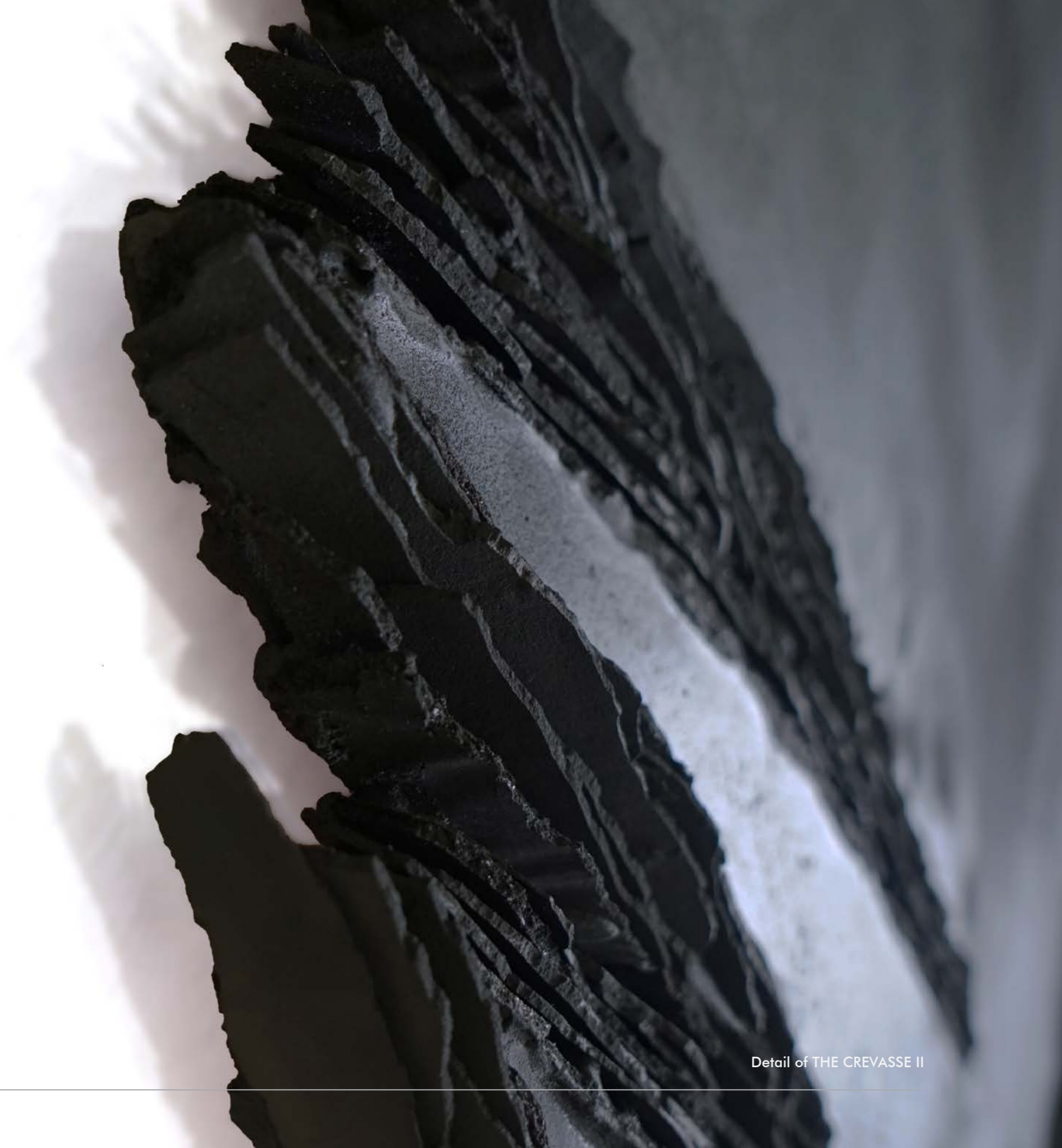
Mahalakshmi's use of charcoal is rooted in drawing but she discovered her material in depth when she began to mix charcoal powder with oil, water, and latex. This resulted to varying consistencies whose fluidity and suppleness allowed greater exploration of form. This malleability has always been a source of fascination for her. Writing about her Fine Art thesis project in 2018, she mentioned experimenting with materials like charcoal, rope, cloth and wire because "exploring and expanding [them]..." allowed "the materials...to exhibit a peculiar attribute."⁶ These resulting qualities borne out of processes that altered inherent characteristics were well suited to articulating complex emotions like "fragility, fluidity and (in)stability."⁷ This transformation emanates from and results to a complex 'force field'; where the artist adds, subtracts, integrates or intervenes in a chain of exchanges and flows.

Charcoal's hue and tones symbolized for Mahalakshmi the diversity of cultures. While her initial experiments with charcoal referenced her migration to Singapore from India, her later works were mostly about its inherent expansiveness. She further underlines this by claiming a "strong feeling that the multi-dimensional nature of several materials serve as an impactful conduit to articulate my thoughts."⁸ While her earlier pieces reference difficult and complex emotions, her recent works explore possibilities that material allows. This trajectory can be discerned in the articulated surfaces and a resounding emphasis on plasticity in her pieces.

Works for her solo exhibition are markedly sculptural, an attribute understood as a “distinctive way of using the physical and perceptual properties of materials as an artistic medium”, and realized by a thorough exploration of a medium’s representational properties.⁹ They call attention not only to the visual and tactile textures of abstract forms but also point to a deeper perception of plasticity. Several of her wall pieces appear like the earth’s terrain from above yet they also simulate fractures on land that are ‘at hand’, that can be readily touched. ‘*The Blotch III*’ simulates a bird’s eye view of a bottomless pit, while fissures in her *Crevice* series are comparable to cracks and clefts on parched earth. Their grounds were meticulously laid with the charcoal mixture and supported by a ply armature, with fissures deftly constructed by embedding sheets of charcoal into solid surfaces. These pieces condense the abstract image of land from afar and ground that is close by, as such evoking proximity and distance in both space and time.

A related perceptual register points to the transformation the artist wields on charcoal powder; from granular to sculptural, and from dispersal to compact mass. While perceived solid and whole, her constructions and forms signify an underlying fragility. Yet this delicate quality is part of the tension that keep structures intact, a force similar to the balance of order and chaos that allows ecosystems to thrive and grow. The artist reflects that she “synthesized the pure blackness and the various tones of charcoal to symbolize a uniform and diverse culture environment...the invariable layers of charcoal suggest calmness and the protruding abstract forms allude to chaos and anxiety.”¹⁰ She is keenly aware of the sculptural potential of her medium, its density and fluidity capable of conveying the fusion of content and form in her works.

Mahalakshmi Kannappan’s evolving art practice is shaped by a rigor with which material is engaged and craft is applied. Ingold expands on the act of making by claiming that artists and artisans “couple [their] movements and gestures— indeed [their] very [lives]— with the becoming of [their] materials, joining with and following the forces and flows that bring [their] works to fruition.”¹¹ An artist’s life is intimately tied to her material as she coaxes them into forms, which by themselves are part of an overarching current of forces. Mahalakshmi’s immersion in her medium is not willfully bent on production alone, it is an exploration of materiality that considers a wider berth of purpose including that of “the ephemeral, the imaginary, the biological, and the theoretical,” a framing that brings to light the forms of agency that objects allow.¹²



The artist recalled that boys from her home in Chennai scratched parked vehicles at random, an act of mischief laced with rebellion. This haphazard act she said, cannot be captured in a single word. This recollection draws for her a reference to what may be singular moments, or slivers of events that can be transposed onto material which by turns is brittle and strong, or fluid and fixed. Watching her rhythmic gestures build layers or mass in her works is akin to witnessing the making of a shelter. Hers is an approach to materiality that is enlivening, sensitive to the friction and flow that sustains life and within the perceptive realm of art, the summoning of deep attention; a state of being that arises from stillness and pause. Making is comprised by both activity and pause, or as Ingold (2013) aptly described making and growing is an act of “bringing things back to life.”

TESSA MARIA GUAZON

ENDNOTES

- 1 Tim Ingold. *Making: Anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture*, (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2013), 21.
- 2 Tim Ingold. *Making: Anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture*, 21.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid., 31
- 5 Mahalakshmi Kannapan, *Artist statement*. (Gajah Gallery group exhibition, 2019).
- 6 Mahalakshmi Kannapan, *Final year essay*. (NAFA, 2018).
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Erik Koed, “Sculpture and the Sculptural” in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63: 2 (2005), 150.
- 10 Mahalakshmi Kannapan, 2018.
- 11 Tim Ingold. *Making: Anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture*, 31.
- 12 Daniel Miller, ed. *Materiality*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 200), 4.

Tessa Maria Guazon is assistant professor at the Department of Art Studies at the University of the Philippines Diliman. Her curatorial and research projects focus on place making through contemporary art, art and urbanization, and art’s mediation of the public sphere.

She has curated exhibitions and art projects for museums and institutions. Recent ones include “Shutter, Screen/ Window, Veil” for Gendered Bodies in Southeast Asia with Taiwanese curator Fang-Tze Hsu at the Metropolitan Museum of Manila (2019), Lawas Public Art at the UP Diliman campus grounds (2018) and Consonant Forms, Resonant Practice at the Yuchengco Museum Makati City (2018).

In 2017, she co-curated Tropical Cyclone at the Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts Taipei, Taiwan. Her exhibition *Plying the Seas, Divining the Skies* explored place, belonging, and loss in new media art, installations, and photographs of Taiwanese artists. *Traversals, Trajectories* (2017) at the University of the Philippines Vargas Museum was the inaugural exhibition for the Philippine Contemporary Art Network.

Her current projects include the Southeast Asia Neighborhood Network organized by the Urban Knowledge Network Asia and the International Institute of Asian Studies Leiden, the Netherlands. Her case study on art and gentrification considers the curatorial potentials of research-oriented projects. She curated *Island Weather* for the Philippine Pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale.

She has received fellowships for research and fieldwork in Asia and has lived in Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, and Japan. She was recipient of the 2013 Nippon Foundation Asian Public Intellectuals Fellowship and was researcher in residence at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum Japan in 2017. Her essays and reviews have been published in anthologies, academic journals, and exhibition catalogues.



IN CONVERSATION

MAHALAKSHMI KANNAPPAN & NICOLE SORIANO

Nicole Soriano: You have highlighted how materiality is an integral aspect to your practice, allowing the organic qualities of your mediums formally and conceptually influence your finish work. The charcoal medium currently takes centre stage in your oeuvre--can you share what first drew you to the material? How did you begin experimenting with it; and as you continue to test its possibilities, how has your relationship with the material evolved over the years?

Mahalakshmi Kannappan: My journey with charcoal started in my early years when I was doing a lot of sketching. Charcoal was my preferred material as I felt it gave me room to portray various levels of intensity with ease. Later, as part of my art curriculum in NAFA, I focused on material exploration and once again, Charcoal was my go-to material. I did a lot of experiments, combining charcoal with other materials.

Finally, I realised, Charcoal, on its own paved the way for varied creative inputs, and it never failed me in delivering my expected (and sometimes very unexpected) outcomes. I find charcoal a very self-generating medium. The more I explore with it, the more results it presents, which then creates new possibilities and concepts.

You speak of how the vulnerable, uncertain nature of the charcoal material helps metaphorically express your emotions and experiences as a diasporic individual. Can expound more on this aspect of your identity you frequently speak of: To what extent has the diasporic experience, and the realities that come with being in-between worlds, affected your artistic practice and career? How did you come to embrace this unique aspect of yourself, and enable it to expand, rather than constrict or pigeonhole, you as an artist?

When I migrated to Singapore from India, there was quite an upheaval in my personal and social life. This transition mainly upended my career. I had to build these aspects of my life from scratch again; indeed, the struggle to relate to the disparate culture and lifestyle took its toll.

These experiences were my first source of fuel and inspiration for my initial works. However, from an artistic practice perspective, this transition is indeed positive. I find that the Art Community here is a close-knit and receptive one which values and respects the role of an Artist. I feel I can thrive in such an ecosystem.

Having completed your fine arts diploma in 2018 and joined Gajah Gallery's New Now exhibition in 2019, you have been deemed an upcoming, burgeoning artist, still relatively at the early stages of your career. Yet, you have already established a strong, distinctive practice through your affective and abstract charcoal pieces. Can you share about how you found your voice this early on in your career? Do you have any significant influences--mentors, veteran artists, etc.-or core philosophies that keep you rooted as you grow and evolve your practice?

I am not too sure if this is my voice or the practice which will follow through for the rest of my career. As an artist, I believe it is crucial to keep an open mind to varied ideas and concepts. As of today, I certainly enjoy and relish this close relationship I have with charcoal.

Artists who have expressed diasporic experiences have always intrigued me. In recent times, I have been drawn to and inspired by material-based artists like Jane Lee and Kumari Nahappan. Their ability to explore, develop and magnify conceptual ideas using materials is something I hope I can emulate.

Alongside several of your charcoal paintings, you are displaying fresh, important additions to your oeuvre: sculptures. What moved you to explore three-dimensional forms and include these works in the show? As your paintings are already highly tactile and filled with dynamic textures, can you briefly share about your history with the sculptural practice? How, to you, do these sculptures enrich the concept of this exhibit?

I subscribe to the idea that a canvas should not limit you to creating works in a 2D form. That set me on my journey of trying to create 3D imagery on canvas. Sculptures are a natural evolution of my 3D forms from canvas to being detached, on their own. In effect, by disengaging material from the canvas, I can exhibit the pure, uncontaminated characteristics of charcoal.

The title of the show, *Singular Moments*, alludes to the concept of time, its inevitable passage, and the 'freezing' of distinct moments that can never be replicated. Revealing multiple layers and complex textural details, your pieces in themselves subtly communicate the slow, meticulous time spent creating them. Can you share more about how has your artistic practice investigates and perhaps, defies notions of time? If applicable, what were the new, different dimensions of time that you explored in the process of making this show?

I have always found charcoal intriguing as coal represents singular moments frozen in time. The earth's crust is layered with coal – each layer representing a time capsule of an era. In the process of creation, these works often encapsulate a moment, a texture or an image which cannot be replicated again. These moments are what I hope to show in this exhibition.

At present, what is currently motivating you to keep on creating? Can you share some of the broad plans and hopes you have for yourself as an artist, whether in the near or distant future?

Till date, I strongly feel that the medium I work still has a lot to offer. As I mentioned earlier, charcoal's self-generating nature means I have boundless opportunities to create, and this keeps me going. Working with various materials inspires me, and I wish to create larger conceptual works combining different materials.

PLATES



From left:

THE CREVICE I

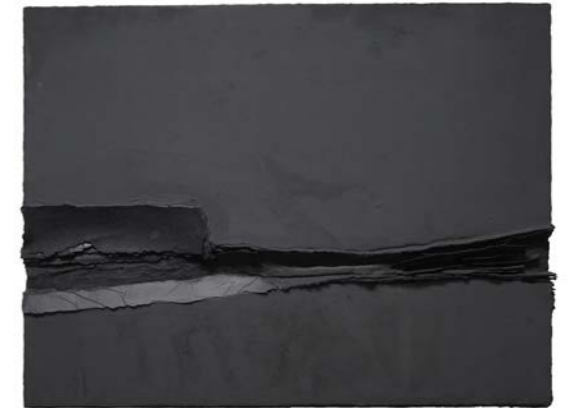
2020, charcoal on wood, 90 x 150 x 8 cm

THE CREVICE II

2020, charcoal on wood, 83 x 123 x 8 cm

THE CREVICE III

2020, charcoal on wood, 77 x 100 x 7 cm





Detail of THE CREVICE III

The surfaces of her works receive light in curious ways,
reflecting a subtle range of grays
from industrial tints like slate, iron, and metal grey
to a softer palette like feather or dove grey.

These references to hues and tonal values
evoked cycles inherent to materials,
encompassing transformation and synthesis
from nature to industry, from growth to death, from raw to refuse,
then back again.

These cycles make us discern
that the states and properties of materials are not fixed
but are

mutable.

THE CREVASSE I
2020, charcoal on wood, 103 x 93 x 5 cm





THE CREVASSE II
2020, charcoal on wood, 125 x 95 x 7 cm





From left:

SHREDS I

2020, charcoal, 36 x 26 x 27 cm

SHREDS II

2020, charcoal, 48 x 27 x 17 cm



Watching her rhythmic gestures build layers or mass in her works
is akin to witnessing

the making of a shelter.

Hers is an approach to materiality that is enlivening,
sensitive to the friction and flow
that sustains life
and within the perceptive realm of art,
the summoning of deep attention;
a state of being that arises from stillness and pause.

Making is comprised by both activity and pause,
or as Ingold (2013) aptly described making and growing,
is an act of bringing things back to life.

THE BLOTCH I
2020, charcoal on canvas, 102 x 52 x 5 cm



THE CREVASSE III
2020, charcoal on wood, 102 x 92 x 8 cm



From left:

THE BLOTCH IV

2020, charcoal on wood, 123 x 93 x 7 cm

THE BLOTCH III

2020, charcoal on wood, 123 x 100 x 7 cm





SHREDS III
2020, charcoal, 43 x 29 x 34 cm



THE BLOTCH II
2020, charcoal on canvas, 120 x 120 x 5 cm





SHREDS IV
2020, charcoal, 25 x 56 x 8 cm

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Mahalakshmi Kannapan's body of works show a keen engagement with material. Her primary medium is charcoal which she renders in various viscosities and form on different surfaces and grounds. She has always been interested in the infinite possibilities of industrial and natural materials and finds in their transformation, a wide range of expressive qualities. In previous works for group exhibitions, she explored a range of complex emotions to do with immersion in a different culture. Her solo exhibition Singular Moments explore the materiality of her chosen medium and its potential to relay gaps in perceptions of space and time.

Mahalakshmi has a diploma in Fine Art from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. Her artworks were included in group exhibitions in Singapore, including the Southeast Asia (SEA) Focus 2020. Some of her pieces were selected for the 3rd International Mini-print Biennale (JIMB) in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

AWARDS

- 2018 SINDA Excellence Award 2018, Singapore
- 2018 Distinction in Diploma in Fine Arts, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2020 In Sensible Spaces, S.E.A. Focus, Singapore
- 2019 New Now III: Convergence, Gajah Gallery, Singapore
- 2018 Young Artists 2018: Ring Road, Bale Banjar Sangkring, Yogyakarta
- UOB POY: Natura Hominis, Galeri Nasional, Jakarta Pusat
- 2019 New Now III: Convergence, Gajah Gallery, Singapore
- 2018 3rd Jogja International Mini-print Biennale (JIMB), Yogyakarta, Indonesia
- Centering the Margin, Lim Hak Tai Gallery, Singapore
- Best of Best Show, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore
- Graduate Diploma Show, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore
- 2017 Savour the Arts, TCC, VivoCity and Bugis Outlets, Singapore
- 2016 The Spiders with Seven Tau-Geh Legs, The Little Skool House at Downtown East, Singapore
- EAST Meets WEST, ON AIR Gallery, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore

SINGULAR MOMENTS

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