



AMITA MAKAN
Āvāhana – Invocation



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Oliewenhuis
ART MUSEUM

Oliewenhuis Art Museum is a satellite of the National Museum,
Bloemfontein, an agency of the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture.





Hélène Tissières

Translation from French by Michael Prytz

Amita Makan:

Art of the thread (knotting/unknotting) and ecology

[...] one must know that governing, like surviving, is learning to 'tie' (code) and 'untie' (decode) the knots or codes of systems and 'radiations' through the world in which we live. The coding and decoding process must start at home, with our environment, and at the seat of our own government.

– Fu-Kiau, *Mbongi*, p. 73

For the [...] Bântu, each plant on earth, i.e., each species [...] has a special power and a unique function in relation to the futu (earth) onto which it grows. This power and function are never identical to those endowed on other plants.

– Fu-Kiau, *Self-Healing Power*, p. 121

Rothko through his painting conveys the energy that landscapes exude, the artist El Anatsui evokes the degradation that Nature suffers at the hands of human beings. Ndary Lô in *La Muraille Verte* points to the project of the Kenyan activist Wangari Maathai¹ who founded the Green Belt Movement and mobilized women to plant trees to fight soil erosion and desertification. In a context where species are rapidly disappearing, where the Earth is savagely overexploited, any such reference is not merely an expression of nostalgia: harking back to a moment of unity, of harmony, of wonder when confronted with the beauty of a flower, a butterfly or a landscape, but also the expression of a profound questioning of man's domination over his environment.

These works make an appeal to ethics in order to interrogate individuals' readings of their experience in the world and encourage them to seek other approaches. Along the way, they expose humans' greed in order to foster in them a greater sense of unity with nature.

In all of the world's cultures, plants have been used to heal – powerful remedies that demand expertise. They have also been used for pigmentation (natural dyes for the creation of rugs, shoes, cloth and tattoos) as well as to transmit meaning. Healers and craftsmen learn their secrets in order to have an impact upon events – plants have an undeniable power. Two South African artists take a particular interest in flowers. Andrew Putter, in his series *Hottentots Holland: Flora Capensis*, takes photographs of indigenous flowers from the part of the Cape where he was born, imitating the floral still lifes of 17th century Dutch painters (Milbourne, *Earth Matters*, pp. 32-33):

The butterfly that alights upon crisply delineated clusters of soft pink and fuchsia blossoms is a species that would have flitted among the foliage through which the Cape's native population walked centuries ago. These blooms, in their lush crimson, lilac, ivory, gold, and verdant variety, teeter on the verge of extinction today, but their tenuous presence alludes to the Cape Khoikhoi people, who had also been a part of the landscape in 1652 when the Dutch arrived and began to call them 'Hottentots'. (Ibid, p. 33)

PAGE 2-3 (DETAIL)
Leucospermum lineare

2015
Hand embroidered with silk, viscose thread, repurposed plastic packaging and vintage saris on tulle and silk organza.

135 x 67 x 3 cm (encased in perspex and can be suspended from ceiling for recto/verso viewing or hung on the wall)

PAGE 4 (DETAIL)
Water Mantra
2018
Hand embroidered with viscose and nylon threads and crystals on silk organza
146 x 126 x 35 cm

Putter has spent years roaming the region to find and catalogue these plants. Through his work, he attempts to sensitise people to their heritage, which forms part of a rich ecosystem that is under serious threat. And any species that is lost imperils others, such as the insects that depend on it to survive. This photographer depicts the luxurious beauty of these flowers, the richness of their colours, and their uniqueness. Their extinction further impoverishes our planet and threatens our environmental balance.

The artist Willem Boshoff is troubled by the threat looming over the flora and fauna, and in parallel with his artistic creation (sculpture, painting, performance), he catalogues and photographs flowers from around the world and makes them accessible to the public: 'I have made notes on more than 15 000 plant species on trips to natural areas and botanical gardens all over the world' (Willem Boshoff, website²). He emphasises that more than 15 000 of the 22 102 species in South Africa are at risk of vanishing in the near future. His work *Garden of Words III* is a memorial that presages their disappearance in order to foster awareness and mobilise the public.

Amita Makan, a South African artist whose ancestors were Gujarati cobblers from India, works with embroidery and assemblage (sari fragments) on silk, weaving in synthetic threads used by the clothing and food packaging industries (mesh bags for oranges or lemons, fishing nets): 'stitched threads, fragments of sari, miscellaneous ornaments, [her] work [...] grapples with the question of mending and restitution in a globalised context where the urge to dominate is still strongly present. [...]

'She draws on the power of embroidery, the beauty of the colours and patterns of

the saris that she cuts up and rearranges – fragments that inevitably take us back to the work of the anonymous artisan who makes these clothes. That oft-exploited worker labours under difficult conditions, suffering silently to survive.³ These issues of exploitation and domination by humans over their environment are the theme of this exhibition.

The protea burns with a thousand fires and has become symbolic of South Africa. However, nature's balance has been lost, and the protea is in danger of returning to the Ancestors, reducing Earth's biodiversity. In Makan's work *Leucospermum lineare*, the flower is situated towards the bottom of the tableau, glowing but also burning, threatening to go extinct, taking with it a rich heritage. The vertical extension of the work accentuates the menace: the flower is suffocating from the growth of human activity, the spreading towns and changing climate. It will only appear in museums, under glass, a relic of lost medicinal powers. The work combines nylon thread, fragments of sari, playing on the idea of shreds, of traces, and on the insidious nature of plastic substances as well as on the context of exploitation in which they are produced. And the plexiglass frame serves as a sarcophagus.

'The chosen medium (silk), lets an image be presented while allowing a view right through to the background, dialoguing with the space around it. The simulacrum questions our relationship to the world, to events, and urges us to go beyond the surface, the visible. The threads on silk serve as clues, signs, writings to decipher – the colour of the threads, their criss-crossing, the alignment of points and knots, the back-and-forth between sides (front and back) open up possibilities and cloud the reading: moving

from here to there, from the surface to the underside, from inside to outside. Following the craft of her cobbler ancestors, she deploys the needle, going from front to back, working at the interface – passage between surfaces. A musical score where several lines of melody superimpose and intersect with each other, weaving together the threads of the drama, and making sense of it. Also stitching, the possibility of mending things. Thus the point of a needle is double-edged: it can wound or heal, scar or repair. We come to find a permanent tension between visible and invisible, reality and illusion, wounding and healing. Accordingly it is about being a trickster, inducing a malaise, by means of metamorphosis (perhaps momentarily incarnating the force of that flower) in order to draw the gaze of the spectator and bring them to contemplate the situation.⁴

In *Snow Protea I* (2017), the rectangular shape is similar, but the flower is now positioned towards the top, giving the impression of sounding an abyss. The movement of folded petals proclaims the coming fall. Here the flower is made of translucent white polyester. This arrangement evokes our fascination for bling-bling, artificiality, ostentation – all that glitters, and underlines the tension that has come to exist between man and nature.

Should we not rediscover a balance, inspired by the force of these flowers which mirror the power of the sun here on Earth through the shape and colour of their receptacles and the circular arrangement of their petals?

The central question is what trail must we know to follow in order to get to the very essence of the flower? *Samsara – The Cycle of Rebirth?* (2014) conceives of a whole realm of flowers in movement, rotating in the cosmos. Both cosmic dance and

departure from our world. The invocation of prayers, rituals to counter this reality. Makan is also preoccupied with butterflies, which are disappearing at a rapid pace. *Ravaged butterfly II* (2016) pays homage to a butterfly whose survival is threatened by a damaged wing and which makes its journey in total silence. From the front, the artist shows the fragility of the butterfly, while on the underside the threads trace the trajectory of the butterfly, the obstacles (knots) that it encounters, the traps (tangles) and the detours. How long has it managed to live this way? Will its determination be enough to contribute to the survival of the species? Its disappearance has an impact – one has only to think of the importance of the weft of our hinterlands which Edouard Glissant so brilliantly brought forth in his writing.

The rendering of nature into art aims to question the objectification and domination of nature which gradually leads to the disappearance of thousands of species, breaking the food chain, disrupting the regulation of the ecosystem. Guattari decries the work of politicians who in his view have proven unequal to the task assigned to them, unable to put an end to the harm that has resulted. He contends that 'only an ethical-political linkage – which he names *ecosophy* – between the three ecological pillars of environment, social relations and human subjectivity will be able to answer these questions satisfactorily' (*Les Trois Écologies*, pp.12–13). For him, it is essential that individuals change their way of acting, their conditioning. Hence they must reconstruct their subjectivity, rework their social relationships and break free of their passivity: 'The relationship of humanity to society, the psyche and nature tends to grow ever worse, not only due to objective

contamination and pollution but also due to lack of awareness and the fatal passivity of individuals and authorities with respect to these questions considered as a whole' (*Ibid*, p.31). Contemplating the context is not enough. There must be a turn to action.

Sometimes the decorative nature of Makan's work suggests a stance that could seem ambiguous: the plastic is beautified and does not disturb the viewer with its presence. In this context, the imposing plexiglass frame, which serves as a sarcophagus, re-centres these questions, highlighting the illusory and destructive nature of human behaviour: do we really want to be able to gaze only upon replicas of these flowers or plants – imitations without ecosystemic value? Makan ties and unties the threads of our history through her art. Thus we come to ask if in the end only radical action can cut the Gordian knot that our political and economic systems have created.

Notes

1 The former president of Senegal, Abdoulaye Wade, took up this idea, proposing to plant trees in various regions of the Sahel. This project was soon abandoned.

2 <https://www.willemboshoff.com/product-page/garden-of-words-iii> Consulted 30 January 2018.

3 Tissières, 'Amita Makan, artiste sud-africaine: *ubuntu et hindouisme – l'art du fil*', to be published in the review *Ethiopiques*, Senegal.

4 Tissières, 'Amita Makan, artiste sud-africaine: *ubuntu et hindouisme – l'art du fil*', to be published in the review *Ethiopiques*, Senegal. It is pertinent to quote this paragraph as well as the previous one since they serve to clarify the theme of the exhibition.

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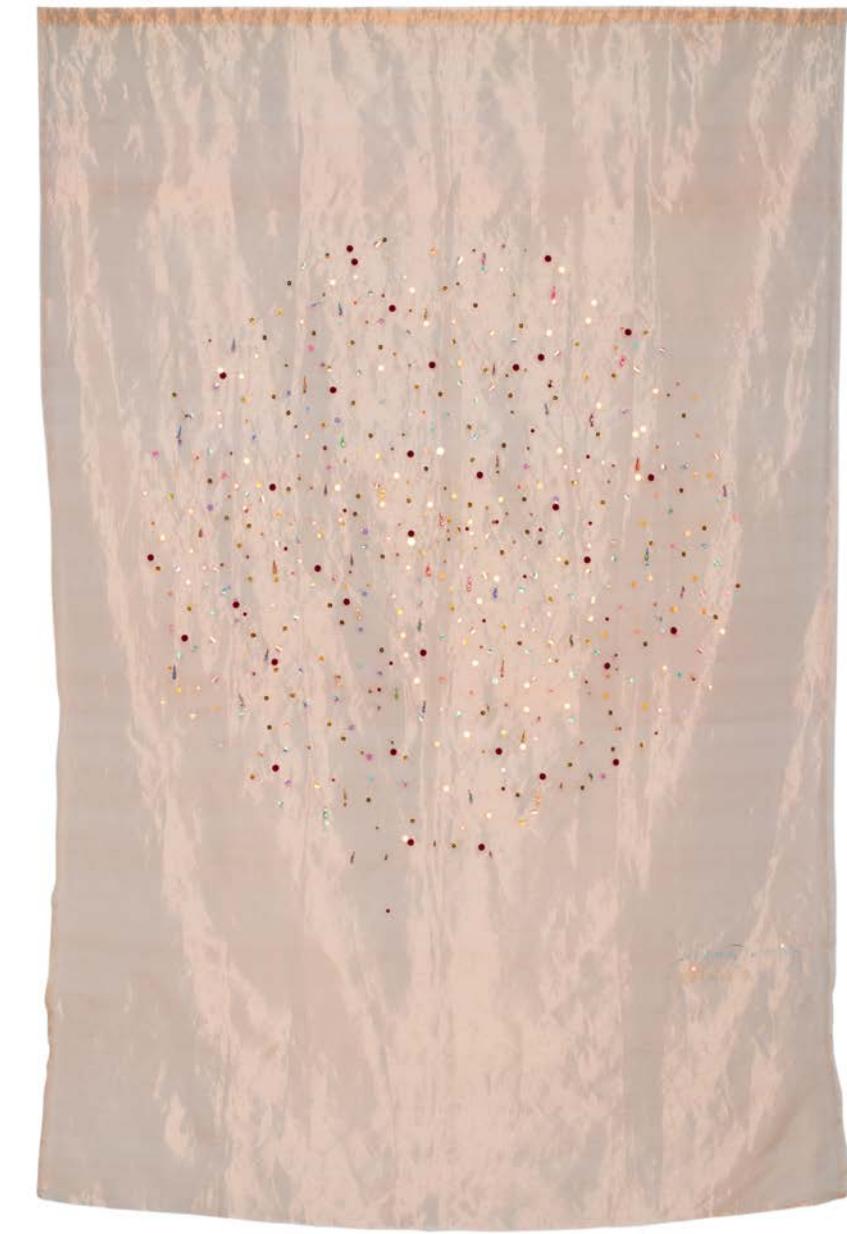
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Hélène Tissières, curator and scholar of African literature, film and contemporary art was Associate Professor at the University of Texas at Austin. She left her position in 2016 to settle back in Geneva where she is Guest Researcher at the Global Studies Institute.



The Āvāhana works were conceived during the annual Hindu festival of 'Navrathri'. In her unmanifested state, the primordial Divine Mother is said to inhabit a 'bindu', a dot. Decorative dots called 'bindis' – the decorative mark worn in the middle of the forehead especially by Hindu women – and sequins were ritualistically laid down on silk canvas to Sanskrit mantras invoking the Goddess Kali for peace on earth and to rid the world of darkness.



Āvāhana – Invocation I
2017
Hand stitched sequins and bindis with viscose
and metallic thread on metallic fabric
162 x 107 cm



Āvāhana – Invocation II

2019

Hand stitched sequins and bindis with viscose, nylon

and metallic thread on silk organza

108 x 134 cm



The multifarious mixed media Fynbos works are odes to these ancient, now increasingly threatened flowers, and are recreated from ubiquitous, non-degradable environmentally damaging derivatives of alluring plastic and recycled plastic packaging from quotidian living.

Leucospermum cordifolium

2016

Hand embroidered with silk, viscose thread, repurposed plastic packaging and vintage saris on tulle and silk organza.
127 x 64 x 3 cm (encased in perspex and can be suspended from ceiling for *recto/verso* or hung on the wall)





Leucospermum lineare

2015

Hand embroidered with silk, viscose thread, repurposed plastic

packaging and vintage saris on tulle and silk organza.

135 x 67 x 3 cm (encased in perspex and can be suspended from
ceiling for recto/verso viewing or hung on the wall)





Snow Protea I

2017

Hand embroidered with metallic, nylon and polyester threads, synthetic ribbons, beads, Swarovski crystals, vintage saris and sequins on tulle.

130 x 92 x 6cm (encased in perspex and can be suspended from ceiling for recto/verso viewing or hung on the wall)



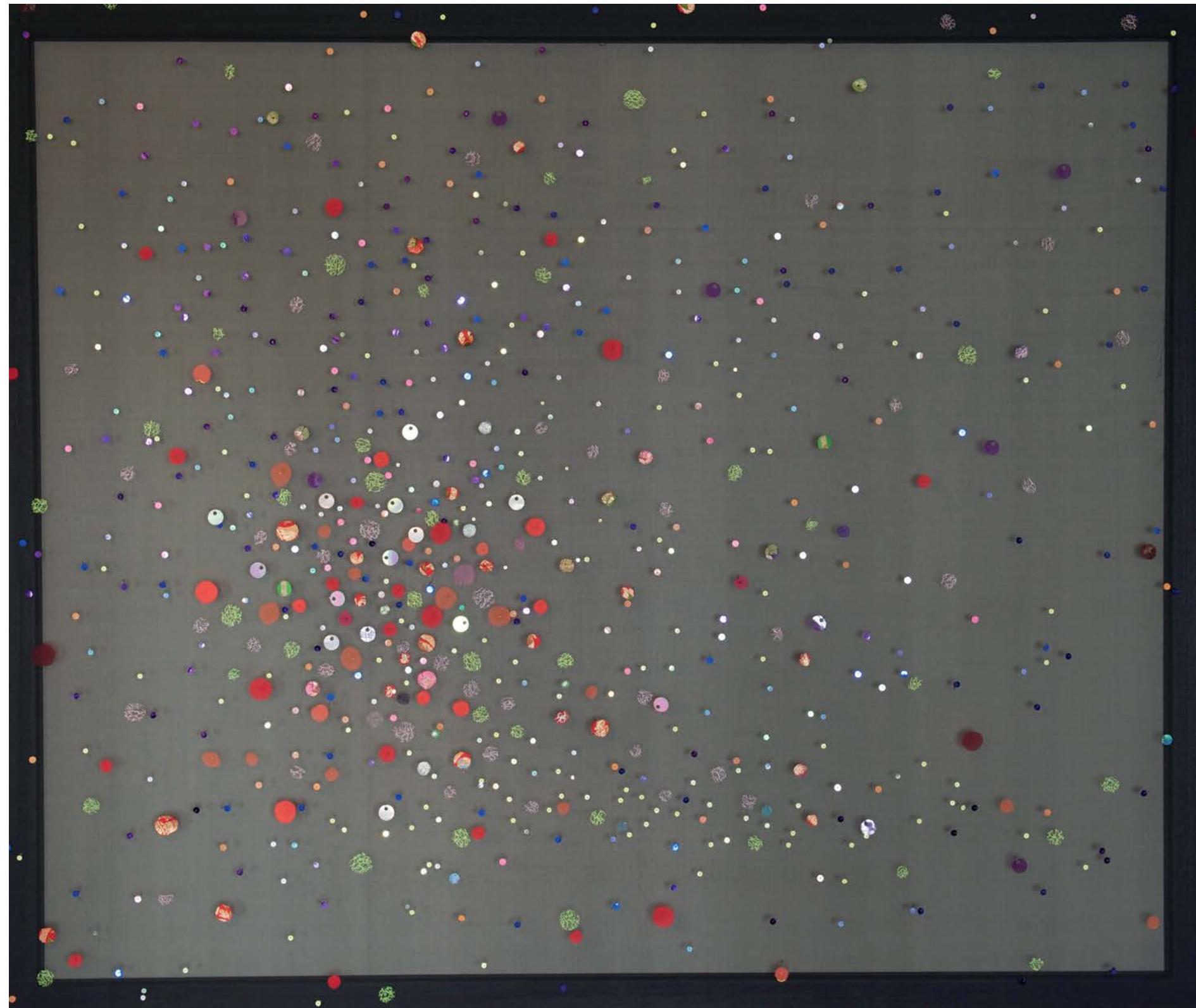
Snow Protea II

2017

Hand embroidered with metallic, nylon and polyester threads, synthetic ribbons, beads, Swarovski crystals, vintage saris and sequins on tulle.

143 x 65 x 6 cm (encased in perspex and can be suspended from ceiling for recto/verso viewing or hung on the wall)





Sunyata – The Full Void I

2014

Hand stitched vintage saris, ribbons, sequins with
and metallic silk thread on silk organza
130 X 154.5 X 3.5 cm (encased in perspex)



Samsara – The Cycle of Rebirth?

2014

Hand stitched with silk, viscose and metallic threads, vintage
saris, dupion silk and vintage sequins on silk organza
130 x 138.5 x 4 cm (encased in perspex)

Endangered Fynbos: 100 % Plastic

2019

Hand embroidered with ribbons, sequins, repurposed plastic and polystyrene
packaging materials, glass beads and metallic and nylon threads on tulle
220 x 155 cm (unframed to be suspended)





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Memorial to Fynbos

2020

Hand embroidered with recycled nylon threads
from packaging of oranges on polyester tulle
127 x 81 x 6 cm (unframed to be suspended)

Water Mantra
2018
Hand embroidered with viscose and nylon
threads and crystals on silk organza
146 x 126 x 3,5 cm

Water Mantra was conceived during the crippling drought in Cape Town when 'Day Zero' loomed. An embroidery of my cupped hands with Sanskrit mantras is a prayer to preserve precious life-giving and life-sustaining water. The daily morning ritual worldwide is to cup our hands to receive water. Cupped hands are also a gesture for begging. Water Mantra begs Indra, the Hindu God of rain, to break open the clouds and quench our plains.





Vasant III
Hand embroidered with silk and viscose thread,
repurposed plastic packaging on silk organza.
83 x 120 x 3 cm (encased in perspex and can be
suspended from ceiling for recto / verso viewing
or hung on the wall)

Vasant III captures a surreal, transitory moment of a swarm of migratory golden butterflies in the arid Kalahari. 'Vasant' means spring in Hindi. This suspended moment is hand-embroidered on silk organza with silk, viscose and metallic threads as well as repurposed non-degradable yellow nylon packaging material. This work draws attention to their plight and the need for their preservation for our own renewal and continuity.



Ravaged Butterfly II

2016

Hand embroidered with gold metallic thread on silk
104 x 60 x 3 cm (The work is encased in perspex and can
be suspended from ceiling or hung against the wall)



Ubuntu Baobab I

2019

Hand embroidered with vintage saris, sequins, beads
with metallic and viscose threads on silk organza
Dimension: 270 x 114 cm (unframed to be suspended)



Ubuntu Baobab II

2019

Hand embroidered with vintage saris, sequins, beads
with metallic and viscose threads on silk organza
313 x 134 cm (unframed to be suspended)

The baobab works are odes to the towering, magical baobab trees that have marked the African landscape for thousands of years and are now dying. These guardians and witnesses of time and history are deeply rooted in African identity, mythology and belief. The ancient San of Southern Africa believe that the baobab does not grow but crashes to earth fully grown. This towering 'upside down tree', with its tangled roots forming a giant canopy is a metaphor for Ubuntu. In the restoration of our Ubuntu, I pray the baobab will be revived.



La mort du baobab
2019
Hand embroidered with saris and viscose
and silk thread on silk organza
115 x 207 cm (unframed to be suspended)



Agnicayana draws on the 4 000-year-old religious Hindu ritual whereby 1005 bricks are laid to form a fire altar in the shape of a bird in flight. In my prayer, saris, threads and stitches recall the ritual that is in its essence a call for the reconstitution of our universe.

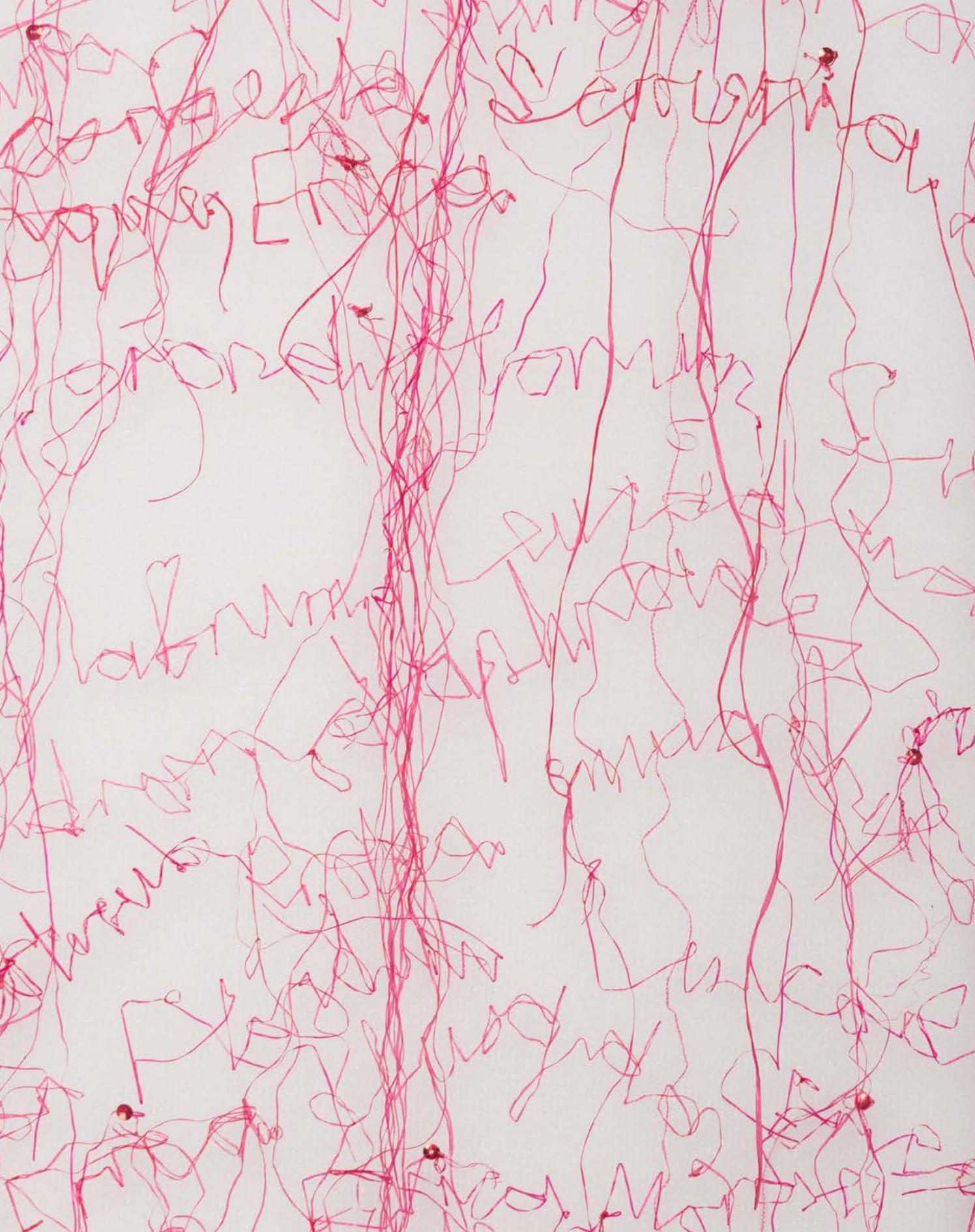
Agnicayana
2018
Hand embroidered with silk, viscose, metallic threads with vintage saris (with zari -silver) and sequins on silk organza
115 x 180 cm (unframed to be suspended)



Self Portrait: African Renaissance
2012
Hand embroidered with silk thread on silk organza,
tulle, vintage saris and sequins
146 x 90 x 3 cm (encased in perspex)



Self Portrait
2012
Hand embroidered with vintage saris, metallic threads,
metallic coils, beads and sequins on silk organza
76 x 70 x 3 cm (encased in perspex)



Amita Makan: Biography

Amita Makan was born in 1967 in South End, Port Elizabeth, currently lives and works in Pretoria, South Africa, and has produced three solo exhibitions to date: *Vasant* (Galerie Rosa Turetsky, Geneva, 2016), *Nomalungelo: Threads To Freedom* (Constitution Hill, Johannesburg, 2014), and *Evanescence* (KZNSA, Durban, 2011; Ron Belling Gallery, Port Elizabeth, 2011).

Selected group exhibitions include: *Awesome Womxn* (Arts of Association, Pretoria, 2019), *Artgenève* (Galerie Rosa Turetsky, Geneva, 2019, 2018, 2017), *Emerging Visions: Launch exhibition of the National Art Bank* (Oliewenhuis Museum, Bloemfontein, 2017–2018), *Speaking out and Standing up* (Oliewenhuis Museum, Bloemfontein, 2018), *Aqua* (Art for the World, Lake Maggiore, 2018), *A New Humanity* (Dakar Biennale, Dakar, 2018), *Ubuntutu: A Commitment to Peace, Love and Social Justice – Quilt Tributes To Desmond and Leah Tutu* (Robben Island Museum, Cape Town; Stellenbosch University Museum; Potchefstroom Museum, 2016–2017), *Imago Mundi – Bennetton Foundation* (Ca'dei Carraresi, Treviso; Museo Biltotti, Rome; Giorgio Cini Foundation, Venice Biennale; Pratt Institute of Brooklyn; and the United Nations, New York, 2015).

Makan has been awarded residencies at the Cite International des Arts (Paris, 2014) and the Chowmahalla Palace of the Centre for World Exposition of Arts and Culture (Hyderabad, 2010). In 2014 she participated in France–South Africa Dialogues at the Orangerie du Senat, Paris, and in 1994 received a British Council Scholarship. In 2016–2017, Makan collaborated with Reach for Recovery on the Artivism for Breast Cancer fashion programme.

The artist's works are housed in the following collections: South African National Art Bank, Robert Sobukwe Museum and Learning Centre, University of South Africa, Dr Miriam Makeba Concert Hall, University of Pretoria, Edoardo Villa Museum, South African Reserve Bank, Durban International Convention Centre, Luciano Benetton Foundation, and the Chowmahalla Palace Collection.

Memorial to Fynbos (detail)

2020

Hand embroidered with recycled nylon threads
from packaging of oranges on polyester tulle
127 x 81 x 6 cm (unframed to be suspended)



Amita Makan

Āvāhana – Invocation

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THIS PAGE

Endangered Fynbos: 100 % Plastic

2019

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220 x 155 cm (unframed to be suspended)

COVER (DETAIL)

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INSIDE FRONT COVER (DETAIL)

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2014

Hand stitched with silk, viscose and metallic threads, vintage saris, dupion silk and vintage sequins on silk organza
130 x 138.5 x 4cm (encased in perspex)

INSIDE BACK COVER (DETAIL)

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Dimension: 270 x 114 cm (unframed to be suspended)



