

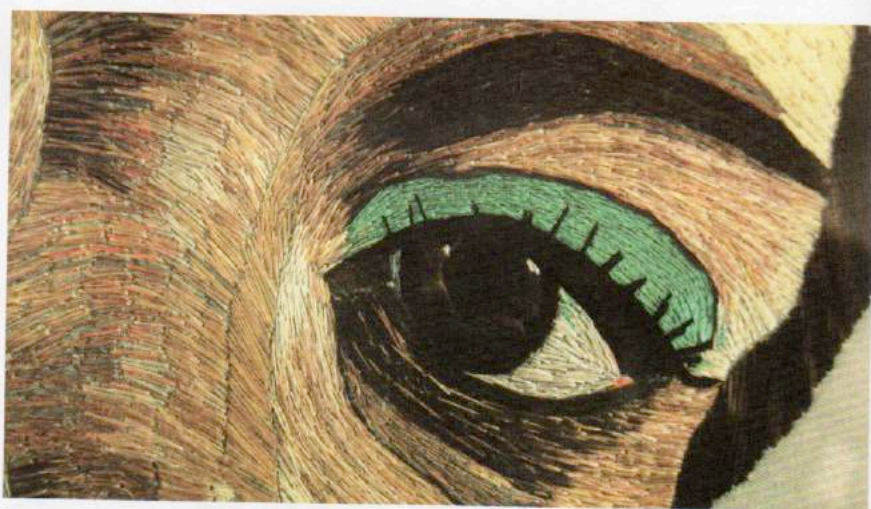
Amita Makan

NEVER INTO NOTHINGNESS

Words by Rick de Villiers

"Those are pearls that were [her] eyes;
Nothing of [her] that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange."

The Tempest, I,ii,400-405



The woman in Makan's portrait bestows a magnetic gaze. Her vivid turquoise eye shadow, glittering jewellery, rose-shaped hairpin, and maroon sari combine in a surprising way to create an appearance that is colourful yet stately, confident yet quiet.

Upon closer inspection, the unusual nature of the portrait reveals itself. The extraordinary media – silk threads, hand embroidered on a

silk fabric with brocade, beads and crystals – flow together to present the half-haloed figure fully hallowed in regal materials. But for all the dignity that surrounds her, some element of fragility, too, is felt.

Makan is eager to display the portrait's reverse and attempts to unclasp it from the canvas stand. Though the canvas surface is about a square meter, she manages to swing the perspex-protected object around.



The portrait is swivelled around once more and the frazzled face of the woman with the captivating gaze is restored to perfection. There is not a stitch out of place. Though you are aware of loose ends that trail off at the back, of thoughts and memories lost and unrecoverable for all time, what stares back overwhelms: beauty indomitable.

Instantly, the title makes sense. Where the face of "Loose Ends: A Story About My Mother" communicates precision and beauty, the back betrays a harsher reality of disconnected filaments and broken strands.

Amita Makan, the artist, was born in Port Elizabeth, has a Masters degree in International Relations and Political Science from Rhodes University, and received the British Council Scholarship in 1994 to go study at University College London. She lived in Geneva between 1998 and 2002.

Curiously, her involvement in art is a fairly recent development. Though she did a one-year course on the History of Art and Practical, it was not until her sojourn in Switzerland that she started taking painting seriously.

On her return to South Africa, she completed the first year of a Fine Arts Degree at the University of Pretoria and, during the subsequent years, kept honing her technique through renderings of masters' work. Yet in 2006, she was ready to tackle something completely original and completely personal.

In 1997, at the age of 56, her mother Vasanti Dhanjee Makan was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Over the course of more than a decade her mind suffered steady decay. When the deterioration had reached its extreme, she had to be fed through a tube and no longer recognised her own children.

"My family and I witnessed the loss of sense of self and identity over twelve years, which was a long and painful process," Makan, the daughter, reflects. "My paintings became a form of grieving, a way to spend time with her. It put me on a quest."

"It really started in 2002 when my mom visited me and brought me, of all her worldly possessions, two sepia tinted photographs of herself as a young wife and mother. She was



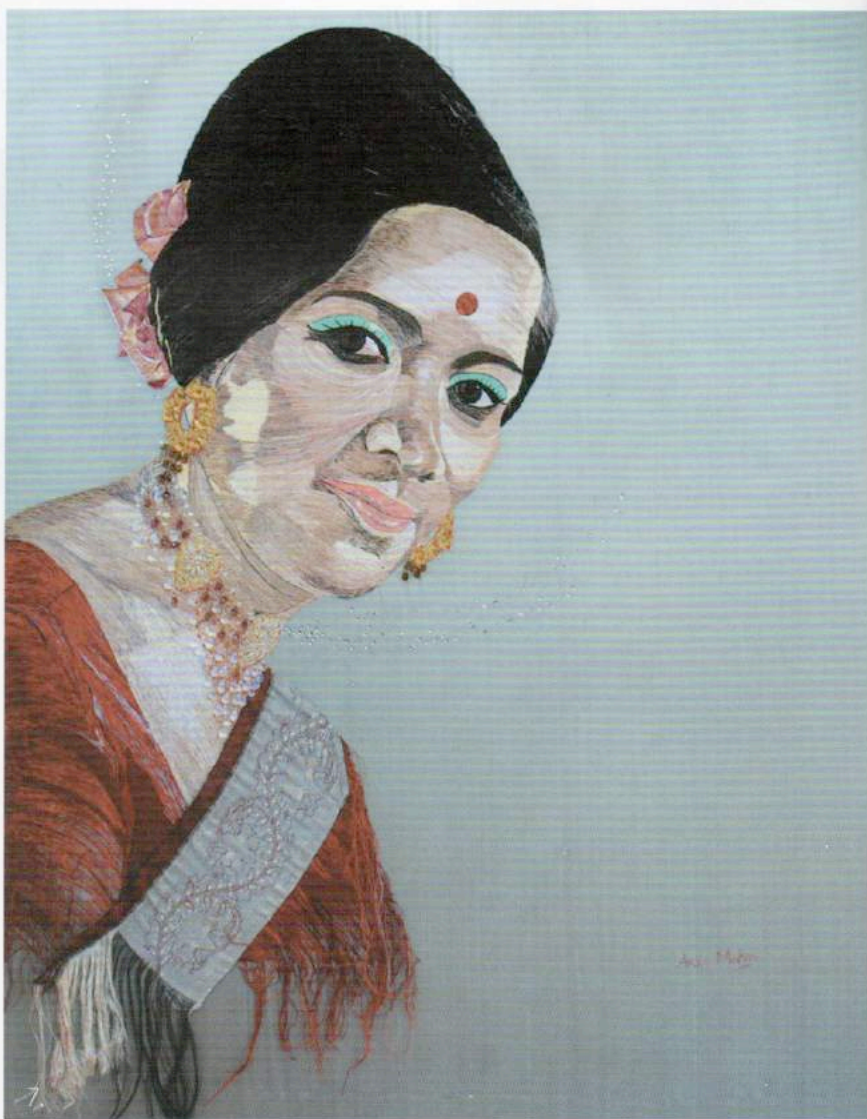


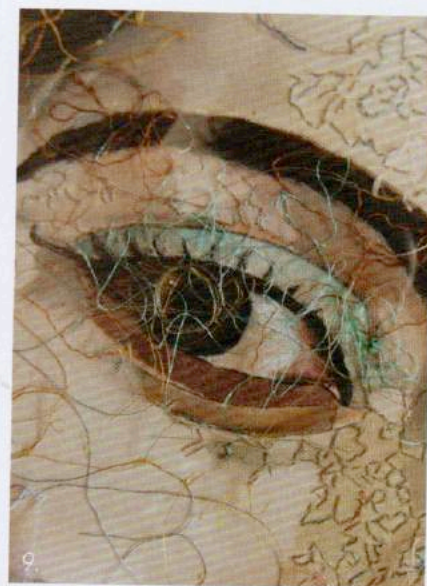
asking me to remember. Of course, she didn't realise she had Alzheimer's, but in retrospect I understand she knew that something was amiss, that she was not who she used to be. She needed me to remember her because she was forgetting her own self."

Evanesence, Makan's series of twelve portraits of her mother, won second place at last year's SASOL New Signatures National Art Competition. It was described by chairperson Franci Cronjé as a work that "speaks of loss of identity, and feeling of belonging and longing."

What makes the collection unique is not its subject matter, but rather its symbolic construction. The first few portraits, photorealist representations in oil of the two photos entrusted to Makan by her mother, aim at immortalising a woman as she is remembered by those close to her. The progression to silk-woven portraits deepens the work's thematic thrust.

"The medium of the work, the thread and the canvas, the silk, all allude to the impermanence of life," Makan explains. "I think that was the lesson





1. Details from *Loose Ends: A story about my mother*, (2009).
2. *My mother: 1970*, (2008).
3. *My mother- Bollywood: 1977*, (2008).
4. *Sleep*: Hand embroidered with silk and rayon thread on silk (2009).
5. *Suspended*: Hand embroidered with silk and rayon thread on silk (2010).
- 6+7. *Loose Ends: A story about my mother*, (front and reverse), hand embroidered with silk thread on silk with brocade, beads and crystals (2009).
8. *Self Portrait*: hand embroidered silk and cotton thread on Indian cotton (2010).
9. *My mother in doodles*: oil and hand embroidered on canvas with silk threads (2010).

I had to internalise in order to accept or confront the disease: that we all are here for a short period, we are all susceptible to death."

The sentiment is supported by an intertwining of religious texts that accompany the portraits. Makan drew on a range of Eastern religions to underpin *Evanescence*'s message of memory, metamorphosis, and acceptance, but also to help her cope on a personal level.

To say *Evanescence* was a labour of

love is an understatement. "Loose Ends" alone took eight months and required eight hours of excruciating attention daily. Due to the physically taxing nature of the unrelenting weaving, Makan developed tendonitis in her left shoulder. "My husband and I often joke that my arm is in that portrait," she smiles.

As Finuala Dowling puts it: "Time cannot hide what once stood here, / or its glory."