

Artist statement

My artistic research is fueled by finding alternative ways to exorcize marginalized narratives/counter histories that have been lost as a result of colonial/imperial legacies. Through a multidisciplinary lens that includes, installation, text, textile, audiovisual, and photo-based media, I understand art as a liminal space that brings marginalized histories to the forefront, allowing them to emerge and be seen. The act of searching, collecting, and parsing through these buried narratives becomes a guide to challenge modes of meaning-making.

My current research questions how the Portuguese colonization of Goa (1510 - 1961) and the Partition of India (1947)-among other factors-incited layers of erasure and exclusion. These subsequently led to the marginalization of various minorities from the larger histories of the Subcontinent. As a result, my exploration turned to how these dislocations impact our notions of home, belonging, and identity.

What does it mean to be left out of colonial archives? I looked back to my family archive and history, only to find that, after Partition, all that was left were a handful of family photographs and oral narratives that shifted each time they were retold. The gaps are large and endless, but it is this unknowable void that needs to be underscored. Through art, these chasms take on shapes of figurative ghosts and remind one of the undocumented violences that perpetrated during colonial rule. I aim not at absolution, but to create spaces of discomfort and haunting; a reiteration of history continuing to haunt the present.

I find intersections between institutional and vernacular archives. Questioning the process of archiving is a necessity. Who / what is archived? What are the tools used for archiving? How do institutions aim to create spaces that acknowledge various forms of historical violences and erasure of marginalized groups: what is the purpose and to what effect?

Piercing Time and Distance: Jovita Alvares Preserving the Incompleteness of the Past

Coastal cities mimic the rhythm of the ocean. The ebb and flow of people and material remain consistent as these ports of entry and exit become a rich hub of entangled cultures and languages. Thus, the emergence of new communities and thickly diverse networks within these lands resulting from coastal exchanges has been a common and communal occurrence since the first records of seafaring in the 3rd millennium. However, it is these same portals that the colonial enterprise used to establish control over territories, developing a deeper connection between the coastal colonies that enabled a flow of material and human labor extracted from each territory across to the other and the seat of empire. This further resulted in a flux of enslaved, forced, and indentured labor that was moved from one colony to another. Sometimes, if fortunate, members of communities escaping the oppressions or employed for missionary purposes managed to move independently across the ocean.

Karachi is a city that has been nurtured and developed by migrant minority communities arriving on the shores and from inland. It prides itself on the richness of its diverse cultures, architectures, cuisines, and tongues that comprise its vibrancy. However, it is exactly these notions that have been threatened by the ideologies of the independent nation state that strives for a homogenous identity. There remains a romanticized nostalgia in its wake, where stories are regaled of the vibrant and lively city life until the 70s when cross-cultural practices and multi-lingual connections were a norm. But there are rarely questions posed in this reminiscence about the shrinking of communities and now rare occurrences of such connections. It also raises the question, how deep does this celebration of diversity run? How much is known about the history and the present of the minority communities? Which histories are centered, and to what end, while others are suppressed and obscured, and lost within the gaps of the archive?

The Portuguese Goan or Christian Goans stem from a similar background, their arrival to the port of Karachi is recorded back to the early 19th Century for trade and economic aspects in addition to missionaries. Goa, the smallest state of India, was colonized by the Portuguese in 1510, 12 years after Vasco de Gama's first visit to the subcontinent to map this land. The Portuguese colonies around the Indian Ocean in East and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia were all controlled by the viceroy of Goa. This rule was not limited to the extraction and shipment of resources but also came with the Christian missions that have been the handmaiden of the colonial agenda, indoctrinating the local population of the region. It is in 1961, 450 years later and 14 years after the independence of India that Goa was reclaimed from the Portuguese hold and became part of the Indian state. To escape this rule and in search of economic stability the Goans moved North to Karachi and towards East Africa. Recognized as one of the earlier communities of Karachi pre-partition, their contributions to the urban and social infrastructure have been immense. Though, with the shaping of the nation state and constricting pathways for secularity, class hierarchies, and struggle to maintain their voice in dominant structures, minority communities such as the Goans, were led to the loss of the Konkani language by not carrying it over to the next generations. Many traditions that were previously celebrated publicly are now maintained more privately. Such constraints and self-censorship for safety and community preservation in the face of increasing religious intolerance has led to the dwindling numbers of the community as most members have opted to leave the country for reasons beyond economic stability.

The silences of her grandmother on this collective and private past have led Jovita Alvares on the quest to trace these trajectories through the family archive, given the lack of official records and archives on the movement of the Goan community across the subcontinent. The strict border regimes between India and Pakistan have led to a complete disconnect from a point of origin that anchors the community, and the animosity towards minority communities since the 90s makes the current generations feel uprooted. The fragmented movement of her family between Goa and Karachi over a stretched period, also resulted in a loss of paraphernalia and artefacts except for some family pictures and blurred anecdotes from her aunt. In interpreting and holding these images, Alvares tries to write herself into the archive, bridging the gaps by acknowledging their absence and embracing their presence. These gaps have also led to a sharpening of the gaze inwards and a consciousness of what accompanies in the everyday, the presence of consistent material traces and artefacts in the domestic sphere that almost become embodied and invisible, such as the lace doilies, the plastic flowers, and the altars. The practice of claiming that which has not been acknowledged, formalized, or officiated due to negligence, control, and entitlement of the mainstream narrative, is an act of resistance and refusal that Tina Campt deliberates upon as the mobilization of the quiet and quotidian - the act of creating possibility within the constraints of the everyday life.

Leaning into the photographic medium, Alvares inquiry moves through material experiments where the multiple layers and interactions with the camera and the multistep process lead to finding different thresholds and nuances of being. The engagement with the camera and the act of including her own body into the equation builds multiple readings of a past that has been activated and remains as a living archive, where each click of the camera adds a new layer to the existing one. Walter Benjamin has referred to it as the 'incompleteness of the past' countering linear and scientific historiography where the past continues to be determined and established with the present moment, hence its interpretation and readability continues to evolve. Alvares asks, why do multiples exist? Perhaps it is the reiteration that becomes a validation and manifestation or leads to an abstraction that reveals a new aspect and reading of what is and can be. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay proposes, 'to see the archive as a shared place, define it as a shared place that enables one to maintain the past incomplete,' when probing the notion of revolutionizing official archives.

Stretching the material possibilities further, Alvares translates these ideas through ephemeral experiments that continue to challenge ideas of visibility, that partially reveal yet remain ungraspable. Similar to the vestiges of thoughts and anecdotes that flow in conversations between Alvares and her aunt as well as in the fragmented archive that she carries. A sensitive rendering with loose strokes of white on white on the walls created as enlarged image negatives, allows the viewer's shadow to accompany or become part of the image. The lace patterns carved onto the wall share glimpses of the layers hidden underneath, reminiscent of a palimpsest that bears witness to all that has existed before. The cyanotypes, developed in sunlight, yet sensitive to the light, reveal some stark details while incorporating minute dust particles from the present moment that become ingrained in the print, under and over exposed parts of the image. The salt prints hold symbolic significance drawing upon material resonances from the ocean, and their porous nature shares a hazy and fluid image divided in layers that the eye tries to hold together before it melts away and dissolves into oblivion. But oblivion remains here and within.

pānī vic mīn piyasī

Imagine me	a house
without	hearth.
Nothing	to fill the roti,
nowhere	to roll out dough.
Imagine me,	that pink shell,
a house	my father
knocked down,	a façade road-facing,
wood rotten,	sold sold sold.
Imagine me	a town named
Crabwood Creek	with neither
crab wood	tree nor
creek.	

Imagine me	a thirsty fish—
what is inside	if not water?

- Rajiv Mohabir⁴

- Hajra Haider Karrar

¹ Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Duke University Press 2017), 4.

² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eilan and Kevin Maclaughlin (Harvard University Press, 1999).

³ Ariella Azoulay, "Archive: Ariella Azoulay," *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*, Issue 1, (2017). <https://www.politicalconcepts.org/archive-ariella-azoulay/>

⁴ Rajiv Mohabir, "pn vic mn piyas," *Small Axe*, SX Salon 2021. <https://smallaxe.net/sxsalon/poetry-prose/poems-rajiv-mohabir>.

Profile

Jovita Alvares' artistic research is fueled by finding alternative ways to exorcize marginalized narratives / counter histories that have been lost as a result of colonial / imperial legacies. Drawing on firsthand experiences, her research often begins by parsing through photographic archives as a guide to challenge modes of meaning-making through form and gesture.

Alvares received her MFA from the School of Art and Art History at the University of Illinois Chicago as a Fulbright Scholar in 2024. She graduated with a BFA and the title of Valedictorian from the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture in 2016. She has been the recipient of several residencies and awards, including the Imran Mir Art Prize for emerging artists. Additionally, as a researcher, Alvares finds intersections between her art-making and writing, and allows both facets to inform and complement each other.

Education

- 2022-24 Master of Fine Art, School of Art and Art History, University of Chicago at Illinois
2012-16 Bachelor of Fine Art, Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture IVSAA

Solo Exhibitions

- 2024 'who do I pray to?', School of Art and Art History, UIC, Chicago
2022 'Artificial Sensations', Chawkandi Art Gallery, Karachi
2018 'Wallflower', Imran Mir Gallery, Karachi

Group Exhibitions

- 2021 'Time Won't Tell', Project Gallery V, New York
2021 '1x1', Full Circle (Karachi), O Art Space (Lahore) and Dubai
2020 'THP Daak', Lahore (Pakistan) and Jaipur (India) by the Happiee Place
2019 'Microcosm III', AAN Gandhara, Karachi
2019 'Focal Point', Sharjah Art Foundation, by Vasl Artists' Association, Sharjah
2019 'Palat kay dehtay hain', Chawkandi Art, Karachi
2019 'Art Book Depot', Farside Collective by Vasl Artists' Association, India
2019 'The Long and Short of it', IVS Alumni Show, Karachi
2018 'Augmentation', by Sanat Initiative at the US Embassy, Karachi
2018 'Utopian States' by O Art Space, Lahore
2017 'Chiaroscuro' by My Art World, AnYaah Art Gallery, Dubai
2017 'Super Duper Perspective', Koel Gallery, Karachi
2017 'Dil to Pagal Hai', 4th Sanat Residency, Sanat Initiative, Karachi
2016 Thesis Exhibition, Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, Karachi

Residencies

- 2024 Solo residency, Institut fur Alles Mogliche, Berlin, Germany
2017 4th Sanat Residency, Sanat Initiative, Karachi, Pakistan

Awards

- 2024 Lobby Competition Winner, Gallery 400, UIC
2022 USEFP Fulbright Scholar, Masters in Fine Art, Cohort 2022-2024
2021 Recipient of the UNESCO Madanjeet Singh Institute for South Asian Arts Scholarship, Beaconhouse National University
2017 Recipient of Imran Mir Art Prize for Emerging Artists.
2016 Abu Shamim Areff Award for Best Research
2016 Shehr Asfandyar Khan Award for Academic Excellence
2016 Distinction in Thesis and Overall Distinction
2016 Valedictorian of the Graduating Class of Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture.

Work Experience

- 2025 - present Assistant Professor, Habib University
2024 Lecturer, Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture
2023 - 24 Student Instructor, – School of Art and Art History, University of Illinois at Chicago
2020 - 22 Instructor, Imperial Tutorial College for Fashion design
2019 - 21 Instructor, Roots Millennium College | The Cedar College | Southshore College
2017 - 20 Designer | Sub-editor, ArtNow Pakistan

Artwork featured in permanent collections

Wusaaq- An artisanal boutique hotel, Pakistan.
Ambiance Hotel- Boutique art hotel with a carefully curated permanent collection of artworks, Pakistan.

Documentation / Publications

- 2024 'Who Do I Pray To?', Recipient of the Lobby Competition, Gallery 400, UIC
https://www.instagram.com/gallery400/p/C2k97kqRukq/?img_index=1
- 2023 'Specters of Coloniality- A Conversation on Archival Encounters and Praxis', Mutual Interpretations, UIC
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CyT3MYmpVeW/>
- 2023 'Roots that Hover about the Soil', Feminism Lunch Lectures, Women's Leadership and Resource Center, UIC
<https://wlrc.uic.edu/events/roots-that-hover/>
- 2022 'Karachi Chronicles', Quddus Mirza, The News,
<https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/977957-karachi-chronicles>
- 2022 'Artificial Sensations', Chawkandi Gallery, Catalog,
<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/10gcmpmjeEIYDRun-Lzx-doUesWZnJhE7?usp=sharing>
- 2021 'Time Won't Tell', Project V Gallery, Press Release,
<https://project-gallery.com/time-wont-tell>
- 2019 'Microcosm III', Noor Butt, ArtNow Pakistan
<https://www.artnowpakistan.com/microcosm-iii/>
- 2019 Optics of a City, Published by Vasl Artists' Association: featuring artist
<http://vaslart.org/optics-of-a-city/>
- 2019 'Exploring the Lens of Time-based media', Koonj Syed, ArtNow Pakistan
<https://www.artnowpakistan.com/exploring-the-lens-of-time-based-media/#more>
- 2018 'The Winner of Imran Mir Art Prize Exhibits her Latest Work'
<https://www.imranmir.com/happenings/2018/2/8/the-winner-of-the-imran-mir-art-prize-exhibits-her-latest-work>
- 2018 'Rioting to Life' by Saira Danish, ArtNow Pakistan.
<https://artnowpakistan.com/rioting-to-life/>