

AUT GRAPH

Exhibition Audio Guide Transcripts: I Still Dream of Lost Vocabularies

1. Senior Curator Bindi Vora introduces the exhibition: I Still Dream of Lost Vocabularies

Hi, my name is Bindi Vora and I'm the senior curator here at Autograph. Welcome to our exhibition *I Still Dream of Lost Vocabularies* – which brings together the work of thirteen artists, all working with ideas of collage.

While the works featured here are all materially and conceptually different, the exhibition demonstrates the essential role collage plays in sharing diasporic histories and experiences through themes of political dissent and erasure. It touches on issues that are important to my own practice as both a curator and an artist working with collage, as well as my experiences as a second-generation East African Indian.

Here, collage serves as a tool to address significant questions like: how does the absence of images shape the stories we are told? What do I find when I search for myself within the archive? How do we grapple with the contested nature of truth, photographic records and missing histories?

As a medium, collage offers a visual language to describe a multiplicity of experiences and a variety of narratives that resist the flattening of complex subjects.

The exhibition opens with nine works by artist Henna Nadeem, who has been creating intricate hand-cut collages since the 1990s. For this exhibition we commissioned Nadeem to produce a new work titled *Night Circles* – recalling her earlier work *Circles* from 2004 which is also on display.

Taking inspiration from the textiles of Pakistan and South Asia, Nadeem also draws on the spiritual significance ascribed to shapes, patterns and proportions within the concept of sacred geometry. While her earlier work often focused on rural scenes, *Night Circles* provides the missing link between her early collages and her more recent work, where landscapes become increasingly indistinct and obscure – obliterated by the city's relentless march.

At first glance Nadeem's works appear idyllic – beautiful and harmonious. Yet beneath this surface they expose the politics of racialised landscapes. Through cutting, fusing and reordering fragments, the works reveal the lingering residues of colonialism and emphasise the need to reclaim these histories.

If you would like to find out more about the different artists and works on display in this exhibition you can explore the digital content available through Autograph's website.
I hope you enjoy your visit.

2. Artist Sabrina Tirvengadam discusses her work

After slavery was abolished in the British Empire, the British needed new workers for their sugar plantations. Between 1834 and 1920, around two million Indian men, women and children were taken to work on these sugar plantations – my great-grandmother included. They came under contracts called indentures, which meant they had to stay for a certain number of years before they could go back home. Most never returned to India, and many of their stories have been ignored, erased or forgotten.

Since 2020, I've been working with images from my family archive and have started to combine them with AI technologies to reconstruct elements of my family album that were missing. By bringing these different elements together I want to question the accuracy of memory, photography and AI. My work blends what is real, remembered and imagined. It's not only about looking at the past, it's about reimagining history and giving voice to stories that have been silenced or forgotten.

The absences and biases within AI technologies reflect Western datasets and reinforce eurocentric beauty standards, meaning AI clearly wasn't designed to represent people who look like me – a South Asian woman of indo-Mauritian heritage. Using this technology to create images that resemble both me and my ancestors has become a way to say: "We are here. We exist in the digital space too." It's true that the technology has evolved and developed quickly, but even now, AI often turns the people in my constructed images into a white-skinned person unless I define their ethnicity. The bias remains, and that's why I continue to work against it.

Four of the works on display here were produced earlier in 2025, as part of a residency I undertook at Light Work in New York, with Autograph's support. One of these works is titled *Pose for our Family*. While looking through my family archive I noticed a recurring scene - of mothers and daughters posing with dolls or soft toys. This scene chimed with my own experience of photographing family. I didn't understand it at first, but as I kept looking I started to understand the pattern.

When I began researching the history of indentured labour, I discovered that children as young as five were expected to work on plantations. The repetition of this pose started to feel like a trace of generational trauma and a symbol of stolen childhood. These photographs show how we have learned to present ourselves, shaped by our family histories.

3. Writer and poet Nina Mingya Powles reads *Blue Trees*, a poetic response to Sim Chi Yin's Work

Blue Trees – after *The suitcase is a little bit rotten* by Sim Chi Yin, 2022. In the photograph, the blue of the trees in the distance reminds me of the wings of seabirds. The blue is in motion, not static – the leaves inside the blue are moving, breathing. It's true that certain shapes and figures appear blue when you move further from them, a phenomenon I find myself constantly returning to. I try to describe it again and again, but when I reach out too far, there's nothing there to touch.

I wanted to tell you I saw the blue tree again the next day in the foreground of a painting in a gallery in the city. The thick, pale cloud of colour appeared to be floating. I moved closer to it, then a few paces back, watching the branches begin to open.

A blue portal opens up at the end of the track, at the edge of the forest, leading somewhere both familiar in memory and unknown. These ghosts of the archive witness over and over the dusk of another country. The white walls of memory, breathing. The familiar sound of distant birds.

4. Artist Arpita Akhanda discusses her work

I have been working with my family archive for over five years, but the works on display here represent the first time I have explored archives

from my maternal side. Portraits of my grandfather, Sadhan Kumar Banerjee, and grandmother, Priti Banerjee, appear throughout these works.

The series is titled *A Veil of Memories*, with the word veil used as a reference to multiple meanings and metaphors. My grandfather was from Faridpur in undivided Bengal, which became part of Bangladesh after the Partition of India. During the freedom struggle before Partition, he participated in many activities in his village against the British government. This eventually forced him to move to Kolkata to continue his studies, where he had to adopt a veil of sorts over his identity for protection.

For my grandmother, the veil became a symbolic tool of protection during Partition, a time of heightened violence against women. She was a young bride from the Indian side, married into a new family in divided Bengal. She was asked to veil her face and identity, not as an act of modesty, but as a shield.

Contrary to the photograph we see, both of them seated, looking directly at the camera, when I asked my grandmother about that image, taken shortly after their marriage, she spoke of memories of veiled identities.

My grandmother loved to crochet, and the patterns, or rather, the gaps and voids you see in these works, reference the designs she created. In my maternal home, her crochet covered nearly every object, functioning both as decoration and as a fragile form of protection. Paper weaving became a way for me to honour her labour.

Although I have no formal training in weaving or textiles, I have been working with weaving as a language for nearly a decade now. I see it as an opportunity to bring together different sources and materials. In my work, personal narratives and archives become the warp, while institutional documents, maps or colonial records form the weft. Bringing them together allows me to create a third narrative, with exposed and hidden elements troubling or questioning official histories, and making space for forgotten or hidden voices.

5. Bindi Vora introduces Gallery 2 and discusses the work of Kudzanai-Violet Hwami

The exhibition continues in this gallery and expands further on the idea of collage as both method and metaphor, bringing the mediums of painting, film and mixed-media assemblage to the forefront.

Through the collision of materials and mediums, these artists visually express hybrid identities that don't conform to any singular definition or place. By using a multiplicity of materials, their toolkit of disruption reimagines ways to both question imposed histories and articulate new possibilities of belonging.

In the centre of the room is a mixed-media painting by Kudzanai-Violet Hwami titled *Expiation*. In this layered painting, full of contrasts Hwami combines mark making with handwritten lettering and photographic collage, using paint to obscure, glitch and vanish, in order to re-imagine what might lie beyond the frame.