

Nalini



Captions and additional
words from Arpita Shah

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**Great-Grandmother
Nairobi Photo Studio**

"This is a portrait of my great-grandmother taken in a photography studio in Nairobi in 1939. Many affluent Indians would often have these Victorian style portraits taken to send back home to their relatives. I only discovered this image during research for this project and was initially planning on restoring it, but the more I looked at it, the more I loved it. Like the body, this photographic object has aged with time, full of scratches, scars and secrets from all the journeys it's made."



Krishna Milk Depot, Nairobi

“This is one of the first images that I found, it’s a crumbling photograph of the infamous Krishna Milk Depot that my family owned in Nairobi in the 1930s. In the centre of the image is 5-year-old Nalini, my grandmother.

Finding this photograph was very significant for me - my grandmother would talk endlessly about the turquoise hues of the Mombasa sea and the wild bougainvillea that surrounded the Krishna dairy farm. So being able to physically see it was wonderful and incredibly emotional. I think if I hadn’t started this project, this image would have decayed in the attic where I found it.”



Canal Road

“This is a portrait of my great-grandmother. This passport documents her journey across India and Kenya, a journey that many Gujarati Indians had made when Kenya and India were colonised by the British. When I travelled to Kenya in 2017 for the first time as part of this project, I took this passport with me and created this still life in Nairobi. I wanted this image to include my journey to my family’s past, so as homage to my great-grandmother and my grandmother Nalini, I picked fresh bougainvillea from Canal Road, where their home used to be. I wanted this image to travel across time and space, through generations so there is a piece of her and a piece of me in it. Canal Road was difficult to track down when I visited Nairobi in 2017, because all the road names had changed from when my family lived there to after Kenya gained its independence from the British in 1963.”



Bougainvillea Mahara

"This is a portrait of my mother in Ahmedabad, India. She's entering wild bougainvillea that leads to where her childhood home once was. She's wearing a sari that matches the dusty pink petals, because we wanted the image to look like she was sinking into the photograph and returning to the past.

Bougainvillea is very significant in *Nalini*, because my grandmother always told me that the first thing she noticed when she moved back to India from Kenya, was that the bougainvillea reminded her of Nairobi. Bougainvillea is originally from Brazil but was propagated and planted by the British in countries they colonised such as Kenya and India. So, like us, they have migrated across lands and are just as displaced, but they still remind us of home."



Mombasa

"This was taken near the old port in Mombasa, when I visited Kenya for the first time in 2017 as part of this project. I'd grown up with hearing stories of my family's time there, my grandmother would talk endlessly about the turquoise hues of Mombasa's sea, so I wanted to capture it in this image to show her it still looked the same.

Water is a reoccurring theme in my work; in Hindu mythology it's often a symbol for life and eternity, universally it's often associated with fertility, nourishment and transformation. The sea is also a powerful and complex symbol for migration and voyages old and new, so I wanted to touch on all these themes in this image."



White Sands

"This is a passport photograph of my mother when she was 16, taken in India. In the image she's wearing floral fabric from Kenya, that her grandmother had given her, so the image is already layered with that history. I wanted to add to the image by planting the passport photograph into white sand that I collected from my journey in Kenya, so all four generations could co-exist together in one image.

The white sand almost looks like ashes, but as you get closer you can see it's coarse grains of sand from Mombasa beach. As an artist I'm interested in how a single photograph can bring various narratives together across time and space. I often work with old archival photographs, using them as a vehicle to return to the past, but intervening with them so I can add new narratives to them."



Silver Strands



Untitled



Choti

"Growing up as an Indian woman, one of the most familiar memories is watching all my female relatives combing and braiding their hair, usually in the morning and then before bed. My mother still does this, and my grandmother used to till her hair was cut off when she was really unwell, this is a photograph of her braid decorated with wild roses from Nairobi. The language of hair is very complex and varied in India. Historically it's a powerful metaphor used in Hindu mythology and even today there are certain hair ceremonies that happen at particular life events, such as birth and death. For me as Indian woman, the ritual of braiding my hair is a really important part of my identity, as it makes me feel closer my female relatives and my ancestors, it's a ritual we all share."



Pankho

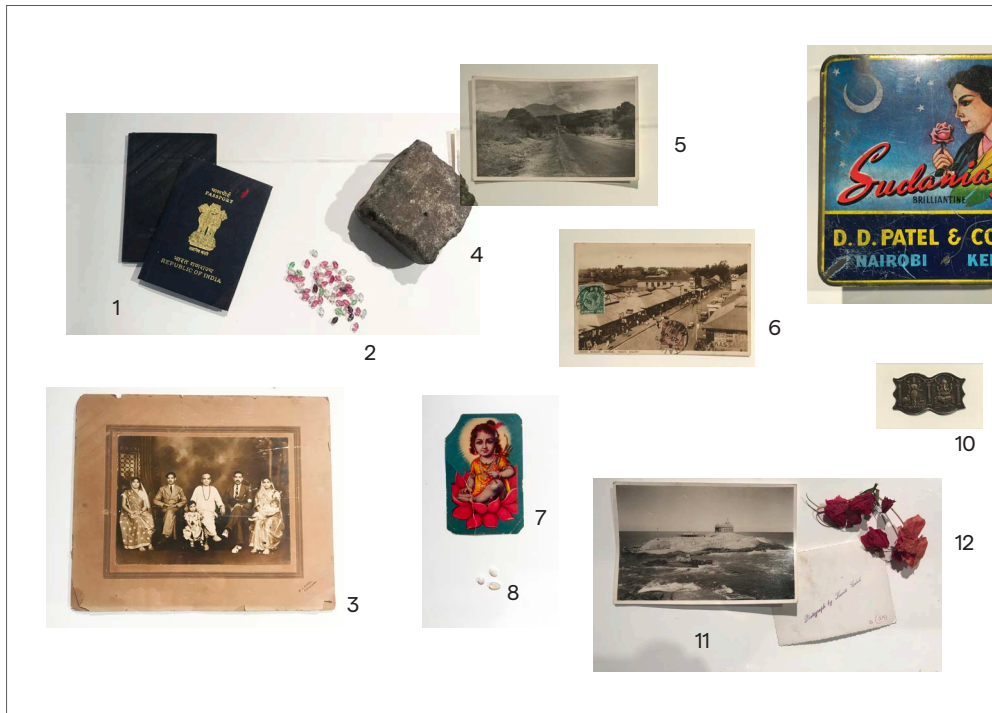


Nalini in bloom

"This is a hand-tinted portrait of my grandmother, which I've re-photographed with dried lotus flowers – almost like a shrine-like still life. The original photograph was taken in a studio in Mehmdabad, Gujarat in the 1950s. Nalini is the Sanskrit word for lotus flower and in Hindu mythology it often symbolises the womb, femininity, the cycle of life and rebirth. In India and in various cultures, flowers are often used as garlands in various life events.

The lotus is a reoccurring theme in many of my projects and I often use it as a metaphor to evoke the experience of female displacement and the female life cycle. I wanted this portrait to be imbued with all these elements and to also reflect how sacred she is to me. Jāmbalī (purple) is also my grandmother's favourite colour, so there are different shades of it throughout the series."

Display case contents



1. Great-grandmother's and grandmother Nalini's passports

2. Gem beads collected by great-grandmother

3. Pandya family portrait, Nalini (centre) aged 4, 1938

4. Brick from remains of Krishna Dairy Farm building, Nairobi, Kenya, collected 2017

5. Photograph from family road trip outside Nairobi, late 1930s

6. Postcard from Kenya, 1931

7. Baby Krishna from family archive

8. Opals from East Africa

9. Tin, Nairobi, Kenya, c.1931

10. Religious coin featuring Lord Venkateswara belonging to great-grandmother

11. Photograph of island taken from ship

12. Flowers from Nairobi, Kenya

13. Sweet tin bought by great-grandmother

14. Nalini and daughter, Reshma, 1938

15. Reshma, Ahmedabad, 1941



1935

ing Lakshmi and Ganesha,
eat grandma

temple, South India

collected 2017

reat-grandfather in 1930s

reshma, Mehmdabad, 1959

1973

16. Nalini with sisters-in-law, Mehmdabad, 1962

17. Letter from Nalini to her mother, 1981

18. Reshma, Ahmedabad, 1973

19. Arpita, photographed by father amongst Indian
roses, Saudi Arabia, 1989

20. Nalini, Ahmedabad, 2018

21. Reshma, Mehmdabad, 2018

22. Reshma, photographed by her husband amongst
flowers, Ahmedabad, 1985



Pink Kabūtar



Mehmdabad



Untitled



Parimal Gardens



Reshma

"The lotus is a sacred flower in Hinduism, it's been carved in Hindu temples for centuries, used in religious events, Hindu goddesses are often depicted seated on one and it's a national symbol that is embedded in everyday life and culture in India. The lotus represents femininity, fertility and rebirth, I often reference it in my work and use its symbolism to evoke the female experiences of uprooted-ness, longing and displacement.

The lotus bud looks so distant from its origin of mud and water, floating above it as if detached but there is this strong umbilical-cord-like stem that anchors it down to its roots. From early ancient Indian texts, such as Rg-Veda, the lotus has always been associated with the womb.

There are numerous Indian paintings and scriptures of Lord Vishnu depicted sleeping in the ocean, with a lotus flower sprouting out of his navel – in Hinduism this story represents the birth of Brahma, the creator of the universe. I had this image in my mind when creating this triptych which features my mother (on the right), grandmother (on the left) and sprouting lotus in the centre image".



Untitled



Untitled



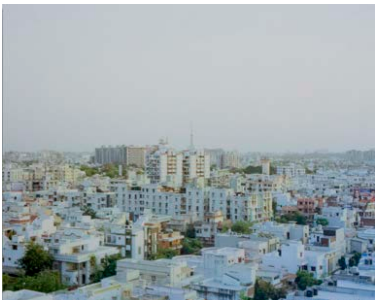
Moti's Tiffins



Bombay



Untitled



Ahmedabad



Nelumbo at Dusk

"This is a *Nelumbo Nucifera*, a species of lotus that originated in India, it's often referred to as an Indian Lotus or Sacred Lotus. I was really drawn to the delicate changes of the petals throughout the day, reminding me of the way skin slowly becomes more fragile and translucent as we age"



Mother's Mother



Nalini's Hand



“This lithograph of baby Krishna was bought by my grandmother in the 1970s. It’s travelled with my family ever since, being hung in kitchens around the world including my parents house in Saudi Arabia in the late 80s, and more recently at my flat in Edinburgh.”



"This suitcase was used by my great-grandmother in her travels from India to East Africa in the 1930s, and when she returned back to India in 1942."

*Wrapped in the folds of your sari
Nanhi Pari calls out to me
Her two tongues thirsty for Krishna's milk and ghee
Slowly she emerges like Padma
Your soft pallu blooms to the Surya
The scent of jasmine lingers
Beneath your Sari
I stretch inside of you and you stir inside of me*



"This is my great-grandmother's silk sari from Nairobi, which was passed down to my grandmother, to my mother and now to me. Fabrics, and specifically saris are something that I often photograph in my work as a way to explore my cultural identity and heritage.

As an Indian woman, there is something incredibly powerful in being able to perform the same rituals of wrapping a sari around your body in the same way your female ancestors did. Knowing my great-grandmother's sari was once wrapped against her body, then my grandmother's and mother's, and now by me, is really powerful so it was really important to include it in the series and exhibition."

Arpita Shah Nalini

Impressions Gallery
17 January to 28 March 2020

Spanning India, East Africa and the UK, *Nalini* is a personal journey exploring the connected histories of Arpita Shah's mother, her grandmother and herself.

Through forgotten family photographs and heirloom objects alongside contemporary portraits and still lives, Shah reconnects with the past and explores how migration, distance and loss has shaped her heritage.

This guide features extended information from Arpita Shah about some of the photographs and objects in the exhibition.

Nalini is a Street Level Photoworks touring exhibition supported by Creative Scotland and Hope Scott Trust.

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