

# KUNSTMUSEUM THUN



## REENA SAINI KALLAT. DEEP RIVERS RUN QUIET 10.6. – 3.9.2023

### ENGLISH

#### INTRODUCTION

The Kunstmuseum Thun is presenting the first solo exhibition in Switzerland devoted to the work of Indian artist Reena Saini Kallat (b. 1973 in Delhi). Kallat is regarded as one of today's most important Indian artists. Among the themes she deals with intensively in her work are the manifold effects of national and geographical boundaries as well as geopolitical border conflicts and their consequences for both people and the environment across the generations. She focuses her attention for example on cross-border disputes over water and the impact of what is known as hydrohegemony, man-made water scarcity, in frontier areas as well as entire cultural landscapes. The artist moreover arrestingly demonstrates the repercussions of colonial history on the fates of people living in border regions, evident for example in the "scars" that still persist to this day in Pakistan and India. Kallat's work focuses on the plight of

people under the impact of political and economic pressures. She places special emphasis on river landscapes, as lifelines that at once divide and connect, playing a key role in today's fragile ecological and social balance.

In her practice, Kallat delves into not only contested territorial boundaries but also social and psychological barriers. Her father's family had to leave Lahore in the wake of the partition of India into India and Pakistan, with the resulting forced relocations between the two states. Using materials such as electrical cables, the artist renders the violence of this division palpable. But the wires simultaneously form a kind of connective tissue between people in her work, because not only energy but also ideas and information flow through them, so that they foster relationships.

### DEEP RIVERS RUN QUIET, 2020 - 2022 (GALLERY 1)

The meditative images of water surfaces in *Deep Rivers Run Quiet* originated in the contemplative act of drawing. In a process that can be described as a form of (digital) drawing-as-thinking, Kallat repeatedly traced the lines of contentious international borders. The staggered lines thus created, reminiscent of waves in a body of water, became the springboard for these drawings of water surfaces. In the process, the rigid territorial boundaries and the conflicts they embody are symbolically transformed, dissolving into tranquil portraits of a body of water that is nonetheless moved by deep currents harbouring profound meaning. The waterscape and the original line drawings appear to be interwoven in this work, interrupting and enriching one another.

### RIVER DRAWINGS, 2021, VORTEX, 2022, THE WATER BOOK, 2022 (GALLERY 2)

The *River Drawings* highlight the absurdity of national efforts to discipline landscapes and to lay claim to ever-changing bodies of water by reshaping them. Many rivers form political boundaries, whether the Imjin River between North and South Korea, the Danube between Serbia and Croatia, the Colorado and Rio Grande between the USA and Mexico, the Indus between India and Pakistan, or the Shatt-al-Arab between Iran and Iraq. In the artist's hands these dividing lines are rearranged and playfully reconstituted to form a new topography in which a river is the defining element for the landscape.

Boundary lines that separate nations in conflict and which run right across rivers are the elements that make up the work *Vortex*. The wall installation consists of electrical wires, a material symbolic of human contact and the transmission of energy and ideas. The artist started by tracing the borders between countries that are battling over the shared use of their rivers. Kallat arranged the lines in such a way that they form a fingerprint, a symbol that acts as a reminder that the landscape is continually undergoing change due to human activity.

The fold-out pages of *The Water Book* show traced lines that map borders between countries that are fighting over shared bodies of water. These include rivers such as the Nile, the Teesta, the Rhine, the Tagus, and the Arpaçay. Kallat has intuitively extended these lines representing man-made river courses to create a pattern that is at once organic and artificial. The delicately fluctuating horizontal lines also suggest the fragility of human life, recalling a pulse line as measured by a medical monitoring device.

### LEAKING LINES (RIVER DRAWINGS), 2019 - 20 (GALLERY 3)

Rivers are a recurring motif in Kallat's work. For a long time they were used and manipulated by humans for irrigation, navigation and energy production. But rivers are often also sites of conflict, vital natural resources that meander between nation-states. While the delicate colour scheme of *Leaking Lines (River Drawings)* mimics idyllic postcard scenes, the depiction of barbed wire hints at the political tensions that rivers can summon worldwide.

## OVERVIEW



#### SIAMESE TREES, 2018–19 (GALLERY 4)

In her works, Kallat seeks answers to perennial human conflicts by exploring the natural world, often blending disciplines such as botany and zoology in a visual and artistic way in order to examine underlying political issues. In *Siamese Trees*, electrical cables were woven to create upside-down trees that are joined together to take on the shape of human lungs. Symbols of specific states sharing a disputed border, the trees unite here to claim their natural habitat.

Electrical wire appears often in Kallat's work as a metaphor for contact and a channel for energy and thoughts. The artist shapes it into barbed wire to point to instances of resistance, barriers, and boundaries. Kallat is fascinated by how trees develop underground communication channels and share a common fungal network through which they mutually support each other.

#### RIVER BOUNDARIES BREAK THE SOUND OF SILENCE BETWEEN THEM, 2023, CHORUS I, 2015-2019 (GALLERY 5)

Similar to *Vortex*, Kallat's *River Boundaries Break the Sound of Silence Between Them* traces the boundaries between countries fighting over the use of shared rivers. Electrical wires are wrapped around nails here to create barriers, referencing border fences and the violence associated with them. Rivers do not recognize political borders, whether it is the Rhine, the Nile, the Arpaçay, or the Imjin River flowing between North and South Korea, the Danube between Serbia and Croatia, the Rio Grande between the USA and Mexico, the Shatt-Al-Arab between Iran and Iraq, or the Indus between India and Pakistan. The artist has rearranged artificial political borderlines such as those formed by the above rivers, dividing them into groups. The resulting variations in the lines generate a more familiar and liberating topography, where rigid territorial boundaries seamlessly transition into a free-flowing river.

*Chorus I* is modelled on devices used to detect the sounds of enemy aircraft during the Second World War. These devices, called acoustic mirrors, took various shapes. The armies on both sides used them as early warning systems. Here Kallat has replaced the sounds made by the war planes with birdsong. The national birds of countries with common borders and a troubled history sing together harmoniously. Although appropriated as national symbols, the birds are of course oblivious to human hostilities and inhabit territories that are free of borders. The chorus of free-floating birdsong alludes to how nature resists artificially imposed, man-made divisions.

#### HYPHENATED LIVES, 2014 – 22 (GALLERY 6)

*Hyphenated Lives* poses poetic and provocative questions regarding unity and alienation, interplay and conflict. The series of drawings and objects shows hybrid species of birds and other animals as well as trees and plants that are appropriated by countries as their national symbols. Nations that are otherwise in conflict are united here by the hyphen joining their animal emblems to create a hybrid creature. In this way, Kallat shows how we try to divide up a planet where the existence of one species in fact depends on the others, or the disappearance of one species adversely affects the rest.

"I often think of these conjoined forms as an allusion to nature's defiance of artificially imposed, man-made divisions on the ground; a poetic provocation from the past or a proposition for an imagined future where indeed they may reunite", Kallat says.

#### RULED PAPER (RED, BLUE, WHITE), 2015 – 2022 (GALLERY 7)

*Ruled Paper (Red, Blue, White)* consists of individual sheets of paper and a book. The pages are lined like those found in exercise books. Only here, the lines consist of electrical wires, the conduits used by global communication technologies. In some places, the wires become barbed wire barriers – a motif Kallat uses to evoke associations with borders, menace and mistrust.

The straight lines that organise the students' handwriting convey an impression of conformity and submission to authority. But when the lines become distorted, they resemble waves breaking a calm surface, calling to mind a variety of images ranging from electrocardiograms to meteorological or seismological graphs. The colours red, blue and white recall the flag of the British colonial government as well as those of other global powers, conjuring up a long history of colonialist nationalist claims.

#### PATTERN RECOGNITION, 2022 (GALLERY 8)

In this 29-part photographic work, the letters of the alphabet used in the Snellen Eye Chart have been replaced by the silhouettes of countries, arranged on a hierarchical scale. The more powerful nations – whose citizens are able to enter most other countries without a visa – are larger, followed in descending size by the less influential countries. At the top of the pyramid is Japan, where a passport granted its citizens visa-free access to 193 countries in 2022, while at the bottom are countries such as Afghanistan, whose passport allowed entry into only 26 countries. We encounter national borders here not as physical fences or barriers but as constraints created by policies and privileges.

#### WOVEN CHRONICLE, 2023, UNTITLED (ENEMY PROPERTIES), 2019 (GALLERY 9)

*Woven Chronicle* is a group of works that Kallat has been realising since 2011 with diverse content. The wall installation that she conceived expressly for the exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Thun illustrates the impact of humans on the environment using a colour code showing the carbon footprint of each country. The ecological footprint is determined here by how much land and water area a population requires to produce the resources it consumes, and by how quickly the waste generated in the process can be broken down to produce new resources. When a population's ecological footprint exceeds its biocapacity, there is a biocapacity deficit in that region. The region has an "ecological deficit" when the demand for the goods and services that the land and seas can produce is greater than what the region's ecosystems can regenerate. If, however, the carbon footprint of a region is smaller than its biocapacity, that means that the people there consume less than their biosphere regenerates and absorbs. Then we speak of an "ecological credit". With this way of visualising ecological debtors and creditors, the Global Footprint Network intends to initiate a dialogue on the increasing importance of biocapacity. In the installation, the map distinguishes between the high standard of living in the Global North and the lower standard in the South, but this particular scale reverses the usual roles: The South does relatively well here, while the footprint of the Global North is significantly larger than its biocapacity.

In the four-channel video work *Enemy Properties*, we encounter buildings dating from India's pre-independence days that were once classified as "enemy properties" and were annexed by the government during the 1965 war between

India and Pakistan. These structures were classified as such because of their association with people who chose Pakistan over India during partition. In the video, the dotted outlines of the buildings, created from salt, slowly appear like star charts, generating faint, fleeting impressions that belie the heavy weight of the past. The images gradually fragment and dissolve, symbolizing both the physical decay of the buildings themselves and the fading memories of partition that still shape life in India and Pakistan today. The architecture of these inanimate buildings dubbed “enemy properties” is thus personified to form a projection of historical hostilities.

VERSO-RECTO-RECTO-VERSO, 2017 – 2019 (GALLERY 10)  
These ten silk scrolls were tie-dyed to display the preambles to the constitutions of nations that are politically partitioned or in conflict. Rendered in English as fragmented white dot patterns, the texts were dyed into the cloth by workers in the city of Bhuj in the Indian state of Gujarat. Kallat has replaced words that appear in the preambles of both nations in a pair with Braille characters, represented as yellow dots, making the texts illegible for both sighted and blind people. Through the metaphor of blindness, the inscrutable texts suggest a collective forgetting that leads to a failure to understand and defend the common values on which the nations were originally founded. The constitutions were taken from India and Pakistan, the USA and Cuba, Sudan and South Sudan, Bangladesh and India, and North and South Korea.

Kunstmuseum Thun  
Thunerhof, Hofstettenstrasse 14, 3602 Thun  
T +41 (0)33 225 84 20  
www.kunstmuseumthun.ch

With the kind support of:



#### LEAKING LINES, 2019 (Gallery 11)

*Leaking Lines* refers both to aspects of violence and to the fragility of national borders. In ten diptychs, the artist intentionally conflates the line – an elementary artistic device – with the language of epic territorial demarcations. The work juxtaposes the courses of boundary lines from around the world with images of the landscapes that they separate and divide. The lines appear like charred fissures in the earth, revealing a frayed web of connections that once held the terrain together. Inserted texts refer to the highly contested nature of these boundaries. Many of them are national borders that, decades after their creation, still remain the focal point of violent conflicts and bilateral disputes. Others, like the Maginot Line, were wartime fortifications that once offered a false sense of security before being overrun by invading armies. Some of the names remind us of their trivial origins: The “green line” that forms the blood-drenched boundary between Israel and Palestine got its name from being drawn with green pen on an old map. The borders that crisscross the Indian subcontinent are named after British officers who were charged with dividing this densely populated terrain into independent territories, insensible to the violence that this process would unleash, the effects of which are still keenly felt today.

#### BIOGRAPHY

Reena Saini Kallat is a distinguished Indian artist known for her diverse artistic practice. She was born in Delhi, India, in 1973 and earned a bachelor's degree in painting from the Sir J.J. School of Art in Mumbai. She currently lives and works in Mumbai.

Kallat has participated in exhibitions and is represented in the collections of renowned institutions worldwide. Her works are featured at prominent international art fairs and biennials. She has received numerous awards and grants and is considered one of India's leading contemporary artists. Kallat creates with her art haunting links between the personal and the political, inviting the viewer to reflect on issues of identity and belonging and the impact of borders and conflict.

To accompany the exhibition, a richly illustrated catalogue is being published by Hatje Cantz featuring texts by Diana Campbell and Helen Hirsch, designed by Sibylle Ryser, Basel.

#### IMPRINT

Director: Helen Hirsch  
Exhibition concept: Helen Hirsch, Reena Saini Kallat  
Exhibition management: Claudia Blank  
Text: Claudia Blank  
Proofreading: Claudia Blank, Cornelius Krell, Miriam Margani  
Administration: Michael Röthlisberger  
Financial management: Tanja Hählen  
Communications: Elsa Horstkötter, Alisa Klay, Miriam Margani  
Art education: Regula Brassel, Elisa Daubner, Meret Landolt, Gabriele Moshhammer, Adrien Rihs, Eva Schuler  
Exhibition installation: Lisa Blatter, Raffaella Chiara, Marius Lüscher, Dan Reusser, Mirjam Sieber, Simon Stalder, Henry Thomet  
Visitor services: Lisanne Alder, Amer Aiyub, Senta Eggens, Simone Füredi, Stefan Giger, Luc van Lieshout, Lara Perren, Andrea Sohm, Raphael Walker, Sibylle Wymann, Roman Zaugg  
Graphic Design: Bonsma & Reist