

Harnessing the Mind: A Review of Nirmal Raja at The Alice Wilds

DECEMBER 18, 2019 AT 9:00 AM BY RAFAEL FRANCISCO SALAS

Nirmal Raja believes borders, like our bodies and skin, are porous membranes, breathing, never fixed. Her exhibition, “Wrapping Air in Cloth and other Seemingly Impossible Acts,” creates a space of empathy to provoke an understanding of how we could see the world, beyond the futility of fake boundaries.

White, welcoming fabric inspired by traditional Indian door decorations hangs above viewers as they pass into the gallery. On these gauzy lintels, Raja has embroidered colored “fault lines” describing the borders of the United States and Mexico, India and Pakistan, and other contested lands. One must consider who, and who might not, be welcome beyond this threshold.



“Fault Lines,” 2019. 5 fabric panels suspended in a row from ceiling overhead, inspired by the door hangings from Gujarat, India. Embroidery on silk organza, 21” X 48” each. /Photo: Robb Quinn.

The exhibition is expansive in its use of materials and formal experimentation. Paper, plaster, fabric and film are all used to express a longing for understanding, a desire to reach beyond isolationism and nativist sentiment. Translucent bags of fabric appear filled but are actually empty vessels, as ephemeral as tumbleweeds. They echo bundles that immigrants might pack with belongings, held aloft as they cross a river or climb a fence. Their emptiness evokes a loss or a death, but they also bear a lightness, a buoyancy. These objects, air wrapped in cloth, evoke the body, the breath, with a human presence.

This presence is inverted in still life objects displayed on irregular tables. Jars and vessels have been cast in white plaster. Rather than air, Raja has pressed colorful fabric into the wet plaster, filling them with visual and metaphorical weight. These domestic objects were collected by Raja from her grandmother, and they describe a collective consciousness of eating, washing and human interaction. They are poignant relics of ourselves, the things we carry with us on our journeys.

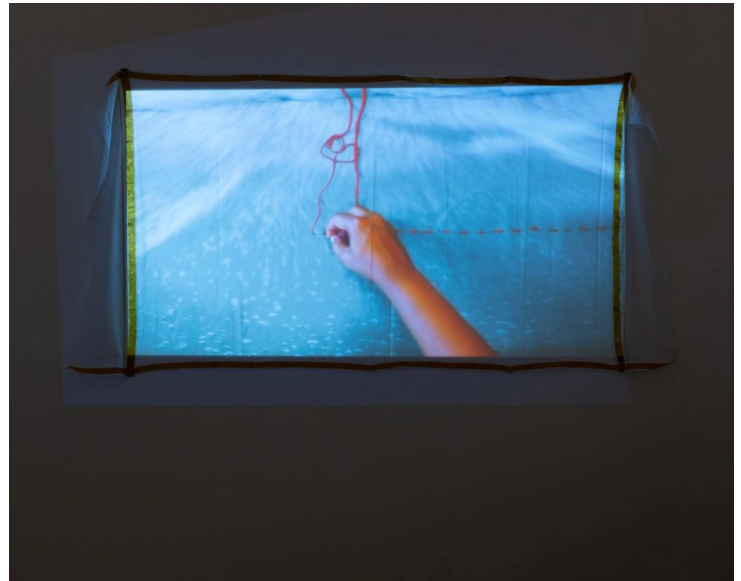
“Blurred Boundaries” is a monumental paper sculpture hung from the ceiling. Hand cut hanji paper and screen printed maps are cut apart and reassembled into a cloudy mass that mimics weather events or smoke. The artwork slowly shifts with air currents that pass through the gallery. As its title suggests, the use of deconstructed maps and the spiraled interweaving of them in this dynamic sculpture shows the indescribably complex connectedness of the world. The sculpture might be equally powerful without the use of didactic maps and emphatic title. The forms do this work on their own.

The exhibition concludes with the film “Thread in Open Waters.” Clips of various bodies of water are projected onto a suspended cloth, which moves slowly in the air. Raja superimposes her hands sewing a trail of red stitches

seemingly onto the surface of the water itself. She weaves a journey across the water, her hands pulling the thread from right to left across the screen. At the end of the film, Raja pulls the thread through and we see the red stitches disappear one by one. The water is revealed, undivided and whole.

Raja's artwork is a remarkable palliative to our current global condition. I left the gallery feeling lighter, and open. I hope you get to experience it too.
(Rafael Francisco Salas)

"Wrapping Air in Cloth and Other Seemingly Impossible Acts" is on view at Milwaukee's The Alice Wilds, 900 South 5th, Suite 102, through December 21.



"Thread in Open Waters" (5:00 minutes), 2018. Video performance projected on fabric, 35" x 64." Image courtesy The Alice Wilds.