



‘SAMSKARA’- संस्कार

DHEEPANA GOPI DEVI NIRHOO

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Photographed by Niamh Walsh-Vorster

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‘Beyond the Surface – exhibition’. UNISA Arts and

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Devi Nirhoo and her artwork. curated by Rohini Amratlal.

Photographed by Niamh Walsh-Vorster.

SAMSKARA – THE CONCEPT

In Life, some of the most extraordinary moments are woven into the everyday acts we often overlook. It was in the personal interest toward the ignorance of such moments, that I found myself interested in. Being a Hindu, I was curious to see what our religious scriptures had to say about these particular moments, and this was where I found the ancient Sanskrit concept, ‘*Samskara*’ संस्कार (saṃskāra), an ancient Sanskrit term that describes the way experiences leave lasting imprints on our lives and shape who we become. As I began to explore the theme of ‘*Samskara*’, the ancient Sanskrit concept of deeply ingrained impressions and memories, I found myself drawn to the idea of how ordinary actions can leave profound marks on our lives.

My mother has always been the quiet constant in my life — her hands working tirelessly, her voice steady, and her presence unwavering. But it was only when I stepped back to observe her from an artist’s perspective that I truly saw her. I began to wonder: could I capture the essence of my mother’s daily, selfless acts in a way that reflects their profound effect on me? As Homi K. Bhabha (1994:185) describes that the individuation of the artwork usually occurs in a moment of displacement, my aim was not only to honour her but to create pieces that invite viewers to see beauty in their own unnoticed moments and relationships.

For me, ‘*Samskara*’ was not only an abstract concept; was a lens that illuminates my relationship with my mother. Growing up, I witnessed her in countless small moments — moments that, at the time, seemed like every day acts but have since become defining memories. Her quiet dedication, her unwavering presence, and her seemingly invisible efforts are imprinted on me, shaping how I view the world and what I value.

[The concept ‘Samskara’ can be described in many different ways but all derive from the same source of ‘thoughtfulness’](#)

I wanted to explore this concept from an artistic perspective, but with the interest in keeping the art as close to the heritage of my culture as possible, to create authenticity without the interference of modernisation or Western influence, or rather, with the influence of Western artistic influence, to actively reject the concept by reclamation of culture instead. As Ingrid Stevens (2008:43) points out that the most obvious example of cultural domination is colonialism, I wanted to ensure my concept stays as close to my heritage as possible.

Just as Sabine Marschall (2010:78) indicates that heritage to be a malleable and ambiguous concept, which both encompasses tangible reminders of the past and the intangible aspects of the current culture. I wanted to explore both the moments I spend with my mother, as well, as consider the influences over the situation, emotional, physical, I observed.

The ancient Sanskrit concept of ‘*Samskara*’ invites us to look deeply, to perceive with great care and presence. It’s a lens through which every moment, gesture, and feeling becomes etched into our being — a way of honouring life’s intricacies. In my work, I chose to embody ‘*Samskara*’ by focusing on someone who has left an indelible mark on my life: my mother. She has been a constant source of strength, wisdom, and love, qualities I have come to appreciate even more with each passing year. Through three distinct but interconnected pieces, I have sought to capture and honour her tireless dedication and the quiet, often-overlooked actions that reveal her character and depth.



Figure 1. (Fig.1. - Right) ‘Rebirth’. By Manu Manjesh Laal. (2016). Made from Fibreglass, Automotive paint and vinyl.

Choosing this approach was no easy task, as I would then need to find relative artists who still consider their culture even in a modern artistic demand. I found inspiration in Manu Manjesh Laal’s sculpture (*Fig. 1.*) ‘Rebirth’, which features an oval-shaped object predominantly in purple with intricate green and pink designs on the top that evoke traditional Indian artistry. The detailed patterns (*Fig. 1.*), draw from Indian heritage, paying homage to traditional art forms. The vibrant colours (*Fig. 1.*), symbolise life, resilience, and cultural pride.



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I chose to refer deeper into the Sanskrit concept, especially from an ancient Indian perspective, as Sanskrit itself, is an ancient Indian language, and found myself drawn to ancient Indian carvings (*Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 respectively*), which depict artistic stories from a narrative form, ranging from Gods to Demigods, to even the simplest peasant, or creature, all having their own story to tell, carved in intricate and skilled details, in order to communicate a story.

Figure 2. (*Fig. 2 – Left image*) "'Descent of the Ganges" or "Arjuna's Penance"' Carvings on various stone material. Indian ancient stone sculptures of Mahabalipuram.

Figure 3. (*Fig. 3. – Right image*) 'Sculpture of a woman removing a thorn from her foot, northwest side exterior wall', Carving on sandstone. Lakshmana temple, Khajuraho, Chhatarpur District, Madhya Pradesh, India, dedicated 954 C.E



MUM WANTS A CUP OF TEA – DHEEPANA GOPI DEVI NIRHOO



Figure 4. (Fig. 4 – above images) ‘mum wants a cup of tea’ by Dheepana Gopi Devi Nirhoo. Carvings on ceramic cast teacup. Scumble glazed. Photographed by Niamh Walsh-Voster.

The first piece, a ceramic cast teacup, ‘Mum wants a cup of tea’ (Fig. 4), is a tribute to the everyday moments I share with my mother, moments that may seem fleeting but are deeply significant to me. Each detail of this teacup (Fig. 4) had been carved by hand, a process that required patience and deliberate focus — a meditative act, echoing the essence of ‘Samskara’. As I etched each line, I revisited scenes of my mother at work, whether typing on the computer, preparing meals, or sharing her thoughts during family gatherings. These actions may seem simple, but they hold a world of meaning for me. They speak to her commitment, her care, and her presence in my life. The scumble glaze I chose for the teacup (Fig. 4.) gives it an aged appearance, connecting it to the aesthetic of ancient Indian carvings (Fig. 2. And Fig. 3.) and drawing a parallel between those timeless works and the lasting impression my mother has left on me.

In a further homage to our shared time, I filled the cup (Fig. 4) with used teabags from her own cups of tea. This accumulation of used teabags is more than a nod to our shared ritual — it’s a tangible symbol of the many small moments that add up to form the fabric of our relationship. The amount of teabags was also symbolic, as my mother’s favourite number was 786 – I had deliberately chosen to only use half that amount in numbers of teabags (393 used teabags) as a reflection on myself as being ‘half’ of her worth. The teacup (Fig. 4), filled in this way, represents the fleeting but recurring nature of time and how each moment, even those that may seem insignificant, is stored in memory, shaping who we are and how we see those we love. The use of the ‘Western’ teacup (Fig. 4.) was a direct challenge to Indian culture, as tea itself comes from Indian background, which had been drastically changed due to colonisation. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1994:442) states that by controlling people’s culture, it thereby controls their own tools of self-definition in relationship to others, the form of a Western teacup had been reused as a ‘canvas’ to carve intricate details of pastimes – reclaiming the ‘teacup’ as well.

MUM WANTS A CUP OF TEA – DHEEPANA GOPI DEVI NIRHOO

Figure 4. (Fig. 4) 'mum wants a cup of tea' by Dheepana Gopi Devi Nirhoo. Carvings on ceramic cast teacup. Scumble glazed. Photographed by Niamh Walsh-Voster.

Top Image – left face

Bottom Image – centre face

Right Image – Right face

Dimensions: 21cm H. 36cm W. 30cm B



MUM WANTS A CUP OF TEA: 2 – DHEEPANA GOPI DEVI NIRHOO



Figure. 5. (Fig. 5) ‘Mum wants a cup of tea:2’ by Dheepana Gopi Devi Nirhoo. Carvings on ceramic plaques, scumble glazed.

A Secondary piece (Fig. 5), ‘Mum wants a cup of tea:2’ was then formed from the first artwork (Fig. 4), where I had then chosen to directly use my heritage in depicting moments of times spent with my mother, throughout my life, in the form of ceramic cast plaques, hand carved and bisque fired, just like the first piece (Fig. 4.), it required a lot of patience and focus to maintain adequate pressure to not break the clay. Inspired by ancient Indian art traditions (Fig. 2), I aimed to capture these everyday memories in a tangible form, echoing the way history was once recorded through intricate carvings and preserved stories, Thiong’o (1994:439) mentions that language should be seen as a dual character, both as a means of communication and a carrier of culture, I used ancient Indian techniques (Fig. 2 and Fig 3) of capturing ‘culture’ by depicting simplistic moments spent with my mother, created in a way in which it depicts a story. Like Manesh Manu’s installation, (Fig. 1), both artworks (Fig. 4. And Fig. 5. Respectively), also use details of Indian geometric patterns to convey the Indian heritage.

MUM WANTS A CUP OF TEA: 2 – DHEEPANA GOPI DEVI NIRHOO

Figure. 6. (Fig. 6 - Left) 'Mum wants a cup of tea:2' by Dheepana Gopi Devi Nirhoo. Carvings on ceramic plaques, scumble glazed.

Figure. 7. (Fig. 7 - middle) 'Mum wants a cup of tea:2' by Dheepana Gopi Devi Nirhoo. Carvings on ceramic plaques, scumble glazed.

Figure. 8. (Fig. 8 - right) 'Mum wants a cup of tea:2' by Dheepana Gopi Devi Nirhoo. Carvings on ceramic plaques, scumble glazed.

DIMENSIONS: 12cm H. 12cm W. 1.5cm D.



STARS FOR MUM – DHEEPANA GOPI DEVI NIRHOO

My third piece, ‘Stars for Mum’ (Fig. 9.) is a portrait of my mother crafted from recycled aluminium cans, folded and crimped into origami stars. The form of strips of cans was extracted from collected cans, which were washed, cut, and shredded by hand into strips, then folded and crimped in a special technique to form a true ‘star’ – the form we recognise in school. I create an entire portrait out of each of these stars, as a means of ‘awarding’ my mother with stars for all her efforts. By reusing aluminium cans — ordinary, often-discarded objects — I wanted to symbolise how my mother brings light and value to what others might overlook. Each star represents an act of love or pride, a gift I give back to her in recognition of all she has done. Up close (Fig. 9), viewers can see the individuality of each star, just as one might notice each unique quality of my mother. But from afar (Fig. 9), these stars combine to form her portrait, a vision of her radiant, complex presence that brightens my world.

The stars (Fig. 9) form a rainbow, which for me is a representation of my mother as a “ray of sunshine,” illuminating the lives of everyone around her. The rainbow signifies joy, strength, and vibrancy —qualities I see in her, even if they are subtle, even if they are sometimes unrecognised. In making this portrait (Fig. 9.), I aimed to show how each small act — each folded star, each gesture — comes together to form the broader image of my mother as I see her: a source of light, warmth, and inspiration.

As Vivan Sundram (2015:25) mentions that artistic expression, rooted in cultural heritage, has the potential to create powerful connections and foster a deeper understanding of shared human experiences, by reflecting on ‘Samskara’, I have learned to see my mother through a lens that highlights the significance of every small action, every word spoken, and every look shared. Through these two pieces, I hope to convey how much I admire her hard work, her resilience, and her grace. This work was my way of documenting, preserving, and paying tribute to the beauty I see in her, one that was both profound and enduring.

Figure. 9. (Fig. 9 - Left) ‘Stars for Mum’ by Dheepana Gopi Devi Nirhoo
Aluminium cans shaped into stars, framed in a hand made clay frame,
embedded with geometric Indian artistic patterns. . Photographed by
Niamh Walsh-Voster.



STARS FOR MUM – DHEEPANA GOPI DEVI NIRHOO

Figure. 9. (Fig. 9 – Left and Bottom) ‘Stars for Mum’ by Dheepana Gopi Devi Nirhoo Aluminium cans shaped into stars, framed in a hand made clay frame, embedded with geometric Indian artistic patterns.



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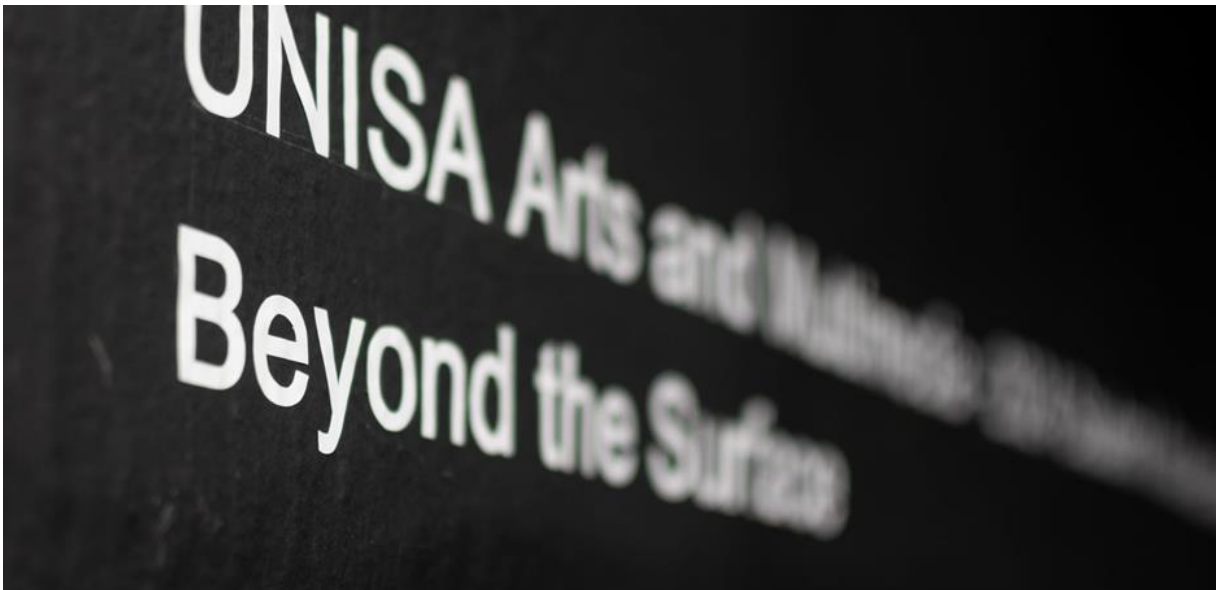


Figure 10. (Fig. 10- above images) 'Beyond the Surface – exhibition'. UNISA Arts and Multimedia 2024 final year exhibition. curated by Rohini Amratlal. Photographed by Niamh Walsh-Vorster

ARTIST'S CV

EDUCATION

2015 – National Senior Certificate : Matriculation

2022 – 2024 – Undergraduate at UNISA, studying BA Visual Multimedia Art (90091)

EXHIBITIONS

Unisa Arts and Multimedia - 2024 Student Final Exhibition - Beyond the Surface, KwaZulu Natal, Society of Arts (KZNSA Gallery).

Figure 11. (Fig. 11 - Left) *'Beyond the Surface – exhibition'*. UNISA Arts and Multimedia 2024 final year exhibition. Featuring Dheepana Gopi Devi Nirhoo and her artwork. curated by Rohini Amratlal. Photographed by Niamh Walsh-Vorster.

