

## MADHVI SUBRAHMANIAN



*Extreme left: Rubber-tapping cup from the 1960s. Collection of Asian Civilisations Museum. 4 cups on the right are from Madhvi Subrahmanian's Ode to the Unknown, 2017. Facing page: Ode to the Unknown, 2017. Ceramic, installation. Site variable. It is currently showing at the India Heritage Center, Singapore*

The rubber-tapping cup in the collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum has neither an exquisite form nor surface. It is ordinary, mundane and easily forgotten like the people who were connected to it. Yet, the cup resonated with me and was my source of inspiration for 'Ode to the Unknown'. Made for the rubber industry in the 1900's in colonial Malaya, cups like these were used to collect latex from rubber trees.

Singapore, known for its tidy environment, is not recognised as a centre from where the rubber plant spread all across South East Asia hugely profiting the colonists and feeding the global demand for rubber. Nor would one think about concretised Singapore as a place with rich clay deposits or where you would find Dragon kilns; the last remaining 40-metre long dragon kiln, Guan Huat, stands testimony to that era and is the centerpiece of my collective artists' studio space.

Indentured and migrant Chinese workers who brought the ceramic technology with them made the cups

and the Indian migrant and indentured labourers used the cups to collect the latex. For me, the cups symbolise the inadvertent cross-cultural engagement and its embedded hand marks reflect strife and labour, narratives of colonial exploitation and poverty.

My interpretation of the cup is made at the same space where the Chinese indentured labourers worked labouring for long hours. I made them in a repetitive rhythm drawing on the energy of those who had previously worked there. And my installation includes photographs of Indian plantation labourers taken from the Singapore archival collection. The room is filled with a soundscape from the plantation, with sounds of crickets and workers scratching the half spiral on the tree to extract the rubber. The spiral repeats itself in the cup hoping to mesmerise and draw people closer to examine the photographs. I am interested in bringing attention to the plight of the migrant and indentured labourer who is easily bypassed like the simple mundane cup in the museums' showcase

Madhvi Subrahmanian [b.1962, in Bombay] trained at and attained her Masters in Fine Arts from SMU, Dallas, interactive. She shows with Gallery Chemould in around the world, while her works are in private Airport, India, Shigaraki Ceramic Sculptural Park, Subrahmanian lives and works in Mumbai and



the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry India and TX. Her work is often site-specific, installation art in Mumbai and in several solo and group exhibitions and public collections such as the Mumbai Domes, Japan, and Fule Museum in Fuping, China. Madhvi Subrahmanian lives and works in Singapore.

