

My Family and Other Animals

Sosa Joseph explores characters caught in a swirl of connections and alienations, observes **Zeenat Nagree**.

In much of Édouard Glissant's life and theoretical work, the archipelago occupied a central place, so much so that he used its geographical form to theorise a state of being and relation, which he termed "archipelagic thinking." The concept locates Glissant as an island-dweller – he came from Martinique – and indicates how his experiences on the continent of Europe were oriented towards the environment in which he had spent the first 18 years of his life.

In *Where do we come from?* at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke in Mumbai, from the 13th of January to the 26th of February, Sosa Joseph's paintings of the lifeworld around the river Pamba in Kerala placed a similar emphasis on the landscape, with its creepers and critters, as a point of origin of her painterly sensibility. In a note, she says that the village of Parumala, her home till she was 24, "influenced my visual vocabulary, set its grammar, and enriched its lexicon." The specificities of Joseph's individual experience are her own, but they acquire an epic scale in her paintings, which the viewer may imagine inhabiting herself on account of their vivid depictions and arrangements.

The key to the exhibition is the large canvas, *Duck Farmers* (2019-21), which introduces viewers to the socio-political life of Parumala. Communist protestors march between the church and the arrack shop, where a man is being stabbed. A woman's corpse floats down the river, while two others appear to exchange a secret under the guise of taking a bath. Nearby, duck farmers take their birds out for a walk amidst the mayhem of ordinary life. Other paintings in the exhibition expand some of these

scenes and further introduce viewers to people in Joseph's world: her father cast as a space traveller in *The Ferryman and his Jaundiced Child* (2019); the magnetic, oracle-like figure of her *Grandmother and the Banana Flower* (2019); and an aunt bitten by a snake in *A Viper in the Sugar Cane Field* (2021).

Yet, Joseph insists, "...portraiture or storytelling is not my motivation here." Nevertheless, it is impossible to disregard our encounters with people, animals and their tales, in all the paintings, or view any of them as only formal experiments. Perhaps, that is not what Joseph is asking of the viewer, especially after having painted each character with such keen wit and observation, and largely from memory. What Joseph may be getting at is that a place shapes a worldview, which extends beyond a concern with authenticity, infuses the field of imagination and colours future encounters. The unexpected palette Joseph draws from this world is indeed captivating, in which no being or form is really quite shown as separate from the other, only occasionally separated by vibrating outlines. The proximity of the land and the water, and all the life it supports, while indicative of a rural life, also suggests a porosity that is rendered as a painterly argument about the figure and the background, and the harmony and juxtaposition of colour. Under the ruse of meeting her family and village folk, we find ourselves face to face with Francisco Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son* (in *The Ferryman...*) and John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (in *Gift from the River II*). Joseph seems to propose that the act of looking back need not be nostalgic but full of play, casting herself as an audience in the theatre – in a setting that extends far beyond her native village. /



Sosa Joseph. *Duck Farmers.* Oil on canvas. 108" x 118". 2019-21. Photograph by Anil Rane. Image courtesy of the artist and Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke.