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OCULA

Sosa Joseph Returns to the Pamba River

By [Sherry Paik](#)

Mumbai

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Drawn from the riverside village of her childhood and early adulthood in Kerala, India, [Sosa Joseph](#)'s paintings trace the origins of her life back to the river.

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Sosa Joseph, *Luffa Gatherers* (2021). Oil on canvas. 91.4 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke.

Joseph grew up in the north of Parumala, a small town on the Pamba River, and activities and festivities associated with the river—from turtle hunting to luffa gathering—were a constant in her life before the artist left to study painting at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda.

Rendered in the artist's characteristic, loose figurative style, 15 new canvases completed between 2019 and 2021 manifest Joseph's memories of home in *Where do we come from?* at [Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke](#) in [Mumbai](#) (13 January–26 February 2022).



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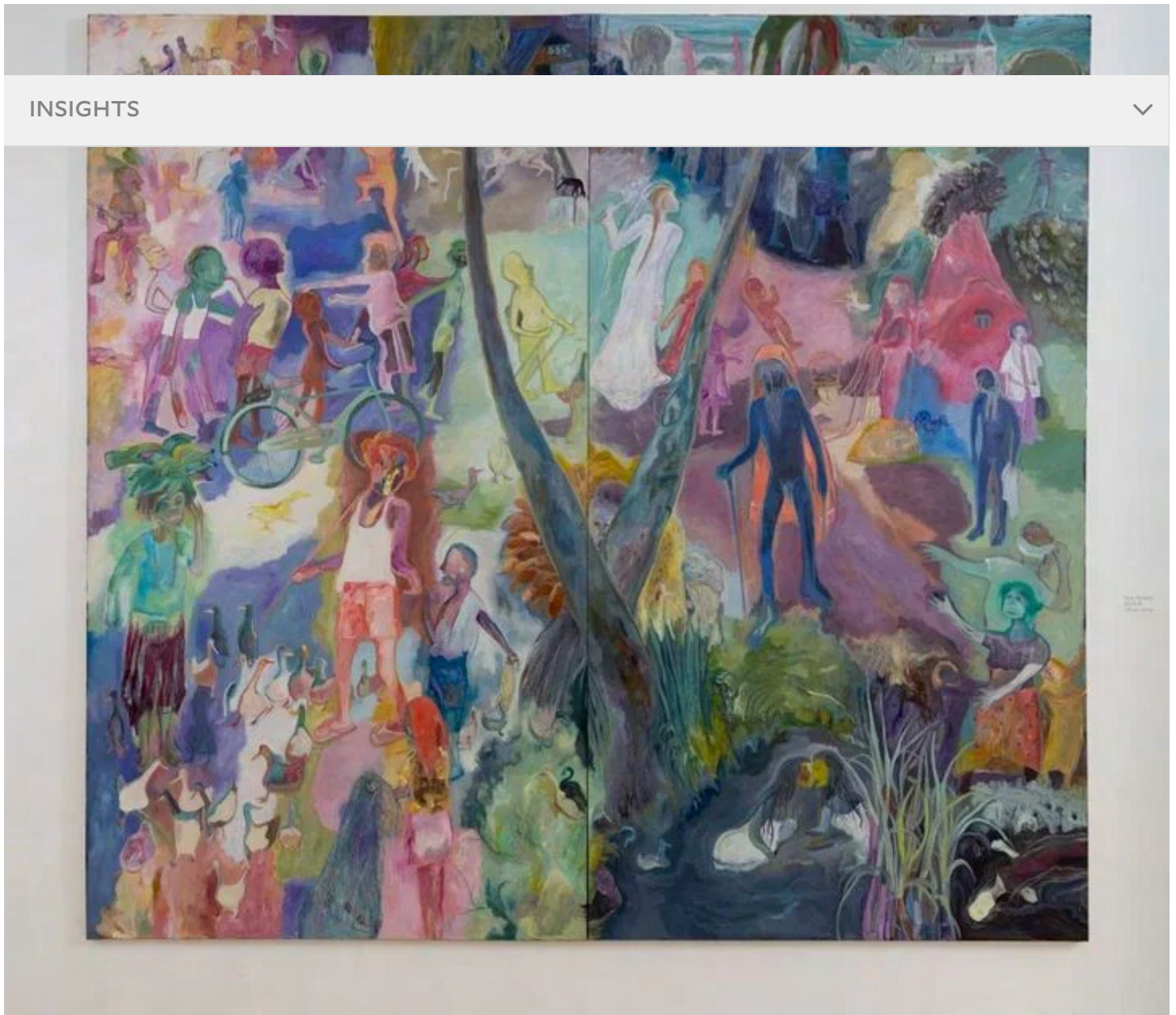


Sosa Joseph, *Gift From the River I* (2021). Oil on canvas. 116.8 x 243.8 cm. Courtesy Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke.

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There are many faces to the river in Joseph's new works. In *Duck Farmers* (2021), figures populate the canvas, colours and activities abound, while the river itself is dark and foreboding.

Painted at the bottom-right corner of the canvas, the river frames three figures: two are long-haired and clad in white, bending towards each other for a kiss; the third, to their right, is almost invisible in the water save for their pale face and hands raised, in a pose reminiscent of John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1851–1852).



Sosa Joseph, *Duck Farmers* (2019–2021). Oil on canvas. 274.3 x 299.7 cm. Courtesy Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke.

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Elsewhere on the canvas, children and adults dance, gather around for a chat, or form a procession. A group of ducks tilt their heads, their plump bodies and comically tiny feet uplifting the mood.

Joseph adroitly shifts from one colour to another to separate figures into smaller, more manageable groups, balancing pastel yellows and greens with darker blues. The resulting image is one of dynamic village life that is charged by the river's presence, even at a distance.

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Sosa Joseph, *Where do we come from?*, Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai (13 January–26 February 2022). Courtesy Mirchandani + Steinruecke.

The river is similarly a silent witness to surrounding activities in *A Viper in the Sugar Cane Field* (2021), where it appears again in dark hues at the bottom-right corner of the frame.

Tall strokes of green and brown earth part the way for human figures in the middle, whose bodies are highlighted by auras of pink and purple. A man holds the limp body of a woman in his arms, while a boy, to their right, hauls a viper off the ground with a long stick.

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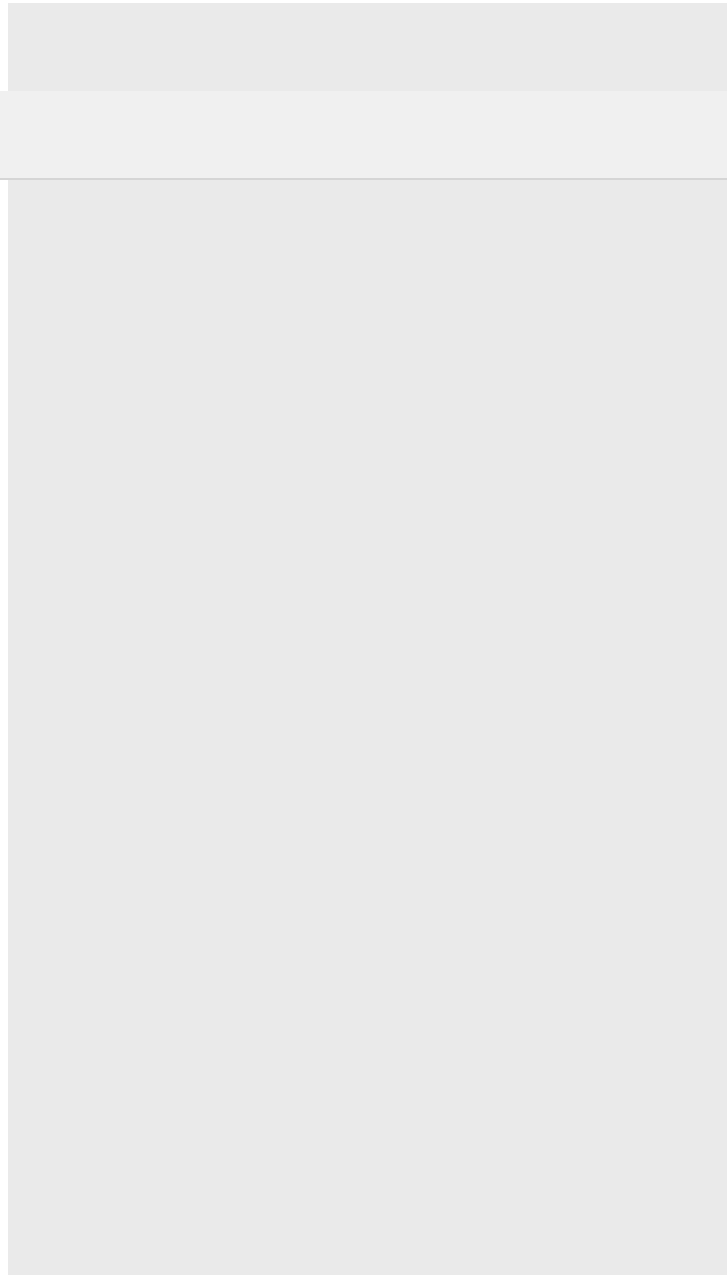
Sosa Joseph, *A Viper in the Sugar Cane Field* (2021). Oil on canvas. 91.4 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke.

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In contrast, *The Ferryman and his Jaundiced Child* (2019)—painted in pools of green, blue, and deep purple that frame the ferryman's boat—depicts the river as a mesmerising galaxy. Specks of white paint sprinkle the water like stars, and the small orbs in orange and yellow evoke celestial bodies.

Here, the river is a passage, a route that connects one place with a myriad of others, offering new possibilities in life. That representation finds its counterpoint in *Turtle Watcher* (2021), whose waves, rendered in shades of blue, green, and purple, sweep diagonally across the canvas, engulfing a lone swimmer and turtles in the process.

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Sosa Joseph, *The Ferryman and his Jaundiced Child* (2019). Oil on canvas. 272.29 x 146.81 cm. Courtesy Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke.

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While *Where do we come from?* marks Joseph's first solo exhibition to focus on the river, precursors to its treatment as both a lifegiving and formidable entity can be found in earlier works from 2009 that depict animals in a flood (*Floating Moment I*) or a figure wearing a colossal dress consisting of variously coloured fish, turtles, and waves (*Incomplete Lesson*).

Joseph's imagery continued to draw on aspects of her life in the following years, most notably bazaar and street scenes from near her studio in Kochi, Kerala.

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Sosa Joseph, *Incomplete Lesson* (2009). Courtesy Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke.

The three-part painting series 'What Are We?' (2012), first presented at the inaugural Kochi-Muziris Biennale in 2012, and then at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke in 2014, is one such work, featuring women and children in outdoor spaces.

Comparing 'What Are We?' and *Duck Farmers* side by side, it might be tempting to say that Joseph now uses more vivid and saturated colours. As photographer John Mathew observes, however, this description can undermine the full effects of Joseph's ongoing concern with colour relationships.¹

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Sosa Joseph, *What are we? I* (2012). Oil on canvas. 146 x 365.7 cm. Courtesy Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke.

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In *What are we? I*, women in niqabs line up across the horizontal canvas, surrounded by architectural structures and discarded objects. Joseph organises the scene with colour, using deep blues and purples for niqabs and counterbalancing their weight with pale yellow, pink, and blue on the ground—a strategy that she also employs across the paintings in *Where do we come from?*

The exhibition borrows its title from Gauguin's 1897–1898 masterpiece *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, and Joseph has adopted parts of this longer title for other works.

Sosa Joseph, *Gift From the River II* (2021). Oil on canvas. 106.7 x 243.8 cm. Courtesy Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke.

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exploration of her own origins.

In these recent paintings, the river that Joseph grew up with becomes at once an actual place and a symbolic site. Where memories and dreams, struggles and survival, are rooted in the particular as much as they are framed by the common denominator of home. —[O]

1 Sosa Joseph in Conversation with John Mathew. This unpublished interview, taken between 2018 and 2021, will be published by Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke in the coming future.

