Arcadia Missa

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FRIEZE

CRITIC'S GUIDE

The Best Shows to See in London During Frieze

From the elegance of Robert Ryman at the Barbican to Philip Ewe's slyly theatrical new exhibition at TINA

By Harriet Lloyd-Smith | 13 Oct 26

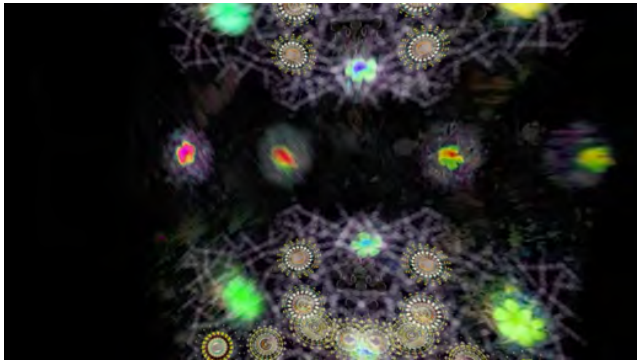
Vijay Masharani | Arcadia Missa | 25 September – 29 October



A crab blows bubbles to a splintered soundtrack that's half choral, half printer spitting ink. Vijay Masharani's video *O———K* (2026) is a psychedelic assault course: floaters crawl across the eye; tunnels and concrete flyovers belong to seemingly no city. A figure sits in a car passenger seat, their face obscured by a spinning contraption – Friedrich Nietzsche's post-Copernican man, perhaps, rolling 'from the centre toward X'? Video, the artist concedes in the accompanying text, is the more forceful medium, but drawing can pull a 'jiu-jitsu move'. Here, his drawings hit hardest: small but charged from edge to edge. *Bird of Paradise* (2026), for example, is a hatched fever dream poised to spring into animation. Some half-forms, technical plans, dizzying landscapes, expelled interiors, a hospital scene, something godly and odd. Masharani also writes that drawing each line provokes 'groundless terror and freefall', to which I say: consider the poor viewer.

Artist Profile: Vijay Masharani

by Charlotte Strange
2026-08-27



Vijay Masharani, *O −−−−−K*, 2026 (Included in Greater New York, MoMA PS1, NYC, 2026) single channel video, r/t 18:48

1. Mimi Howard describes this as a motif of "lights—and green lights in particular" in her conversation with Masharani for Momus.

The latest in a series of interviews with artists who make work that responds to network culture and digital technologies.

Charlotte Strange: I experience your works most immediately through their use of color. Your drawings in the exhibition *Sequin, Shadow* reference it in their titles—both explicitly, as in *Red Drawing* and *Green Vision*, and through associative phrases, as in *Midnight*—and feature a varied palette of colored pencils ranging in vibrancy from intense to muted. There is also the motif of bright shapes—in particular, circles and stars—across your drawings, sculptural pieces, and videos. [1]

How are you thinking about color as it structures your work? There's color, the aesthetic tool whose implementation and overall character changes across mediums, and color, the shorthand for collective perception that artists, psychologists, political thinkers, and advertising professionals have used as a metonym for particular affects and ideologies.

Vijay Masharani: Eric Beltz once mentioned that he renounced the use of color because he was able to produce color-effects using contrasting shades of graphite. Looking at one of his drawings from around that time, like *Buddha Zodiac*↗, he was onto something. The challenge of how to make a drawing is constantly renewed, and is better distilled by temporarily setting aside color, value, composition, and/or scale. In video, color has been a constant—I've filmed lasers, scorched forests, bunting, algae, nudibranches, taillights, sunsets, chemotherapy, tunnels. Color is always in the calculation that produces a forceful shot.

I mostly look at paintings in books. The green background of a Mughal-era painting of a falcon↗, the blue-grey sky in El Greco's *View of Toledo*↗, the red shields in Masaccio's *Crucifixion of St. Peter and Beheading of St. John the Baptist*↗—all grab me. I never wore green until my first admission to the hospital—I felt weak, ugly, and uncomfortable, so I shopped, determined to restock my wardrobe with sherpa hoodies and cushioned sneakers. I wanted the pink gel kayanos that Veeze wore on Instagram, but they were too pricey, so I bought the green ones, thinking, "I wear green now." I envisioned returning to New York healed, gorgeous, in green.



Vijay Masharani, *Green Drawing*, 2025. Graphite and colored pencil on paper, 9″ x 6 1/4″.



Vijay Masharani, *Red Drawing*, 2025. Graphite and colored pencil on paper, 14″ x 10″.

Red Drawing↗ was sparked by composer Andrew Stock introducing me to Jean-Luc Godard's remark about Weekend: "it's not blood, it's red." At the time, I had just gotten a bone marrow transplant, which is also a blood transplant, and it resonated. It's an extraordinary experience, but my fixation on blood is ordinary; Gil Anidjar has identified blood's location at the center of Western thought, for him it's evidence that we are still Christian. I consider the Gaza genocide the opening salvo in the climate genocides, slated to condemn billions in Africa, South and West Asia, South America to death. The ordinary functioning of our civilization is genocidal, foreclosing our ability to speak about anything else in non-nonsense terms. There can be a soft punishment in art for speaking directly about these things, as though one is being self-righteous rather than descriptive. That's where art comes in—color empowers artists and renders an audience more pliable to receive an eschatological signal or a decent idea.

I reject the idea that the charisma of form—in writing, music, art, fashion, architecture—used to authorize power, but now does something else—it smacks of imperial presentism, a false consensus about who (transparent reasoning subjects), where (the West), and when (secular capitalist modernity) we are, and therefore, aren't (mad, stained, foreign, superstitious, primeval). My view is that in the past, dazzling pigments and ornamental patterns arranged into imposing compositions to shore up sovereignty and, in the market, activated a desire to possess and digest. Unburnished, undyed appearance connoted a lower social station. The codes are more complicated today, but not different in kind. What's interesting now is how elites' interest in the intricacies of visual art's power-effects are waning, perhaps harkening a transition to an order of dominance sans hegemony, or general cognitive decline, which can reinforce one another.



Left to Right: Vijay Masharani, *Lighthouse*, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 8″ × 6″, 2025, *I shall wear a crown*, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 10″ × 8″, 2025, *Mausoleum*, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 10″ × 8″, 2025, *Untitled*, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 10″ × 8″, 2025, *Heat*, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 8″ × 6″, 2025, *Figurative drawing*, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 10″ × 8″, 2025, *Midnight*, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 10″ × 8″, 2025.

CS: The Froebel shapes dotting your 2025 show at Veronica↗ in Seattle are fascinating partly because they reference the confluence of modernist artistic experiments, pedagogy, and spiritualism, which you've discussed before (here↗ and here↗), and also because they invoke the lifespan of an artwork before it goes on display.

The easy word to describe the process of artmaking might be play (as in the platitudes about art being a way of connecting with some universal childlike state), but I think of tinkering, the experimental act of tweaking materials without a fixed objective. How does exactitude show up for you across different mediums? I'm thinking of what I perceive to be the chasm between these intricate pencil drawings and highly dynamic video editing. Also, the ways that visual mediums—especially time-based forms—are further mystified through metaphors about language and writing (when an image is "poetic.").

VM: The objective, shared by my drawings and the videos, is art. Art practice holds my interest as a generator of novel solutions to an unfixed dilemma: how to make a work of art? This question is better approached from a standpoint from which art might be impossible, which is why I work in "little brother"—and I am a little brother—mediums: drawing not painting, video not film. Drawing risks slipping into not being art but an auxiliary lubricant for art—a plan or schematic. Video risks being mere perception, or logging—a stack of rocks next to the acropolis of cinema.

An answer to the art question, which can only ever be provisional, unrepeatable—proceeds through sedimented decision, modification, and adjustment toward that moving target—and perhaps that addresses your question about exactitude: my experience has been that it's a game of inches until it requires a leap of faith. The shapes were a formalization of the first part of that process; a fast way to array options—mono/polychrome, a/symmetry, exposing or mystifying the material of an art-object, horizontality versus verticality, etc. I left them behind because they didn't present enough vistas to leap from, after the single bold zag of showing works that were more inside-voice-slash-minor-key.



Vijay Masharani, *Various block sculptures*, 2025. Installation view The Cure at Veronica, Seattle, 2025. Wood, glue, paper, Various sizes.

There is a chasm, but it's unspecific to me: the groundlessness of drawing apprehends the grand canyon discovered by poststructuralism, that art skirts the edges of and presides over—an instability that becomes palpable when considering the whole known history and prehistory of the human animal whose signature behavior is to compulsively cage and wound with graphemes as soon as the concept of the population crests the horizon. Any use of a stylus-shiv apprehends this tripartite circuit of writing, normmaking, and violence in more or less oblique ways. Eugenie Brinkema is correct that "we didn't take deconstruction seriously enough," in part because of the way it flays our ability to cleanly "do" history, science, or politics using 19th-century German metaphysics anchored in ideal averages—freedom, truth, and history. I won't mobilize, or kill in the name of, these universals; I'd rather treat them like unsophisticated playthings—tessellate them, roughen their edges, cast them aside.

CS: You mention in your 2025 lecture-performance↗ for the exhibition Big Casino at Kunsthalle Zürich an interest in the metaphors artists such as Pippilotti Rist and Vilém Flusser have used to describe video (handbag, staring at one's reflection in a pond, respectively). You compare video to a basin. This reminded me of John Baldessari's statement at the 1971 Open Circuits conference, where he says that video should be "as neutral as a pencil. Just one more tool in the artist's toolbox." [2] This describes video's function as a technology—and Baldessari's ambivalence about its wholesale embrace by artists of the time—more than its aesthetic qualities, but it strikes me now as I've been sitting with your work between graphite and video. A different type of video than Baldessari was facing at the time. In the lecture you also describe your own editing techniques and visual flourishes as "video gestures." Flusser was famously enamoured by gesture and defined it in his book on the topic as a "movement of the body or a tool attached to the body for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation." [3] How are you thinking of video in relation to your body—as an accessory, reflective device, tool of gathering or inscription, incidental extension? What are these metaphors doing for the work?

2. The New Television: Video After Television (no place press, 2025). Referenced by Rebecca Cleman and Susan Murray in the keynote lecture for Open Circuits Revisited organized by EAI and NYU department of Media, Culture, and Communication (October 2025).

3. Flusser, Gestures, 2.



Vijay Masharani, *Facade Rotary Sequence*, 2025. Single-channel video, runtime 8:55.

VM: Rist and I speak metaphorically, Flusser doesn't. The two-part schematic "'genealogical tree of the film': cave wall—church wall—framed painting—photograph—film. 'Genealogical tree of video': surface of a pond—mirror—telescope—microscope—video" disentangles the lineages of film and video. The benefit for me is avoiding recency bias, in which the history of video art is narrated through technological determinism, signposted by new gadgets, from the Portapak to LLMs. Flusser's conception of video as a "way of knowing," an encounter with a strange surface, mytho-poetic in origin, feels more correct.

My work has a body-biography problem because we all do—it's a mediation of our race-gender-debility problem (which is a mediation of the aforementioned writing-violence-population problem, the attempt to use empowered writing—which includes but is not limited to "the law"—to delimit violence to mostly mark some and not others). My sense is that we don't know exactly where to locate, in the history and criticism of art, which is made of the art of artists, the lives of artists. Rosalind Krauss' structuralist-informed art criticism jettisons biography, replacing a biographical reduction (a periodization of Picasso's life signposted by love affairs) with a diagram of the artwork as a semiporous semiotic system that is still, ultimately, a diagram, devoid of an account of the force of the artwork. My gut tells me that force is not a metaphor. Philip Guston said, "real art makes you shake. Let's not kid ourselves." In other words, it's the same force of life, love, the new, the car, the gun, the disease, the Real. Understanding this force may entail figuring out what to do with, for instance, his brother Nat's car accident, his gangrenous legs. Plenty of people suffer horrific personal tragedies, but only one of them became Philip Guston. In other words, when we start asking questions about the relationship between the lives of artists and the internal machinery of artworks, the conversation quickly becomes about causality, contingency, and catastrophe.

The body is also at the heart of my critique of psychoanalysis as anti-somatic, which I've developed since I concluded my essay↗ in Parapraxis with a provocation: was my experience, in which my psychoanalyst insisted my cresting cancer symptoms were psychosomatic, explained by a single rotten apple (this is what all the psychoanalysts wanted to be the case), a minor body problem, or a total crisis of legitimacy? My current position, outlined in my new essay *Hatred of Psychoanalysis*↗, lies somewhere between the second and third option. It seems that "organic illness" is the "real" symptom against which the still real, but in-credible, "psychosomatic" illness is defined—unaccounted for by the theory, waived off to be biomedicine's issue. In other words, psychoanalysis has the capacity to expand and contract the domain of its sovereign claim to narrate the body, to its own advantage—like any institution, its goal is to preserve and ensure the continued existence of the institution; some suffering may be salved along the way, but that is a secondary aim. It is unknowable how many fall into this disciplinary crack; in America, analysts constitute a priest caste accountable to no-one other than the court of public opinion which pays no attention, holds no power, and, most importantly—from the standpoint of psychoanalysis, or any other quasi-hermetic, priestly, fortressed discourse—*has no standing* to criticize. Psychoanalysis is more than well equipped to encode or pathologize outside criticism as projection, rage, or resistance.



Vijay Masharani, *Urchin Foragers (Luka Doncic)*, 2024. Single-channel video, runtime 16:11.

CS: *Urchin Foragers (Luka Doncic)* (2024) layers a semi-melodic, ambient soundtrack over night vision footage of the foragers on Mavericks Beach in the Bay Area. The title hinges on the word association between the name of its location and the NBA team that Doncic had recently brought to the finals, and the loose homophony of "Doncic" and "urchin."

Can you talk about your relationship to music and sound? How do they figure into your practice as incidental qualities of the moving image, distinct artistic and technological mediums, and vehicles for reference, remixing, and association?

VM: Exciting combinations of video and sound cinched my attachment to the medium: Alton Ellis in Cyprien Gaillard's *Nightlife*, the Für Elise lighter in Jia Zhangke's *Xiao Wu*, Otar Iosseliani's *Georgian Ancient Songs*, Shirin Neshat's *Turbulent*, Robert Altman's *Nashville*—I could go on. It takes restraint to not turn every video into a music video. In my new video for MoMA PS1, I wanted to include Charles Ives' "The Unanswered Question," Jonny Chingas' "Cruising Down Whittier Boulevard," Waka Flocka Flame's "15th and the 1st", but elected not to, because a great song will dismember an artwork's potential.

Resisting the temptation of a hit score has become a Barneyian propulsive restraint in the practice: while working, I drop songs in, use them as a scaffold to iterate affective associations of a shot, even though this scaffold will eventually get dismantled. The final video samples five tracks: iLoveMakonnen's "In the Bity," Young Thug's "Love Me," Maurice Ravel's "Pavane Pour Une Infante Defunte" performed by an infusion pump, a snippet of B L A C K I E's "Selfishness of Evil Men," and Clarence Clarity's "Cancer™ In The Water."

Sorry to name a bunch of songs, but it's the best way to answer the question—I love music, and for a long time was envious of it—Krauss's comment about visual artworks that either aspire to the condition of music or photography comes to mind, and in a way, this question is a different voicing of your question about color.

I made videos alone, without much attention, from 2017–2024. I had to make it fun for myself. Listening to NTS is fun. I took a year away from art to focus solely on music, in my collaboration with Coco Klockner.

Age (if you'd like to share): nominally 31; if you factor in the chemo, like 65 and rickety

Location: Parents' basement, suburb on the Peninsula of the Bay Area, ~20 minutes south of San Francisco.

How/when did you begin working creatively with technology? First grade, computer club, Photoshop, gradient tool set to difference, going crazy.

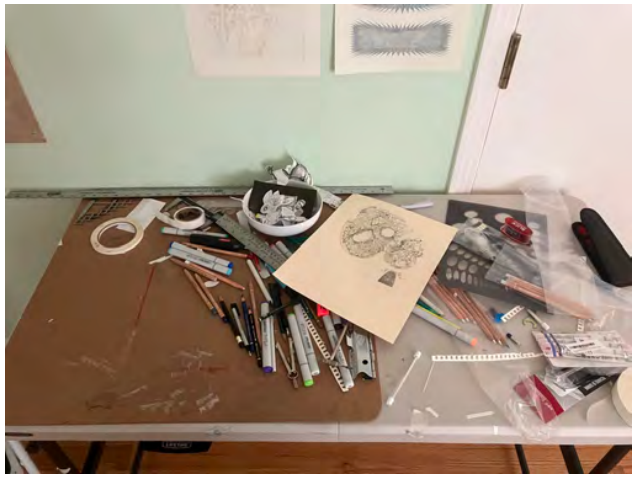
What did you study at school or elsewhere? UC Santa Barbara BA Art for a year, didn't finish, transferred to MICA, graduated with a BFA in 2017, went back to school from 2021–2022 for my MA in Race, Ethnicity, and Postcolonial Studies at UCL.

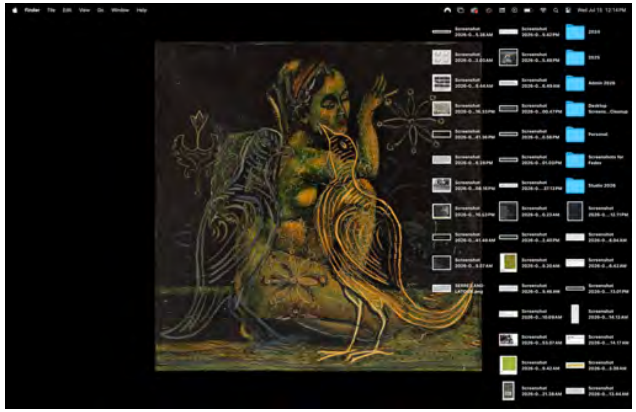
Tags

#artist profile, #Charlotte Strange, #Coco Klockner, #drawing, #editorial, #Eric Beltz, #Eugenie Brinkema, #Greater New York, #iLoveMakonnen, #Jean-Luc Godard, #John Baldessari, #Pippiloti Rist, #publication, #Rosalind Krauss, #video, #Vijay Masharani, #Vilem Flusser

What do you do for a living or what occupations have you held previously? Writing tutor, drawing peddler

What does your desktop or workspace look like? (Pics or screenshots please!)





BOMB

Vijay Masharani by Liza St. James
Making systems of power physical.

March 4, 2026



Vijay Masharani, *Red drawing*, 2025, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 14 × 10 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

As I studied Vijay Masharani's *Yellow scene* (2024) at Thomas Erben Gallery last summer, I had the uncanny feeling that the drawing, with its tape and pencil additions, was annotating itself in front of my eyes. Reality in Masharani's work across video, drawing, and sculpture is unstable and hallucinatory, ready to collapse or to lead—via bright green light and star-shaped portal—to another realm. But this place is not an escape. Here, systems of power are made physical; here, the body, brimming with bats, opens in an enigmatic rearranging.

I met Masharani at Cooper Union, where we both teach, but it wasn't until I attended his performance-lecture accompanying *Big Casino*, his solo show at Kunsthalle Zürich last year, that I considered the ways in which being from the Bay Area, where I'm also from, informs his work, which is as witty as it is existential.

Liza St. James
I'm watching a bird hit the window in the work-in-progress video you sent me, *Tapper* (2025). What's up with this bird?! The thought of putting language to the sound of the bird reminds me of the sound engineer at his switchboard in Memoria. Is this the view from your room?

Vijay Masharani
I love that scene; it reminded me of my friend Raza Kazmi's footage of the editing bay in his film *The Animal has Memory but no Memories*. I hadn't thought of it as a studio portrait, but, yes, it's my bedroom where I work. The tapping is quantized, locked into a meter. It's not really discernible, but I hope this subtle regimentation, marring the video into a grid, acts on the viewer.

LSJ
How has making work at home in the Bay Area felt for you?

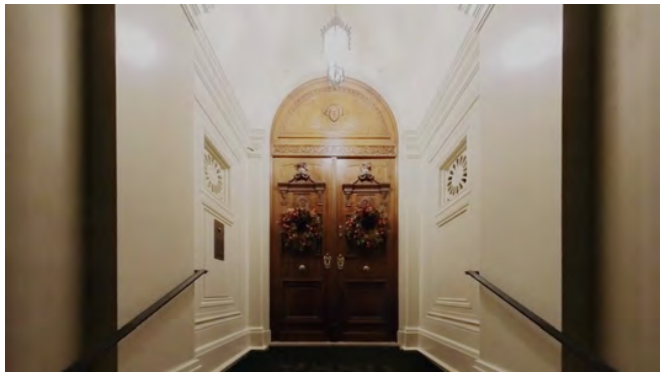
VM
Making work at home is distinct. There's symmetrical abstraction around the house, bright colors, a few Hindu figurines, some undergrad work. I like the tessellating geometry that features throughout the architecture of San Francisco, including radial-patterned gates and William Mitchell's concrete reliefs in the 24th and Mission station. It's trippy, and some of that was here before the city was associated with psychedelia. This winking symmetry is menacing, like the fractal aftershock of genocide and rapid capital accumulation; it's a settler modernism encouraging you to take leave of reality and not think about what subtends it.



Vijay Masharani, *Hospital scene (the West is a bloodbath)*, 2024, graphite, colored pencil, conté crayon, and collage on paper, 31.5 × 4725 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

LSJ
Your current show, *Sequin, Shadow*, at Clima in Milan, Italy, features recombinable elements in drawings and videos, many of which use geometric forms that build on the series of brightly colored wooden sculptures featured in your recent solo show at Veronica in Seattle. *Block drawing* (2025) seems the most direct, perhaps, but several of your drawings feature portal-like arches, stars, and shapes evocative of stained glass and of children's block toys. What got you started on these?

VM
The timelines overlap. Most of the block sculptures were made concurrently with the works in *Big Casino* at Kunsthalle Zürich, and then many of the drawings on view in Sequin, Shadow were made before the wall works I showed at Veronica. I had pattern blocks as a kid. I was reminded of them reading Maya Martinez's chapbook *Hell or Mercy* in 2022. She arranges big concepts—god, love, life, death, hell—playfully, undaunted by their weight. I used the blocks as a metaphor to try to understand how she accomplishes that in her writing. They're grand abstractions and they're toys appended together into surprising, arresting arrangements. The scene of Krishna swallowing a bit of clay and then opening his mouth for his foster mother to remove it, revealing the whole universe, comes to mind. I focused on color combinations and the ovate shapes the glue made. The later ones are asymmetrical and monochrome. After working with them for a bit, I learned about Friedrich Fröbel and how arranging colored tiles was an important activity in his spiritually inflected kindergartens exported around the world in the late nineteenth century. Many modernists were exposed to them; Kenjiro Okazaki discusses this in "Abstract Art as Impact."



Vijay Masharani, Facade rotary sequence, 2025, single-channel video, 8 minutes, 55 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

LSJ
I'm used to talking pedagogy with you, so this feels appropriate. You've spoken about bracing against New York City's recognizability in *Mourning in advance* (2019) and *My Coarsening* (2023) by working to anonymize the city; whereas in *Facade rotary sequence* (2025), you walk San Francisco's Billionaires' Row in a dazzling mask-helmet. Did you bead it yourself? You've described filming there as entering a dreamscape.

VM
I've never had that trepidation about my Bay Area works, though some videos still have a no-place quality. The hospital room and the beach at night are somewhat unspecific. My mom beaded that mask, actually. My dad needed a growth behind his eye irradiated, and they made it to restrain his head. My mom decorated it after the treatment. She's a retired pharmacist and has always been a hobbyist in textiles, beadwork, and drawing. It hung in our house by an anatomical model of a skeleton. Lowering the mask is a satisfying repeating cue that plays off the maximalism of the architecture, and the idea of masking is quite rich.

LSJ
The mask is stunning. And thinking of your mom's time beading it and your dad's wearing it adds so much to the image of you dancing in it in front of Larry Ellison's reflective garage. I'm between living situations, staying with friends, and in a bizarre turn of events, I was offered a vacant, ten-room SF mansion for twenty-eight days—California's transient-guest limit—while some party awaited title insurance. Considering this from NYC, I felt I'd have to use it effectively somehow. I thought about Walter Benjamin's "Manorially Furnished Ten-Room Apartment," in which he locates traces of early detective fiction in the nineteenth-century interior that "fittingly houses only the corpse." What would you do if offered use of a mansion? With the only stipulation that it stay intact, and you don't burn it down or anything.

VM
That's wild. I want to know what it was like inside. I grew up visiting wealthy people's mansions in Woodside, Atherton, Hillsborough, with big TVs everywhere, poorly constructed outdoor wicker furniture, strange hybriding of styles, kitschy art, clutter. I haven't been inside a Pac Heights mansion, but I find their facades genuinely alluring, although they still have garish elements. New money seems less interested in projecting power through sophisticated, enigmatic architectural facades. I watched SF noir, neo-noir, and other crime thrillers like Jagged Edge, The Maltese Falcon, Petulia, and The Conversation to better contextualize how sinister it feels there. In some of these films, the Peninsula, where I live, is represented as a home base for evil that takes place in the city.

You had to stipulate that I couldn't burn it, maybe because by looming outside these houses, the work has the specter of the propaganda of the deed. When asked what I was doing, the mask acted like dazzle camo; I said, "Art project," and the bright colors validated it. From a distance, I probably looked like a delivery guy. There's not a lot of pedestrian traffic there at night—just me and my colleagues, the Waymos.

LSJ
In in-progress video (2026), you leave the city for a beach moment with a crab. I found the crab moving, and I imagine much of this has to do with sound. How do you decide on sound for your videos?



Vijay Masharani, *Still from in-progress video,* 2026, single-channel video. Courtesy of the artist.

VM
I got rediagnosed on a Friday, two days before I was supposed to fly to Zürich to install, and I had to reenter chemo on Sunday. My friend Maggie and I ended up at Point Montara Lighthouse in Pacifica, and I held that crab while bargaining with no one: if all I could do for ten, fifteen more years was drive to the beach, listen to the radio, be near the waves, and hold a crab, that would be enough for me. Anything is better than the total cessation of experience, memory, time, music, love, all of it. I also have a gallows sense of humor about the whole thing. Having a transcendent experience looking at a crab is so stupid. Sound imbues the shot with an antimony of pathos and humor, and I layered Alicia Keys's "If I Ain't Got You," where she's singing about how material things pale compared to love, and aligned it to the even beep of an infusion pump. My work has featured motifs of toggling between absolute states. A sound or a light is absolutely on or off. Keys's lyric "everything means nothing" appeals to that binary sensibility. But now everything in the studio is graying out. When I started drawing again after transplant, a sense of detailed linear vibrancy was temporarily blocked off. What opened up were evenly applied glazes of graphite and colored pencil, which in turn affected how I use lines in drawings such as *Red drawing* (2025). For a brief interval, my hand became more effaced and the drawings more constructed and monochromatic.

"As the space between where I am and total dematerialization—a kind of death—shrinks, it also dilates."

— Vijay Masharani

LSJ
How do you think your sculptural works fit in with this idea of a monochrome terminus?

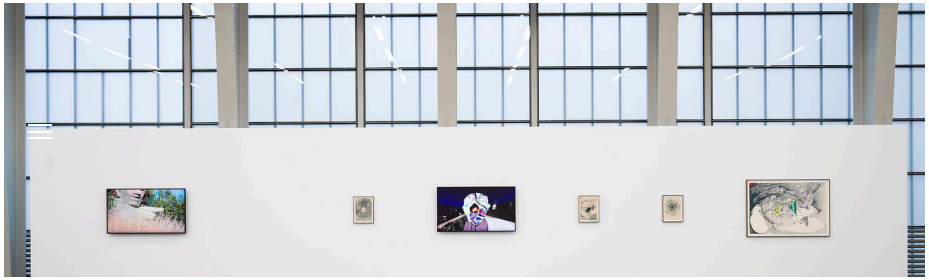
VM
My videos started out pretty big, loud, teeming, scored with beats and samples. Over time, they got dark, drone-like, and short. Recently, I made a small, light-pink near-monochrome and thought, Okay, we can keep going; but there's not much after this. What artists do when they start to feel that limit is interesting. Philip Guston eventually returned to figuration. Ad Reinhardt gave slide presentations and aspired to make a film, but died before he could. As the space between where I am and total dematerialization—a kind of death—shrinks, it also dilates. Right now, I see more directions than I could pursue in a lifetime.

FRIEZE

‘Artists Are Secret Stabilizers’: Vijay Masharani in Conversation

With his Kunsthalle Zürich show open, the artist joins Hannah Black to discuss distrusting circles, inviting chance and the impossibility of repetition

+2 BY **HANNAH BLACK** AND **VIJAY MASHARANI** IN **INTERVIEWS** | 25 APR 25



In Vijay Masharani’s intricately absorbing videos and drawings, small gestures connect to larger systems. In his current exhibition at Kunsthalle Zürich, ‘Big Casino’, the motif of the circle predominates, prompting meditation on the surreal factuality of chance and emphasizing the politically ambiguous scale of the planetary versus the perceiving or suffering body. Masharani’s veneration of the possibilities of the small gestures of art is full of humour and pain. Here, he speaks to artist Hannah Black about some of the influences on his work and thought.



Vijay Masharani, *Stranger*, 2025, graphite and coloured pencil on paper, 36 × 25 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Kunsthalle Zürich

Hannah Black Let’s begin with circles, which have many significances in your work, especially in your current exhibition: a crowd’s attention concentrated on a single point, the egg from which life and death hatch, the globe as a vision of integral humanity, and so on. Yet, in *Big Casino Zoom Lecture* (2025), the performance lecture accompanying the show, you revealed that the first iteration of the circle in your work was a star shape that indicated dismemberment. What is the relationship between the circle as a whole and the threat of disintegration?

Vijay Masharani From the left-wing texts I read from the interwar period, especially the Frankfurt School, there’s a lot of wariness towards the circle. It’s a justifiable wariness of the idea of a false or reified totality and how that idea can be a pernicious myth to promise wholeness or total integration. A big part of the right-wing imaginary seems to be a primordial unity fantasy. But then, if you think about the circle as the image of the planet, the material fact of a shared world is a super important starting point for left-wing theorists such as Paul Gilroy. I also just like drawing circles. So, I was trying to approach them with a sense of their being provisional – just these cast-off symbols.



Vijay Masharani, *Pointer*, 2024, single-channel video. Courtesy: the artist and Kunsthalle Zürich

HB So the circle is both the possibility of fascism and of communism.

VM Yes, in short.

HB In your videos, such as *Grazers* (2025), the use of animation adds a hallucinatory and profoundly subjective dimension that also seems to be the dimension of life.

VM One of the artists that has helped me in the studio is Philip Guston, precisely because he considered his own life to be the substrate of the practice. When I'm trying to make art happen, the lens of life is, for me, the most generative. I realised in a conversation with the poet Benjamin Krusling that my work is more like life writing. It was an epiphany moment. That's when I started letting go of a lot of my anxieties. I realised I could move through the world, always collecting stuff, and then begin to sandbox it together through a collage practice. For me, animation is an extension of that kind of haptic putting things together.



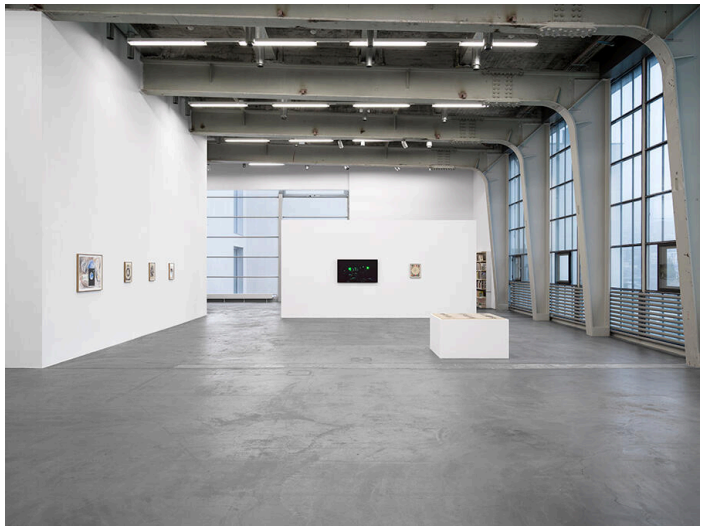
Vijay Masharani, *Glimpsed World*, graphite, pen, conte crayon, coloured pencil on paper, 36 × 25 cm, 2023. Courtesy: the artist and Kunsthalle Zürich

HB There has to be something sustaining and alive. You've said that you developed your drawing practice by producing perspective studies. You seem to relish the strangeness of perspective and how it hovers between abstraction and figuration.

VM I remember this drawing with a vortex in the background, which I made a few years ago. I just liked how refractory, unstable and vibrating the whole thing felt. Every subsequent drawing would feel dead compared to that one. Eventually, I realised that I've always been able to get somewhere else if I'm just a little bit more forgiving of myself.

HB As you mentioned in your lecture, perspective in painting and European colonial conquest happened at around the same time. In this schema of thought, the line or grid functions like the W.E.B. Du Bois line you quoted, 'a spider from hell spinning a web of American gold that envelops the earth' (*The Black Flame*, 1976). The circle is a repudiation of brute linearity. But your work also refuses the simplicity of this binary.

VM The state has a set of legal procedures that authorise, say, carving up the body of an illegitimate subject, or partitioning territory. In *The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (2014), Nahum Dimitri Chandler described race as a system of repetitive marks. When I returned to art after an academic degree, it was really like: wow, drawing a line is loaded. I love those games that are like, how far back in history did all the problems start? I joke that it was the moment that someone drew a line.



Vijay Masharani, 'Big Casino', 2025, installation view, Kunsthalle Zürich. Courtesy: the artist and Kunsthalle Zürich; photograph: Cedric Mussano

HB But in your work, the circle isn't simply the good antithesis of the bad line. The circle can also represent solipsism or a desire for total control. On the positive side of the linear, you talk about how science is a means of survival; it's not only the bad enlightenment or whatever. You sometimes seem like a scientist of art.

VM Maybe that is a relationship with science in my family, because the people in my family are very fact and number-oriented. I was reading Morton Feldman's *Give My Regards to Eighth Street* (2004), in which he writes that art is more like chemistry in its relationship to social good. It might look like artists are doing something relatively narrow and very specific; how it will come to bear on the broader culture is not yet known. Still, we've developed procedures and structures to be systematic about getting from something very experimental. It feels like we're fumbling in the dark, almost, to something that could help.

HB In the videos in 'Big Casino', we see New York subway tunnels, the billionaire fortresses of San Francisco, and then there's the negation of space of the hospital room. I wanted to hear more about the perspectival shifts between these different places.

VM It is related to this life writing thing. I have found less success in my work came from planning than from wandering around and getting surprised at what I stumbled upon. When I moved to Queens after my undergraduate degree, I felt very unmoored, so I sought out Indian neighbourhoods that I had heard referenced in songs. I went to Richmond Hill because Heems rapped about it in 'Soup Boys' (2012). It happened to be around Halloween, and a lot of the houses had the prayer flags out front, but also plastic decorations. I thought that juxtaposition was funny. And that became the basis of the videos with rotary sequences. It's all just happenstance. Then I was like, that worked so well, I'm going to try to do it again. But it's impossible. You go back to the same neighbourhood, but you're different. I used to be afraid of repeating myself, but now, even if I try to repeat myself, I realise that that's impossible.



Vijay Masharani, *Blue Mandala*, 2024, graphite and coloured pencil on paper, 36 × 25 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Kunsthalle Zürich

HB I'm thinking about the happenstance of migration.

VM Yes. My aunt was like, I'm so grateful to Idi Amin for forcing us to leave Uganda because otherwise, I'd be dead from an asthma attack.

HB I'm imagining her meeting Amin in the afterlife and this very confused interaction between them. Guston proposed a certain relationship to chance, right?

VM Yes, in *12 Americans* (1956), Guston wrote: 'Usually, I am on a work for a long stretch, until a moment arrives when the air of the arbitrary vanishes, and the paint falls into positions that feel destined.'

HB So good. I'm thinking about the art historical rupture of modernity and how it opened the artwork up to contingency, away from a particular conception of religious or social obligation, and towards another. What does art do to alter the wound that chance inflicts on meaning?

VM That's a dope question. I don't know. The question of contingency and unknowability has really been hitting me now, with my illness. If these chromosomes split and then fuse together, then you're dead. Talk about a radical sense of contingency. All the symbols and letters of medicine really do mediate biological and chemical processes.

HB In your writing, you seem to see the body, at least in the moment of illness, as stubbornly resistant to interpolation, even indifferent to the self. But maybe illness is a kind of interpolation.

VM People generally don't like to talk and hear about illness. In *Literature and Evil* (1957), Georges Bataille writes about insects drawn to the light and humans flocking to things that connote life and fleeing from things that represent death. Artworks are also *memento moris* that register the belaboured effort to keep clamping down on mortality.



Vijay Masharani, *Two Earths (Red)*, 2024, graphite, gouache, pen, and collage on yupo, 66 × 101 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Kunsthalle Zürich

HB It feels like, perhaps paradoxically, your illness has enlivened something in your work.

VM I feel much more solid. Art feels very easy now. You need to put the time in, of course. Before I got sick, I would ask, is this the right decision? But that's a fake problem. It's not real. Yes, I feel more alive than before. That's my experience, but I'm hesitant to generalize because it can be problematic to associate suffering with enlightenment. Fred Moten wrote a piece on American Artist where he said, what's the meaning of all this suffering, these historical trajectories of degradation, what does it all mean? And he's like, nothing. 'Our travail shows us nothing at all.' (*Cura*, 2022)

HB What came into my head as you said that was corny, it was the Shakespeare line from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: 'The poet's pen gives to airy nothing, a local habitation and a name.' There's something about art not imbuing meaning but taking the nothingness of happenstance and giving it a form.

VM Yes, it doesn't fix the wound, but it gives it a form. Louise Bourgeois said: 'Art is a guarantee of sanity but not liberation.' I've been trying to figure out what Ad Reinhardt wanted artists to be. He saw artists as having a political function, but you would ruin the whole thing if you named it. So, artists are basically like secret stabilisers of contingency.

*Vijay Masharani's 'Big Casino' is at **Kunsthalle Zürich** until 25 May*

Main image: Vijay Masharani, 'Big Casino', 2025, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Kunsthalle Zürich; photograph: Cedric Mussano

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