

## *Artist Pages*



# Rituals, Remembrance, Rupture, and Repair: The Jhandi Flag in Contemporary Guyanese Art

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Across Guyana, clusters of colourful *jhandis* (ceremonial Hindu prayer flags) mounted on tall bamboo poles staked in the ground are a common sight in private home shrines, front yards, temples, public spaces, and near bodies of water to indicate that a Hindu prayer ceremony (*puja*) has been performed. In their ubiquity, these multicoloured jhandi flags signal Hinduism as the nation's second most common religion. As objects, they serve as a sobering reminder of how Hinduism in Guyana, a former British colony, is historically linked to the colonial desire for the cheap labour of Indian bodies, and why it evolved as a dominant spiritual practice. From the nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, a system of indentured servitude replaced the enslavement of African peoples with Indian and Chinese labour. Between 1838 and 1917, over five hundred ships crossed the *kal pani* [Hindi for “dark waters”], depositing more than a quarter-million men and women from India to Guyana's Atlantic coast. Over the last eight decades, as Indians laboured on British-owned sugar plantations and rice fields, the rituals and ceremonies they practised and creatively invented served as a sacred gesture to protect them from the violence and trauma that came with their new identities as migrants on foreign soil. These flags were also staked to honour the Hindu god Hanuman, a symbol of strength and energy, to mark the fields of Indian landowners, and to celebrate one's Hindu heritage.

Michael Lam, Victor Davson, and Bernadette Persaud, three contemporary Guyanese artists of Chinese, African, and Indian heritage, respectively,



FIGURE 1 Michael Lam, *Seaward Bowline* (Kingston, Georgetown, Guyana), from the series *Oniabo*, 2013, digital photography.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

reference the religious iconology of jhandi flags in their artmaking. Transcending notions of Hindu Indian religious symbolism, their artworks illustrate how jhandi flags function as contemporary tools of remembrance, rupture, and repair.

In his black-and-white photography series *Oniabo* (2013), Michael Lam documents the jhandi flags planted on Guyana's bodies of water (figs. 1 and 2). They are often tattered and torn by their exposure to wind and rain. Intentional in his naming, "oniabo" means "water" in the language of the Indigenous Arawak people. The tranquil scenes in *Oniabo* can be deceiving. They implore the viewer to meditate on the historical relationship to water that bonds Guyanese: a sacred and life-giving resource for the country's first peoples, the Amerindians; the means by which European colonizers first arrived; the traumatic transatlantic Middle Passage that brought enslaved Africans to its shores; and the precarious crossings for indentured Indians and Chinese. The jhandi flags in Lam's *Oniabo* mark water as the site where the ancestral histories of Guyanese people and their collective trauma, survival, and spiritual desire all share space.

In his *Jhandi Flags* series (2017), Victor Davson eschews both the triangular shape and material of the jhandi flag by transforming an unstretched canvas with a heavy bath of glitter, sequins, and acrylic paint (figs. 3 and 4). Davson rejects its traditional form because, for him, the jhandi flag is an abstraction, a



FIGURE 2 Michael Lam, *Devotion Point (Bushy Park, Parika, Essequibo, Guyana)*, from the series *Oniabo*, 2013, digital photography.  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

symbol. As the son of a postmaster—whose stations throughout the country allowed him to bear witness to its multi-faith practices, including Hinduism—Davson calls on his childhood; in doing so, the artist, who does not practise Hinduism, nevertheless declares, “I claim the jhandi flag as part of my identity.”<sup>1</sup> In this statement, Davson alludes to the chaotic and divisive period of Guyana’s history during the 1950s and 1960s, as it sought independence from the British. As he travelled the country in his youth, the artist intimately experienced how these tensions exacerbated racial conflicts between Africans and Indians and tore families—and a nation—apart. In turn, Davson envisions jhandi flags as a way, perhaps for all Guyanese, to share in a collective experience of rupture and separation, noting his intention for the work as “a countermeasure to the despair of colonial rule and the indenture experience. These objects occupy a liminal space fraught with uncertainty, shifting boundaries, loss of identity, and desire.”<sup>2</sup>

1 Artist Statement submitted by Victor Davson for the series, *Jhandi Flags* (2017), featured in the group exhibition, *Liminal Space*, curated by Grace Aneiza Ali, at the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute (CCCADI), New York, New York, on view 17 June 2017 to 30 November 2017.

2 Davson, Artist Statement, 2017.



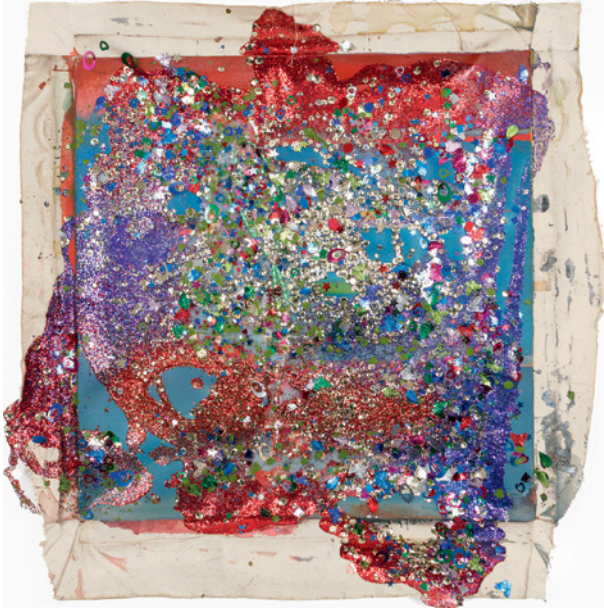


FIGURE 4  
 Victor Davson, *Jhandi Flag #8*, from the series *Jhandi Flags*, 2017, glitter, sequins, acrylic on canvas, 77.5 × 76.8 cm (30.5 × 30.25 inches) (unframed).  
 COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



FIGURE 5  
 Bernadette Persaud, *Colours of God/Self* (detail), 1996, mixed-media construction, varied dimensions.  
 COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

to convey that two centuries later, the violent rupture created by the initial crossing of *kal pani* remains pervasive, but that it equally serves as an urgent call to remember their divine meanings and to return to them as objects of the sacred.

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