

Conflicting Truths

Melissa Joseph





Conflicting Truths

March 8 — April 8, 2023

List Gallery, Swarthmore College

Melissa Joseph





Melissa Joseph and the Art of Salvage

– Tess Wei, exhibition curator

A first dive into a lake, a family gathered for a portrait, a conversation during a kitchen renovation. Images of such moments can feel relatable and even familiar. These scenes of everyday life are central to Melissa Joseph, who uses textiles, clay, paper, and found industrial objects as vehicles for understanding family history and identity within the elastic landscape of memory.

Conflicting Truths: Works by Melissa Joseph, the artist's first major solo exhibition, brings together numerous wall-mounted and sculptural forms that prioritize intimacy in scale, irregular edges, and softness of image. Mining her family's photographic archive as the starting point for her subjects and scenes, Joseph translates carefully selected snapshots through a range of processes, including: altering textiles through wet- and needle-felting, combining differently colored stoneware through inlaying, and forming delicate linen surfaces through paper-making. What unites all of these processes is the use of friction and pressure to transform highly malleable materials into relatively taut forms: repetitively rubbing strands of wool in a soap-and-water mixture to interlace the fibers, flattening clay bodies of differing colors with a rolling pin to create continuous ceramic surfaces, and pouring and dripping linen pulp onto a screen to form an integrated sheet of paper.

Joseph's materials slide, shift, and slosh before they are compressed and dried in place. The image and substrate become one and the same in works such as *Julie at Nan's, blue geometric sweatshirt* (2021, pg. 18), *The Potato Peelers* (2022, pg. 34), and *Big Dad's Funeral* (2021, pg. 25). This union of subject and matter calls attention to the type of significance found in one of the artist's main source materials—her family's photographs. Of course, their printed surfaces offer re-presentations of people and places in moments past. However, the photographs themselves are also Joseph's family heirlooms—fragmentary objects that can embody and activate collective memories.

When visiting Melissa's studio in 2022, I became acutely aware of her complex system of meaning-through-object making. We touched everything in her New York-based ecosystem: extraordinarily soft fibers organized by color in low bins, reclaimed industrial objects dimpled from rust, and fragments of hardened clay—some sharp and some smooth. She took out a stack of family photographs and shuffled through them, describing the stories they carried and sharing a photo that corresponded to one of the



felted cameos in *Albums ½* (2022, pg. 29). Some of the photographs feature Melissa Joseph's late father, Dr. K.C. Joseph, and other paternal relatives of Malayali heritage living in Kerala, India. Other snapshots, taken in the United States, include various maternal family members. Some of the photographs from the 1980's onward show Melissa or occasions at which she was present. However, much of her heirloom source material depicts a space and time quite distant from the artist, such as the portrait that inspired *Kadankavil Family, 1954* (2022, pg. 4).

The magnitude of geographical and temporal change has been evident to Joseph from a young age. Growing up in St. Marys, Pennsylvania, a sparsely populated town with primarily white and working class inhabitants, Joseph's exposure to her Malayali heritage occurred at home with her father. He shared Malayalam language, music, dance, fashion, and flavors—playing songs in the mother tongue, wearing clothing appropriate for Kerala's warm climate, cooking dishes with aromas of rice, not wheat. Together with their family photographs, such moments with her father offered Joseph a glimpse of his life in Kerala before he em-

igrated to the U.S. and became central to her biracial identity. These slivers of experience also allowed her to imagine aspects of the people and places that contributed to her transnational heritage. And so goes the construction of identity in diaspora—pieces brought together to inform a new whole in a new homeland. Here, parallels with Joseph's present-day artistic practice emerge. She is committed to touch, to collecting, to placing fragments into new constellations of significance. In this way, her artworks serve as tributes to memory's malleability, asserting that identity is never an essential fact but, instead, a pliable, resilient, and evolving space.

This retrieval and multiplication of the self is evident in works such as the aforementioned *Kadankavil Family, 1954*. Essentially bifurcated, the left side of the piece is made of inlaid stoneware and the right side

is made of a mixture of needle-felted wool on industrial felt. Together, both sides complete the Kadankavil's family portrait. Despite the harmonious use of matching brown, white, grey, and black tones throughout the piece, there is a friction between the continuous image and the contrast in materials. One cannot help but acknowledge the transitions from firm to soft, natural to industrial, smooth to wavy, and back again. The image is disrupted by this distinction. Yet, it commits to coming together. The resulting composite form successfully translates a nearly seventy-year-old memento from India (before Kerala was even formed) into an expanded and open-ended narrative.

This gesture toward flux is reinforced by other aspects of Joseph's distinct visual language. While looking at *Christmas train* (2021, pg. 21) for example, one begins to make out three figures leaning forward toward toy train tracks underneath the branches of a Christmas tree. Although we are aware of these forms and begin to deduce their relations in space, the boundaries between them remain elusive. The same pressure that fixed the linen pulp surface also warped the image. We are left with an impression that appears familiar but lacks complete articulation. Joseph purposefully introduces such ambiguity into her compositions, leaving space for the imaginative projection required when retrieving and synthesizing complex pieces of family history and selfhood.

Perhaps, Joseph's diverse bodies of work can be described as the art of salvage—an attention to identities and materials that are both hybrid and fluid. Her tendency toward the poetics of salvage is especially evident in works that incorporate found objects—often industrial discards such as bricks, dies, anchors, and so on. Joseph explains that she collects these objects simply when they speak to her and she respects and follows that gravitational pull. Such is the origin of elements like the large, extruded tile in *Bray Sunset #1* (2022), or the distinct mold used to create unni appam (a sweet rice cake popular in Kerala), which she incorporates into *My favorite appam (and idli) wallah* (2022, pg. 13). The very surfaces of these industrial bodies—oxidized, worn, corroded—speak to their history even without greater context.

Joseph allows materials and histories to inflect one another and spark something new. This ability to communicate without being overly prescriptive is a hallmark of the works in *Conflicting Truths*—they emanate a profound emotional content while leaving room for us to consider our own relations to the complicated themes of longing, loss, and belonging. Here, Joseph uses the language of the seam—the coming together of distinct fragments in organic, irregular, and surprising ways—to reimagine the histories and materials she has inherited. In amplifying the unique encounter of these items of significance, she reminds us that memory is not neat and, accordingly, identity is always kaleidoscopic.





In Conversation:
Melissa Joseph & Bakirathi Mani

Professor in the Department of English Literature at Swarthmore College and Founding Member of the Tri-College Asian American Studies Program.

B. Mani: I thought we could begin by asking you to speak more about your own interest in family photography and what I saw as your real deep investment in archiving these images through the practice of your felting, your sculptures, your painting, and all of these different mediums. How do you think about your practice of archiving these images? I guess the better way of putting this question is, how do you think of your work as a method of producing and archiving images and memories of your family—both in the United States and in India?

M. Joseph: That question . . . I think about it a lot. It's one of those things where you start doing something sort of instinctively and then you spend the rest of your life trying to understand the instinct. And I have so many hypotheses about why it's important. It starts to become apparent that first- and second-generation immigrants, especially that I've noticed here in the US—and I can only speak about being a second-generation American born in the US, that's my point of

view, so that's kind of where I'm coming from—but I think these photos are just so important to us for reasons we don't understand from a very young age. There are obvious reasons such as trying to connect identity, trying to understand our identity, trying to know these people that are our family, because the idea of what family is, especially nuclear family that you're fed in media in the US, looks very different from the family that we are naming and experiencing in our homes. And so I think that that's part of what, from a young age, I've been trying to reconcile or what I've been looking for in the images.

It's an experience that is so common, but not so visible in the institutional art world or even the commercial art world. So for me, it feels like important work to be able to put these photos in a space where they are visible, and people have to reckon with them and sort of acknowledge them. And it feels like I'm doing the work for my ancestors. I feel like I'm allowing things that they've done, worked for, and sacrificed to have space and visibility here, because my dad was too busy trying to survive here to be able to do that work. So then I get the opportunity as the next generation to bring attention to that work.

B. Mani: I am really struck by how you say that the experience that you're bringing forward in your work—in your art—is common but it's not visible often in an institutional art world, and how you're bringing these photographs, in one form or the

other, into those spaces so that people have to reckon and acknowledge them. I find that to be just very moving. Your work is also about making us work as viewers. In *Unseeing Empire: Photography, Representation, South Asian America*, I've been thinking a lot about how South Asian immigrants are haunted by a variety of image archives in our attempts to represent ourselves. And I've written about national archives, like colonial or settler-colonial archives. In your practice, with its focus on drawing from family photographs, I actually feel like this incredible sense of release or relief, rather than a sense of haunting. And so I'd love to hear you speak a little more about your relationship to the image archives that you work with, whether photographic or not.

M. Joseph: I really appreciate that read of them and that they can provide that kind of release. I think it's a goal of mine too. I think a lot of artists say, "Make the work that you want to see in the world," and I think that's what this work is for me. I remember there's a part in your book *Aspiring to Home: South Asians in America* where you're talking about this need to kind of cling to a middle-class version of South Asianness. The big takeaway for me was that in America, we South Asians—a broad and very diverse group that's often in conflict on the subcontinent—here, we need to band together under one banner, that doesn't really describe the larger percentage of us, or maybe only a small percentage of us. But it's more in an effort to be recognized as

an American subgroup than actually as a South Asian. I think about that a lot. Why is it that we are doing these sort of subdivisions?

One of the things that these photos from my family archive do is point out where those differentiations break down and it becomes less about being any particular group and more just about socialization and family structures. And so there are certain things that are universal and that is what I'm hoping the images that I choose can communicate. And what happens, because I am coming from a biracial place, is that the skin colors are interchangeable in any of the works, or can mix and match, or both can be included. So people can find a way in regardless of race, hopefully.

But there is very much embedded in my artworks—even in the fact that I often use industrial objects—my own narrative of being raised in a coal mining town in Western Pennsylvania. I'm using wood, and I'm using rusted metal, and I'm using industrial refuse. And so, I think those kinds of things still make them representative of my own narrative, but they also allow space for those objects to contain these much larger stories. I kind of view myself as a container, with a specific package that holds many more stories.

I've described myself as a storykeeper before—that was my role in the family. I think often the youngest child becomes the storykeeper. So the images allow me to sort of hold those stories,

but also place those stories somewhere. Somewhere safe. And by putting them in these objects in a way that I think is with care, or with empathy, I feel like I'm doing my duty to safeguard these stories and put them somewhere for people to access them.

B. Mani: I was using the word "archive" earlier, but I love this idea of how you are framing it as you being a story keeper, and that's kind of a role that you've grown up with in some ways as the youngest child in your family. I feel like those two words, care and empathy, are really qualities that emerge out of your artwork for me in the process of viewing. I feel like there's a real tactile quality to your work that communicates the care with which you're holding these stories.

You had spoken about some of the objects that you used to frame your artwork and the industrial objects, and I'd love to ask you to speak a little further about that. I'm really struck by the weight of these objects.



M. Joseph: I definitely think the objects are storykeepers, especially anything that someone has manufactured has a lot of other people's lives entwined in it. And then things like stones also carry stories of the earth with them too. I've said this before too, but I feel very much like a conduit for the things that I come across and the things that I make. I just am a facilitator, sometimes to help the object find the image and



sometimes to help the image find the object that is meant to be its holder. Sometimes, it's just pairing objects together, not even making an image, but just finding two objects that I feel were meant to find each other. I consider it almost like curating in a way, because I think about the relationships between objects, and it has to do with their proximity and the space relative to me, but also to the space of my studio. Things might live in the studio side-by-side for a while before I understand their relationship to one another. And it can be a formal relationship or it could be an emotional relationship, that can always change.

But there are certain objects I've always been drawn to: always heavy things. I have a part of my artist statement that I wrote a while ago—when I was carving stone—that was just called *On Heaviness*. It's interesting that I found textiles and found felting which is so light and then I'm still finding the need to anchor them into these heavier objects. There's something about the heaviness that for me is a reminder of being here—in a particular place—because it has become so easy to disconnect and not be in a particular place and not acknowledge the things that are right in front of you.

And going back to this idea of social practice, acting locally is where we have the most agency. So if you're constantly avoiding locality then you are going to have a problem in effecting any kind of meaningful change.

B. Mani: As you've spoken about how felting is such a light practice but you've also been attracted to heaviness and, particularly, a comforting weight of heaviness, I am wondering if you can speak to what I've been thinking of as juxtaposition. I use the word "juxtaposition," but I think you would use a different set of words, and I'd love to hear what words you would use.

M. Joseph: I like juxtaposition, or dichotomy, or opposites, all of those words. "Juxtaposition" is great because I think what's nice about juxtaposition is it refers back to this idea of the relationship between objects and space. And that's the center of my practice.

So something happens where I find great joy—again, I don't necessarily know the *why* yet, I'll probably spend the rest of my life trying to understand why—in finding these harmonies between disparate things. It's an endlessly joyful endeavor to find those, and I never stop finding them, which is what keeps me coming back into the studio. This idea that things that ostensibly don't have a connection can make such a whole. I think an obvious thing would be to think about two different cultures coming together, but I've also recently been thinking that binary thinking is the problem of our world. Maybe by highlighting that things that are considered even opposites can feel so whole, there is a path forward with that kind of thought process.

B. Mani: Tess Wei described your work as characterized by pressure or tension or friction, in terms of the sense of layering and compression that's central to your work across different forms. And so for me, the notion of friction or tension was particularly resonant in one of the larger-scale paintings where you depicted your father at the doctors' conference, and that is a really interesting image to me because it looks like he's with his family, but, in fact, they are a group of professional peers. And so, I wondered if you could speak about how Tess's words resonate with you—like pressure, tension, and friction—again, both in terms of your artistic production as well as in terms of your approach to art making or creative practice.

M. Joseph: This is one of the many things that I appreciate about Tess's read of the works, is their ability to not be as close as I am to it, and then therefore, seeing things that I don't see. In this case, the way that I make all these works does involve those things. So, with felting, you are either literally agitating the surface to make the fibers link together, or you are stabbing, with some pressure, the fibers to embed them. Even the sound of the needles going into the foam is a reminder of that friction that is needed for that image to happen. The same with the paper. You're making it, which may be a fluid experience, but then after you make it, it gets pressed by a huge amount of weight to press all the water out. And so, if you're thinking about bodies

moving through space, you're also thinking about bodies hitting into other bodies, and the pressure and the tension and friction that can come from those encounters.

There are all these factors that are contributing to your ideas and your vision that you're forced to respect and sometimes defer to. That part of the process is very exciting to me. There's nothing about my process that involves knowing where it's going to end when I start. And I think that those processes, all those words—the tension and the friction and the pressure—are all just part of the discovery process, or how I view making as a discovery process.

B. Mani: In thinking about how you don't work with an idea of how something is going to end up—it takes its form, in a sense, more organically—can you share with us how you have seen your trajectory as an artist evolve from your early interest in textiles, I guess your lifelong interest in textiles, to the variety of media that you work with now?

M. Joseph: I think when I was growing up the materials that were most accessible to me were kind of craft materials. We were in a small rural town. There wasn't a museum or a mall or an airport for at least three hours driving from where we grew up. So it wasn't like we had access to much art history. My mom was called a



“picture lady,” she would bring reproductions of Mary Cassat or Salvador Dali into the classroom and go from room to room, and that was our exposure to the arts. So I think what I understood more than art as a child, was being a maker. And I still think of myself as a maker and I still think of the things I make as objects. So my relationship to art has been that I've always loved making and it never stopped even when I was doing other things and pursuing other things.

Certain materials offer certain things and have certain abilities to communicate just by virtue of what they are. And so, it was really useful for





me to understand that I'm not limited to really anything when it comes to making. I can use *anything*. I will make with whatever is in my hand. Because the impulse for me is to make. I also love learning. I feel like I learn from these materials. I'm in conversation with and in dialogue with these materials: they do something, I respond, they respond in a certain way, I have to respond to that. It is a really beautiful thing. I love that. I love the discovery. So, the materials are my guides here in the studio, and they are what drive me.

There aren't a lot of people making work that looks like mine and because of that I am learning about this work with everybody else. I can't understand it already because it's not fully derivative of something else. I don't think I need to know and I'm lucky to have people like you and Tess to be able to know more than I know.

B. Mani: So one of the things that you just mentioned was that, "certain material offers certain things." And in our previous conversation, you had spoken about the sense of presence or thingness of your work, or what you called the "thingness" of your work. So, can you share with us how you work with a sense of thingness or presence across different scales?

M. Joseph: One of the things that allows those artworks to feel "thingy" to me is the felt. The felt

is structural, it's a sculptural way of representing the image. So, when I'm done, I still have this thing I can hold—and even I can roll it up and carry it under my arm.

Before felting, I tried to do some bigger paintings and things, and they didn't hold up. They didn't have the presence that you're talking about, that I was trying to communicate. But the felt does. Something about the felt, it is magic. This material is so versatile. It can be a sculpture and a painting at the same time. It can be a thing. I think those photos—going back to the archive—those photos are *things*. They're so much more than just a 2D image. So, I think there's a relationship between how I feel about *things* versus *images*. And I think there's a time and place for all of it. What I'm compelled to make expands beyond the container. These are just portals into something much bigger, at whatever scale they are.

I would like to thank you for these amazing questions—important topics that I think about but don't get to talk about often.

B. Mani: I really felt like I had a chance to enter into your work in this conversation. So thank you for sharing the fullness of your practice and also creating a really open-ended set of narratives about the meaning that your work carries.





22 *Birthday Kisses and Freedom Fighters*, 2022, needle-felted wool on wet felt in found wooden object, 6 x 3 ½ x 4 inches each



Aunt Sue and Lee and Linda, Jeffrey and Homer, 2020, wet-felted wool and sari silk, 38 x 27 x 1 inches 23











Duet with Olive, 2022, needle-felted wool on wet felt in found vintage ball stencil, 10 x 10 x 9 inches





Melissa Joseph (b. 1980) received a Bachelor of Art in Individualized Study from New York University in 2003, an associate's degree in Textile Surface Design from the Fashion Institute of Technology in 2006, a Master of Art Education from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2008, and a Master of Fine Arts from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 2018. Her work has been shown in numerous exhibition spaces, such as the New Art Dealer's Alliance, Miami, FL; the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, Salt Lake City; Dieu Donné, NYC; Jeffrey Deitch, NYC; REGULARNORMAL, NYC; Fleisher Art Memorial, Philadelphia; Bradley Ertaskiran Gallery, Montreal; Bravin Lee, NYC; Rider University, Lawrenceville, NJ; The Delaware Contemporary, Wilmington, DE; Woodmere Art Museum, Philadelphia, PA; and Rider University, Lawrenceville, NJ.

She has been awarded residencies by numerous organizations, including the Museum of Arts and Design, Greenwich House Pottery, the Archie Bray Foundation, Fountainhead Arts, Dieu Donné, Textile Arts Center Artist, and Chautauqua School of Art. Joseph's work has been written about and featured in *Hyperallergic*, *Architectural Digest*, *CNN*, *New American Paintings*, and *Maake Magazine*. She currently lives and works in New York City.

Bakirathi Mani is a scholar of Asian American Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and Transnational Feminist/Queer Studies. She is a professor in the Department of English Literature at Swarthmore College, where she has taught since 2002, and a founding member of the Tri-College Asian American Studies Program.

Mani's most recent book, *Unseeing Empire: Photography, Representation, South Asian America* (Duke University Press, 2020) earned an Honorable Mention Book Award from the Association of Asian American Studies in 2022. *Unseeing Empire* considers how empire continues to haunt contemporary photographic representations of South Asians in America, shaping both the form of racial representation as well as how diasporic viewers claim and identify with these images.

Mani's writing has been published widely, including in *American Quarterly*, *Social Text*, *The Journal of Asian American Studies*, *Diaspora, Positions*, and *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas*. She received her Ph.D. in Modern Thought and Literature from Stanford University, her Master's in Art in Modern Indian History from Jawaharlal Nehru University, and her B.S.F.S. in Non-Western History and Diplomacy from Georgetown University.

Tess Wei is an artist, curator, and writer born and based in Philadelphia. They received a BA from Swarthmore College and a MFA from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Tess is currently the Exhibitions Manager and Assistant Curator at the List Gallery, Swarthmore College, and a member of the artist-run collective AUTOMAT in Philadelphia. Recently, they taught as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Art at Swarthmore College, and had a solo exhibition of paintings at Larry Becker Contemporary Art in Philadelphia.

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Cover image: see page 9
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Inside front cover: *Continuity, after Boccioni*, 2022, inlaid stoneware, needle-felted wool on industrial felt, 10 x 13 ¾ inches

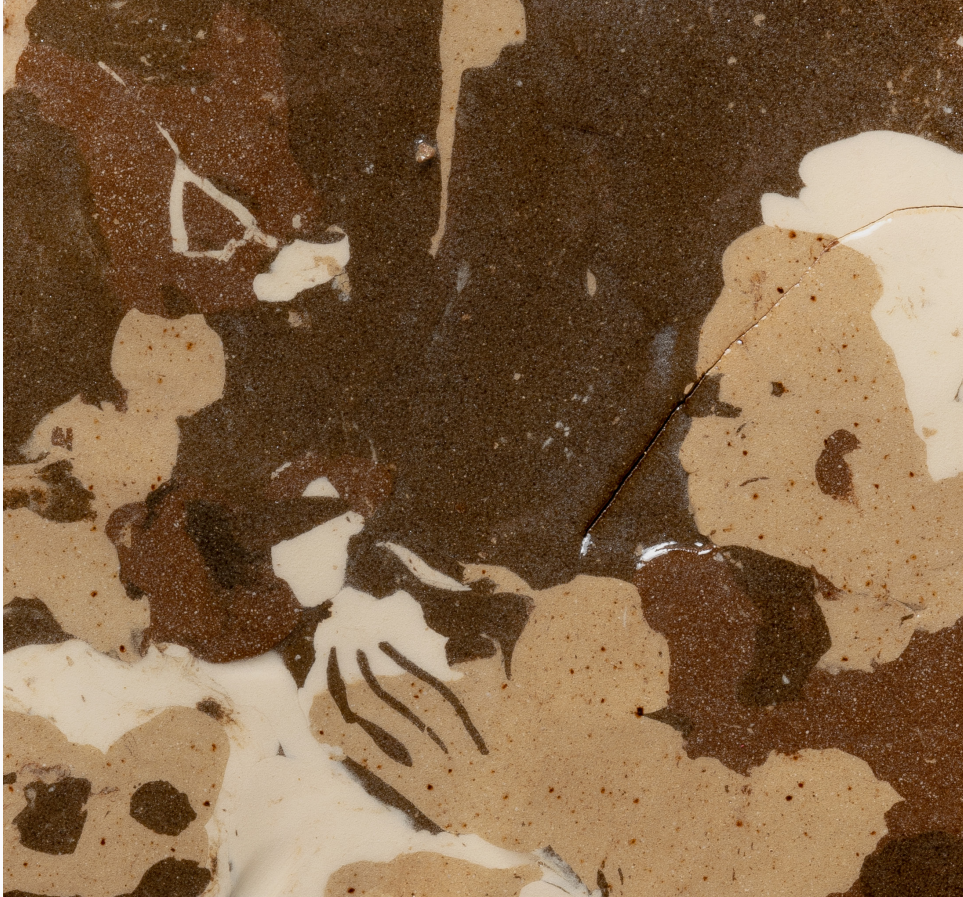
Page 24: *Mom and Ollie doing yoga*, 2021, linen pulp paint with abaca base sheet, 30 x 40 inches [unframed]

Page 25: *Big Dad's Funeral*, 2021, linen pulp paint with abaca base sheet, 30 x 40 inches [unframed]

Page 28: *Aunt Jeanne and Aunt Francie in OCNJ*, 2020, wet-felted wool, 30 x 36 x 1 inches

Opposite: *After Thanksgiving Dinner, 1983*, 2020, wet-felted wool and sari silk, 19 x 22 x 1 inches





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