



VISUAL ART

Kyoto Prize winner uses surreal art forms to make sense of the world's ugly realities



Visual artist Nalini Malani, a 2023 Kyoto Prize Laureate, will speak March 14 at UC San Diego as part of the Kyoto Prize Symposium. (Courtesy of The Inamori Foundation)

Indian artist Nalini Malani will talk about her life and work at the Kyoto Prize Symposium this week in La Jolla

BY DEAN NELSON

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When Nalini Malani was 12, and visiting Tokyo with her parents in the 1950s, her mother told her that they would have difficulty ordering food in a restaurant, since few people at the time spoke English.

Malani wondered what they would do. She decided she would draw what the family wanted.

“I learned to draw well, just eggs and shrimp and chicken and different vegetables,” she said. The shopkeepers were amused. “I was a little girl saying could we have some eggs?”

At home she practiced, wanting her drawings to look exactly like the object she was trying to portray.

Malani no longer creates art that looks exactly like the object. Her art now is considered “phantasmagorical,” or something surreal, as if created from a dream. It could be summed up in the title of one of her award-winning installations: “My Reality is Different.”

Malani, who recently was awarded the 2023 Kyoto Prize in the category of Arts and Philosophy, will be in San Diego Thursday as part of the nonprofit Kyoto Prize Symposium hosted by UC San Diego and Point Loma Nazarene University (PLNU). Since 2002, the symposium has generated more than \$4.8 million for scholarships, fellowships and other educational opportunities in the San Diego-Baja region. Her lecture, along with two others on Wednesday by, or about, the other 2023 Kyoto Prize Laureates, are free to the public.



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Addressing social problems

These days, instead of drawing food, Malani directs her art toward social problems. War, for instance.

“If adults want to start wars between themselves, so be it,” Malani said, in a recent interview. “But why should the children suffer? I try to find a form. Because how else to make sense of it?”

Malani recently used her iPad to sketch a little girl skipping, with blood slowly oozing out of her body. After skipping for a while she says, “I’m tired, I’m tired, I’m tired.” It’s a way for Malani to imagine what is happening in Russia, Ukraine, Gaza, Israel, Syria, Yemen, Mexico and your neighborhood.

“You see these pictures in the newspapers and usually you want to weep,” she said. “But that doesn’t help anybody. How else can you bring it out? It’s a cry. To find a form for it is important for me.”

Other topics she addresses in her art are religious conflicts, discrimination and oppression of the poor. Her focus now is on what hurts her head and her heart, she said. And instead of paper and pencil, she uses video, shadow plays, projection, revolving lanterns, animation, painting and, of course, her skillful drawings.



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Michael Trigilio, director of UC San Diego's Suraj Israni Center for Cinematic Arts, will host Malani's appearance. He said she is considered the pioneer of video art in India.

"Malani courageously forged a way for women artists in India in the 1960s during a time when such a career path was inconceivable," he said. "Her efforts to reflect the possibility of a better world are nothing short of visionary."

Malani's childhood experience as a refugee during the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan shaped both her art and her identity. After moving to India from what had become Pakistan, the family moved from community to community, always as outsiders. She studied in Mumbai, then Paris, and returned to Mumbai where she focused her art on what she was seeing around her. Her art became a form of activism.

"I aim that way (toward activism)," she said. "A lot of artists would say 'no, I'm not political.' But what's not political? Today the water you drink is political."

Lael Corbin, who teaches art history at PLNU, said students love to study her work.

"Women from Pakistan and India have led the way in feminism for global artists," he said. "She is both subtle and sophisticated. She seems fearless."



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Her works have garnered attention worldwide, most recently in a solo exhibition that concluded last year at The National Gallery in London, with works in the permanent collections of prestigious institutions such as New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Centre Pompidou in France.

She received an honorary doctorate in fine arts from the San Francisco Art Institute in 2010 and was the first non-Western artist to receive the prestigious Joan Miró Prize in 2019.

One of her works was part of the collection donated to UCSD last year by Iris and Matthew Strauss. It will be exhibited in the Strauss Family Meta Gallery in the university's new Triton Center, scheduled to open in 2026.

"I am still very interested in alternative systems of critical thought and passionate about pioneering artistic expression which can touch our spirits," she said in her acceptance speech last fall in Kyoto. "I feel art has a function, more than ever before: to return us to that part of the human we deny, the part that thwarts our capacity to make sense of what we see and hear."

Nalini Melani is no longer drawing food. She's creating food for thought.



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About the Kyoto Prize

The Kyoto Prize is presented each year by Japan's nonprofit Inamori Foundation to individuals and groups worldwide who have demonstrated outstanding contributions to the betterment of society in the categories of Advanced Technology, Basic Sciences, and Arts and Philosophy. The prize consists of academic honors, a gold medal and a cash gift of 100 million yen (more than \$750,000) per category, making it Japan's highest private award for global achievement. Kyoto Prizes were awarded last year to Nalini Malani in the category of Arts and Philosophy; the late Dr. Ryuzo Yanagimachi in the category of Advanced Technology; and to Dr. Elliott Lieb in the category of Basic Sciences. The Inamori Foundation is a nonprofit established in Kyoto, Japan, in 1984 by the late Dr. Kazuo Inamori, whose career included founding Kyocera Corp. and serving as honorary adviser to both KDDI Corp. and Japan Airlines. Inamori created the Kyoto Prize in reflection of his belief that people have no higher calling than to strive for the greater good of humankind and society, and that the future of humanity can be assured only when there is a balance between scientific progress and spiritual depth.

The Kyoto Prize Symposium

10 to 11:30 a.m. Wednesday — "My Journey Through Physics & Mathematics" by Elliott Lieb, a pioneer of mathematical research in physics, chemistry and quantum information science based on many-body physics. Online only.

1 to 2:30 p.m. Wednesday — W. Steven Ward, director of the Institute for Biogenesis Research at the University of Hawaii, will present a lecture on the late professor Ryuzo Yanagimachi's life and work. Yanagimachi was a reproductive biologist who made revolutionary contributions to both obstetric medicine and mammalian embryology.

10 to 11:30 a.m. Thursday — "My Reality Is Different" by Nalini Malani, an international artist specializing in a broad range of visual genres, including video, projection, painting and drawing installations.

Where: Price Center, Ballroom East, UC San Diego campus, 3135 Matthews Lane, La Jolla

Admission: Free

Reserve tickets: kyotoprize-us.org/event-registration

Kyoto Prize Scholarship Gala

When: 5:30 p.m. Wednesday

Where: San Diego La Jolla Marriott, 4240 La Jolla Village Drive, La Jolla

Tickets: \$350 and up

Phone: (858) 733-0323

Online: kyotoprize-us.org/about-1

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