

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT SOCIOLOGY & HUMANITIES



ISSN 2277 – 9809 (online)

ISSN 2348 - 9359 (Print)

An Internationally Indexed Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

www.IRJMSH.com
www.isarasolutions.com

Published by iSaRa Solutions

From Canvas to Immersive Space: The Emergence of Video Art Installation in Contemporary Indian Art

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Abstract

The emergence of video art installation in India represents an important transformation in the development of contemporary visual art. The shift from traditional two-dimensional practices such as painting and drawing towards time-based, spatial and multimedia forms expanded the possibilities of artistic expression and audience engagement. Nalini Malani occupies a significant position in this transition and is widely recognised as one of the pioneering figures of video and multimedia art in India. Her artistic journey demonstrates a gradual movement from painting and drawing towards performance, experimental practices, video, projection and immersive installation.

This paper examines Nalini Malani's contribution to the emergence and development of video art installation within contemporary Indian art. It focuses on the evolution of her artistic practice, the influence of Partition, displacement, gender, violence, mythology, literature and social injustice on her work, and her experimentation with new technologies and spatial forms. Selected works such as *In Search of Vanished Blood* and *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* are examined to understand her use of multiple projections, sound, animation, text and spatial arrangements. The study argues that Malani's contribution lies not merely in adopting video as a medium, but in transforming the gallery space into an immersive environment where image, sound, movement, memory and narrative interact. Her practice therefore represents an important stage in the emergence of video art installation as a significant form of contemporary Indian visual expression.

Keywords: Nalini Malani, Contemporary Indian Art, Video Art, Video Installation, Multimedia Art, Installation Art, Drawing, Painting, Indian Contemporary Visual Art

Introduction:

Indian culture is regarded as one of the oldest cultural traditions in the world. Over thousands of years of transformation and development, various art forms within Indian culture have acquired unique significance. Many of these art forms became integrated with society and entered the public

sphere, while others remained confined to domestic activities or individual spaces. Despite this distinction, the diversity of these art forms and the ideas underlying them continue to be important subjects of research.

Both women and men have made efforts at various levels to preserve and sustain these art traditions. However, historically, women's participation in public art and in art used in commercial or professional spaces remained limited. At the domestic level, women developed and preserved numerous artistic traditions. For example, *ovis*—traditional songs sung while working at the grinding stone—as well as specific songs, arrangements, decorative practices, and other creative activities associated with cooking and household work have a very ancient tradition. These practices helped nurture and preserve artistic abilities among women. However, such artistic skills did not receive equivalent recognition or opportunities in professional and commercial fields.

During the pre-independence period, social reformers such as Savitribai Phule, Ramabai Ranade, Pandita Ramabai, and Ahilyabai Holkar advocated strongly for women's education and empowerment. Subsequently, many women also played important roles in India's freedom struggle. Nevertheless, women's participation in the professional art world remained extremely limited. In the field of visual art, Amrita Sher-Gil was among the pioneering women artists whose presence marked an important development in women's participation in modern Indian art. Following her path, many women artists made significant and distinctive contributions to the field.

One of the prominent names among these artists is Nalini Malani. This research paper examines her significant contribution to contemporary Indian visual art, particularly her pioneering work in video art and installation.

Brief Introduction to Nalini Malani:

Nalini Malani is a contemporary Indian artist who is recognised as one of the first-generation video artists in India. She was born in Karachi in 1946. She is the only child of Satni Advani (a Sindhi Sikh) and Jairam Malani (a Theosophist). Born in Karachi, Sindh, in what was then British India and is now Pakistan, Malani's family moved to India during the Partition. The family initially relocated to Kolkata, where her father worked for Tata Airlines, later known as Air India, and subsequently moved to Mumbai in 1954. There, they lived in a colony established for displaced Sindhis.

Malani received her Diploma in Fine Arts from the Sir J. J. School of Art in Mumbai in 1969. She also had a studio at the Bhulabhai Desai Memorial Institute in Breach Candy, Mumbai, an important multidisciplinary centre where artists, musicians, dancers, and theatre practitioners worked individually and collectively. She worked there between 1964 and 1967. This environment provided her with opportunities to meet and collaborate with practitioners from theatre and other experimental and artistic disciplines.

At the Vision Exchange Workshop (VIEW) in Bombay (Mumbai), organised by the late artist Akbar Padamsee, she presented one of her early experimental video and multimedia installations.

She was the youngest and the only woman among the participating artists in the workshop. From the beginning of her career, she was conscious of the barriers faced by women artists in India. Frustrated by the lack of recognition despite producing high-quality artistic work, she sought to encourage solidarity among women artists. In 1985, she curated the first exhibition of Indian women artists in Delhi, bringing women artists together through a collective exhibition.

Between 1970 and 1972, she received a French Government scholarship to study Fine Arts in Paris. She also received two scholarships from the Government of India, as well as grants to travel and work in the United States. Throughout her career, she has produced an extensive body of work. Her works have been exhibited and collected by several prestigious museums and institutions around the world, and she has received numerous national and international honours.

In addition to her artistic achievements, Nalini Malani has been an active advocate for women's rights and social justice. She has worked with organisations concerned with human rights and has participated in initiatives aimed at empowering marginalised communities in India. Alongside her practice as an artist, she has also contributed to art education and has taught at various art institutions in India. She has mentored young artists and contributed to the growth of the Indian art community by encouraging artistic exploration and new talent. Her contribution to Indian art continues to inspire younger generations of artists through both her artistic practice and teaching.

Intellectual and Artistic Foundation:

Nalini Malani draws her artistic inspiration from a wide range of sources, including Indian folk art, traditional Indian culture, nature, literature, and her personal experiences. She has been deeply influenced by the vibrant colours and textures of Indian folk traditions, which she incorporates into her distinctive artistic language.

Nature is another important source of inspiration in her work. Her artistic practice frequently reflects her engagement with landscapes, changing seasons, natural environments, and the relationship between human beings and nature.

Her personal experiences and observations of life in India have also played an important role in shaping her work. Her artistic practice often explores the experiences of individuals and communities and reflects upon the conflicts, struggles, and moments of resilience that shape everyday existence. Through her work, she seeks to engage with the complexity and diversity of Indian culture and communicate these concerns to a wider international audience.

Nalini Malani is also known for her engagement with social and political issues. Her works frequently address themes such as gender equality, social justice, displacement, violence, environmental concerns, and human rights. By addressing these issues through art, she encourages viewers to reflect upon contemporary social realities and the role of art in creating awareness and critical dialogue.

The experience of displacement and exile following the Partition of India has remained a recurring element in Malani's artistic practice. The deep impact of migration and Partition can be traced throughout her work. Although her subjects expanded over time to include various social and political conditions, the communal violence that occurred in India during the early 1990s, particularly following the demolition of the Babri Masjid, brought a significant transformation in her artistic practice. Memories of Partition began to reappear in her work.

This renewed experience of religious conflict pushed her artistic thinking beyond the boundaries of the traditional two-dimensional surface and into spatial and immersive environments. This development contributed significantly to her exploration of video installation as an artistic medium. Her earlier engagement with performance and her interest in literature further expanded the conceptual and expressive dimensions of her practice.

Analysis of Artworks and Artistic Style:

Nalini Malani is widely recognised for her innovative video art installations. Her practice explores complex themes such as violence, conflict, Indian culture, personal experience, memory, gender, identity, and displacement. Her installations often incorporate multiple simultaneous projections, soundscapes, moving images, text, and spatial elements, creating immersive environments that encourage viewers to engage critically and emotionally with the work.

One of her significant video installations, *In Search of Vanished Blood*, explores the impact of violence and conflict in India through a complex arrangement of interconnected images and sounds. The work makes sophisticated use of multi-channel projection. It incorporates imagery related to riots, protests, and other forms of social unrest alongside references to nature and traditional Indian culture. Through this combination, Malani creates a layered representation of India's complex social and political landscape.

Another important video installation, *Remembering Toba Tek Singh*, explores the trauma associated with the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan. The installation incorporates a large-scale projection of the handwritten text of a story by writer Saadat Hasan Manto. Music, spoken words, and sound elements contribute to a powerful and emotional representation of the impact of Partition on individuals and communities.

Nalini Malani's artistic style is characterised by experimentation with form, texture, colour, and technology, together with an exploration of complex themes such as gender, identity, memory, violence, and social justice. Her works demonstrate a sustained engagement with Indian mythology, literature, cultural history, and contemporary social realities. They are often charged with a sense of urgency and activism.

Her practice is recognised for its innovative use of technology, visual and auditory complexity, and ability to engage with significant social and political issues in unconventional and thought-provoking ways. She works across multiple media, including theatre, video, installation, mixed-media painting, and drawing. Over the course of her career, she has developed an iconic visual

language through techniques such as stop-motion, erasure animation, reverse painting, and, more recently, digital animation.

Contribution of Nalini Malani to Contemporary Indian Visual Art:

Nalini Malani's contribution to contemporary art is significant and far-reaching. She is recognised as one of India's important contemporary artists, and her work has played an influential role in shaping discussions surrounding contemporary art in India and internationally.

One of her major contributions to contemporary art has been her experimentation with form, medium, and technology. She has worked across painting, drawing, installation, video art, and multimedia. Her practice frequently incorporates innovative techniques and technological approaches. In particular, her use of multiple projections has been highly influential in demonstrating the possibilities of video and multimedia installation and has inspired subsequent generations of artists to explore these mediums.

Another important contribution is her sustained engagement with complex social and political issues. Her work explores themes of gender, identity, memory, displacement, violence, and social justice and is often characterised by a strong sense of urgency and activism. Through her artistic practice, she raises important questions regarding the role of art in society and the responsibility of artists to engage with social issues.

Her works are particularly recognised for their visual richness and layered imagery. They bring together elements of mythology, literature, cultural memory, and contemporary social realities. Her artistic practice has received widespread recognition for its distinctive visual language and ability to combine traditional cultural references with contemporary technologies.

Nalini Malani's contribution to contemporary art has therefore extended beyond the creation of individual artworks. Through her experimentation, teaching, advocacy, and engagement with younger artists, she has contributed to the development of India's contemporary art discourse and continues to inspire emerging artists and audiences.

Awards and Honours:

Nalini Malani's works have been exhibited and collected by numerous prestigious museums and institutions around the world. She has received several national and international awards and honours. Among the significant recognitions associated with her career are:

- **2010:** Honorary Doctorate in Fine Arts, San Francisco Art Institute, USA.
- **2013:** Fukuoka Arts and Culture Prize for Contemporary Art, Fukuoka, Japan.
- **2014:** St. Moritz Art Masters Lifetime Achievement Award, St. Moritz, Switzerland.
- **2016:** Asia Arts Game Changer, Asia Society, Hong Kong.
- **2019:** Joan Miró Prize, Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona, Spain.

Her works have been exhibited at renowned museums and institutions around the world, including the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and The Museum of Modern Art in New York. Her video installations have also been presented at major international art institutions and biennales, including the Venice Biennale, The Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul.

In 2013, she became the first Asian woman artist to receive the Fukuoka Arts and Culture Prize, recognising her sustained focus on contemporary and universal themes such as religious conflict, war, violence against women, and environmental destruction.

Conclusion:

- Nalini Malani is a prominent Indian contemporary artist who has made significant contributions to the field of video art.
- She is recognised for her innovative use of video technology to create immersive and thought-provoking installations that explore social, political, and cultural issues.
- Her video art installations frequently incorporate multi-channel projections, creating visual and auditory environments that surround and engage the viewer.
- Her work demonstrates a sustained exploration of complex themes such as violence, conflict, Indian culture, personal experience, memory, gender, and displacement.
- Her practice is characterised by layered imagery, soundscapes, and narrative strategies that challenge conventional storytelling and offer new perspectives on complex social issues.
- Her contribution to the worlds of art and activism has earned her widespread recognition and appreciation. Her innovative and thought-provoking works have inspired audiences and encouraged artists to explore new forms of artistic expression.
- Through her artistic practice, teaching, and mentorship, Nalini Malani continues to inspire younger generations of artists and contributes significantly to the development of contemporary Indian art.

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