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UCT graduate traces and rewrites her Indian indenture ancestry in SA through art



Zenaéca Singh

Photo: Lerato Maduna

The history of the indentured Indians who left their homeland to work in the sugar plantations in the British Colony of Natal from 1860 to 1911 will come into focus when University of Cape Town (UCT) visual artist Zenaéca Singh graduates with her Master's in Fine Art on Wednesday, 10 September 2025. This marks a key moment in her artistic journey to unleash this history of indentured Indians through art.

At the advent of indentureship, more than 150 000 Indians migrated to Natal with promises of a better life, which never happened. Instead, working conditions were punitive with pathetic wages, poor housing conditions, extended working hours and numerous injustices on sugar estates.

Singh's work focuses on the "complex history of the sugar economy in South Africa and its entanglement with migration, colonialism, labour exploitation, and the dynamics of the domestic sphere," through painting and sculpting with sugar.

"My use of sugar expands on its cultural economy to include the lost history of indenture, connecting the nuances between slavery and indentureship. I use sugar, in its varying liquid and solid properties, to reflect upon the sticky residues of the archive. I extend the medium of sugar as a marker of mourning and strength. The ways in which sugar reacts to different materialities represents the slow violence of indentureship. However, the sweetness of sugar also speaks to the desires of descendant communities to work through their historical trauma and find a means to be seen and recognised," she said in her master's explication text.

A personal and political investigation into indentureship

Singh is a fourth-generation Indian born in South Africa. This investigation into indentureship is both a personal and political one. Her paintings, sculptures and installations aim to interrogate and reinterpret the mostly state-produced archival materials relating to the lives of indentured ancestors and their descendants. It also intends to honour the resilience and acts of self-making against all the odds against the Indian community.

She uses family photographs to envision "an intimate picture of the lived experiences of South African Indians, which remains silenced in colonial documentation".

Singh also creates sculptures of melting sugar ships to represent the shifting relations between India and South Africa via the Indian Ocean, including Britain's colonisation of both nations during the late 19th century. Much of her subject matter relates to domestic life: For instance, *It's Playtime*, a series of five portraits of children playing in a yard which is part of an ongoing series of paintings where she translates her own family photos onto hand-made sugar-paste, painting with molasses and preserving the artworks in resin; and her sculpture *High Tea*, in sugar, clay and resin, is a sculpture of melting sugar-ships aimed at highlighting the implications of British colonialism on domestic life, and critiquing British 'high tea' culture.

Debunking the "sugar coating"

Sugar references are everywhere in her work. She also looks at how colonial archives or governments used "sugar coating" to try to "obscure the narrative of indentured Indians".

"There's also this conception that there was a linear transition from slavery to indenture, which wasn't the fact. It was purely another cheap labour source for colonial administrators and sugar barons to establish a booming sugar economy in South Africa," she said. She believes in the importance of seeing the history of indentureship through the eyes of the plantation workers and their descendants.

Singh received numerous awards for her BA in Fine Art and was also a UCT Accelerated Transformation of the Academic Programme (ATAP) fellow. She completed her master's with distinction at UCT's Michaelis School of Fine Art. Her work forms part of several private collections. She has had numerous art exhibitions locally and abroad. Last year, she was commissioned to make a sculpture for the new Fenix museum of migration in Rotterdam, Netherlands, which forms part of Fenix's permanent exhibit *All Directions* (2025).

A lifelong passion for art

Born and raised in Port Shepstone on KwaZulu-Natal's south coast, Singh always wanted to be an artist. "It was not an easy journey. I do not come from an artistic background, and I grew up largely self-taught." She later went to the National School of Arts in Johannesburg. She described her creative practice as research led. "My great-great-grandfather arrived in KZN as indentured labour, but this was relatively silenced in our family. I grew up not knowing much about this history."

Visualising the lost stories in the archives

Singh said the history of Indians and indentured labour in South Africa is better documented than the history of slavery. "I was able to find the colonial archives and learn about it for myself. My predicament was that these archives only offered the colonial gaze and not the voices of the people who were actually affected, and how they experienced it," she explained. "That's where my practice came into play, trying to visualise the lost stories in these archives and to dispel the many misconceptions."

Her master's thesis examined South African Indian historiography through a gendered lens to focus on the stories of indentured and passenger Indian women in South Africa then. "Indian women were sidelined or defined by colonial and patriarchal structures that either constructed them socially as chaste or subservient wives and daughters. On the other hand, they were also exoticised. The colonial psyche saw Indians as 'other', so notions of Indian womanhood were largely over-determined by the colonial and male gaze," she said.

Singh hopes to do further research into South African Indians' identity and is looking into doing a PhD, which dives deeper into the broader global aspects of indenture. In the meantime, she's moving from one exciting exhibition and commission to the next, including the commissioned sugar-ship work titled "25 days' for Fenix," an upcoming exhibition reflecting on colonial photography in Rietberg Museum, Switzerland; and an exhibition titled *Entangled* at Rhodes House at Oxford University, which reflects on monumental representations of marginal identities.

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