D’Souza, Aruna. “For South Asian Artists, Identity Doesn’t Fit in a Box,” *The New York Times*, August 2025

Brendan Fernandes, “In Two XI,” 2025 digital print. Courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.

Ask the Guadeloupean artist Kelly Sinnapah Mary about her origins and the answer is, to say the least, complicated. As a child, she thought that she was of African descent, like many of the people around her. It was only later that she realized that her ancestors — like millions of others around the globe in the 19th and early 20th centuries — had actually come to the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe generations earlier as indentured workers from South Asia.

Her paintings, sculptures and ceramics, which layer Caribbean, South Asian and African cultural references, are a record of her search to learn how she and her family ended up so far from their original home, and understand the cultural melting pot they experienced in their new one. Schoolgirls ride a lion in one of her paintings, hair fanning out in an unmistakable reference to the Hindu goddess Durga. The landscape they’re in is Caribbean. Sinnapah Mary’s name for them is Sanbras — her play on Sambo, from the children’s book character Little Black Sambo — whose name has come to represent the worst kind of anti-Black stereotype, but who, in the original telling, was Tamil, like the artist.

Tracing a single origin of her imagery would be impossible, which is exactly the point.

She’s part of a wave of South Asian diasporic artists, writers and filmmakers who have taken up stories of how and why their ancestors ended up in unexpected places around the world, and the cultures they experienced and created there. That includes the film director Mira Nair — mother of the New York City mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani — whose breakout 1991 movie “Mississippi Masala,” starring Denzel Washington and Sarita Choudhury, focused on a Ugandan family of South Asian origin who moves to the United States.

Works like Sinnapah Mary's may also shed light on Mamdani's response to why he checked both the "Asian" and "Black or African American" boxes on a college application: "I checked multiple boxes trying to capture the fullness of my background," he said.

I spoke to four artists about how they weave their own sense of place and belonging into their work.

'All Those Things Have Evaporated'

"I know my origins are in India, but I don't know enough about that place, that culture," says Kelly Sinnapah Mary. "I can search my genealogy and find those records, but the language, the religion, the ritual, all those things have evaporated." Waves of migrants left South Asia starting in the early 19th century for different reasons — some to open shops in towns newly established by colonizers, some to work as colonial administrators. But between 1833 and 1920, a vast number — around 1.6 million, along with their families — did so in the hope of escaping the dire poverty and caste discrimination of their homelands by becoming indentured laborers.

The British transported these workers throughout their empire and supplied other colonial powers as well. Alongside laborers from China, South Asians were dropped off in places as far-flung as Fiji, Mauritius, South Africa, East Africa and the Caribbean. There they took the places of newly emancipated plantation workers of African origin after England abolished slavery, working under conditions that were nearly as harsh. Though the workers signed contracts promising that at the end of their term they could return to India, in practice it was nearly impossible to do so.

For Sinnapah Mary, this history both complicates and clarifies her sense of where she comes from. "I know my origins are in India, but I don't know enough about that place, that culture. I can search my genealogy and find those records, but the language, the religion, the ritual, all those things have evaporated." "We have some vestiges in our food, some words from our original language," she said, "but really, I am Caribbean, full stop."

A 'Complicating Factor'

A portrait of the artist Brendan Fernandes, wearing all black, with his hands clasped behind his back.
The Chicago-based artist Brendan Fernandes, whose great-grandparents immigrated from Goa, India, identifies as "a Kenyan Indian Goan who is Canadian-slash-American." "I identify as a Kenyan Indian Goan who is Canadian-slash-American," said Brendan Fernandes, a Chicago-based artist whose work melds dance, sculpture, installation and performance, in a recent conversation. "I'm also queer, a punk rocker, and a ballerina."

Fernandes's great-grandparents migrated from Goa, then a Portuguese colony on the western coast of India, to Nairobi in the 19th century to administer the building of railroads. Fernandes subsequently moved to Canada with his parents in the 1980s and recently became a U.S. citizen. He sees himself as a "complicating factor" in an art world that he said often relies upon fixed identity categories like Black, Latino, Asian and so forth.

His background is considered so unfamiliar that his work was once dropped from a book about Black and African futurisms when the editors realized they had mistakenly assumed that since he was African, he must be Black. "People will say to me, 'Well, you're not African.' And I'm like, 'Why am I not African?'" he said. "The continent of Africa is vast. It's not a monolithic space, but people try to put me into a very monolithic narrative."

Fernandes has traveled to India as an adult — including to Goa, where he said he was struck by the way the shrimp curry he ate at restaurants was almost exactly like that of his grandmother, even though she never left Kenya. The persistence of such cultural practices over time and geography fuels his work, which will be on view in New York at his solo show of photography and sculpture at Susan Inglett Gallery, opening Sept. 4. “I’ve always looked at questions of authenticity, homemaking, belonging, the migration of cultural artifacts, and so on,” he said.

For an upcoming public art project, he plans on working with cowrie shells. “You can find them on the beaches of Kenya, you can find them on the beaches of Goa,” he said. “They’re just like the spices that were crossing the sea, connecting these two places before European colonizers ever showed up.”

Staking Out a Place

The artist Shivanjani Lal, in a blue and white dress, smiles as she stands in front of an artwork laid on a table.Shivanjani Lal traces her ancestry to indentured laborers who left India to go to Fiji in 1879. Poring through historical shipping manifests, Shivanjani Lal’s cousin discovered that their shared paternal ancestors were on the first boat of indentured laborers who left India to go to Fiji in 1879. By the time her family immigrated to Australia in 1985, the Indo-Fijian population outnumbered Indigenous Fijians, a factor that led to a military coup in 1987 and an exodus of people of South-Asian origin in its wake.

“India for me is an ancestral homeland,” she said, “but the place my ancestors left in 1879 was very different to what it is now.” This is especially the case with respect to caste discrimination, which Lal said her family was able to escape by moving to Fiji, and then to a much more multicultural Australia. The flip side, she said, is that “Australia was a beneficiary of a lot of the sugar money that my family and community produced” on Fijian plantations.

An art installation comprising 87 plaster-cast sugar cane stalks that sprout from brass bases.
Shivanjani Lal’s “Aise Aise Hai (how we remember)” (2023), a memorial to the history of indentured workers. Lal’s “Aise Aise Hai (how we remember)” (2023) is an installation of 87 plaster-cast sugar cane stalks that sprout from brass bases, one stalk for each ship that carried more than 60,000 indentured workers from the subcontinent to the Pacific island; the stalks are set just far enough apart that viewers can enter the mazelike space. “In my work, there’s always an invitation to walk with this history — not around it, but through it.” The installation formed the centerpiece of her presentation at the 2025 Sharjah Biennial, titled “I Felt Whole Histories.” Also included was a film that interweaves the landscapes of Fiji with a song sung by diasporic women in Fijian Hindi dialect asking who will continue to tell their community’s stories.

In Australia, she identifies herself as a Pacific person with South Asian heritage. But in other places, despite having lived in Australia since she was a child, she is Indo-Fijian — in part, she says, because she feels it’s important to stake out a place for her community’s culture in a global context. “There’s not really an art school in Fiji. The sign on the door of the National Gallery in Fiji is a piece of paper. And there are very few Indo-Fijian artists,” she said.

‘I Wanted to Know Them’

The painter Ravelle Pillay uses family lore and historical records to shine a light on her ancestors, who came as indentured laborers from India to South Africa. The painter Ravelle Pillay mines family lore and historical archives to bring to light her ancestors, who came as indentured laborers from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu to South Africa in the 19th century.

“It’s incredibly hard to find them and to place yourself,” she said. “You look for their names in the archives, and you have to associate their names with indenture numbers. And these indenture numbers could be right, or they could be wrong. Their names could be spelled correctly or spelled badly. They could be mistaken for somebody else,” she explained. “It’s evidence of a lack of care.”

Her paintings — whether of people in historical photographs or the landscapes in which they built their lives on a new continent — attempt to recreate for her forebears the care that they were denied back then. “Maybe there’s an intervention that I can create that’s about making the figures more comfortable, making a little more space for them.”

A painting of a female figure all in white surrounded by lush plants and vibrant magenta bougainvillea. Ravelle Pillay’s “Sanctum (The Light and the Shade),” part of a suite of paintings set in the island of Réunion, a French territory off the east coast of Africa. In a recent show at Goodman Gallery in New York, Pillay showed a suite of paintings set in Réunion, an island colonized by the French off the southeastern coast of Africa. She was inspired, she said, by realizing how familiar the landscapes of indenture were across the world — not only in South Africa but in much of the Indian Ocean world and the Caribbean.

She hopes her upcoming commission by London’s National Portrait Gallery, focused on her family, will introduce English audiences to an element of their own colonial history that, Pillay feels, is still relatively unknown there.

Pillay describes herself as a South African artist, full stop. “I feel India figures less in my perception of myself as a person, as an artist,” she said. “It kind of exists as a spiritual homeland. But I’m not sure how much India has acknowledged the descendants of indenture.”

Aruna D'Souza writes about modern and contemporary art and is the author of “Whitewalling: Art, Race & Politics in 3 Acts.” In 2021 she was awarded a Rabkin Prize for Art Journalism.