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Saga seeds of history

Little India museum's first special show explores the Indian diaspora past and present

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For more than 20 years, Singaporean artist Kumari Nahappan collected red saga seeds.

The 63-year-old says she is obsessed with the little kernels from the *Adenanthera pavonina* tree, with which she taught herself to count as a child.

BOOK IT / ONCE UPON A TIME IN LITTLE INDIA

WHERE: Indian Heritage Centre, 5 Campbell Lane

WHEN: Today till July 21, 10am to 7pm (Tuesdays to Thursdays), 10am to 8pm (Fridays and Saturdays), 10am to 4pm (Sundays)

ADMISSION: Free for citizens, permanent residents and children aged six and below, \$4 for adult foreigners

BOOK IT / THE DAY I LOST MY SHADOW PREMIERE

WHERE: Rex Cinema, 2 MacKenzie Road

WHEN: Nov 3, 6pm

ADMISSION: Free. Go to indianheritagecentre.peatix.com or call 6291-2536

Now her saga seed collection, which weighs three tonnes, spills out of a pair of giant weighing scales and down one flight of stairs at the Indian Heritage Centre. It is part of the Little India museum's first special exhibition since it opened last year.

The *Once Upon A Time In Little India* exhibition was launched yesterday by Minister for Trade and Industry (Industry) S. Iswaran and will run until next July.

The museum commissioned works by three artists for the exhibition, which explores the Indian diaspora past and present.

For her piece, Nahappan chose to represent the vanishing trade of the Little India goldsmiths, who traditionally used saga seeds as a weighing measure for precious metals. Four seeds make up one gram.

The seeds come from six countries across Asia, including India, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. They are picked by her or mailed to her by friends.

As for the goldsmith's scales, the artist sees them as a form of negotiation between the heavy gold and the tiny organic seeds. "In the end, what is natural outweighs the gold," she says.

Also commissioned for the exhibition are three short films by director K. Rajagopal, each centring on an iconic locale in Little India. The trilogy will premiere at Rex Cinema on Nov 3, while one of the films, *Campbell Lane*, is screened on a loop in the museum.

Campbell Lane juxtaposes scenes from the life of the late prominent businessman P. Govindasamy Pillai with that of a modern-day migrant from India, who works in a fruit shop found the corner from the museum.

Rajagopal, 51, was struck by the similarities between their experi-



Artist Kumari Nahappan with her art installation, *The Weighing Scales*, at the Indian Heritage Centre. ST PHOTO. CHEW SENG KIM

ences, yet at how different their paths will turn out. Mr Pillai was able to be successful in Singapore, while the fruit shop worker's stay here is likely to be a transient one.

Rajagopal named the trilogy *The Day I Lost My Shadow*, as it explores how the past is lost.

One particular "shadow" that Singaporeans seem keen to shake off is the immigrant history of their ancestors, even as they protest the influx of foreign workers today.

"We have forgotten where we come from," he says. "It's important not to shun that - Singaporean or migrant, we are trying our best to

give ourselves better lives."

For Thai artist Navin Rawanchaikul, the exhibition has been a way to reconnect with his past.

The 46-year-old is a fourth-generation Punjabi from India. His father, a textile merchant, changed their family name to a Thai one to improve business prospects.

It took him and a team of 10 six months to paint a 14m-long collage of street signs, shop fronts and more than 250 people connected with Little India.

The collage is a melange of not just places, but also times. Architectural drawing plans from 1899 jostle

with the shopfront of P. Suppiah, the last traditional dhoby, or laundry, and Indian eatery chain Komala Vilas.

Celebrities such as the late musician Alex Abisheganaden appear alongside Little India residents past and present, painted from photographs of people Rawanchaikul interviewed or from archives.

He says: "When I was in Thailand, I didn't know much about my Indian roots. Through this project, I learnt the history of Indians from different people's stories."

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