

Voices of the Western Coast

by Olympe Ramakrishna

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Olympe Ramakrishna wearing the artwork, Voices of the Western Coast. *Photo credit: Saloj Nair*



The artwork presented is monumental in scale: a six-metre-long textile piece created on a traditional white cotton Kerala saree and displayed horizontally. The process began with a triptych of oil paintings, later photographed, digitally assembled into a single composition, and finally printed onto the saree.

The saree here is not a support alone; it is an archive, a skin, and a territory of memory.

This layered process reflects the artist's ongoing exploration of textile as a medium – its materiality and transparency, its fragility, but also its role as a bearer of history, intimacy, and cultural continuity.

Voices of the Western Coast celebrates the life trajectories of six women from Kerala, brought together in three mother-daughter duos.



Olivia and Siya

Intergenerational transmission

Through these pairings, the work explores intergenerational transmission – not as something fixed or frozen, but as a living, evolving process. These women embody what might be called *living legacies*: traditions carried through language, food, clothing, gestures, and stories, sometimes consciously preserved, sometimes absorbed silently. Their lives unfold across geographies – Kerala, Bangalore, Kochi, Delhi, and beyond – yet remain anchored in a shared emotional landscape.

Kerala as an interior landscape

For some, Kerala is the place of birth; for others, it is a land of holidays, ancestral homes, and recurring returns. Many grew up elsewhere, yet spent their childhood summers running through grandparents' houses, shelling jackfruit, tasting ripe mangoes, or observing the slow rhythm of village life. Thrissur, Alappuzha, Kochi, Ernakulam — each place appears as a constellation of memories: festivals like Thrissur Pooram, rivers and backwaters, bustling markets, temples, churches, and the quiet domestic rituals that shape belonging. These memories are often intensified by distance. Living away from Kerala transforms cultural identity into a deliberate act — speaking Malayalam at home, cooking traditional dishes, following news and cinema, wearing the kasavu saree whenever possible.

In vivid colours reminiscent of Gauguin's palette — ranging from deep greens to luminous pinks — the surrounding landscape evokes the women's childhood environments. Tea plantations, rivers, mountains, and lush vegetation unfold in a style inspired by Pichwai painting, creating a sacred and symbolic nature. Kingfishers, cows, monkeys, and snakes inhabit the composition as spiritual presences, deeply rooted in Kerala's collective imagination. Nature here is not a backdrop but an active force: protective, nurturing, and charged with meaning.

Kerala becomes an interior landscape — shaped by emotion, longing, and repetition — a place that continues to live in the body even when daily life unfolds elsewhere.



Sreedevi and Aditi

The women themselves are represented in a deliberately stylised and simplified manner. Their figures resist anecdote and portrait realism, allowing them to embody both individual stories and echoes of a shared history. Each face becomes a threshold – between past and present, origin and displacement, intimacy and collective memory. Together, they raise a question that is at once simple and complex:

What does it mean to be a woman of Kerala today?

Being a woman of Kerala is not necessarily about being born there, living there, or even speaking Malayalam fluently. Many women deeply identify with Kerala while living in Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chennai, Delhi – or even in Dubai or New York. What binds them is a choice: the choice to keep alive invisible threads – language, values, sensibilities, and ways of being. It is an identity shaped by contradiction: pride and critique, warmth and distance, rootedness and movement. It is the feeling of not always being “Malayali enough,” while knowing that no other culture resonates as deeply.

This painting also carries a collective memory of departures and returns: migrations from villages to Kochi, from Kochi to larger Indian cities, and from India to abroad. It speaks of ancestral homes revisited during holidays, of family gatherings around festivals, of childhood worlds remembered through taste, texture, and sound. Kerala becomes an interior landscape – shaped by emotion, longing, and repetition – a place that continues to live in the body even when daily life unfolds elsewhere.

Voices of the Western Coast is both intimate and political. It pays tribute to women who carry Kerala within them and, through this quiet persistence, become vectors of an identity in motion – suspended between fidelity and transformation. Through their voices, the work affirms that culture is not only inherited; it is practiced, questioned, and continuously reimagined by women across generations.



From left to right: Sreedevi, Aditi, Seena, Ann, Olympe, Olivia, Siya



Ann and Seena

Olympe Ramakrishna

Olympe Ramakrishna (b. 2 February 1986) is a visual artist living between Normandy, France and Bangalore, India. Her practice combines painting, collage, textile art, and embroidery, and explores representations of femininity and contemporary female identity in India. She also examines the place of women in history, bringing visibility to female figures that have often been overlooked.

Articulating European and Indian artistic traditions through a cross-cultural visual language, her work is often narrative and symbolic, particularly through the use of the saree, and explores the fluidity and transparency of textile materials.

Her works have been exhibited in several Alliance Française venues across India as well as in heritage sites in France, and have been the subject of multiple publications in national and regional Indian and French press outlets.

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