

EDUCATOR GUIDE



Sreshta Rit Premnath: Grave/Grove

September 18, 2021–February 27, 2022

Welcome!

Dear Educators,

We are delighted for you to join us, as the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) brings you the work of Sreshta Rit Premnath on the second-floor gallery from September 18, 2021- February 27, 2022.

Premnath uses sculpture, language, plants, and drawing to activate productive tension between seemingly opposing forces. In his exhibition, *Grave/Grove*, Premnath explores the relationship between spaces of confinement or death and places of growth or cultivation.

Utilizing ideas of Minimalism and Conceptualism, Premnath creates a sprawling installation using natural, raw, and industrial materials to highlight the inequities faced by marginalized groups.

We invite you to explore, create, immerse yourselves, and discover what stories, connections and lessons can be found within this exhibition.

Enjoy!

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About the Artist

- Born in 1979 in Bangalore, India and based in Brooklyn, New York
- Completed his BFA at The Cleveland Institute of Art and his MFA at Bard College
- In addition to creating his own work, Premnath is the founding editor of "Shifter," an issue-based journal featuring contemporary art, creative writing, and critical theory.
- Premnath also directs the BFA Fine Art program at Parsons School of Design in New York
- His work has been the focus of solo exhibitions at Spaces, Cleveland (2007); Wave Hill, New York (2011); Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis (2012); Nomas Foundation, Rome (2017); and the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver (2019), among others
- He has participated in group exhibitions including *The Matter Within: New Contemporary Art of India*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco (2011); and *The Hollow Center*, Smack Mellon, New York (2013), among others



About Premnath's work

- Premnath works in sculpture, installation, and painting, exploring the politics of boundaries, bodies, and labor in contemporary life
- He uses minimalist aesthetic and relies heavily on philosophy
- Recently, questions of space—who can own or occupy it—have guided Premnath's work, as has the artist's investigations of visibility, invisibility, and misrecognition as part of the everyday experiences of those who are marginalized.
- Premnath has stated that he is resistant to creating work that "...reifies an identity position...", and that both locating and undergrounding must coexist within his body of work.



Quotes

"I have never been able to access a universalist position. I'm always interested in how a contingent encounter with an image or material is framed, and how it can change in another context. As someone who has a hyphenated identity—Indian-American living in New York—I often ask myself what it means to comment on a particular political situation or to appropriate the gesture of another artist."

~Sreshta Rit Premnath

"There are three registers of meaning-making that I work through. One is an analytical engagement with language and modes of representation. The second is paying attention to power and how it gets articulated or made invisible. And the third is an investment in materials that exert their own force on the viewer. It's hard for me to separate those points in the triangle, even if they appear distinct."

~Sreshta Rit Premnath

About the Project

For his solo exhibition at the CAC, Premnath explores how shared spaces of growth and care, such as community gardens or nurseries, can be embedded within dehumanizing spaces of collective discipline and confinement, such as detention centers or refugee camps. Weeds sourced from communities around the museum grow between sheets of aluminum cut to resemble unfolded cardboard boxes. Above these, suspended figurative sculptures hang in pairs, submitting to gravity as they lean on each other for support. Drawing from his own experience as an immigrant to the United States and an advocate for the rights of asylum seekers and incarcerated individuals, Premnath employs weeds as an allegory for the complex relationship that so-called outsiders have to the land they occupy. "The condition of being different – 'other' – becomes a radical precondition for political possibility." Premnath writes, "The very bodies that do not count – that are dead to the social process – hold the key to reanimate the social."

Vocabulary/Key words

Space Marginalization Symbolism Dichotomy Waiting
Confinement Life cycle Social Justice

Themes

Hope: Despite the themes of displacement and confinement, Premnath offers growth, outlets, and empathy throughout the works.

Social Justice: Premnath's exploration of the status of marginalized groups, immigrants, the incarcerated, and their forced waiting—for freedom, justice, equality—forces us to ask what we can do

Time: Time shows up in various ways in Premnath's exhibition: time of plant growth, the erosion of the plaster on the foam bodies, the gravity of the bodies. Think about life cycle—the potential of life and transition.

PRE-VISIT DISCUSSIONS

ABOUT THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

In 1939, Betty Pollak Rauh, Peggy Frank Crawford and Rita Rentschler Cushman took the advice of Edward M.M. Warburg, the founding father of the American Ballet and a founder of the Museum of Modern Art. He suggested that rather than stress about finding non-existent art jobs in New York, "Why not starting something in Cincinnati? Plenty of room there. If you decide to try, come and see me and I'll help you."

By August of that year, Peggy Frank Crawford, Betty Pollack and Rita Rentschler raised \$5000 (about \$93,000 today) and created the Modern Art Society (MAS). For almost a year their "office" consisted of a letter file and a portable typewriter set up in one or another living room. Within a few years, the MAS had exhibited Renoir, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, Beckman, Klee and many more in the lower levels of the Cincinnati Art Museum. In 1952, the MAS changed their name to the Contemporary Arts Center and in 1964 they earned a space of their own in downtown Cincinnati. In 2003, the CAC moved into the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art designed by architect Zaha Hadid. The NY Times called the structure, "the best new building since the Cold War."

The Contemporary Arts Center is a non-collecting institution, meaning there is no permanent collection. All exhibitions are borrowed from artists, collectors and other art galleries and institutions. We strive to create exhibitions that allow visitors to "open their minds" to the arts, and to the dialogue that can be had when viewing contemporary art. We believe that art and the creative process belong to all people

and that contemporary artists are an important part of how we see and interact with our world today.

ABOUT THE LOIS & RICHARD ROSENTHAL CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS

In the late 1990s, after acquiring the lot on which the Contemporary Arts Center now sits, a committee narrowed a field of over 300 architects chose to design the building—first to 97, then to 12 and finally 3 of the most exciting designers working in the world today. From them, a unanimous choice emerged: Baghdad-born, London-trained Zaha Hadid.

The decision was in keeping with the CAC's 60-year history of promoting the new. Though Hadid had been the subject of adulation, study and controversy, her work exhibited at major museums with international critical acclaim, she had only completed two freestanding structures during her career. As a largely untested inventor, a woman and an Arabic Muslim, Hadid had not found the construction world easy to enter. This renowned building is Hadid's first American building, and is the first American museum building designed by a woman. Groundbreaking took place in May 2001 and the new Center opened to rave reviews on May 31, 2003. The seven-story, 82,265 square-foot Contemporary Arts Center is named the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art after the CAC's former Chairman of the Board and the most generous contributor to the new building. It sits on a narrow 11,000-square-foot footprint, and includes a 2,366-square-foot black box performance space.

Born in Iraq in 1950, Hadid received her degree in mathematics from the American University in Beirut and studied at the Architectural Association in London where she won the Diploma Prize in 1977. Upon graduation, Hadid became a partner at the Office of Metropolitan Architecture where she worked with influential architects Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis. Establishing her own practice in London in 1979, she soon gained international attention with her groundbreaking plan for the Peak International Design Competition for Hong Kong in 1983. In 2004, she became the first female recipient of the Pritzker Architecture Prize, which is the equivalent to the Nobel Prize for Architecture. In 2008, she was listed as one of Forbes Magazine's "100 Most Powerful Women," and in 2010, Time Magazine named her one of the "100 Most Influential People in the World," and UNESCO Artist for Peace. She was

awarded the Stirling Prize for Architecture in 2010 and 2011. In 2012, Hadid was awarded Damehood by Queen Elizabeth II. And, in 2015, she received the Royal Gold Medal from the Royal Institute of British Architects. Hadid died in 2016.

RULES AND GUIDELINES

- Visitor admission and school tours are free at the Contemporary Arts Center.
- We require that there must be a chaperone for every 5 students under the age of 18 for self-guided groups. For docent-led tours, the required ratio is 1 to 10 for students through grade 5 and 1 to 15 for students grades 6-12.
- No backpacks, coats or lunches are permitted in the galleries, but personal belongings may be stored in the large bins or lockers we have available. Instructors may keep any emergency bags and purses with them.
- Currently photography is permitted in all areas of the museum. The CAC encourages you to post photos to various social media sites using @CincyCAC and #CincyCAC.
- Pens are not permitted in the gallery spaces. Pencils are available for use at the front desk.
- Walk throughout all galleries- no running, climbing, or roughhousing. If visiting with students under 18 please provide guidance and supervision.

ACCESSIBILITY INFORMATION

- Our facility is ADA compliant and we will make every effort to provide accommodations when requested.
- Hearing protection is available upon request.
- Fidgets are available upon request.
- Sensory maps and social stories are available upon request.
- Large text is available upon request.
- Two quiet spaces are available—the Lower Level Lobby and the Contemplation Room.
- For further inquiries or requests, please contact Shawnee Turner at sturner@cincycac.org

ARTWORK DISCUSSIONS

These discussions can occur prior to, during and after viewing.

- What does minimalism mean to you? How do you see the artist using a minimalist approach in their work?
- Does this artwork remind you of anything? If so, what? How is different than other objects you have seen before?
- The artist was thinking about space and who can own or occupy it. How do you occupy space? Are there things that keep you from owning or occupying your desired space.
- Do you see where places of change will occur in this exhibition? What do those changes make you think about?
- How does where the object is place change how you see it?

LESSON PLAN IDEAS

- In Premnath's exhibition, *Grave/Grove*, the artist references poetry. These references appear in the form of paired "exit" signs through out the gallery, grave/grove, fall/land, hole/home, and lean/hold. A good question to ask is, how do the words affect the meaning of the other in the pair?
- Using an old book or magazine students can discover their own word pairings.

ARTWORK AND WALL TEXT INFORMATION

Introductory Wall Text

Sreshta Rit Premnath uses sculpture, photography, video, and painting to explore the possibilities and limits of political agency. Borrowing from the strategies of Minimalism and Conceptualism—20th century art movements known for simplicity of form and primacy of the idea—he works with natural, raw, and industrial materials. Earth, aluminum, chain-link fencing, foam, and plaster are used to create installations that highlight the inequities faced by migrants, refugees, and other marginalized groups. "The condition of being different— 'other'—becomes a radical precondition for political possibility." Premnath writes, "The very bodies that do not count—that are dead to the social process—hold the key to reanimate the social." Drawing from his own experience as an immigrant

to the United States and an advocate for the rights of asylum seekers and incarcerated individuals, he uses allegory to propose alternatives to the status quo.

For his solo exhibition at the CAC, Premnath activates a productive tension between seemingly opposing forces. The exhibition's title, *Grave/Grove*, refers to the relationship between spaces of confinement or death, such as detention centers and cemeteries, and sites of growth or cultivation, such as greenhouses. Premnath's installation incorporates plants. Weeds sourced from communities around the museum grow between sheets of aluminum cut to resemble unfolded cardboard boxes. Above these, suspended figurative sculptures hang in pairs, submitting to gravity as they lean on each other for support. For Premnath, weeds are an allegory for the complex relationship that so-called outsiders have to the land they occupy. They survive in adverse conditions and are resilient, determined, and resourceful.

Four wall-based LED works resembling exit signs feature ambiguous word pairings—grave/grove, fall/land, hole/home, lean/hold—that activate a range of connected and opposing associations. Premnath uses metaphor to suggest that decay, loss, and alienation are linked to growth, belonging, and intimacy. Their legibility shifts in relation to the viewer's position, since both words cannot be read at once, at times activating habitually overlooked parts of the gallery. A new suite of diagrammatic ink paintings depicts instruments of partition and control, such as chain-link fences and crowd control barricades, subtly undermining their presumed permanence by incorporating areas of abstraction that suggest dissolution, opening, and release.

Artworks and Object Labels

Sreshta Rit Premnath (b. 1979, Bangalore, India; lives in Brooklyn, NY)

Grave/Grove, 2021

Acrylic, gel, and LED

Courtesy of the artist

Hole/Home, 2021

Acrylic, gel, and LED

Courtesy of the artist

Fall/Land, 2021

Acrylic, gel, and LED



Courtesy of the artist

Lean/Hold, 2021

Acrylic, gel, and LED

Courtesy of the artist

- Word pairings create a balance in meaning/feeling, e.g. grave and grove—something that dies and something that grows.
- There is also the implied word “exit,” creating minimalist poems



Sreshta Rit Premnath (b. 1979, Bangalore, India; lives in Brooklyn, NY)

Falling 1, 2021

Plaster, foam, and galvanized steel wire

Courtesy of the artist

Falling 2, 2021

Plaster, foam, and galvanized steel wire

Courtesy of the artist

Falling 3, 2021

Plaster, foam, and galvanized steel wire

Courtesy of the artist



The relationships between bodies and the spaces they occupy are central to the series *Falling*. In these sculptures, strips of foam resembling human bodies are coated in plaster and suspended from the ceiling by hand-woven fragments of chain-link fence. A recurring motif in Premnath’s work, these foam elements are paired and lean against one another for support. “Waiting,” Premnath explains, “is something that is done together, and for each other.” Rendered from mattress foam—a material used to support bodies—*Falling* activates ideas related to intimacy and the ways in which “we occupy space in order to make a claim about the space we are occupying.”

- The foam figures are human-scaled and are covered in plaster
- The plaster is meant to flake off and the figures will slowly droop
- The figures are leaning on one another for support, confined by the chain-link fence; there is both a feeling of imprisonment and the idea of support and strength
- Consider how the figures rely on one another—Premnath was part of an immigrant accompaniment organization where participants would go as support to immigrant hearings and other legal events

Sreshta Rit Premnath (b. 1979, Bangalore, India; lives in Brooklyn, NY)

Fold 1, 2021

Aluminum, weeds, plastic, IV tube, and galvanized steel wire

Courtesy of the artist

Fold 2, 2021

Aluminum, weeds, plastic, IV tube, galvanized steel wire
Courtesy of the artist

Fold 3, 2021

Aluminum, weeds, plastic, IV tube, galvanized steel wire
Courtesy of the artist

Fold 4, 2021

Aluminum, weeds, plastic, IV tube, galvanized steel wire
Courtesy of the artist

Fold 5, 2021

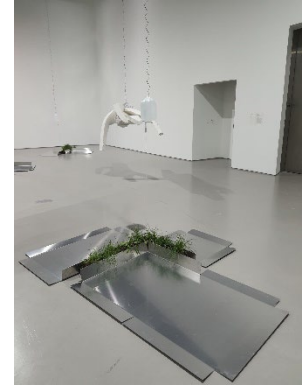
Aluminum, weeds, plastic, IV tube, galvanized steel wire
Courtesy of the artist

Fold 6, 2021

Aluminum, weeds, plastic, IV tube, galvanized steel wire
Courtesy of the artist

Fold 7, 2021

Aluminum, weeds, plastic, IV tube, galvanized steel wire
Courtesy of the artist



Sheets of reflective aluminum cut to the shape and size of unfolded cardboard boxes are arranged on the gallery floor in clusters, calling to mind temporary shelters used by the unhoused. In the gaps between these structures, everyday weeds such as perennial rye grass, dead nettle, common dandelion, and common mugwort grow. Above the plants, plastic bottles connected with IV tubes form a handmade irrigation system. "Yet, even as we threaten the very conditions that sustain life on earth, weeds exuberantly explode through the sidewalk reminding us of what we are burying." Premnath continues, "Their existence is a kind of insistence, and they await a new world, with or without us. So too, the unwanted and dispossessed will persist and finally institute another world." Referencing cycles of growth, Premnath alludes to ways in which the displaced "newcomer" or migrant creates conditions of political possibility, resilience, and renewal.

- The aluminum sheets evoke the unhoused and displaced—consider the idea of marking a space (this is a good connection to Arsanios' theme of ownership)
- The weed symbolism is key to these works—weeds are typically unwanted—however, they are persistent, come up against all odds, and often have important functions
- The IV tubes technically do not water the plants—however, they relate to life and health—creating hope and possibility

Sreshta Rit Premnath (b. 1979, Bangalore, India; lives and works in Brooklyn)

Margin #1, 2021

Ink on paper

Courtesy of the artist

Margin #2, 2021

Ink on paper

Courtesy of the artist

Margin #1 and *Margin #2* belong to a suite of diagrammatic ink paintings by Premnath that renders instruments of partition and imprisonment such as fences, borders, and crowd-control barricades. Premnath uses chain-link fencing as a stencil to produce marks that, in the artist's words, become "a kind of threshold or margin between a here and an elsewhere." These references to borders are paired with passages of gestural abstraction—pools and drips of ink—that reveal the artist's hand. Premnath also regards the viewer's body as an element of these works, augmenting their allusion to "the paper-thin—and imaginary—character of borders and other kinds of enforced separation."



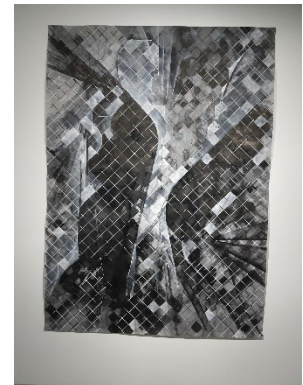
Sreshta Rit Premnath (b. 1979, Bangalore, India; lives and works in Brooklyn)

Strike #2, 2021

Ink on paper

Courtesy of the artist

- The chain link fence (used as a stencil with sumi-e ink) is representative of a barrier and evokes strength, borders, confinement, and ownership (another connection to Arsanios)
- The *Margin* series is more akin to empty lots and offer a welcoming entry—mostly due to the open holes
- The *Strike* series is based off a protest—figure is either striking or being struck—it has a much more aggressive composition than the *Margin* series



RESOURCES

<https://sreshtaritpremnath.com/bio>

<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/sreshta-premnath-interviewed/>

<https://listart.mit.edu/exhibitions/sreshta-rit-premnath>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k74ACE-g7ts>

LEARNING STANDARDS

Common Core Standards

<http://www.corestandards.org/>

Ohio Common Core Links

<http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/OLS-Graphic-Sections/Learning-Standards>

<http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/Fine-Arts/Fine-Arts-Standards>

Kentucky Common Core Links

<https://education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/kyacadstand/Pages/default.aspx>

https://education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/kyacadstand/Documents/Kentucky_Academic_Standards_Arts_and_Humanities.pdf

Indiana Standards Links

<https://www.doe.in.gov/standards>

<https://www.doe.in.gov/standards/fine-arts-dance-music-theatre-visual-arts>

Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change

<http://www.animatingdemocracy.org/aesthetic-perspectives>