

AUSTRALIAN
HIMALAYAN
FOUNDATION

MYTH & MEMORY



Tawa Silli 91.5 x 122 cm Oil on Linen 2026

BIVAS RAI



Bhaale Silli (Triptych) 30.5 x 30.5 cm (each) Oil on Linen



Dhobi Chara Silli 61 x 61 cm Oil on Linen

THE INAUGURAL AUSTRALIAN HIMALAYAN FOUNDATION ART AWARD

Supporting young artists in the Himalayan region

The Australian Himalayan Foundation (AHF) Art Award was established in December 2008 by Margie Thomas, in memory of her close friend, renowned travel artist Murray Zaroni, who had visited and sketched in the Himalaya on many occasions. The award honors Murray's wish to support young artists in the Himalayan region who might otherwise struggle to find the time or resources to develop their talent. Given her deep professional and personal ties to Nepal, Margie felt it was the ideal place to launch the initiative.

With the assistance of Ms. Sangeeta Thapa, Director and Curator of Siddhartha Art Gallery in Kathmandu, one or two young Nepali artists are interviewed, selected, and granted the award each year. Established through Murray's estate, the award gives emerging artists the opportunity to focus on producing a body of work and continue their artistic journeys.



Saras Silli 91.5 x 122 cm Oil on Linen 2026

GALLERY STATEMENT

Long before it was written or documented, Kirati history was transmitted orally. This is how Kirati Rai culture has always carried itself forward: not as a fixed story but as a living, shifting inheritance, remade each time slightly by the narrator. Nowhere is this inheritance more visible than in the Sakela festival, the community's most important dance festival. This festival is celebrated twice a year, as Udhauli and Ubhauli, to mark the planting and harvesting season. The festival honors the ancestors who first learned to live alongside nature. Each paachha within the Kirati Rai community have their own language, their own rituals, and their own version of the silli (dance movements) performed during Sakela.

Myth and Memory, Bivas Rai's first solo exhibition, encapsulates this inheritance. His body of oil paintings treats Sakela as a story still being recounted and remembered in real time. His earlier work, *Echoes of Kirat I and II*, was already committed to Kirati folklore and to the community's deep, longstanding relationship with the forest, mountains, and water bodies, from the flora and fauna and the animal world. For Bivas, the individual folk stories proved difficult to document, as the vast trove of this oral history existed only in the memory of elders. Furthermore, these folk stories are in a state of flux as they continue to be orally enriched by the narrator, blurring the lines between myth and reality.

For the Artist, Sakela, offered a way to explore both myth and reality with this theme. Sakela is in itself a living archive, a centuries-old narrative of the birth of civilization, the discovery of agriculture, and the human bond with nature. The recounting of this narrative is told each year through dance rather than text. Thus, his paintings of Sakela offer a way of honoring indigenous Kirat culture and the people who continue to perform this traditional dance today. In the traditional Sakela dance, the Silliboma (female lead) and Sillibopa (male lead) initiate the Sillis, setting the rhythm and steps for the rest of the community to follow in the circle.

Myth and Memory carries this idea directly—over the past year, Bivas has dedicated himself to archiving these stories from within his own family, from his maternal grandmother, mother, and sisters. Sakela today is rarely danced in traditional costume; people appear in modern clothing, in casual streetwear, or in some fusion of the two, and Bivas paints them exactly as he has seen them, dancers in contemporary attire, caught mid-movement. Into these otherwise contemporary compositions he introduces a layer of fantasy, painting each dancer alongside the actual animal or flower that inspired the silli they are performing, so that past and present fuse into mythic proportions in the same canvas.

Bivas's paintings reinforce that the essence of Sakela lives in the spirit of the movement and its connection to nature, highlighting the reality that culture is not static but ongoing, and is shaped by the people who practice it in the present. His Tawa Silli (peacock dance) painting that anchors the exhibition portrays his maternal grandmother, who was a Silliboma at her prime. Bivas' grandmother has her back to the viewer, her white hair loose against a deep ground, flanked by two peacocks whose tail feathers fan out to frame her. This work is characteristic of this approach: intimate, contemporary, and quietly mythic all at once. The plurality of Kirati Rai culture is expressed in Bivas's paintings—as his mother is Chamling Rai, while his father is Bantawa Rai – both communities performing the Sakela in a different way.

Running beneath the Sakela imagery is a quieter theme: sisterhood and matriarchy. Bivas grew up in an extended family shaped above all by the presence of his grandmother, mother, and his own sisters. Every painting in this series includes one of his sisters, a decision that ties his upbringing to the foundational Kirati myth of Tayama and Khiyama (mythic first sisters), the primordial sisters whose story he first explored during his BFA graduation show. In placing his own sisters within these Sakela compositions, Bivas draws a direct line between lived family bond and ancestral myth, folding his personal history into the same continuum of memory. It is important to note that these works are not ethnographic paintings; through his works, Bivas Rai celebrates and introduces Sakela to a broader audience.

Sangeeta Thapa

Founder/Director—Siddhartha Art Gallery/ Siddhartha Arts Foundation



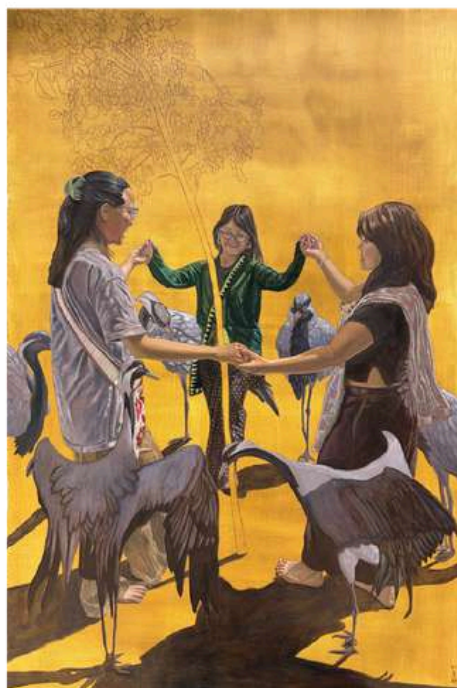
Mirga Silli 91.5 x 30.5 cm Oil on Linen 2026



Chwel Silli Oil on Linen 91.5 x 122 cm 2026



Phool Tipne Silli 61 x 61 cm Oil on Linen



Karyang Kurung Silli 61 x 91.5 cm Oil on Linen

ARTIST STATEMENT

This exhibition is my personal rendition of Sakela. I was born and raised in an extended *Rai* family where somebody was always telling a story. As a child, I did not have the patience to sit through these storytelling sessions. Recently, I have become curious about the same stories that I used to run away from. Since indigenous history is primarily passed down in the form of stories from one generation to the next, I am now keen to explore and document these stories while making them accessible to our generation.



Rai folklore is filled with myths. Folklore relies heavily on memory. *My Kokuji's* (maternal grandmother) stories of the same events in our history are very different from my *Tippajis* (cousins') stories. The stories differ based on village, *paachbha* (sub-group), the person who told you the story, and a lot more variables. One binding commonality is that *Sakela* is our biggest festival. It is a communal dance celebrated twice a year as *Udhauli* and *Ubhauli* to honor nature and our ancestors.

The *Kirati Rai* community is incredibly diverse, with each *paachbha* (sub-group) having its own distinct language, rituals, and variations of *Sakela silli* (dance movements), and it is easy to get lost in the sheer depth of it. The stories that I know have been passed down from the elders in my family. While I have taken creative liberties in the medium, I have remained true to the message that was passed down to me from the memory of the elders in my family. This series is a continuation of my previous works, *Echoes of Kirat I and II*, for which I interviewed the elders in my family, including my *Kokuji* and *Kakajis* (uncles). I dedicated the past twelve months to observing, listening, and archiving their stories.

In addition, the *silli* is also used as a medium in this series. Since *Sakela* is a dance to celebrate nature and the ancestors, each *silli* mimics the behavior of nature, specifically, animals and flowers. While the *Sakela silli* sets the tone of this exhibition, the theme is rooted in sisterhood and matriarchy. The extended family that I grew up in was a chaotic joint family on my mother's side. My world has been shaped entirely by the strength and presence of my mother, her sisters, and my own sisters. They were my first audience and remain my constant support. When it was time to bring these stories to life on canvas, it felt only natural to turn to them. Every single painting in this series includes one of my sisters. By placing them within these compositions, I am tying my own upbringing to the foundational Kirati myth of Tayama and Khiyama, the primordial sisters. This series is an homage to that ancient bond, mirrored by the real-world love and shared history of the women I grew up with.

Bivas Rai

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to the Australian Himalayan Foundation Art Award Team

From Bivas Rai:

To my mother, Devika Chamling Rai; to my maternal grandmother, Pantha Rai.
With heartfelt gratitude to my sisters: Ananyaa Chamling Rai, Anasuya Chamling Rai,
Anisha Rungmang Rai, Ashlesha Rungmang Rai, Bartika Rai, Binita Chamling Rai,
Manasvi Bantawa Rai, Sayami Rai, Suravi Bantawa Rai, Vedanshi Rai

Siddhartha Art Gallery Team:

Binod Adhikari, Binod Bhujel, & Pinak Shrestha



Machama Silli 61 x 30.5 cm Oil on Linen 2026



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