

Sosa Joseph
Rain over the river

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34 East 69th Street, New York



Sosa Joseph, *Devil's hour, by the river*, 2025 © Sosa Joseph

David Zwirner is pleased to present *Rain over the river*, an exhibition of new paintings by Indian artist Sosa Joseph at the gallery's East 69th Street location in New York. This is Joseph's first show in North America, and it follows *Pennungal: Lives of women and girls*, her 2024 solo presentation at David Zwirner London.

A masterful colorist and storyteller, Joseph creates atmospheric paintings marked by a striking visual and psychological complexity, in which figures from her South Indian family and milieu mingle with open-ended motifs from the natural world. Oscillating between sobering reportage and intimate psychological reminiscence, her work offers an alternative approach to the artistic tradition of history painting—one in which everyday moments take on the heft of the extraordinary, and individual narratives coalesce into a richly tapestried collective history.

Quasi-autobiographical yet enigmatic, the paintings in *Rain over the river* reflect on the particularities of life in Parumala, an island village situated on the Pamba River in the South

Indian state of Kerala, where the artist spent the first twenty-four years of her life. As she recalls, the banks of the Pamba would flood every year during the rainy monsoon season, forcing large populations to seek refuge in makeshift camps and public shelters. For Joseph, this rain offers an array of symbolic resonances, standing in for emotional suffering and strife as well as the physical ordeals heralded by the monsoon. In her painted recollections, however, these times of displacement and uncertainty are transformed into scenes of communal resilience in which families are drawn closer together, lovers amorously cavort, and children dance with abandon in the tent-lined streets. The artist often cloaks her compositions in moonlight, creating a hushed, eerie setting in which both strange and quotidian elements of human behavior are laid bare. Through this evocative body of work, Joseph delves into the relentless struggle for survival that animates this riverine world, exploring its capacity for fear, precarity, wonder, and beauty.

While Joseph paints largely from memory, sifting through her lived emotions and experiences, her work is also deliberately open-ended in nature; viewers are invited to participate in their own intensely personal exercise of interpretation and imagination. Approaching the painting process with an improvisatory and deeply introspective spirit, Joseph works on multiple canvases at once, repeatedly building up and wiping down layers of vivid pigment in a creative cycle that ebbs and flows not unlike the river itself. The resulting paintings—while starkly individual in their content and coloration—appear to be connected by an ever-evolving through line of physical and conceptual space.

Joseph's compositions brim with overlapping vignettes that draw the eye back and forth, visualizing the meandering narratives and rhythms of local folktales and other spoken-word traditions. In *Amma wants to finish singing before the flood drowns her* (2024–2025), a woman escapes from the deluge in a boat, holding nothing but her cherished *veena*—a stringed instrument similar to a sitar—in her lap.

The river is similarly omnipresent in *Devil's hour, by the river* (2025)—one of the artist's largest-ever paintings—which depicts the riverbank during the desolate "devil's hour" of three in the morning, when individuals can be seen hunting frogs and hiding among the trees. The figures seem to almost dissolve into the deep, jewel-like expanse of the river that runs across the background of the painting, leaving the viewer unsure where the human body ends and the water's edge begins. The relationship between humans and animals forms a recurring theme in these paintings; juxtaposed with portrayals of hunters and prey—such as frog catchers, clam divers, and fishermen's boats—are moments of tenuous coexistence: a crowd tends to the birth of a water buffalo, and a pregnant woman clutches her stomach, swaying with nausea from the sound of a rooster crowing.

As Joseph remarks:

I come from a rain-drenched riverbank. Apart from the river, which always flowed by, the phenomenon that governed our being was the rain. Its presence or absence did not merely mark the seasons—it shaped the very fabric of our consciousness. We lived through alternating spells of rain and rainlessness; everything happened either during the rain or in its brief interludes.

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My attempts to paint the rain began early, but without success. The rain proved too alive to be held still. Yet each failure only renewed my hope and longing to capture its spirit, its texture. This time though, I realised it was not the rain itself I must paint, but what is rained over—the drenched and dampened lives and geography, transfixed by the rains, both inner and outer. These soaked, damp, and dry vignettes of life along the river—through rain and rainlessness—coalesce in my mind into a single, unbroken rain. Ever-present and timeless, much like the river. Because, for us, rainlessness is also a kind of rain.

These damp canvases are my attempt to capture those rains. The ones that fell over and around the river, and within us, over the years.¹

Sosa Joseph (b. 1971) was born in Parumala, Kerala, India. She studied painting at the Raja Ravi Varma College of Fine Arts, Kerala, and subsequently received a postgraduate diploma in painting from the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Gujarat, India. Joseph lives and works in London.

Recent solo exhibitions of Joseph's work include *The Blue Blindfold and Other Stories*, Stevenson, Amsterdam (2025); *Pennungal: Lives of women and girls*, David Zwirner, London (2024); *The Hushed History of Oblivion*, Stevenson, Cape Town (2023); and *Where Do We Come From?*, Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai (2022). Other one-person presentations include *What Are We?*, Setouchi Triennale, Shodoshima, Japan (2016); *Unspecified*, Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai (2014); *The Common*, Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai (2009); and *Tenacity of the Moon*, Kashi Art Gallery, Kochi (2005).

Joseph's work has been included in group exhibitions at museums and institutions worldwide, including *Condo Mexico City: Lucia striking a crucifix*, Mexico City, Galerie Nordenhake, Mexico City (2024); *I miss myself the most*, Stevenson, Johannesburg (2023); *The Artist List*, Stevenson, Cape Town (2023); *Knowledge of the Past Is the Key to the Future*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2022); *Woman Is As Woman Does*, Jehangir

Nicholson Art Foundation, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai (2022); *Art of India*, Clarinda Carnegie Art Museum, Clarinda, Iowa (2021); *RED*, Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai (2021); *Superposition: Equilibrium & Engagement*, 21st Biennale of Sydney (2018); *Mémoires des Futurs / Modernités Indiennes*, Centre Pompidou, Paris (2017); *Mattancherry*, URU Art Harbour, Kochi (2017); *Kamarado*, Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam (2015; travelled to Clark House Initiative, Mumbai, in 2016); and the first Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Kochi (2012). In 2016, Joseph was granted a Setouchi Triennale Residency in Shodoshima, Japan, and in 2015 she participated in the Global Collaborations Program at the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam.

In 2022, *What are we? III*, a major painting by Joseph that spans over three meters in length, was acquired by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Her work is also held in collections of the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth; Baltimore Museum of Art; and Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, Delhi.

Notes

1. Sosa Joseph, artist's statement, October 2025.

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