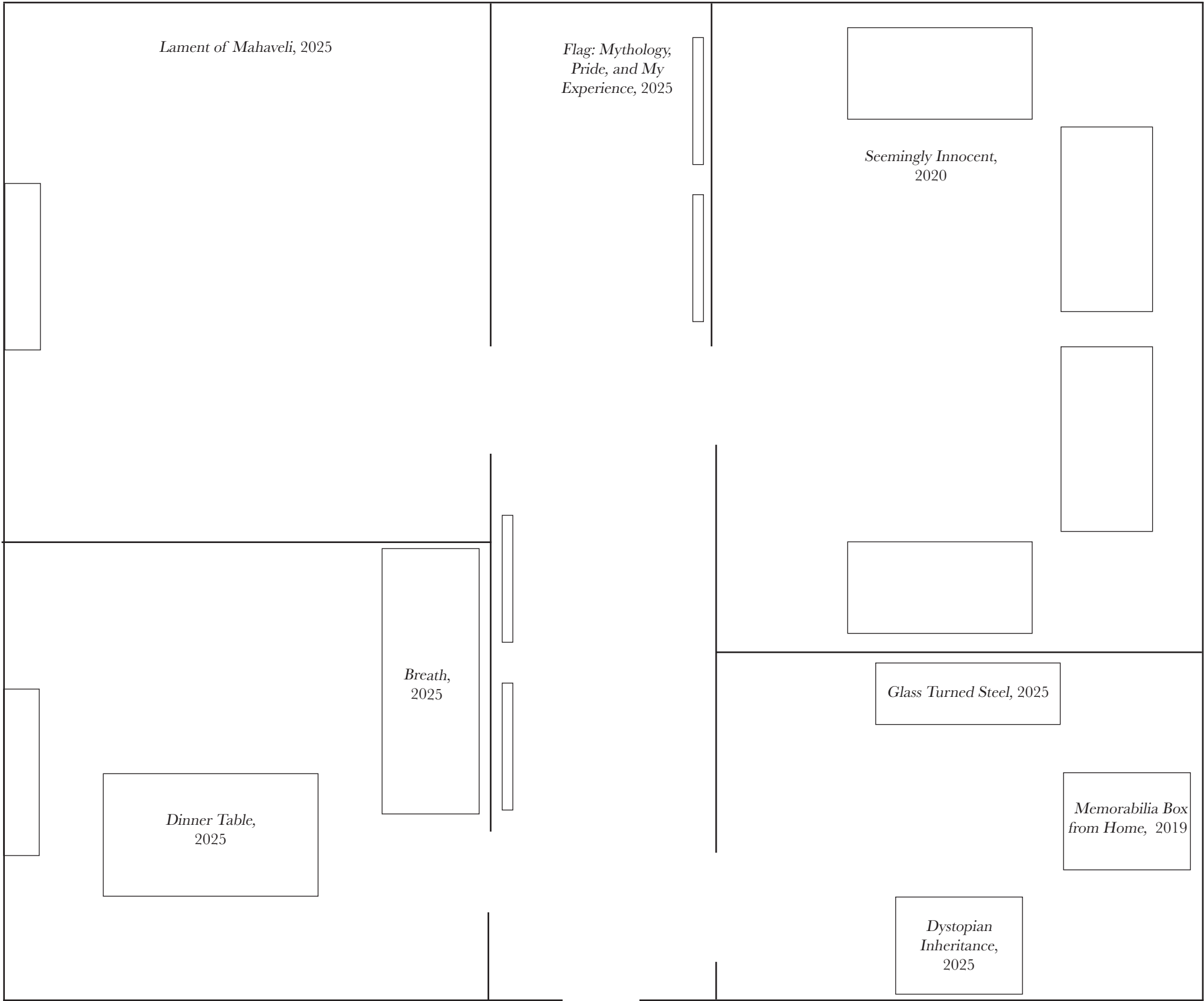
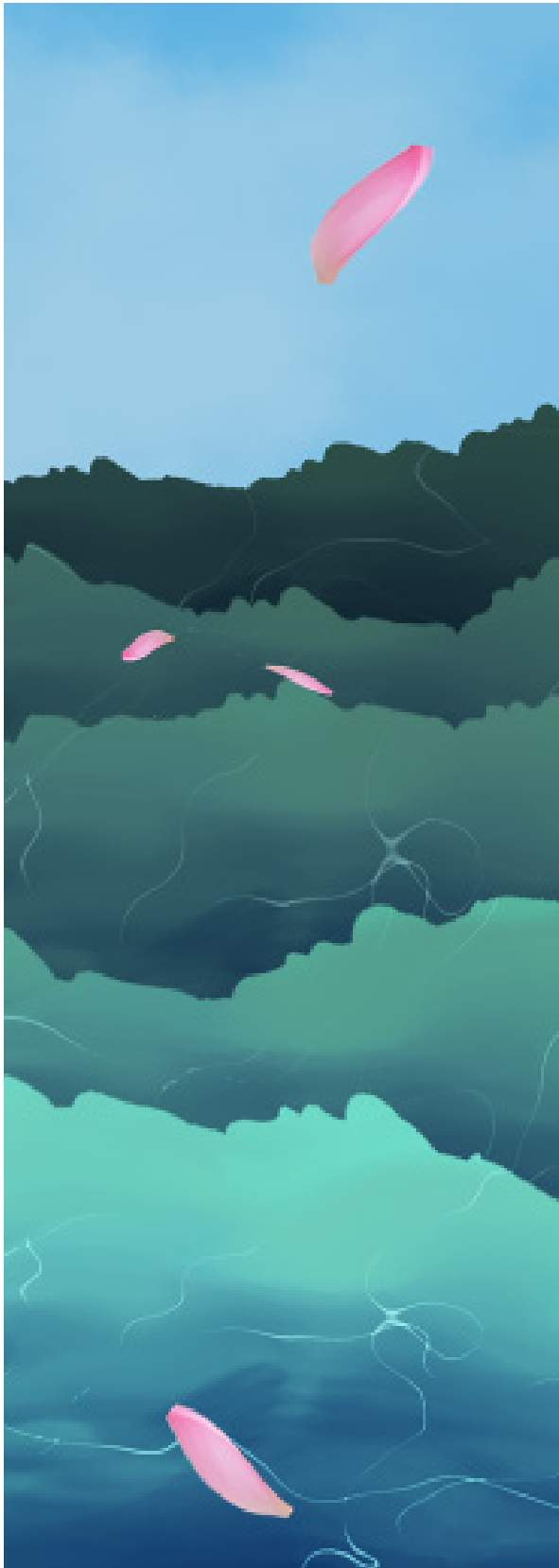




jagath dheerasekara



a river is a witness

Lewers: Penrith Regional Gallery

Jagath Dheersekara: a river is a witness

8 November 2025 - 15 February 2026

Today, the banks of the Nepean River are a site for leisure and lifestyle, primarily. So it can be difficult to conceive that this river – calm, slow, constant – was once the site of unspeakable settler violence. But in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the Nepean and surrounding areas were marked with the oppression of, and resistance by, the Dharug people. The Nepean and Hawkesbury rivers, which form much of the natural boundaries of the Greater Sydney Basin, had become desired resources for British soldiers and settlers.

In 1803, a confluence of events would accelerate the colonial bid for water and useable land. It marked the first year that a drought was recorded in the infant colony, and also the year that Governor Philip Gidley would grant over 4,000 acres of land for agricultural purposes and in 1804 a further 10,000 acres in land grants and over 20,000 acres in commons. These grants were made where there was easy access to water, particularly the creeks and paleochannels along the Hawkesbury and Nepean Rivers.

Conflict was inevitable as these areas were important food sources for Aboriginal people. This systematic occupation was not incidental; it was a deliberate act of policy designed to extend the colonial frontier with devastating consequences for the Dharug people whose access to nourishment – physical, cultural and spiritual – was intrinsically connected to place.

The result was a sanctioned massacre. In 1834, the Presbyterian minister and Republican John Dunmore Lang wrote,

There is black blood at this moment on the hands of individuals of good repute in the colony of New South Wales, of which all the waters of New Holland would be insufficient to wash out the indelible stains.

Despite this history of documented violence, the present landscape bears little public recognition. There is no monument to this frontier conflict, no visible scar that insists on remembrance. The river flows, its surface serene, carrying with it the sediments of unspoken histories.

It is into this terrain that Sri-Lankan Australian artist Jagath Dheersekara presents *a river is a witness*. Born in Matara in 1965, Dheersekara was raised in Post Independence Sri Lanka, a period which had to contend with its own enduring legacies of British colonial expansion. By the late 1980s, the aftereffects of British rule were still being experienced; and in the south of the island, 1987 saw a popular uprising led by JVP (People’s Liberation Front) that would last close to three years. As a university student and activist, Dheersekara witnessed the state’s violent suppression of dissent and minority voices, an experience that motivated his political work and force him into exile. Fleeing persecution, he was granted asylum in France before returning to Sri Lanka in the mid-1990s and later settling permanently in Australia in 2008.

Palestinian American writer, Edward Said, once described the experience of the refugee as having a ‘plurality of vision’, where one’s view of their adopted country is always contrapuntal to their home. Where the otherwise disparate histories of place invariably overlap with one another. Dheersekara’s artistic practice, much like his earlier activism, remains connected to experiences of history, embodied through the personal and place. *a river is a witness* emerges as a counter-archive. An act of resistance against the machinery of forgetting, whether in Sri Lanka or Australia.

At first glance, the contents of the exhibition seem innocent enough. Artworks that mimic the forms and conventions of decorative arts – sculpture, printed matter and textiles. But I am reminded of Walter Benjamin, who once said, ‘There is no document of civilisation that is not at the same time a document of barbarism’. Indeed, the exhibition co-opts the visual language of modernity – of progress, development and nationhood – only to point towards that which has been omitted from the record. The suppressed narratives of those whose suffering underwrites the very notion of modern civilisation itself.

How does one sit with this vertiginous, cruel irony? As if sitting at the same dining table as your former torturers. Or returning to the site of state sanctioned ‘interrogation,’ only to find that is now home to a beauty salon or a laundromat. What kind of language – verbal or visual – is adequate in making sense of these contradictions that would be absurd, if not so violent?

For Dheersekara, the archive becomes a strategy for the accumulation and preservation of memories that have been disregarded by the official record. His materials – photographic references, written fragments and found objects – operate as a confluence of testimonies. Each image and article become a kind of witness, an echo of the absent. Their ordinariness – a clothes iron, a dining table, a bookcase – becomes charged. They are artifacts of everyday life, and ones that attest to transformation and remembering.

The river functions here as both subject and metaphor. It is at once physical and symbolic, a flowing body that is constantly in flux yet permanently present. Rivers carry and conceal; they wash away and reveal. They embody what memory itself performs, erosions, accretion and the reshaping of form. The Nepean and the Mahaveli, separated by oceans but bound through shared histories of colonial violence, become parallel witnesses to human suffering, and ultimately endurance.

In Dheersekara’s ‘plurality of vision’, the river is a living archive; mutable, imperfect and in perpetual motion. It refuses to fix memory in stone but instead, it insists that remembrance is an ongoing process of movement and return. Evoking Benjamin, Dheersekara reminds us that every monument to civilisation is also a monument to barbarism. Every river that nourishes life also carries traces of death. To witness the Mahaveli, or the Nepean, is to confront both beauty and brutality intertwined.

Working with others has always been part of Dheersekara’s artistic vernacular. Here, I refer to processes of collaboration, community-engagement, but also engaging other skilled practitioners to realise his own projects. Working with the Penrith Museum of Printing, Dheersekara has created *Breath*, a concertina book of hand-coloured prints and traditionally typeset poetry. It is a ‘working museum’ of letterpress printing machinery, with many of the machines being salvaged from operating newspapers including the Penrith Press, the Daily Telegraph and the Sydney Morning Herald. Similarly, it is run by a group of local volunteers, most of whom previously worked in daily publishing.

Dheersekara’s engagement with the museum operates on multiple levels. It reclaims the historical apparatus of the printing press, transforming it from an instrument of authority into a tool of liberation, whilst also reigniting the activist ideology of Do-It-Yourself and street press publishing.

The poems, composed on reflection from Dheersekara’s own experience as a survivor of torture and a human rights activist occupy a dual space. They are confessions to the self of experiences almost too difficult to utter, but there are historical records in themselves, too.

The collaboration with the Museum and master printers John Berry, Steve Boyd, Graham Elphick, Dennis Cox, Matt Tilbury and Robert Lockley continues this idea of transformation. Together, they engage in an act of collective remembrance, generating solidarity across generations, cultures and material disciplines. The resulting work unfolds without beginning or end. Its continuous form an echo of the ebbs and flows of the river. The folds both revealing and concealing.

The exhibition puts forth a kind of social document, but not one in the conventional sense. It’s a form of intervention – an attempt to change the flow of how history is seen, felt and read. By reanimating the concept of the historical archive through poetic and visual forms, Dheersekara contests the structures that have silenced dissent. Here, the pain of experiences past is not to be erased but acknowledged. Collectively, these works function as a kind of restorative justice. Small, yet potent gestures against a collective and intentional amnesia. In Sri Lanka, perhaps like Australia, forgetting has become a politically motivated ideology. One that works to suppress uncomfortable truths and reduce complex histories into simplified narratives of that which was required in the name of progress. Dheersekara asks us to resist this closure and to remain open to the unsettling presence of the past.

He prompts us to consider, whose memories are still visible? Whose grief is allowed to be commemorated? What does it mean to hold space for the marginalised and the silence? *a river is a witness* becomes more than an aesthetic encounter. It becomes an ethical demand. To remember is not only to honour those who have suffered, but to acknowledge our complicity in those histories.

- Toby Chapman