

# Sreshta Rit Premnath: Grave/Grove

October 22, 2021–February 13, 2022

SUPPORT



MIT List Visual Arts Center  
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Sreshta Rit Premnath creates works in sculpture, video, photography, and installation that draw on the formal legacies of minimalism and conceptualism to think through the politics of boundaries, bodies, and labor in contemporary life. In Premnath's work, the use of a line, for example, is never neutral or abstract, but rather speaks to the power to demarcate and displace. The corrugated panels, cardboard, metal fencing, or cargo and freight materials that compose his works are not merely convenient modular readymades, but the raw material that visibly indexes "development" and the consolidation of wealth that often results. Recently, questions of space—who can own or occupy it—have guided Premnath's work, as have the artist's investigations of visibility, invisibility, and misrecognition as part of the everyday experiences of those who are marginalized.

In *Grave/Grove*, Premnath debuts a body of work that examines the ways in which natural, political, and human time are interconnected. The exhibition reflects the artist's interest in 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. Inspired by the role of gardening in the lives of incarcerated people or refugees, Premnath presents a material exploration of life that exists in otherwise inhospitable spaces. In his new works, live plants—species that are considered to be weeds—emerge from the gaps between aluminum panels, which are cut to the scale and shape of unfurled cardboard boxes. Within some of these sculptural assemblages, plaster-coated foam figures slump and lie together, their "bodies" merging with the ground as they too become sites for growth. The flat metal box-like forms allude to the discarded commercial packaging often repurposed by those who lack permanent housing to create temporary places of rest. The use of plants that are typically identified as weeds calls attention to the correspondence between horticultural and social systems, and what, or who, is deemed undesirable, or subject to removal. As the artist observes, "Although humans categorize and ostracize some beings, nature proliferates without judgement."



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***Escape/Arrive***, 2021

***Grave/Grove***, 2021

***Insist/Exist***, 2021

***Wait/Wake***, 2021

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Four text-based sculptures made to resemble emergency exit signs bear alliterative and dynamic word pairs that hint at the concepts behind the sculptural works on view. The reference to an exit—or a sign that helps one get outside—inscribes a contrast between interior and exterior, and to social and political boundaries that determine one's place or state of being. The recto/verso quality of the signs also makes it impossible to view both words at once, underscoring the way one's position informs their knowledge or understanding. The work reading "GRAVE" and "GROVE" (also the

title of the exhibition), is emblematic of the series in how it captures two states that could be antithetical or identical. One word signifies a place of death and the other a site of growth, and yet, as the artist observed during walks in a cemetery near his home in Brooklyn, NY, they are not mutually exclusive sites. Neither binaries nor opposites, these word pairs are minimalist poems that bring us closer to the artist's thinking and prompt us to consider both visual and conceptual relationships that surface through his play with language.

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***Fold 8***, 2021

***Head in Sand***, 2021

***Hold/Fold 1***, 2021

***Hold/Fold 2***, 2021

***Prone***, 2021

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In many of Premnath's recent sculptural works, human-scale foam figures, weighted by a plaster coating, lean against chainmail fences. These semi-abstract "slumps" are an embodiment of depletion, and hint at social structures of oppression and precarity. In his newest works, however, some plaster-clad forms—laid upon or nestled around mounds of soil—become a context for growth and new life. Dense and unruly strips of weeds emerge from the

cracks in cold, metallic panels that undergird the assemblages, and their subtly reflective surfaces beckon the viewer's attention as they move through the space. Repurposed IV tubes slowly drip water from plastic jugs to irrigate the soil and plants. The repurposed medical equipment gestures to care and attests to the temporal quality of nurturing. Just as many of Premnath's earlier works have sought to address the experiences of migration or dispossession,



*Fold 1, 2021 (detail). Installation view: Sreshtha Rit Premnath: Grave/Grove, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati. Photo: Wes Battoclette.*

his use of weeds calls attention to hierarchies of class or classification. "The ontology of the weed is so deeply connected to its undesirability," the artist writes, "that *to weed* is also to remove."

For Premnath, these sculptures also give rise to a web of ideas that stem from the subject of waiting, which served as a theme for related public programming in fall 2020

and spring 2021. While for many the act and sensation of waiting defined the early pandemic, it was other aspects—especially the turn toward cultivating plants as a way of coping with isolation—that shaped Premnath's later thinking around these new works. Attentive to the ways that carceral spaces in particular impart a kind of "social death," Premnath also contemplated the

role of gardening for incarcerated people, and for those who are unhoused or are living in encampments as refugees. As spring arrived, the artist was struck to notice weeds sprouting out of every Brooklyn sidewalk crack, and he became drawn to their resilience. "Even as we threaten the very conditions that sustain life on earth," he observed, "weeds exuberantly explode

through the sidewalk reminding us of what we are burying. Their existence is a kind of insistence, and they await a new world, with or without us."

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## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

### **Escape/Arrive**, 2021

Acrylic, color gel, and LED light  
14½ × 10 × 1 in. (36.8 × 25.4 × 2.5 cm)

### **Fold 8**, 2021

Aluminum, weeds, water bottle, IV tube, and chain link wire  
Dimensions variable

### **Grave/Grove**, 2021

Acrylic, color gel, and LED light  
14½ × 10 × 1 in. (36.8 × 25.4 × 2.5 cm)

### **Head in Sand**, 2021

Plaster, foam, aluminum, and sand  
24 × 24 × 30 in. (70 × 70 × 76.2 cm)

### **Hold/Fold 1**, 2021

Plaster, foam, aluminum, weeds, water bottle, IV tube, and chain link wire  
96 × 114 × 24 in. (243.8 × 289.6 × 70 cm)

All works courtesy the artist

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## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Sreshta Rit Premnath (b. 1979, Bangalore, India; lives in Brooklyn, NY) is an artist and 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. Group exhibitions include: *The Matter Within: New Contemporary Art of India*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco (2011); *The Hollow Center*, Smack Mellon, New York (2013); *Common Space*, The Kitchen, New York (2014); *After Midnight*, The Queens Museum, New York; *So-Called Utopias*, Logan Center for the Arts, Chicago (both 2015); *Cartography of Ghosts*, The Drawing Center, New York (2016); *The Socrates Annual*; Socrates Sculpture Park, New York (2017); and *L'Intrus Redux*, and Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster (2019). He holds a BFA from The Cleveland Institute of Art (2003) and an MFA from Bard College (2006).

This exhibition is curated by Natalie Bell, Curator, MIT List Visual Arts Center, and is co-organized by the MIT List Visual Arts Center and the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, where a one-person exhibition curated by Amara Antilla is on view from September 17, 2021 to February 27, 2022. A special edition of the artist's journal, *Shifter 25: Waiting*, co-edited by Avi Alpert and Premnath, is published on the occasion of these exhibitions and resulted from a series of eight virtual dialogues between artists, architects, historians, and theorists that were convened by *Shifter* and co-hosted by the List Center and CAC in fall 2020 and spring 2021.

## PUBLIC PROGRAMS

### **Artist Talk: Sreshta Rit Premnath**

**Thursday, November 4, 2021, 6:00 PM**

In-person program

**All programs are free and open to the public. Registration required.**

**For more information about these events and to register visit [listart.mit.edu/events-programs](http://listart.mit.edu/events-programs).**

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## LEARN MORE

### **Read**

Octavia E. Butler, *The Parable of the Sower* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993).

Octavia E. Butler, *The Parable of the Talents* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1998).

Peter Del Tredici, *Wild Urban Plants of the Northeast* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

Nathaniel Johnson, *Unseen City: The Majesty of Pigeons, the Discreet Charm of Snails & Other Wonders of the Urban Wilderness* (New York: Rodale, 2016).

Jamaica Kincaid, "Sowers and Reapers," *The New Yorker*, January 22, 2001.

### **Watch**

Adoor Gopalkrishnan, *Mathilukal* [Walls], 1990.

## SPONSORS

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