

SRESHTA RIT
PREMNATH

GRAVE/GROVE

September 17, 2021–February 27, 2022

Level 2

Grave/Grove

Sreshtha 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, and industrial materials to create environments that highlight the inequities faced by migrants, refugees, and other marginalized groups. 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. “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.”

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 dialectical 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.

*Organized by Amara Antilla, Senior Curator,
Contemporary Arts Center.*

Sreshta Rit Premnath (b. 1979, Bangalore, India; lives in Brooklyn, NY) is an artist and the founding editor of *Shifter*, an issue-based journal focused on contemporary art, creative writing, and critical theory. 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); *The Hollow Center*, Smack Mellon, New York (2013); *Common Space*, The Kitchen, New York (2014); *After Midnight: Indian Modernism to Contemporary India, 1947/1997*, 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); *L’Intrus Redux*, Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster (2019), and *The Protest and the Recuperation*, Wallach Gallery, Columbia University, New York (2021), among others. He holds a BFA from The Cleveland Institute of Art (2003) and an MFA from Bard College (2006). Premnath is Assistant Professor of Fine Art at the Parsons School of Design in New York.

Ask Yourself

- 1 Think about the title of the exhibition and some of the words you see around the gallery — *grave/grove, fall/land, hole/home, and lean/hold*. How do the words affect the meaning of the other in the pairs?

- 2 Did you know that the dandelion was originally brought to North America by the Europeans for medicinal purposes? The much maligned “weed” is also completely edible. What is your perception of a weed? Weeds are frequently considered invasive and unwanted but can have many practical uses. How does Premnath encourage us to think about the symbolism of the weed in his work?

- 3 Has there been a time in your life when you felt like you didn’t belong? How did it feel and how did you react?

- 4 How has our society erected barriers to people who are seen as different? How does Premnath demonstrate the burden imposed on these individuals?



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The exhibition is co-organized by the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati and the MIT List Visual Arts Center, where a solo exhibition by Premnath curated by Natalie Bell is on view from October 22, 2021 to February 13, 2022. The accompanying publication, a special edition of the artist's journal, *Shifter 25: Waiting*, is co-produced by the CAC and the List Center and follows from a series of public discussions convened by *Shifter* and co-hosted the CAC and the List Center last year.

