

Chotsani Elaine Dean

I am applying for the Red Lodge DO GOOD-MJ Wood Memorial Short-Term Residency for the opportunity to create a new body of work following the research and experiences of my Fulbright Scholar grant 2012-13 in India. The goal of my residency is to create work that will recognize, honor and address the history of the people of tea plantations in Assam, India combined with the history and people of cotton plantations in the 18th and 19th centuries of colonial America. The past and present conditions of the Adivasi people (name used to identify tea plantation laborers) is marginalized and undervalued in the history record and current political sphere in India and globally. The people of tea and cotton plantations share the experience of suppression and control by their respective systems of colonialism. Therefore, I am motivated to make work that will engage meaningful discourse, giving audience to the complex and marginalized histories of tea and cotton plantations.

My plan during the residency is to create 2 full tea services with 15 place settings and 3 ceramic quilts (simulated quilts made from ceramic tiles that hang on the wall). Two of the quilts will be made of tiles similar to my current work and one made of tea cups. The two ceramic quilts will serve as portraits to honor the two young Adivasi girls I met and spent time with in Assam, Tuktuki Nayak and Matu Tati. They are live-in babysitters working for Assamese families, located off the tea plantation in order to earn extra money for their families. The two ceramic quilts will have the dimensions of twin size quilts to represent Matu and Tuktuki. The girls shift back and forth, going home to the tea plantations on the weekends. They both dream of a different life and future from the tea plantations, however they accept that work on the tea plantation is their destiny - they know this at the ages of 10 and 12. The third ceramic quilt will be made up of an assemblage of cups reflecting the dimensions of a queen size quilt. The cups will sit upon tile shaped saucers that are mounted and cantilevered from the wall. They will commemorate significant events and people in tea industry in Assam coupled with historical events and people from my ancestral roots of cotton plantations.

The women of both plantations labored to bring privileged, wealthy people the enjoyment of fine cotton clothing and tea. They never experienced the enjoyment of these plantation commodities, yet their labor fueled economies and generated great wealth of which they saw no return, no recognition. The purpose of the tea service is to create a place for these women at a table they had a hand in creating yet were never invited. Six places will be for the women I was photographed with on the tea plantations I visited. They will sit at the table with Harriet Tubman,

Sojourner Truth, Sally Hemmings, Mary and Emily Edmonson, the plantation Nursemaid, the plantation Seamstress and the plantation House-servant. I recognize that because of the efforts of these women from my history, it is my choice to freely enter and leave the tea plantations, a choice Tuktuki and Matu in reality do not have as the Adivasi people are on the lowest rung of the caste system in India. I want to create a table at which they all sit share their stories, struggles, triumphs, and encourage one another. There will be a vacant seat for the viewer to place him/herself. Every year I will make two extra cups that I will send to Tuktuki and Matu. It is important to me to share their lives, history and current circumstances with others in my work. Meeting Tuktuki, Matu, the families they work for and the Adivasi people on the plantations who embraced me so warmly, have made a great impact on me personally and artistically. It is important to me that Tuktuki and Matu know that their culture and their lives are being shared with others and mine with them.