

It sounds like a mythological fable: four figures try to divide a cloud, each desiring their own portion of the vaporous territory. Unable to come to an agreement, they violently tear at the mass with their hands, but their efforts are futile. In the end, each is left with nothing, and the cloud—nebulous and undefined—has dissipated.

This modern folktale, part of a stop-motion animation series that Nalini Malani calls her “#MalaniNotebooks,” distills into a 40-second video humanity’s penchant for possessiveness and division, as evidenced in historical events such as the Partition of India, which the artist herself experienced as a young child in 1947 and that haunts her photograms, reverse paintings, shadow-play installations and videos. Drawn on Malani’s iPad, *Can You Divide the Clouds* (2018) is a fleeting philosophical rumination, expressed in an exercise—as in the daily drawings or paintings of artists—that she shares with her followers on her Instagram account.

Here, the jerky movements of the stop-animation frames illustrate the struggles of grasping at something that is at once hyper-ephemeral, amorphous and recursive—Earth’s natural cycles dictate the flow of water from cloud to rain to sea and back to cloud—and evoke the compulsions of greed and fear that drive us to perform acts of invasion, separation, segregation and isolation. The anonymous figures attack the murky cloud, which represents a false illusion: although it appears tangible, it is nothing more than moist air, suggesting our delusional tendencies in enforcing borders, zones and boundaries that are, but for political control, arbitrary. Conversely, the murkiness expresses an unknown corruption hypnotizing the figures and the unseen displacement of millions of people. Dashed in the center of the cloud are pink lines, evoking the British Empire’s demarcations of its colonies, protectorates and mandates on world maps—a reminder that tensions still reverberate on postcolonial soils today.

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CAN YOU DIVIDE THE CLOUDS, 2018, still image of sketch animation video: 40 sec. Courtesy Arario Gallery, Seoul/Cheonan/Shanghai.