

THE CRYSTAL PALACE

Ilish Thomas

31 October–30 November 2025

Throughout Gujarati folklore, female ghosts called chudel are often described. These spirits are unable to touch the ground; they walk, hovering, with their feet twisted backward. As much as they attempt to make a passage towards the future, the chudel is destined always to tread the waters of the past, caught in a snare of ancestry and fate.

The Crystal Palace traces the site of The Crystal Palace Theatre in Maungawhau, Tāmaki Makaurau, a cinema bought into by the artist’s grandfather in the seventies. Two generations later, The Crystal Palace is shuttered. The building has given way to grief, colliding wishes, the property market, and the elements.

A kartal chimes. The film is a construction site for a ghost story.

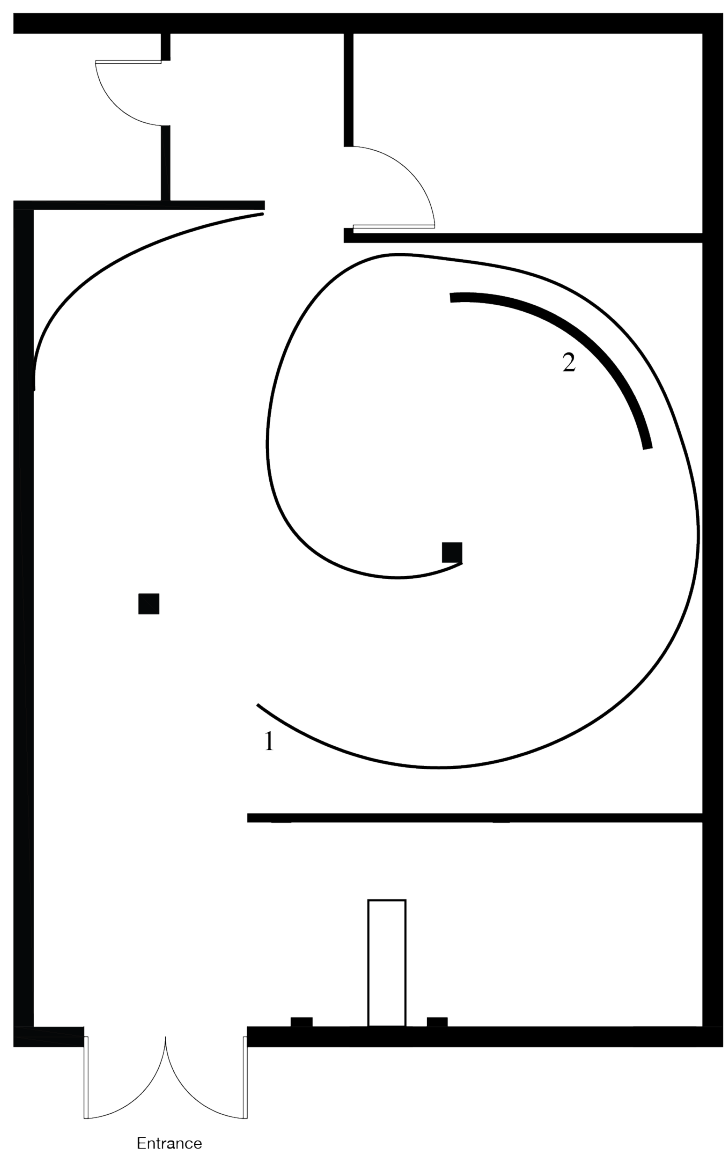
Like the chudel, the theatre is frozen in another time. Its poster boxes, lined with filigree patterning, promote no upcoming programme. Under the view of the maunga, the garden is still neatly kept: the grass trimmed, branches of mānuka and citrus pruned with the seasons. The brick facade of The Crystal Palace marks a hard barrier at the edge of the vegetation. Yet, ghosts can access places that the self might not, dissolving a threshold both built and familial. Thomas asks the chudel for the way in.

The Crystal Palace follows the chudel to rows of empty seats, a roll of ticket stubs, and the internal cavities of the theatre otherwise prohibited, and never brought into the twenty-first century. The projectionist operated a 35mm projector until the cinema’s closure. Gujarati literature notes chudel are symbolised by a flame; perhaps she is the phantom bulb of the projector.

Spirits rarely materialise without reason, and this is true for chudel, who are known for troubling their surviving kin. Many stories in which they appear recount an ill-omened death, such as by car crash or childbirth. They return, seeking retribution through finances or property, and disturbing the patriarchal order of a family. In this way, there is a connection between chudel and property possession that becomes inverted in *The Crystal*

Palace, in that now the building may be possessed—as in, occupied, entered—by the chudel herself. Inside the ghost story, complex layers of family history are moved aside and suspended in a zone of fantasy. The sight of a chudel interrupts the narrative as it is known. A beginning and an end of a film are just two points on a spiral that continues to revolve around the theatre, its occupants, and the whenua it is on.

Ilish Thomas is an artist based in Tāmaki Makaurau, whose practice explores the complexity of South Asian diasporic identity through themes of whakapapa, memory, grief, loss, and belonging. Working across textiles, video, audio, and other archival strategies, they engage modes of storytelling and oral histories as tools for cultural navigation and mediation. Central to her work is a focus on ‘in-betweenness’ and of generating new political imaginaries.



1. Ilish Thomas, *Chudelnum Thiyetara, the never ending beginnings*, 2025. Screen printed cotton netting.

2. Ilish Thomas, *The Crystal Palace*, 2025. Black and white Super 8 film converted to digital, sound, 6:59 mins.

Thank you to Rashmi Chhiba, Jane Thomas and Indira Chhiba for their support of this work, and to Paige Jansen, Mike Boulden, Jamie Richardson, Jack Cannon and David Cooper for assistance with this exhibition’s install. Ngā mihi nui!