

# **ANIMATING CULTURAL ABSENCE: A POETIC JOURNEY OF REVIVAL THROUGH THE CHHAU MASK TRADITION**

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of

**MASTER OF DESIGN**  
In  
**VISUAL COMMUNICATION**

By

**ANURAG PURTY**  
(2K23/MDVC/03)

Under the supervision of  
**PROF. PARTHA PRATIM DAS**



**DEPARTMENT OF DESIGN**  
**DELHI TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY**  
(Formerly Delhi College of Engineering)  
Shahbad Daultpur, Main Bawana Road, Delhi- 110042

**DEPARTMENT OF DESIGN**  
**DELHI TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY**  
(Formerly Delhi College of Engineering)  
Shahbad Daultpur, Main Bawana Road, Delhi- 110042

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I, **Anurag Purty**, Roll No. - **2k23/MDVC/03**, student of M.Des ( Visual Communication), hereby declare that the thesis entitled “**Animating Cultural Absence: A Poetic Journey Of Revival Through The Chhau Mask Tradition**” which is submitted by me to the Department of Design, Delhi Technological University, Delhi in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of degree of **Master of Design**, is original and not copied from any source without proper citation. This work has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, Diploma Associateship, Fellowship, or other similar title or recognition.

Place: New Delhi

**Anurag Purty**

Date: 25.06.2025

**DEPARTMENT OF DESIGN**  
**DELHI TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY**  
(Formerly Delhi College of Engineering)  
Shahbad Daulatpur, Main Bawana Road, Delhi- 110042

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Certified that **Anurag Purty, Roll No. 2K23/MDVC/03**, has carried out his research work presented in this thesis entitled “**Animating Cultural Absence: A Poetic Journey Of Revival Through The Chhau Mask Tradition**” for the award of **Master of Design**, from **Department of Design**, Delhi Technological University, Delhi, under my supervision. The thesis embodies results of original work, and studies are carried out by the student **himself** and the contents of the thesis do not form the basis for the award of any other degree to the candidate or to anybody else from this or any other University/Institution.

Place: Delhi

Date: 25.06.2025

**Prof. Partha Pratim Das**

**SUPERVISOR**

Assistant Professor

Department of Design

Delhi Technological University

**DEPARTMENT OF DESIGN**  
**DELHI TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY**  
(Formerly Delhi College of Engineering)  
Shahbad Daulatpur, Main Bawana Road, Delhi- 110042

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**Anurag Purty**

Date: 25.06.2025

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the role of poetic animation in reviving intangible cultural heritage, focusing on the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of the traditional Chhau mask from eastern India. *The Dream of the Mask* is a hand-drawn animated short film that uses metaphor, atmosphere, and memory to narrate the journey of a forgotten mask lying dormant in an abandoned theatre. Through a surreal dreamscape, the mask confronts its loss of identity and gradually reawakens to colour, rhythm, and spirit; culminating in its rediscovery by a child who embodies innocence, curiosity, and continuity.

The research adopts a **practice-based methodology** combining primary fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, visual documentation, and literature review. Visual metaphors such as stitched forests, embroidered clouds, and a red memory thread are employed to reflect layered meanings of loss, transformation, and rebirth. The poetic narration becomes a narrative spine, guiding the viewer through themes of impermanence, tradition, and revival.

This thesis argues that animation can act not merely as a medium of storytelling, but as a contemporary ritual, one capable of restoring lost cultural meaning through sensory, emotional, and symbolic engagement. By blending traditional motifs with experimental animation, the project positions itself as both an artistic expression and a cultural intervention.

### Keywords:

*Chhau mask, animation, cultural memory, intangible heritage, poetic narration, symbolism, practice-based research, ritual, identity, visual metaphor, folk tradition, rebirth, experimental animation.*



# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Overview of the Project

*The Dream of a Mask* is a hand-drawn animated short that takes us on a poetic, dreamlike journey through the eyes of a forgotten Chhau mask. Left behind in a dusty, abandoned theatre, the mask lies still; worn, silent, and untouched by time. But even in stillness, it dreams.

In that dream, it drifts into a surreal landscape stitched with memory. Clouds float like embroidered fabric, forests grow from threads, and a quiet lake reflects not just an image, but a soul searching for itself.

Threading through it all is a single red string; a delicate symbol of memory, spirit, and ancestral connection. But dreams can't last forever. The mask's dream begins to fade.

Then, in the real world, a child steps into the same forgotten space. With wonder in his eyes and care in his hands, he picks up the mask, not to wear it as a costume, but to believe in it again. In that moment, something stirs. Through this simple act of recognition, the mask awakens, not just as an object, but as a vessel of living memory and spirit, ready to dance once more.



Figure 1: A forgotten Chhau mask in an abandoned folk theatre - lifeless, yet waiting

## 1.2 Poetic Narrative: The Emotional Spine

This poem forms the heart of the animation; it guides the story as the voiceover and traces the emotional journey of the mask. More than just narration, it acts as the soul of the project, shaping its mood, message, and deeper meaning.

### Poem (Narration)

*Once, it danced.  
With sweat, with rhythm, with fire in its eyes.  
But now it rests...  
Forgotten among dust and echoes.  
A mask. Alone. Still.*

*But even masks...  
can dream.*

*And in that dream, it floats -  
Through empty stages,  
through lost songs,  
through silence heavy as cloth.*

*Into a forest stitched with memory...  
Where shadows dance,  
And forgotten footsteps still stir the air.  
It watches.  
It remembers.  
It aches.*

*Then, a mirror appears.  
And in it - not just a reflection,  
but a spark.  
A spirit. A dancer. A soul.  
And once again...  
the mask is alive.*

*Colours bloom.  
Cracks vanish.  
The rhythm returns.  
It wakes.  
Still dusty. Still worn.  
But something stirs.*

*A child enters.  
Eyes full of wonder.  
Hands gentle as time.  
And with small hands,  
he lifts the mask.  
Not to hide,  
but to awaken.*

*A whisper of footsteps stirs the dust—  
a breath, a heartbeat, a first rhythm.  
Some dreams are not lost.  
They are waiting...  
for someone to believe.*

## 1.3 Personal Motivation

Growing up in Jharkhand, the Chhau mask meant more to me than just performance, it carried the weight of memory, community, and spirit. Over time, I watched these traditions slowly fade. The masks stayed still, untouched. The dancers moved on. And with that, something inside me felt lost, something I couldn't quite put into words.

Animation became the way I could respond. Not by documenting what was disappearing, but by dreaming it back into being. *The Dream of a Mask* began with a poem, born from emotion, and it became my compass, guiding the film with quiet purpose.

The child in the story is more than a character. He is the symbol of return, of gentle revival. He is me. And the mask? The mask is all of us, forgotten at times, but never beyond awakening.

## 1.4 Research Questions

- In what ways can animation serve as a vessel to breathe new life into fading cultural symbols?
- How do metaphor and poetic narration help tell stories that go beyond words, stories we feel more than we hear?
- Can visual symbols; like forests made of fabric or lakes that reflect more than just an image help us connect with memories we've almost forgotten?
- And how does the poem in this film go beyond being just a narration, becoming the very structure and soul of the story?

## 1.5 Scope and Objectives

The primary objective of *The Dream of a Mask* is to use animation as a way to breathe new life into traditional cultural symbols, especially the Chhau mask, by reimagining them through a modern, dreamlike lens. This project isn't just about preserving the past; it's about reviving it with emotion, imagination, and meaning. Here's what the project sets out to explore:

- Crafting a visually immersive animated short that speaks without words—using symbols, imagery, and metaphors to reflect on cultural memory, loss, and the quiet beauty of rebirth.
- Exploring how fabric-inspired visuals, like embroidered clouds, stitched trees, and woven forests can represent the delicate nature of memory, tradition, and identity.
- Looking at the Chhau mask not just as an artifact, but as something alive, a vessel that holds spirit, emotion, and the power to transform through performance and shared memory.
- Weaving the red thread throughout the story as a symbol of connection, a pull of memory, of hope, that ties the past gently into the present and extends toward the future.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

### 2.1 Research Approach

This project takes a hands-on, practice-based approach to research, rooted in both visual exploration and personal reflection. At its heart, it asks: how can animation become a vessel for forgotten cultural memory? Using the Chhau mask as a symbolic thread, the process blends conceptual thinking with visual experimentation, allowing ideas to grow through sketches, storytelling, and evolving imagery.

It's an approach that's both expressive and interpretive, one that looks at how memory, ritual, and identity can be felt and understood through mood, metaphor, and the rhythm of visual storytelling. By weaving together traditional narratives with contemporary animation, the project becomes both a reflection and a reimagining.

### 2.2 Research Methods

#### 2.2.1 Primary Research

The primary research phase of this project was grounded in direct, sensory engagement with spaces, people, and stories connected to the Chhau mask tradition. It was an effort not only to observe, but to **feel** what has been lost and imagine how it might be remembered. The approach blended fieldwork, conversations, and drawing as methods of **learning through presence**, allowing the emotional and cultural weight of the tradition to shape the narrative and visual world of the film.

#### Field Visits and Site Observation

To understand the spirit of forgotten performances, I travelled to several regions in Jharkhand where folk theatre once thrived. These included old community stages, now cracked and quiet; village spaces once used for festivals; and small shrines where ritual objects, sometimes masks, and still rested.

What struck me was the **quality of stillness** not emptiness, but a silence that seemed to carry memory. Dust layered over spaces that once echoed with drums and footsteps. The wood was worn, the air thick with something unspoken. These places became the emotional and visual blueprint for the opening scene of the animation, where a forgotten mask lies still in an abandoned theatre.

*"The broken mud stage held a faint smell of burnt oil. A lone wooden beam stood, wrapped with dried red thread. There was stillness, but not absence, it felt like something was waiting."*

- Field Note

This kind of visceral, observational research helped define the texture, lighting, and atmosphere in the film. Dust, cracks, red threads, these became not just design elements but **symbols of memory and quiet resistance**.

## Semi-Structured Interviews with Artists and Elders

Alongside site visits, I held informal but deeply meaningful conversations with people whose lives had once revolved around Chhau. Some were performers who had danced for decades but now rarely wear the mask. Others were artisans who still make the masks, though orders have slowed. A few were elders who remembered the performances but hadn't seen one in years.

These dialogues revealed how much the mask meant not just as a physical object, but as a vessel of **identity, transformation, and connection**. Many spoke of how putting on the mask used to feel like calling in a spirit; a performer would fast, prepare, and step into another self. Now, for some, the mask simply hangs on a wall, its power dormant.

*"We used to fast before wearing the mask. It was like calling a spirit into the body. Now the mask just hangs in my shop,"* one performer told me.

This sense of **personal and cultural grief** became a core emotional thread in the film. It shaped scenes like the mirror lake moment where the mask sees not its surface, but the dancer within, its sleeping spirit. These interviews also inspired the idea that animation can serve as a kind of **ritual performance**, reawakening something that has faded.

## Visual Note-Taking and Sketching

Much of this learning happened not just through words, but through **drawing**. During and after the field visits, I used sketching as a way to process impressions and emotions, capturing textures, shadows, and symbolic moments that couldn't always be explained in writing.

Sketching helped me translate atmosphere into visual metaphors:

- **Fabric trees** representing fragile, stitched memories.
- **Red threads** pulling the past into the present.
- **Floating masks** as lost faces in the forest of forgetting.

These images didn't come from imagination alone, they came from watching dust gather on altars, from noticing red cloth tied to branches, from hearing stories about masks that hadn't been worn in years. In that sense, the act of sketching became a **bridge between research and design**, turning lived experiences into the film's emotional and visual language.

## Outcome of Primary Research

This first hand exploration deeply influenced the film's structure and meaning. It shaped:

- The emotional arc from **loss to memory to rebirth**.
- The use of **metaphor** to carry cultural and emotional weight.
- The design of spaces, textures, and transitions that feel rooted in real, remembered places.
- The belief that animation can go beyond aesthetics to become an act of **ritual remembrance**.

Ultimately, this research wasn't just about learning facts or documenting a fading art. It was about listening with eyes, ears, and hands to what still lingers. And then, through animation, giving that lingering presence a shape, a rhythm, and a chance to be seen again.

### 2.2.2 Secondary Research

The secondary research phase was where the ideas really began to deepen and take root. It gave me the space to pause, reflect, and understand how others scholars, artists, filmmakers have explored the same questions I was asking: What does it mean to remember something that's fading? How do we give shape to silence, to cultural memory, to something sacred that's nearly forgotten?

This part of the journey was less about finding hard facts, and more about **finding resonance**; concepts, images, and theories that helped me articulate what I was trying to express through the animation.

## Literature Review

To begin shaping a conceptual foundation, I turned to writers who've spent their lives exploring the deeper functions of art, symbols, memory, and meaning.

- **Paul Wells**, in *Understanding Animation*, really opened my eyes to what animation can do. It isn't just for linear stories; it can be abstract, symbolic, and emotional. His thoughts on experimental and poetic animation helped me feel confident using **metaphor instead of explanation** in my film.
- **Roland Barthes** and his ideas on **semiotics** (especially from *Image-Music-Text*) taught me how everything in an image; colour, form, space, can carry meaning. That shaped how I used the **red thread, the mask, and the dream forest** in the film. Each visual element became a kind of emotional symbol, not just a backdrop.
- **Maurice Halbwachs**, with his work on **collective memory**, helped me understand that memory isn't always individual. It's shared. It's cultural. It lives in communities, in rituals, and even in objects like a Chhau mask. That idea became central to the story, thinking of the mask not as something broken, but as something **carrying memory**, waiting to be reawakened.

These texts gave me not just theories, but **clarity and language** for what I was intuitively feeling. They allowed me to frame this animation as more than just a film; it became a kind of **ritual in itself**, a way of remembering something sacred through image and rhythm.

## Cultural Studies and Archival Material

I knew I wanted the film to be poetic, but I also wanted it to be **honest**, grounded in real tradition and understanding. So I turned to online archives like **Sahapedia** and **UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage portal**, which gave me access to the rich, layered world of Chhau.

Through articles, images, and oral histories, I learned about:

- The ritualistic origins of Chhau
- The significance behind different masks and costumes
- The regional variations in how it's performed

What stood out most was how much **spiritual meaning** these performances once carried. Chhau wasn't just entertainment; it was transformation, storytelling, and even offering. That understanding reshaped how I treated the mask in my animation, not as a visual object, but as something alive, emotional, and sacred.

I also explored **folk museum catalogues, academic papers, and old documentaries**, which gave me glimpses into how the tradition has changed over time. Some images from these sources; like masks gathering dust in a corner, or an elder recalling a performance, directly influenced the design of scenes like the **abandoned theatre**, the **mirror lake**, and the **stitched memory forest**.

This research helped me walk the line between **authenticity and abstraction**; honouring the cultural depth of Chhau, while still creating something symbolic and personal.

## Film and Animation Analysis

In searching for ways to tell this kind of story; one rooted in memory and metaphor, I turned to filmmakers and animators who have done just that.

- **Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* and *Princess Mononoke*** showed me how entire worlds can be built through emotion, myth, and transformation. His treatment of spirits, nature, and forgotten gods felt close to what I wanted for my own dreamscape, especially the **red thread**, **spirit forest**, and **water reflections** in my film.
- **Soumitra Ranade's *Goopi Gawaiya Bagha Bajaiya*** gave me a model for how to reimagine folk tales through stylized, playful animation. I loved how it balanced cultural grounding with imaginative storytelling, something I also tried to do, but through a more minimal, meditative style.
- **William Kentridge's charcoal animations** completely changed how I thought about **texture, imperfection, and memory**. His use of smudges, erasure, and repetition

reminded me that memory is **never clean or fixed**, it's layered, soft, often incomplete. That informed my choice to use hand-drawn textures, faded colours, and quiet transitions.

- **Nina Sabnani's *The Stitches Speak*** was another beautiful inspiration. Her way of letting craft traditions; like embroidery, speak visually and emotionally made me think about fabric not just as material, but as metaphor. That's how ideas like **embroidered clouds** and **stitched trees** emerged in my work.

Watching these films wasn't just inspiring, it was **reassuring**. They reminded me that there are many ways to tell stories, and that **feeling can be just as powerful as plot**.

## Conclusion of Secondary Research

This stage of research was like walking through a forest of other voices; artists, scholars, traditions, each helping me see the path a little more clearly. It taught me that to create something rooted in culture, memory, and ritual; I needed both **theory and feeling, structure and intuition**.

By combining this knowledge with personal expression, the film became something layered and intentional, **not just an animation, but a poetic offering**, stitched together from what I've read, seen, felt, and remembered.

## 2.3 Design Process

### 2.3.1 Concept Development

- Created a symbolic story with a forgotten Chhau mask at its heart. The narrative grew organically from rich metaphors, the red thread representing memory pull, stitched forests symbolizing shared history, and clouds made of fabric capturing the feeling of dreams.
- Crafted a poetic script to weave alongside the visuals. This poem wasn't just words; it became the emotional core and the guiding structure that shaped the entire animation.

### 2.3.2 Visual Style and Techniques

- I chose to create the animation by hand, drawing each frame individually in Procreate. This approach gives the film a tactile, imperfect feel—one that reflects the fragile, textured nature of memory itself.
- Visual metaphors were crafted to represent key themes:
  - **Dusty theatre**: abandonment
  - **Fabric trees and stitched forest**: fragility of cultural memory
  - **Lake of reflection**: awakening of identity
  - **Red thread**: continuity and hope



### **2.3.3 Storyboarding and Animation**

- I started with rough storyboards and animatics to explore the rhythm, mood, and flow of the film.
- Scenes were refined through several rounds of feedback, from my own reflections and guidance from my mentor.
- Colour and movement were carefully added bit by bit, marking key moments of emotional change and storytelling progression.

### **2.3.4 Sound Design and Narration**

- I crafted a subtle, atmospheric soundscape; using delicate sounds like footsteps, heart beats, the soft rustle of fabric, and distant-faint drums to create an eerie yet gentle mood.
- The poem's narration was delivered in a quiet, reflective voice that matches the animation's intimate and contemplative tone.
- Careful attention was given to syncing the narration with the visuals, so that the rhythm of words and images flow together seamlessly, deepening the emotional experience.

## **2.4 Ethical Considerations**

- I approached the project with deep respect for the cultural traditions, making sure to represent them thoughtfully and accurately.
- Rather than directly portraying real-life Chhau artists or their communities, the film offers symbolic references that honor their spirit and legacy.
- This animation is meant to be a heartfelt tribute; a way to celebrate and pay homage—not a documentary record.

## **2.5 Limitations**

- Since this is a short animation, I had to express the richness of the culture through metaphors and symbolism, rather than detailed, literal explanations.
- Working solo meant the technical possibilities were focused on 2D frame-by-frame animation, keeping things simple but meaningful.
- Some oral histories and cultural nuances were gently simplified to keep the story clear and poetic, while still honouring their essence.

## Chapter 3: Context and Background

### 3.1 About Chhau Dance and Masks

Chhau is a semi-classical martial dance from eastern India, mainly found in Jharkhand, Odisha, and West Bengal. It comes in three major styles; Seraikella, Mayurbhanj, and Purulia, but it's the Seraikella and Purulia forms that are especially known for their beautifully handcrafted masks. These masks aren't just stage props; they're sacred objects that represent gods, spirits, and characters from rich mythological stories. Made traditionally from clay, papier-mâché, and natural pigments, these masks hold deep cultural and spiritual meaning in the region's rituals and performances.

In Chhau, the dancer's face is often hidden, with the mask becoming the true voice of emotion, identity, and transformation. The performer fades away, and the character comes alive. This fascinating balance between hiding and revealing, between self and spirit, became a central metaphor for my animation.



Figure 2: Chhau Dance in Purulia, Seraikella, and Mayurbhanj

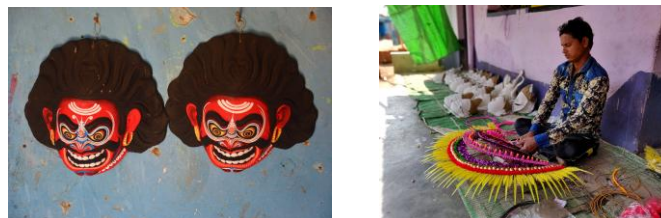


Figure 3: Traditional Chhau masks used in performances

### 3.2 Decline and Cultural Amnesia

In recent years, traditional art forms like Chhau have faced many challenges in staying alive. Economic hardships, migration, shifting entertainment tastes, and fewer young people learning these crafts have all contributed to their gradual fading. Many old theatres and rehearsal spaces have fallen into neglect, and skilled artisans are finding it harder to pass on their knowledge.

This sense of cultural forgetting, where collective memory slips away because of disconnection, is a key theme in *The Dream of a Mask*. The abandoned theatre you see in the film isn't just a setting; it's a symbol of this loss. The stillness of the mask mirrors the quiet pause of traditions that are waiting to be remembered again.

### **3.3 Memory, Material, and Identity in Folk Traditions**

Folk traditions don't rely on written records to keep their identity alive, they live through memory that's felt in songs, gestures, masks, rhythms, and rituals. The materials used; fabric, wood, clay, pigments, become a kind of living archive, holding stories and history in their very texture. In this film, that idea comes to life through images like stitched clouds, forests made of fabric, and a red thread weaving everything together.

By showing memory as something that's sewn, torn, and carefully mended again, the animation highlights both the fragility and the strength of culture. These visual metaphors remind us that folk memory doesn't just survive, it endures through acts of repair, revival, and reinvention.

### **3.4 Theatricality and the Forgotten Space**

The abandoned theatre in the animation is much more than just a setting, it feels alive, almost like a character itself. It carries the faint echoes of footsteps, fading songs, and soft whispers of applause. Dust here isn't just dust; it's a symbol of time passing. Silence isn't empty, it's full of meaning. Through the animation, this forgotten place is transformed into a dreamlike world where memories can once again take the stage.

This idea is inspired by both Indian folk theatre and Western theatrical ideas, like Peter Brook's concept of the "Empty Space," where an empty stage becomes a powerful, almost spiritual space. In this film, the theatre becomes a vessel of longing and hope, a place where what's been lost can be imagined and brought back to life.

### **3.5 Relevance of Animation as a Cultural Tool**

Why animation? Because it lets us bring the unseen to life. It can turn spirit, dreams, and memory into living, moving things, not just symbols on a page. Unlike live-action or documentary films, animation is like visual poetry, where clouds can be embroidered, forests stitched together, and lakes can hold a reflection of the soul.

For this project, animation isn't just a technique, it's a ritual, much like the art of mask-making or the dance itself. Every frame is carefully hand-drawn, carrying the same care and devotion that folk artisans put into their crafts. In this way, the animation doesn't just tell the story of a fading tradition, and it helps breathe new life into it.

## Chapter 4: Visual and Conceptual References

### 4.1 Animation and Film References

*The Dream of a Mask* draws its surreal and symbolic visual style from a variety of animated and film works that explore themes of memory, identity, and the mysteries beyond the physical world.

- **Hayao Miyazaki** (e.g., *Spirited Away*, *Princess Mononoke*): Dreamlike transitions, spirits, and forests as living characters.



Figure 4: Visuals from The Animated film *Spirited Away* and *Princess Mononoke* by Hayao Miyazaki

- **Soumitra Ranade's *Goopi Gawaiya Bagha Bajaiya***: Folk stylization, music-based storytelling, and reinterpretation of oral tales.



Figure 5: Visuals from the Animated film *Goopi Gawaiya Bagha Bajaiya* by Soumitra Ranade

- **William Kentridge**: Charcoal and hand-drawn aesthetics that embrace imperfection, memory, and socio-cultural commentary.

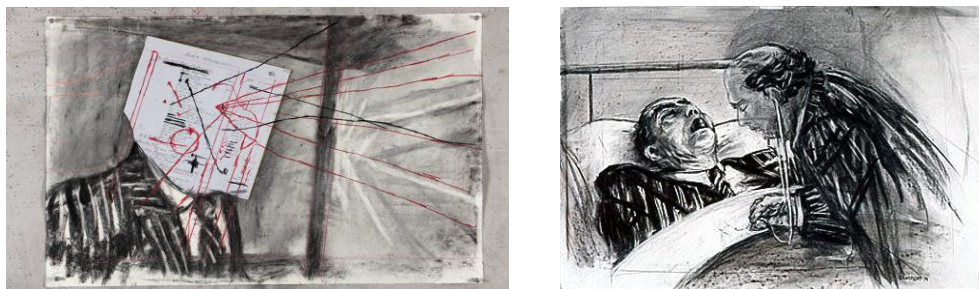


Figure 6: Drawings for the film *Other Faces and Pain & Sympathy* by William Kentridge

- **Nina Sabnani’s *The Stitches Speak*:** Use of textile, stitches, and traditional motifs.



Figure 7: Visuals from the movie *The Stitches Speak* by Nina Sabnani.

These influences helped define the tone of the film, not as entertainment, but as a dream-poem, a moving ritual of remembering.

## 4.2 Folk Art, Material, and Visual Craft

The look and feel of the film are deeply inspired by Indian folk crafts, especially Kantha embroidery, Santhal textile designs, and the rich textures of mask-making.

- **Kantha Embroidery:** The flowing stitches, circular patterns, and layered fabric textures inspired the idea of “stitched memories” that run through the animation.
- **Textiles and Handlooms:** These crafts become more than materials, they turn into imagined landscapes, with clouds, forests, and lakes all feeling textured and sewn together.
- **Chhau Masks:** The intricate details of real Chhau masks, made from papier-mâché and painted by hand, were reimagined here in simplified, dreamlike forms that capture their spirit.
- **Tribal Paintings (like Sohrai and Paitkar):** Their flat shapes, vibrant symbolic colors, and rhythmic storytelling influenced how layers and patterns come together on screen.

## 4.3 Visual Metaphor and Symbolism

Instead of telling the story in a straightforward way, the film uses visual metaphors to awaken emotions and deeper meanings. These images create their own kind of logic, guiding viewers through the film's surreal and poetic journey:

*Table 1: Visual Metaphor and Symbolism*

<b><u>Symbol / Scene</u></b>	<b><u>Metaphorical Meaning</u></b>
<b>Abandoned theatre</b>	Forgotten cultural memory
<b>Red thread</b>	Spirit, memory, hope, revival
<b>Stitched clouds</b>	Memories floating like faded dreams
<b>Fabric forest with masks</b>	Memory forest; fragile, sewn-together identity
<b>Lake of reflection</b>	Core memory and the soul of the mask
<b>Reflection on the lake</b>	Self-recognition; moment of awakening
<b>Child lifting the mask</b>	Rebirth; next generation rediscovering tradition

These metaphors act like visual verses in a poem, forming a narrative arc of death, dream, and rebirth.

## 4.4 Poetic Structure and Narrative Rhythm

The film's visuals are closely woven with the poem that forms its very backbone. This poem, shared earlier in Chapter 1, isn't just a script; it's the rhythm and structure that shape the entire story. Each stanza sets the tone for a scene, guiding the timing, pacing, and flow of the animation.

The narration's rhythm matches the animation's beats, pauses echo the mask's stillness, and crescendos signal moments when colour and spirit burst to life.

## 4.5 Dream Logic and Narrative Techniques

The film moves with the flow of dreams rather than following a traditional storyline. This lets the story unfold in a non-linear, intuitive way:

- **Surreal Transitions:** The red thread weaves and flows through the air, guiding the journey between scenes.
- **No Dialogue:** Without spoken words, the film leans into visual storytelling and a poetic, atmospheric mood.
- **Shifting Perspective:** At times, it's the mask that dreams; at others, the viewer joins in the dream.

This style draws from storytelling traditions like Indian shadow puppetry, oral tales, and Buddhist parables, where meaning reveals itself through metaphor, silence, and rhythm rather than direct explanation.



## Chapter 5: Narrative and Metaphorical Design

### 5.1 Narrative Summary (Overview)

*The Dream of a Mask* follows the surreal, inner journey of a forgotten Chhau mask resting quietly in an abandoned folk theatre. In its dream, the mask drifts through a world of fabric clouds and stitched forests, gently pulled forward by a red thread woven from memory. Along the way, it glimpses shadows of dances long lost, recognizes itself through a reflective moment, and slowly awakens in bursts of colour. But as the dream begins to fade, a child steps into the real world and lifts the mask with awe and care. The red thread then spreads wide across the screen; symbolizing renewal, connection, and the hopeful passing of tradition from one generation to the next.

### 5.2 Scene-by-Scene Breakdown with Metaphors

#### Scene 1: Forgotten Theatre

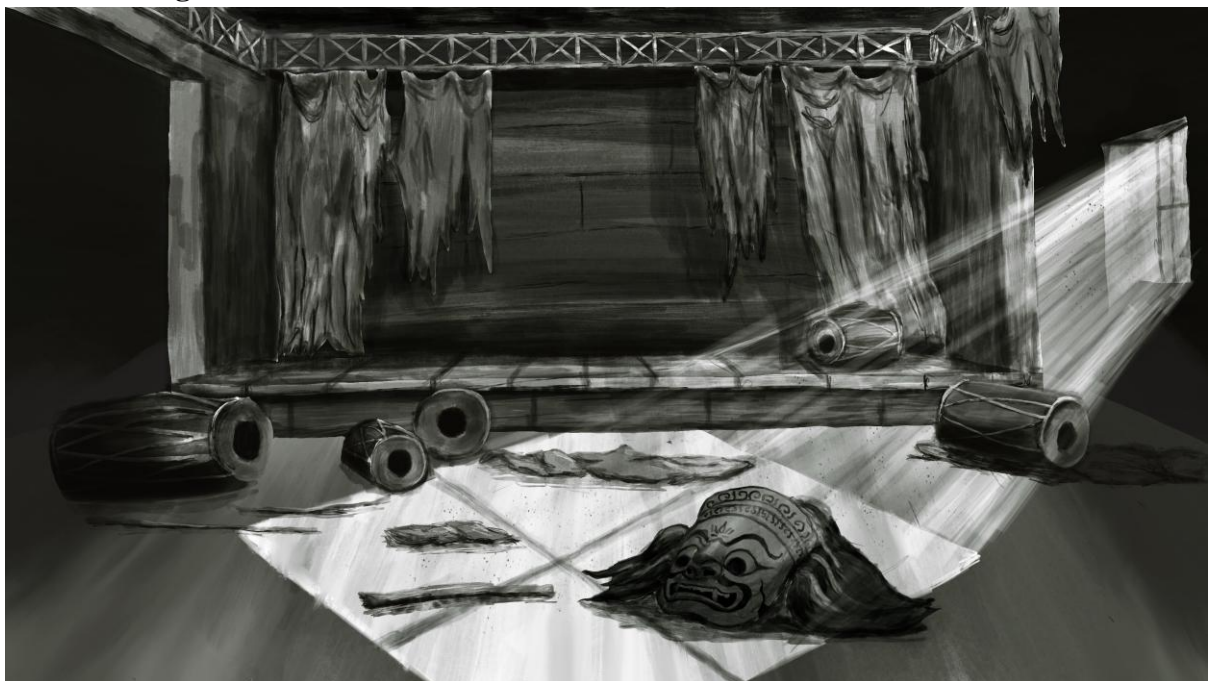


Figure 8: Scene 1

- **Visual:** In a quiet, dusty rural theatre long forgotten, the mask rests motionless on the worn wooden floorboards. Soft light filters gently through the window, casting a calm glow over the stillness.
- **Metaphor:** Cultural silence. Forgotten identity. Stillness of a once-lived tradition.
- **Narration (Poem):**  
*“Once, it danced. With sweat, with rhythm, with fire in its eyes.  
But now it rests... Forgotten among dust and echoes.  
A mask. Alone. Still.”*



## Scene 2: Dream Awakens



Figure 9: Scene 2

- **Visual:** Within a fragmented dreamscape, the forgotten mask begins to stir. Threads ripple across the floor like gentle waves, lifting it softly. Slowly, it floats upward, rising into clouds woven from fabric and memory.
- **Metaphor:** Red thread- memory pull, Torn Fabric: layer of time. Memory pulling the spirit. A dream beginning.
- **Narration:**  
*"But even masks... can dream."*

### Scene 3: Clouds like Embroidery



Figure 10: Scene 3

- **Visual:** The mask floats through cloudy skies made of fabric, with stitch marks and threads. Threads tug gently like memory pulling it forward.
- **Metaphor:** Memories woven into the sky - fragmented, faded, but not gone.
- **Narration:**  
*“And in that dream, it floats — through empty stages,  
through lost songs,  
through silence heavy as cloth.”*

#### Scene 4: Stitched Forest



Figure 11: Scene 4

- **Visual:** A forest of stitched fabric trees. Masks hang from branches. Ghostly silhouettes dance silently.
- **Metaphor:** The stitched forest is memory sewn together; fragile, fragmented, but alive. The past is dangling, waiting to be noticed.
- **Narration:**  
*"Into a forest stitched with memory...  
Where shadows dance,  
And forgotten footsteps still stir the air.*

*It watches. It remembers. It aches."*

## Scene 5: Lake of Reflection

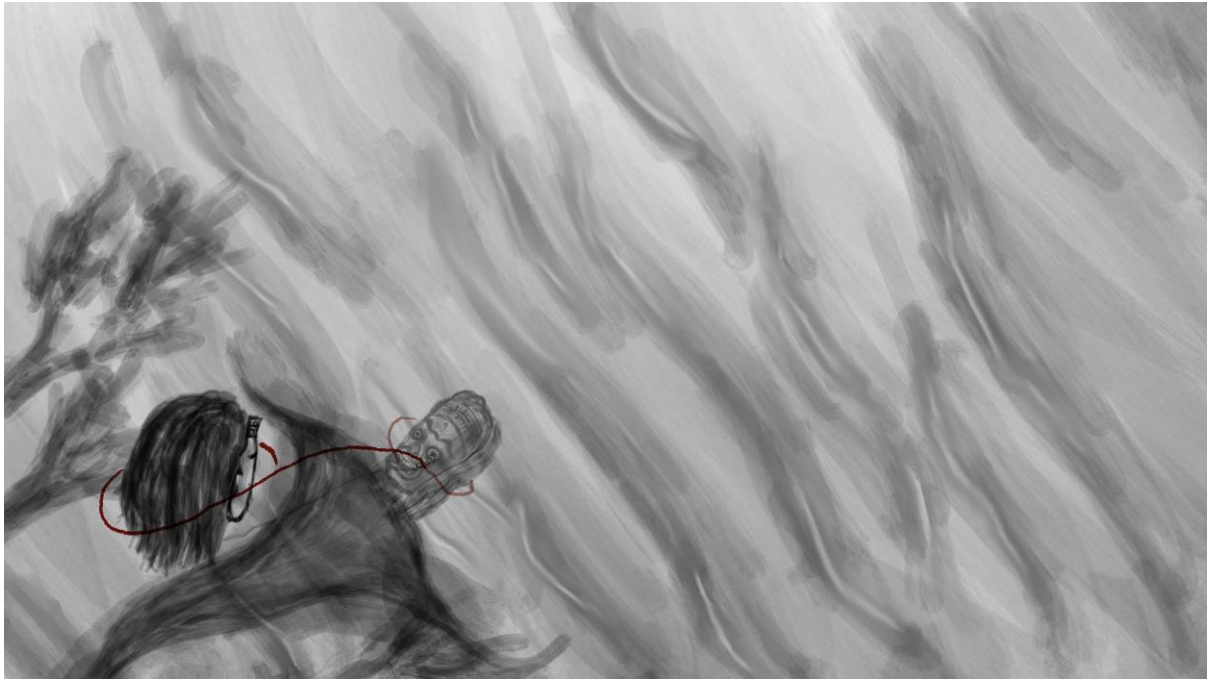


Figure 12: Scene 5

- **Visual:** The mask floats to a calm, dark lake. Reflections ripple. The water surface becomes a mirror.
- **Metaphor:** Inner self, identity, awakening. The soul hidden in the object.
- **Narration:**  
*“Then, a mirror appears.  
And in it — not just a reflection,  
but a spark. A spirit. A dancer. A soul.”*



## Scene 6: Reawakening



Figure 13: Scene 6

- **Visual:** The mask glows. Colours return to its surface. The red thread pulses like a heartbeat. It begins to move again.
- **Metaphor:** Revival. From coal to fire—performance is life.
- **Narration:**  
*“And once again... the mask is alive.  
Colours bloom. Cracks vanish.  
The rhythm returns. It wakes.”*

### Scene 7: Collapse of the Dream



Figure 14: Scene 7

- **Visual:** The real life closes his dream: The dream collapses
- **Metaphor:** Memory cannot survive without being remembered in the real world. The fragility of impermanence.
- **Narration:**  
*“The dream collapses because the memory cannot sustain itself without being remembered in the real world. This is impermanence. A moment of grief.”*

## Scene 8: A Child Enters

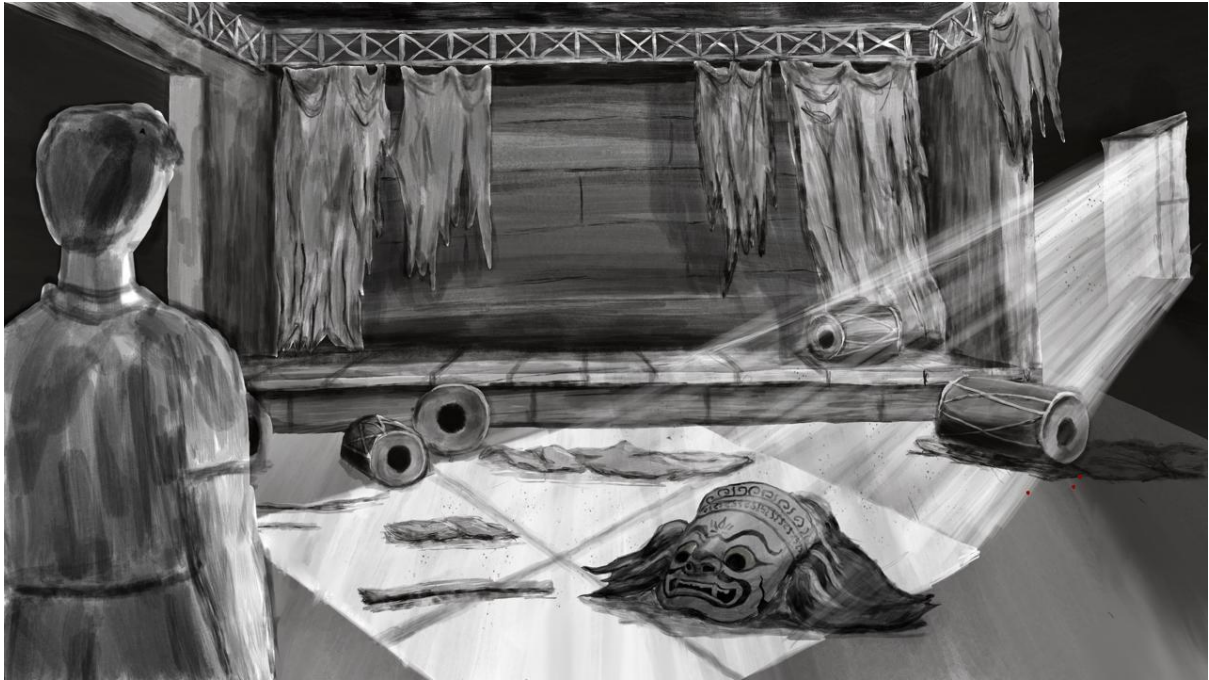


Figure 15: Scene 8

- **Visual:** A real-world shot. A child enters the dusty theatre. He notices the mask, approaches slowly.
- **Metaphor:** Curiosity, innocence, and cultural continuity. The new generation rekindles old memory.
- **Narration:**  
*"A child enters. Eyes full of wonder.  
Hands gentle as time."*

## Scene 9: Rebirth



Figure 16: Scene 9

- **Visual:** The child lifts the mask. It breathes. A subtle pulse. A rhythm returns. The red thread spreads across the screen.
- **Metaphor:** Rebirth. A new vessel of spirit. Tradition revived.
- **Narration:**  
*“And with small hands, he lifts the mask.  
Not to hide, but to awaken.  
A whisper of footsteps stirs the dust —  
a breath, a heartbeat, a first rhythm.”*



## Scene 10: Hope

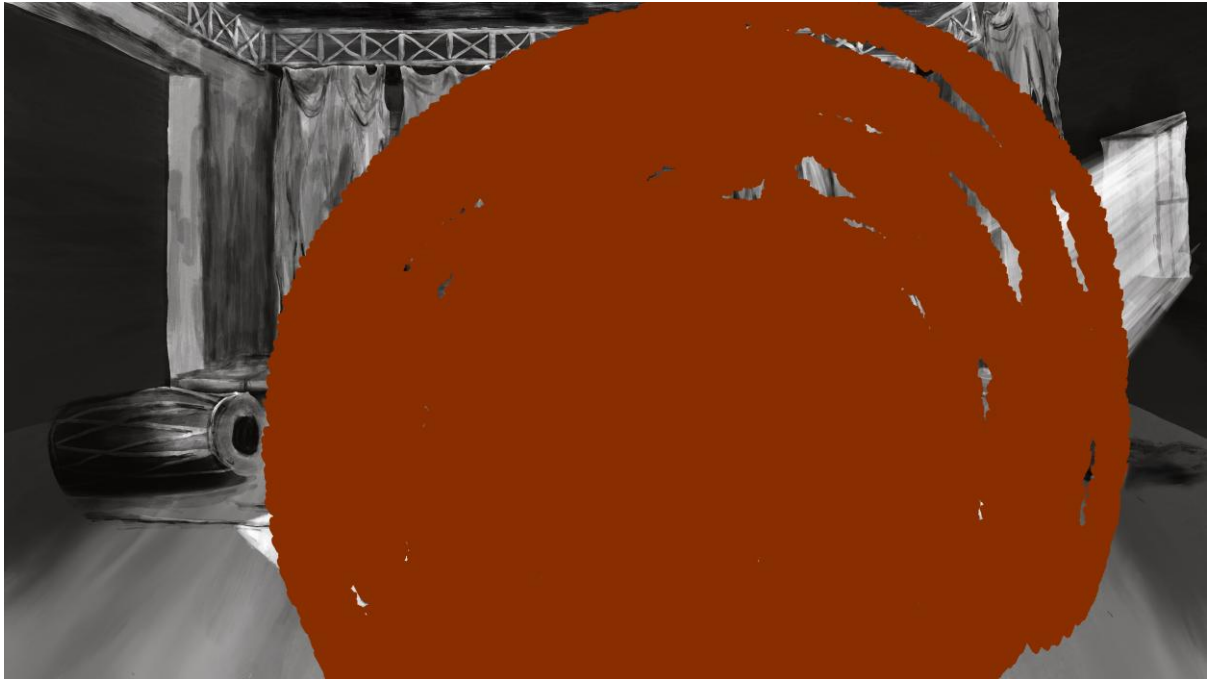


Figure 17: Scene 10

- **Visual:** The red thread weaves through the Screen
- **Metaphor:** The red thread weaving across the screen like veins of life, stitching broken dreams, connecting spirit and world.
- **Narration:**  
*“Some dreams are not lost.  
They are waiting... for someone to believe.”*

## Chapter 6: Process and Visual Development

This chapter is about the hands-on journey of creating *The Dream of a Mask*, from the very first ideas and choices about visual style and symbolism, to the animation process and tools used. It shows how the concept grew and evolved visually, with every decision closely connected to the film's core themes of memory, identity, and renewal.

### 6.1 Ideation and Initial Sketches

The project started by looking at Chhau masks not simply as stage props, but as vessels of shared memory and history. Early sketches showed fragmented shapes, masks, floating limbs, and lines of thread that symbolized the passage of time and memory. The dreamlike journey took shape visually through surreal transitions, landscapes stitched together like fabric, and a sense of space that felt both fragmented and mysterious.

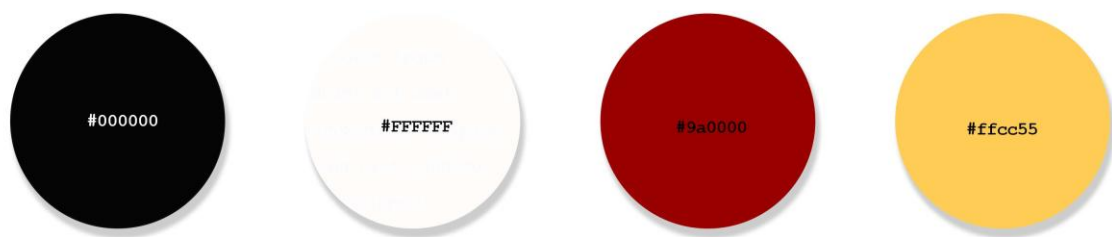


Figure 18: Initial sketches

## 6.2 Visual Language and Style

The film uses a **hand-drawn 2D style**, entirely illustrated on **Procreate**, to maintain an organic and personal texture. Textures were intentionally rough; like cloth, paper, or dust—meant to echo the forgotten, tactile quality of folk tradition.

**Colour Palette:** The film’s color palette is deliberately simple, mostly black and white, to evoke feelings of silence, memory, and the subconscious. This restrained use of color mirrors the dreamlike atmosphere, where things aren’t always clear and reality feels fragmented and fluid.



*Figure 19: Colour Palette*

- **Key Colour Elements:**

1. **Black & White:**

Black and white form the visual foundation of the film, capturing the ambiguity and timelessness of its dream world. The palette also echoes the look of charcoal and ink drawings, adding a raw, hand-drawn quality that feels both intimate and expressive.

2. **Red Thread:**

The red thread is the only colour that stays constant throughout the film, acting as both a narrative thread and a powerful symbol. It stands for memory, spirit, and continuity, gently guiding the faceless protagonist through a fragmented, dreamlike world. In a space dominated by black and white, the red thread breaks through the silence, drawing attention to moments of transformation, connection, and emotional awakening.

3. **Yellow (Mask Revival Scene):**

The red thread is the only colour that remains constant throughout the film, serving as both a narrative guide and a powerful symbol. It embodies memory, spirit, and continuity, quietly leading the faceless protagonist through a fragmented, dreamlike world. In a landscape steeped in black and white, the red thread cuts through the stillness, drawing the eye to moments of transformation, connection, and emotional awakening.

This intentional use of limited colour was meant to let each hue carry deeper symbolic weight, while keeping the film’s visual and emotional tone consistent and cohesive.

- **Line Quality:** Soft, fluctuating lines imitate stitched seams and imperfect memory.
- **Lighting:** The dim, moody lighting creates a nostalgic, almost theatrical atmosphere, where shadows don't just darken the space, they carry the weight of loss and quiet mystery.

## 6.3 Character and Mask Design

At the heart of the film is a forgotten Chhau mask, reimagined as a living spirit that holds memory, identity, and the quiet weight of cultural fading. Its design is rooted in traditional Chhau masks from Jharkhand, but has been abstracted, softened and reshaped, to capture a sense of emotion, decay, and eventual rebirth within a dreamlike world.

### *Visual Breakdown:*

- **Form & Features:**  
The mask keeps the bold facial features seen in Seraikella Chhau; wide, staring eyes, arched brows, and an expressive mouth. But unlike in performance, it's shown alone, separated from any dancer's body. This detachment turns it from a theatrical prop into a symbol, more memory or spirit than character, floating in its own world.
- **Hair & Ornamentation:**  
Its hair, drawn with wild, ink-like strokes, gives the figure a ghostly, timeless quality, untamed and raw. The headband carries faded folk motifs, subtle reminders of its cultural roots now worn down by time, hinting at how memory and meaning can slowly erode.

### *Colour Evolution:*

- **First Appearance - Monochrome (Image 1):**  
The mask first appears in black and white, blending into the muted world around it. In this form, it feels lifeless, ghost-like, its identity blurred, its colours lost. This faded look reflects its abandonment in our collective memory, a tradition quietly slipping into silence.
- **Transformation - Yellow Revival (Image 2):**  
At a turning point in the film, the mask slowly regains its yellow hue, a colour often seen as sacred and celebratory in Indian folk culture. This moment marks a powerful return of spirit, pride, and cultural presence. Against the black-and-white backdrop, the yellow glows with life. As the colour returns, so do the details, decorative elements sharpen, and the mask begins to feel whole again.

This transformation is more than just visual, it's the emotional core of the character's journey. The mask becomes a living symbol of revival, standing for the layered identity of indigenous art forms suspended between being forgotten and being remembered.



Figure 20: Mask Design (Image 1)



Figure 21: Mask Design (Image 2)



Figure 22: Character Design



Figure 23: Other Masks Designs

## 6.4 Scene Development and Storyboarding

Storyboarding was a key part of shaping *The Dream of a Mask*, helping to translate abstract ideas into a clear visual journey. In the early stages, the boards were kept intentionally minimal, focusing more on emotional beats than strict continuity. This gave space for the dreamlike logic of the film to evolve organically.

Each scene was designed with symbolic transitions in mind. Every panel aimed not just to show what was happening, but to capture the mood, the silence, and the inner rhythm of the moment. With no dialogue in the film, visual storytelling became even more important. Compositions were carefully framed to highlight the protagonist's isolation, the flowing red thread, and the surreal, shifting nature of the dream world.

Key transformation moments, like the return of colour to the mask, were mapped out with purpose, using visual contrast and movement to guide emotional shifts.

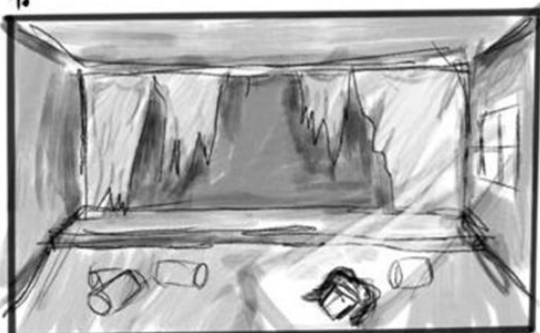
Throughout the process, the storyboard served as a living blueprint, open to change, yet rooted in the film's core themes: a cyclical journey through memory, identity, and rebirth.

### **The storyboarding process focused on:**

- Emotional pacing over strict timelines
- Repeating motifs like threads and silhouettes
- Transitions that act as metaphors (e.g., fabric tearing as layers of time, the red thread as a pull of memory, reflection as a moment of rediscovery)

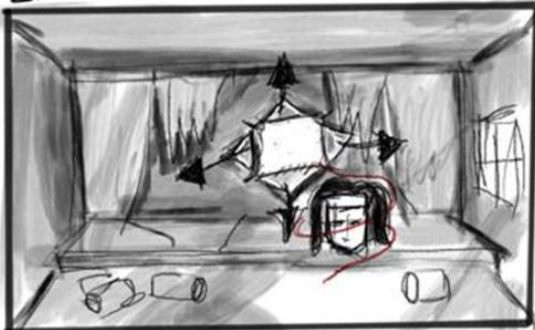
# Storyboard:

1.



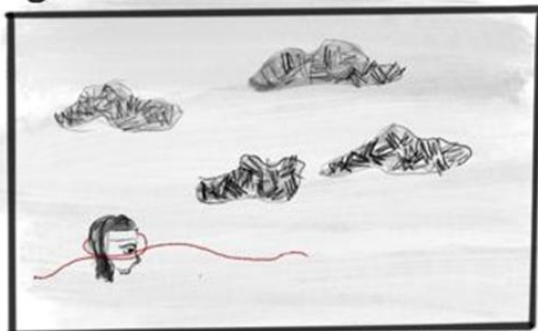
*of dusty, abandoned rural folk theatre. The mask lies still on a dusty floor. Light enters through the window.*

2.



*In a torn dreamscape, a forgotten mask awakens. The mask stirs slightly. Thread ripples through the floor, lifting it. It floats upward into the clouds.*

3.



*The mask floats through cloudy skies made of fabric. Thread ripples gently like memory being stirred.*

4.



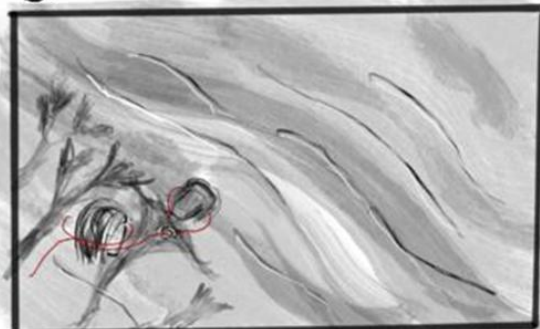
*The mask enters into the forest of stitched fabric trees. Masks hang from branches. Ghostly silhouettes dance silently.*

5.



*The red thread pulls the mask towards the dark lake.*

6.



*The mask sees his reflection, the water surface becomes a mirror.*



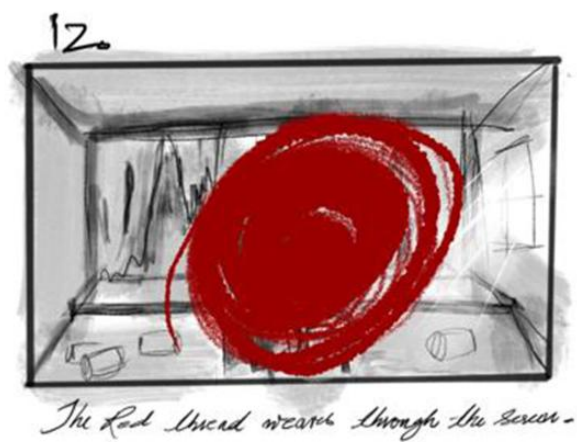
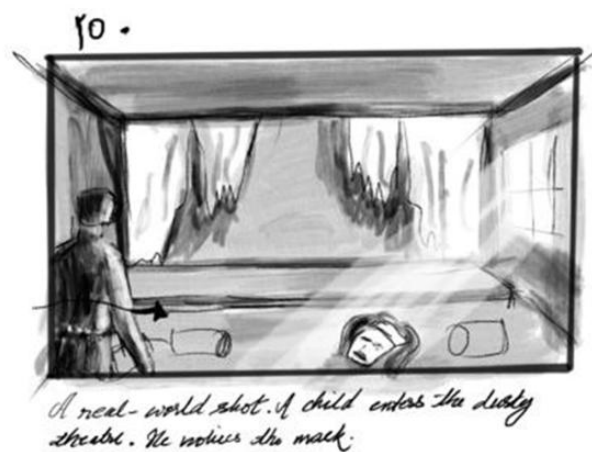
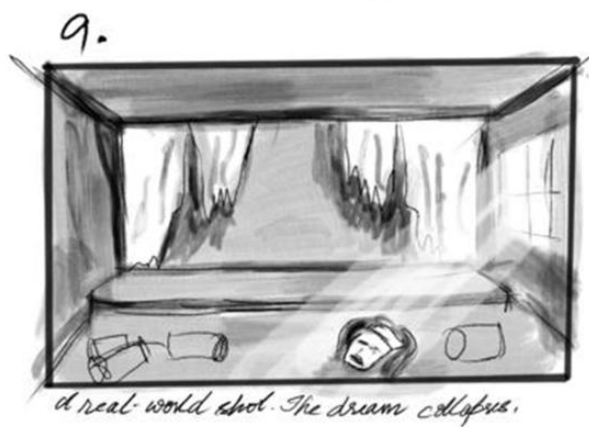
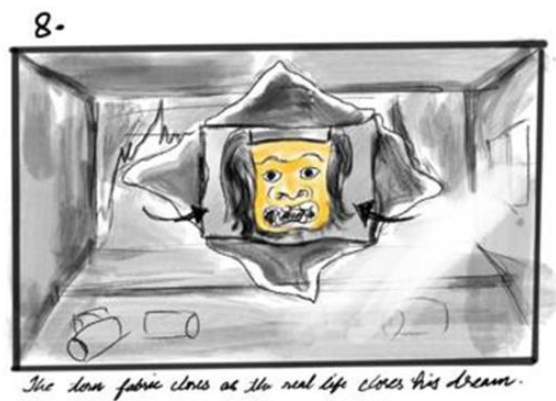


Figure 24: Storyboard



## 6.5 Animation Technique

The entire animation was hand-drawn frame by frame in Procreate. Although the frame rate was modest, usually around 8 to 12 frames per second, the careful timing gave the film a slow, deliberate pace that feels spacious and dreamlike.

- **Red Thread Animation:** The red thread acts like a secondary character; fluid and alive, guiding the mask's journey and responding to its movements.
- **Transitions:** Smooth changes between scenes were created using dissolves, transformations of the mask itself, and morphing effects that make fabric seem to flow and change.

## 6.6 Sound and Music Integration

The soundscape is intentionally minimal, built from ambient recordings like rustling forests, whispering wind, distant drums, and a steady heartbeat, all layered gently with soft musical tones. Instead of matching the visuals exactly, the sound design mirrors the film's emotional flow, creating a subtle echo of its mood.

- **Voiceover:** The poem is narrated slowly and thoughtfully, with gentle pauses that feel like breaths, adding to the reflective atmosphere.
- **Music:** Drawing inspiration from tribal rhythms, the music is transformed into low, pulsing percussion and ambient drones that blend seamlessly with the visuals.
- **Software:** All the video, sound, music, and narration were carefully edited together using Microsoft Clipchamp.

## 6.7 Iterations and Changes

Throughout the development process, the story and its elements evolved in meaningful ways:

- At first, the dream took place on a traditional performance stage, but over time it transformed into more symbolic landscapes, like lakes and forests; that better captured the emotional journey.
- The child character was introduced later, bringing a sense of hope and connecting the story to the idea of passing traditions from one generation to the next.
- What began as a simple visual detail, the red thread; grew into the central narrative thread that ties everything together.

This evolving process gave the story room to breathe and flow naturally, much like the way oral folktales shift and grow as they're passed down through time.

## Chapter 7: Themes and Interpretation

This chapter dives into the heart of the film's themes. Though the story unfolds in a surreal, wordless world, it's rich with deeper emotions and symbols, touching on memory, identity, impermanence, and rebirth. These themes don't just appear as visual hints; they invite viewers to reflect, connect with traditions that are slowly fading, and imagine a hopeful renewal.

### 7.1 Forgotten Identity and Memory

The abandoned Chhau mask stands for a cultural identity that once thrived but is now forgotten and neglected. The dark, dusty theatre where it rests becomes a powerful metaphor, a silent stage where vibrant traditions have fallen quiet. The film itself becomes an act of remembrance, reaching out both to the mask and to us, the viewers.

- The red thread serves as a lifeline, pulling at the strands of lost memory.
- The clouds, stitched like delicate embroidery, symbolize memories drifting through time and imagination; soft, fragile, and ever-moving.

*"But now it rests... forgotten among dust and echoes."*

### 7.2 Spirit of the Object

At its core, the film asks a profound question: Can an object dream? Can it hold memory? The mask is more than just a face covering, it's a vessel of spirit, carrying the energy of tradition, much like fire that quietly glows within coal.

- The mirror scene marks a pivotal moment where the mask glimpses its own soul, reflected back through the layers of memory and identity.
- The lake of reflection becomes both a literal and symbolic space; still, deep, and revealing what lies beneath the surface.

In this metaphor, the dancer within the mask represents the soul of the performance itself—hidden, yet very much alive.

## 7.3 Impermanence and Grief

The dream starts to unravel because memory can't survive alone. Without someone to witness it in the real world, it slowly fades away. This moment captures the impermanence of cultural traditions, a quiet sorrow in watching something precious slip away.

- The tearing fabric and dissolving landscapes reflect a world coming apart at the seams.
- This feeling goes beyond nostalgia; it's a deeper awareness of what's lost when we forget.

*"The dream collapses because the memory cannot sustain itself without being remembered in the real world."*

## 7.4 Rebirth through Curiosity

The final scene brings a quiet hope, not through grand gestures, but in the simple, gentle act of a child. The child doesn't wear the mask but lifts it tenderly, awakening its spirit. This moment stands for continuity, the possibility that the next generation will breathe new life into fading traditions.

- The child's soft, careful touch contrasts with the worn, heavy mask, creating a powerful image of care, curiosity, and potential.
- The red thread unfurls like veins, weaving together spirit and body, past and future.

*"Some dreams are not lost. They are waiting... for someone to believe."*

## 7.5 Hope, Connection, and the Role of the Viewer

Though the film's journey feels personal and abstract, its message is meant for all of us. It invites viewers to remember, to care, and maybe even to carry the story forward. That red thread may be vivid on screen, but it belongs to everyone.

- The dream doesn't stop when the film ends, it lives on in the imagination of each viewer.
- It gently asks us: What forgotten stories do we hold inside? And what will we do with them?

## Chapter 9: Reflections and Conclusion

This chapter reflects on the overall experience of creating *The Dream of a Mask*, its thematic and symbolic resonance, and the deeper meaning it carries within the context of tradition, memory, and animation as a contemporary ritual.

### 9.1 Reception and Learnings

Creating this film was more than just a design project, it became a ritual of rediscovery: a journey into Jharkhandi heritage, the spirit of the Chhau mask, and the emotional power of visual storytelling. Viewers often described the film with words like “haunting,” “gentle,” and “sacred,” reminding me that even experimental and abstract work can touch people deeply.

#### Key lessons learned:

- **Metaphor over explanation:** Audiences often connected more through silence and symbolism than through straightforward storytelling.
- **Cultural research matters:** Rooting the film in authentic Chhau traditions gave it emotional depth and credibility, even when the story ventured into the surreal.
- **Technical patience:** The discipline of frame-by-frame animation taught me the beauty of imperfection, how hand-drawn details add texture and soul to the work.

### 9.2 The Mask as a Living Symbol

As I worked on this film, the mask transformed from being just a prop into something deeply personal and culturally significant; a symbol of potential and a sleeping spirit waiting patiently to be recognized.

- The mask isn’t brought back to life through force, but through gentle, attentive observation, reflecting how traditions endure when met with curiosity and respect.
- It embodies a layered identity: tribal roots, performance, moments forgotten, and the hope of rebirth.

In essence, the mask isn’t a fixed object, it awakens through belief.

## 9.3 Rebirth through Memory and Belief

The film centres on a hopeful idea: some dreams never truly die; they're just waiting for someone to believe in them. This project suggests that preserving culture isn't about freezing the past in time, but about making it alive and meaningful for new generations.

- The child in the film represents every curious mind ready to discover.
- The red thread symbolizes every moment we pause to remember.
- And the animation isn't just an archive, it's a breath of spirit, a revival of what was almost lost.

**Poem lines to reflect this:**

*"A whisper of footsteps stirs the dust - a breath, a heartbeat, a first rhythm."*

## 9.4 Closing Thoughts: Animation as Ritual

Animation, much like ritual, is about repetition, rhythm, and meaningful gestures. This film wasn't created just to be seen, it was meant to be felt deeply. The making of it mirrored the story itself: moving from stillness to motion, from silence to song.

- Like the mask at its center, the film was brought to life through careful, devoted hands and a strong belief in its spirit.
- It doesn't stand as a documentary, but as a spiritual offering, a stitched dream crafted to honor and revive a fading tradition.

*"Some dreams are not lost.*

*They are waiting... for someone to believe."*

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## Chapter 10: Annexures

### 10.1 Poem Summary – “The Dream of a Mask”

The poem begins by recalling the mask’s vibrant past, when it danced with rhythm and life. It carries a wistful, nostalgic tone, acknowledging that what was once full of fire and energy now lies still, covered in dust, and forgotten. This reflects the fate of many cultural treasures that have faded from today’s world.

As the poem moves forward, it drifts into the realm of dreams, suggesting that even in stillness; the mask holds memory and spirit. In its dream, it begins to move again—not in body, but in soul, floating through empty spaces, lost melodies, and heavy silence, evoking a deep sense of cultural loss and longing.

The dream carries the mask into a stitched forest of memories, where shadows of dancers still swirl and move. This delicate, symbolic space represents the richness of tradition lingering quietly in the collective subconscious. The mask watches, aches, and yearns—to be remembered, to belong once more.

The turning point comes when the mask sees its reflection in a lake. But this is no broken, lifeless image, it is a dancer, a soul. This moment reveals the heart of the story: the spirit of the mask, and of tradition, is not gone; it’s simply unseen. This awakening is a metaphor for cultural revival through memory.

As colour blooms and rhythm stirs anew, the dream begins to fade, because dreams cannot live without someone in the real world to hold them. This introduces a bittersweet sense of impermanence and loss.

Then, a child steps into the real world, a symbol of curiosity, fresh generations, and quiet wonder. The child lifts the mask; not to wear it, but to awaken it, fulfilling the dream’s need to be believed in. The red thread, a symbol of spirit and connection, spreads across the screen like veins of life.

The poem closes on a hopeful note: some dreams are not dead, they’re simply waiting for someone to believe in them. It transforms the mask from a forgotten object into a living symbol, one that only needs to be held, remembered, and passed on.

#### 10.1.1 Key Themes in the Poem:

- Loss and memory
- Dreams as cultural metaphor
- Rebirth through recognition
- Tradition as a living spirit
- Hope through new generations

## 10.2 QR Code for the Animation; “The Dream of a Mask”



*Figure 25: QR Code for the animation link*

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