

Henry Lee

B. 1981, Singapore



Scentsational

2022

Charcoal, Pencil and Acrylic on Canvas
H 101.4 x 76.2 cm



Indian Sandalwood (*Santalum album*)

One of the oldest incense materials in the world, sandalwood is highly sought after for its aromatic, therapeutic, antioxidant, antimicrobial and antidepressant properties, with a limited supply making it one of the most expensive woods in the world. The entire tree is uprooted during harvesting, and every part is processed to maximise timber and oil output. Decades of over-harvesting and illegal poaching has led to the species to become endangered in the wild. While conspicuously absent in this work, the tree is instead represented as a giant vial of sandalwood oil orbited by an array of perfume bottles, a reference to the popularity of the oil in the fragrance and cosmetics industries. The timeless Hindu mother-goddess Shri Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, beauty and abundance who nurtures and nourishes all life, is said to reside in the sandalwood tree, one of the five sacred trees in Lord Indra's paradise garden. Underlining her connection to the tree is the lotus pedestal (symbol of purity), attendant elephants (rain and fertility), and Uluka the owl, her vehicle or vahana (spiritual wisdom, warning against greed and the misuse of Lakshmi's wealth).