PHENOMENAL FICTIONS

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Phenomenal Fictions

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Installation view of "Imagined Documents", curated by Ravi Agarwal at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

Imagined Documents and Urban Reimagined 2.0

Curated by Ravi Agarwal
Venue Adil Shah Palace

Curatorial Note

Artists *Bani Abidi, Azadeh Akhlaghi, Dia Mehta Bhupal, Sharbendu De, Yamini Nayar, Prajakta Potnis, Vivan Sundaram, Munem Wasif, Sahil Naik, Achia Anzi.*

Curator *Ravi Agarwal*

The idiom of photographs can reach far beyond the world as we see it. Images which escape an indexicality to the "real", can play between fact and fiction to re-present a hyper- real, abstract, imaginary, or even deeply social or political moment. The reference to "fact" of such images may have been interrupted, yet they act as complex commentaries of our times—reflecting a temporal continuity - in the "now" though not fully of it. They present another kind, and possibly a more enduring reflexivity. Marking an exhaustion with the documentary, they engage with a simulacra of reality, as a condition of the world where all truth is mediated through techno-images.

The artists in this show, by controlling each element of the frame, precisely pre-determine what finally appears as an image. Recreating scenes from memory, constructing elaborate sets, staging selves, or retelling personal encounters they plan their image in minute detail. Often delving into techniques and histories of theatre, cinema, performance, literature, poetry and fiction, the mise-en-scène they produce may be populated with found objects or sculpted elements, re-constructed and re-imagined as new topographies, or just as conceptual narratives. They use both classical film as well as newer digital formats, showing both a rupture as well as a continuity in form

and its materiality. The final image is thus only a closing act of a play. Many a times the original set (if made) is dismantled or destroyed, leaving the image as its only trace.

The exhibition seeks to showcase newer and outstanding contemporary works by artists pursuing such practices, from South Asia and it neighbourhood. Though consciously recognised as a post-modern genre in photography, at least since the early seventies elsewhere, it still needs to be earmarked here as one, and reflects the universality of the moment we find ourselves in today.

Phenomenal Fictions

ALISHA SETT

December 2019 was a time of great tumult, with protests taking place in Panjim and across the country. The unchecked violence against students unfolding in institutions of higher education and the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act were just two immediate causes for the anger on the streets. The many memorable anti-CAA placards—witty, exasperated, and accusatory—made it clear that in a decade of virulent nationalism, documents become the fragile evidence of personal history. And when the nation-state attempts to make the document and the citizen one and the same, the specter of disappeared documents looms large. We find ourselves in a double bind: we are both in need of and at war with documents.

These moving demonstrations infected the exhibition *Imagined Documents*, curated by Ravi Agarwal, which was gesturing towards two tangential questions: what kind of document is the image? And what do we need images to do for us at this time? The first chapter of this show, held in 2018, was titled *Intimate Documents* and it turned to the personal as one method of finding meaning, an inward processing of the political and representational dilemmas of a techno-capitalist present. This was a logical beginning, for the self is closest to us. But while the self can be seen as an intimate document, what is any nation-state if not an imagined document? A fictive state endowed with real dreams; a document continually re-written through the imaginative desires of its politicians and citizens. The constructed image or the staged photograph—which Agarwal positioned as the central medium of *Imagined Documents*—became an apt metonym for the citizen-state relationship, while gesturing to the formal quandaries at the heart of the practices of the ten contemporary artists on display.

In an interview in 2002, Walid Raad said: "The Atlas Group produces and collects objects and stories that should not be examined through the conventional and reductive binary of fiction and non-fiction. We proceed from the consideration that this distinction is a false one, in many ways—not least of which is that many of the elements that constitute our imaginary documents originate from the historical world—and does not do justice to the rich and complex stories that circulate widely and that capture our attention and belief. Furthermore, we have always urged our audience to treat our documents as "hysterical documents" in the sense that they are not based on any one person's actual memories but on 'fantasies erected from the material of collective memories'".[1] If I think of these words as the unspoken manifesto of this exhibition, I find myself with an accurate description of its concerns: Is it possible to push aside all questions of indexicality without foregoing our attention to history and affect? Can the image be emancipated from itself in order to focus on what it "does" to the viewer, where it takes root in their subconscious, whether it can become a part of (or maybe has always already belonged to) their memory?

Artists choosing to work with the photograph as the final form are now in a more existential conversation with their audiences than ever before. This is not just because of the ubiquitous presence of the camera in every pocket but because we are in a continuous dialogue with the images that interpolate our lives—commenting, sharing, re-tweeting, saving, cropping. As Dayna Tortorici wrote recently: "A voyeur knows what kind of viewer he is, but looking at Instagram, you are not always a voyeur. Neither are you always a witness, nor any other single kind of watcher. Each post interpellates you differently. Your implied identity slips with each stroke of the thumb".[2]

Agarwal's own sustained practice as a visual artist makes him partial to artists who have developed their visual vocabulary over significant periods of time. In my conversations with him about the show, it became clear that while he is not unconcerned with text, he understands the space of the exhibition as a place for the body and the

eye to take centerstage. His is not a curatorial practice of deification or overtly performative displays, or even the creation of a space for meta-critique, it is rather a bold editorial gesture—choosing just enough from each oeuvre to make a timely argument about the state of postmodern photography in the subcontinent. While Agarwal inserted enough exceptions, in terms of non-South Asian artists and forms of representation—the selected artists for *Urban Reimagined 2.0* were not those who work with the image primarily, and video art was included—photographic language remained a core concern of the show.

Over the week that I observed visitors in the galleries, it was clear how successful Agarwal had been in his selection and juxtapositions, in drawing people in to the works, and in allowing them to linger with eight discrete visual dialects. Because there is no other static medium as embedded in an inevitable fusion of form and content, it was Agarwal's desire to keep the viewer asking whether these artists can "present another kind, and possibly a more enduring reflexivity" than that offered by traditional documentary norms. A reflexivity that allowed them to move beyond the continuing obsession with photographic "truth". As I made my way through each work, it is this potential for subversive endurance that I searched for.

SHOULD WE BE SKEPTICAL OF BEAUTY?

Munem Wasif has been enamoured with Old Dhaka for even longer than he has been with black and white photography. *Belonging*, his first photobook, was a dedicated documentary exploration of the chaotic beauty of the old city. And though he abandons the photograph in *Kheyal* (2015-2018), an exacting stillness is a constant presence in this video, which inadvertently became the soundscape of the first gallery. *Kheyal's* refrain is made up of echoes from the everyday life of Old Dhaka: a haunting harmonium, the hallowed horn of a ship, the delicate clink of glass, night-time-crickets, running water, crackling oil, the *azaan*, the bell of the rickshaw, and then suddenly a clear deep voice: "ga, ma, dhaaaaa, ni, saaaaaa, re, saaaaa..."

Installation view of "Kheyal" (2015 – 2018), Munem Wasif, as part of "Imagined Documents" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

Though Wasif is working with the moving image, his frame remains intent on emphasising singular moments. In seventeen years spent visiting these dense neighbourhoods he has discovered surprising spaces of sanctuary around which he has built this cinematic ode to a city that will be lost. Only a poem in response seemed fitting:

A clothesline, seen through the mist
And a decrepit fan
The fan of the prisoner
Hanging from the ceiling
Like an image of death
The rope unseen, the glass bottles hidden.

We glide over the ocean of life
With a soul now lost to the world
Crossing over to the other side
Mama-aaa, is this how her son used to call her?
As he ran back home from school
Was he the writer we see through the window?
Or is he the one who is gone?

Is it only his return
That can make her leave that bed?
Was it his hand
That painted those marks on the wall?
Or tapped the words on endless pages
The clack of the typewriter
Just another sound of his youth.

Who are they?
Hiding in this ruin
Is the Mughal mansion, a respite home?
With riyaz coursing through its corridors
Is it music that makes him dream?
Her hair, full of that faraway fragrance
A cascading black mane

Wet, drops shining
The splash of cold milk
On his bare chest
A body that makes melody.

The horse paws the streets
Nervously, trapped, men in the dark
Though we only see the steam
Rising from the windowsill
We know he stands there
Looking into the dark skillet
Listening to the crackle and pop.

The ship that had left
Returns, and with its return
The door opens
A staircase looms
And a descent into the street begins
But it is a dream
He will never leave this room
The bars on the window
Like the unbearable tinnitus
Ringing in his ears.

This city will be lost to water
Water is leaking into it
Even the well is a portal
Telling us that the future
Is a return to wetness
Land has only a little time left.

The utter relief of rain
Like a little girl skipping alone on a terrace
While we all still walk these narrow lanes
Raindrops like grains of pomegranate
That she peels playfully

Picking them out of the honey husk
Watching the world change
From her solitary window.

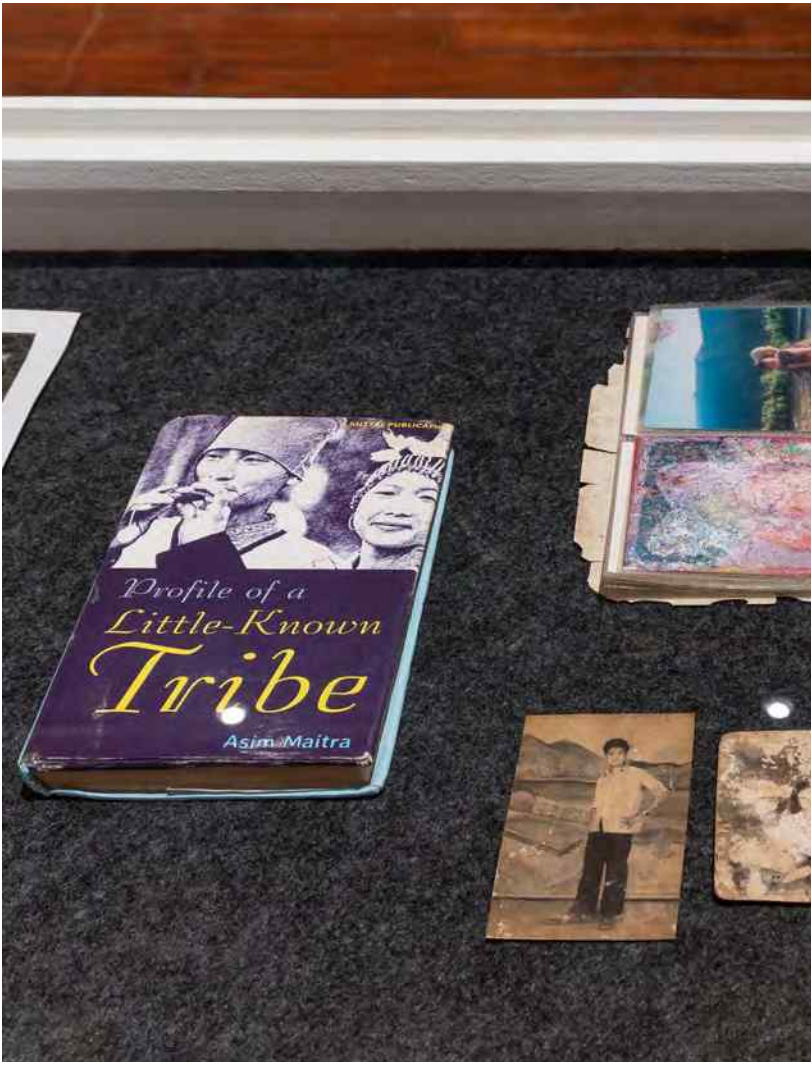
Leakages, spills seeping in
What is a television in a ruin?
Blaring among the last survivors
Man's achievements mean nothing
When a world we could have had
Disappears before us.

There is no security in *Kheyal* apart from that provided by the supple beauty of Wasif's eye. The fast-vanishing areas around Farash Ganj and Bangla Bazaar that we enter have centuries of Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic architecture and culture fused into them. Even though Wasif's chosen characters, Osman Ali, Dadi, Nitu, and Ranju, preserve their humanity, their solitude is a harbinger of destruction. Old Dhaka is in dire straits.

The risk of disappearance also haunts the Tibeto-Burman Lisu community that Sharbendu De has visited for many years. They live precariously in the forest regions between India and Myanmar and are imperiled because of the declaration of their ancestral territories as a protected national park and by the lack of interest that the Indian state has shown in their welfare—no schools, hospitals or roads exist in the region. In *Imagined Homeland* (2018), rather than dwelling solely on their daily drudgery or the exceptional obstacles they overcome, De presents the Lisu as estranged modern subjects.

The clustering of De's images together—with almost no room between one frame and the next, like fresh canvases in wooden frames without glass—added volumes to their sense of continuity and moved them from the realm of photo-essay (with its characteristic moves from one image to the next) to a floating collage, a mirage of forest fragments, allowing the eye to travel diagonally, vertically, constantly finding new shapes.

Installation view of "Imagined Homeland" (2018), Sharbendu De as part of "Imagined Documents" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.



Detail, "Imagined Homeland" (2018), Sharbendu De as part of "Imagined Documents" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

A satellite dish hovers over the children as they stare into a screen playing what could be any film; the vase full of water and flowers perched at the edge of their wooden table, a strangely familiar domestic marker that reappears. The young woman lying down, looking content, is especially captivating. Is the man hovering at the edge of the frame her lover, or an apparition from her dreams? We almost think the camera has caught them unawares but, of course, this intimacy is highly choreographed. Choosing to deal directly with the history of the sublime, De purposely positions powerful internal light sources on his "sets" to create an aura of divinity. By transforming the landscape of Namphada into "Nature", no longer one forest but all forests, through the use of a vivid blue palette tinged with electric greens, De makes every manifestation of urban life an uncanny presence. Because the material conditions of the Lisu have not been hidden—their meagre possessions forming the elements and the mythos of each set—the images seen together also spell death. The rubber gumboots and flimsy plastic sandals on the feet of the children are quotidian and yet so inadequate. Is this all they have to shield them? Is this why the couple with a suckling infant has packed their suitcase? Are they trying to leave? Each person has a gravitas in their bearing; even the children's faces rarely betray the frivolity we associate with the young.

Namphada, or Old Dhaka, may be beyond our known world but what is common in the artists' aesthetic is a pointed use of symbolism, repetition, and the building of a dream-world that co-exists with the real world which their characters inhabit, in order to break the distance between their alienation and ours. This attempt at a subversion of the societal status of their collaborators through poetic elevation reveals Wasif and De's abiding comfort with a perfectly recognisable beauty. Even if they are amid communities hovering near-disaster, for these two men, dignity and splendour go hand in hand.

But any exhibition premised on photography in our region, no matter how deeply ensconced within the realm of contemporary art, always

has to renew the battle against the saturated, saccharine, Steve-McCurryian scenes popularised by fetish-hungry photographers. Wasif and De are the two photographers in this exhibition best acquainted with this burdened history, and for them, it does not mean abandoning drama, or, in the case of De, colour, altogether. It only means conquering the inner colonial eye that threatens its presence within all of us, "the intimate enemy" whose handmaiden has often been beauty.

HOMELESS, IN YOUR OWN HOME

In other words, being a maker of beautiful things is dangerous, often too close to the desires of the market for comfort. Too gratifying. Too sweet. A core aspect of this threat, particularly in making images of marginalised subjects, is described well by Iftikhar Dadi, "a danger in rendering subaltern life-worlds visible is not simply a temptation to retreat into a kind of communitarian nostalgia, but also in bestowing a bogus surrogate subjecthood to the represented".[3] One way out, for artists, is to shirk the sublime for the mundane, seeking the tensions contained within a seemingly everyday subject along with the self-reflexivity that allows the work to be imbued with the absurdities of Google Street View life.

Moving between the staged and the seen, or the experienced and the constructed, is one spectrum on which the work situates itself, but the public and the private is often another essential spectrum. In South Asia, where we imagine life unfolding in our gullies and neighbourhoods, in our homes full of people, to see an image of an empty city, or an abandoned room, is always a sign of disturbance. And we are immediately unsettled by this dissonance in Bani Abidi's *Karachi Series I* (2009) and Sahil Naik's *38 Sinkings* (2019).

While Abidi addresses the loss of secular public space in Pakistan through isolating intensely private actions and bringing them (quite literally) on to the street, Naik's reconstructive sculptures reveal the remembered remnants of two homes in Curdi. Curdi is a village in

Installation view of "Karachi Series I" (2009), Bani Abidi as part of "Imagined Documents" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

Detail, "Karachi Series I" (2009), Bani Abidi as part of "Imagined Documents" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

Goa which was submerged by the Salaulim dam in 1977, but whose owners return when the waters abate, an annual pilgrimage to maintain and revere what was lost.

Abidi is globally renowned for her ability to pinpoint cultural contradictions and blur the binaries between East and West, India, and Pakistan, the religious and the secular, the domestic and the democratic, in subtle and often ironic expositions. In her quiet lightboxes, we find Pari Wania, Ashish Sharma, Ken DeSouza, Chandra Acharya, Jerry Fernandez, and Jacky Mirza. In the portraits, each of them is engaged in familiar rituals: Pari irons, Ken cleans his shoes, Chandra plaits her hair sitting at her dresser, Ashish packs a suitcase, Jacky is in the process of arranging her flowers, and Jerry reads the paper. But there are no walls and boundaries to their home. It is as if the structures which keep them secure have become invisible without them knowing, and here they all are, comfortably caught mid-gesture, unsuspectingly laid bare to the eyes of the viewer, on an empty road in Karachi.

In this series, Abidi plays on several key tropes of her repertoire with a finesse that has become characteristic. Reading that they were all photographed during Ramadan, in the last week of August 2008, their names became indicative of minority status in Pakistan, and the evening light in each image a reminder that the majority Muslim community was breaking their fast indoors. While their neighbours celebrate, the "Jerrys" and "Chandras" of Karachi are resigned to continue their humdrum existence. They are not a part of the ritual. However, the space that Abidi makes theirs—the endangered public sphere—is one that deserves to belong to them too, even if for only an evening.

What if these six citizens are professional performance artists? What would happen if they actually did set up their domestic rituals outdoors during Ramadan every year? What if this became a form of community action? It would be an intriguing and puzzling gesture. Perhaps this is the power of making a home visible. Whether or not we

know anything about Karachi, or the lives that these six people lead, there is an opportunity to begin fantasising about possible futures because of the momentary privacy shared.

Abidi skillfully strips away the physical confines of home while leaving the homeliness emanating from the body intact. Sahil Naik takes the opposite route to affinity, ensuring the inhabitants of his homes are out of sight. Their loss is communicated through the void, the ghosts felt tiptoeing in two empty structures. Both of Naik's installations are a *memento mori* for another time, rooted in the history of Curdi, and presence is established through the carving of intricate details. The artist engages with oral history and personal archives to excavate what these houses may have contained. Recreation requires that Naiks hand must know their every corner, their every secret: the mortar and pestle on the floor with a steel plate resting behind it, the pink *potli* under the wooden bed, the dusty family photographs on the shelves and on the wall, the calendar pages caught in mid-air, the *jhadoo* tucked away, the furniture so identifiably Goan. Each tiny discovery is a reminder of the lingering aura of Curdi's lost hopes.

Naik's miniature form is something we commonly associate with ethnographic and anthropological museums that contain dioramas depicting indigenous life, the Christian tradition of nativity scenes, or doll houses, rather than memorial monuments. It is a form that invites a particular type of investigation. I know that I must look inside this small world and imagine another world that existed there. I crane my neck, bend down, and pull out my camera phone to take pictures, becoming the maker of photographs because I cannot cross the threshold and touch the objects. Who used to live here? Unknowingly presaging the pandemic's psychological unmooring of home—think of the way in which we have all become familiar with the nooks and crannies of our shelters—*38 Sinkings* feels prescient in its understanding of what an erosion of an abode truly means.

For Goan viewers especially, these sculptures are familial, part-past, part-future. The moving timescale was amplified further on leaving

Detail, “38 Sinkings” (2019), Sahil Naik as part of “Imagined Documents” at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

the Adil Shah Palace. Massive prints, the size of a two-storey house, providing a photographic view into Naik's sculptures, were installed on the promenade in Panjim, one just opposite the entrance to Adil Shah and two across from the old Goa Medical College. The desire to signal the consequences of an increasingly degraded environment became apparent in this installation because the images brought on to the street by Naik indirectly reveal the reality of the deprivation wrought by "development". Rather than resorting to the kind of environmental-disaster imagery we have become immune to, these looming images hovering above us on the promenade felt like colourful phantoms that will haunt the state. The casino-infested waterfront lining the polluted river on which the prints rested became a mirror to the destruction wrought by the dam. How many more in Goa are destined for the same fate? How many artist-archivist-architects will we need in the future?

A dream: Ken and Jacky walk from the street in Karachi, leaving their possessions behind, right in to a home in Curdi. Ken sits on the chair looking at the clock. Jacky sits on the stool looking at the door. They wait.

ALONE IN A HALL OF MOVING MIRRORS

If our habitats say as much about us as our appearances, then we must also look carefully at the architecture of the spaces we traverse. For Dia Mehhta Bhupal, sanitised and often banal chambers, symbolic of urban life, reveal the endless, inane replication of what are assumed to be model modern forms. Bhupal's contention is that waiting rooms become respite rooms, places in which we find solace and a moment for self-reflection because they lack individuality. She spends months creating these transitory edifices in paper, and in the process captures a neoliberal lifestyle in which transition is the norm. If there is solitude in these voids, is it only for those constantly living between events, or between destinations? Are we truly always on our way somewhere or always in anticipation? The glossy solidity of Bhupal's plexiglass prints scream yes, shiny and cold, they are reflective of a

doubly alienated life.

For those who may wonder whether Bhupal's work is a poor copy of Thomas Demand, it may be helpful to underline the differences. Demand is a German conceptual artist whose dialectical images have become a postmodern landmark. His life-sized paper sculptures usually exist only as photographs (or more recently videos) because they are destroyed once he has captured them. They are too fragile to be preserved. Demand aims to replicate, as closely as possible, either an image from the mass media, or from memory, while preserving essential "flaws" in order to jolt the viewer out of any easy contemplation.

Bhupal's relationship to mass media is more material. The recycled paper that goes into making the fine rolls of similar colours she eventually uses as the building blocks of her sculptures are sourced from discarded magazines. And while Bhupal also destroys her models, allowing the work only to exist in image form, her images do not conjure that momentary "mistake" we experience when faced with Demand's work—this is real, is this real? It cannot be, but it is drawn from life? Why do I know this image? Do I know this image?—forcing an excavation of what it is in his construction that disturbs our psyche. Though Bhupal was an undergraduate student of photography in New York at the time in which Demand had his first major American retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, we do not experience anything like a homage in her work. Yes, Demand's images are also devoid of people but the trace of the past usually lingers around them. Even though he is interested in a representation of memory, Demand's mastery over the delicate qualities of paper and cardboard, as well as the use of a large format camera, provides both depth and an ephemeral texture.

In complete contrast, in *Airplane* (2016), for example, the interior space of Bhupal's aircraft is made up of stolid bulky blue seats. They look uncomfortable, stuffy, and distant. The grey overhead luggage racks mark gloom. The walls of her *Waiting Room II* are a

Installation view of artwork by Dia Mehhta Bhupal as part of "Imagined Documents" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

Installation view of “Airplane” (2016), Dia Mehhta Bhupal as part of “Imagined Documents” at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

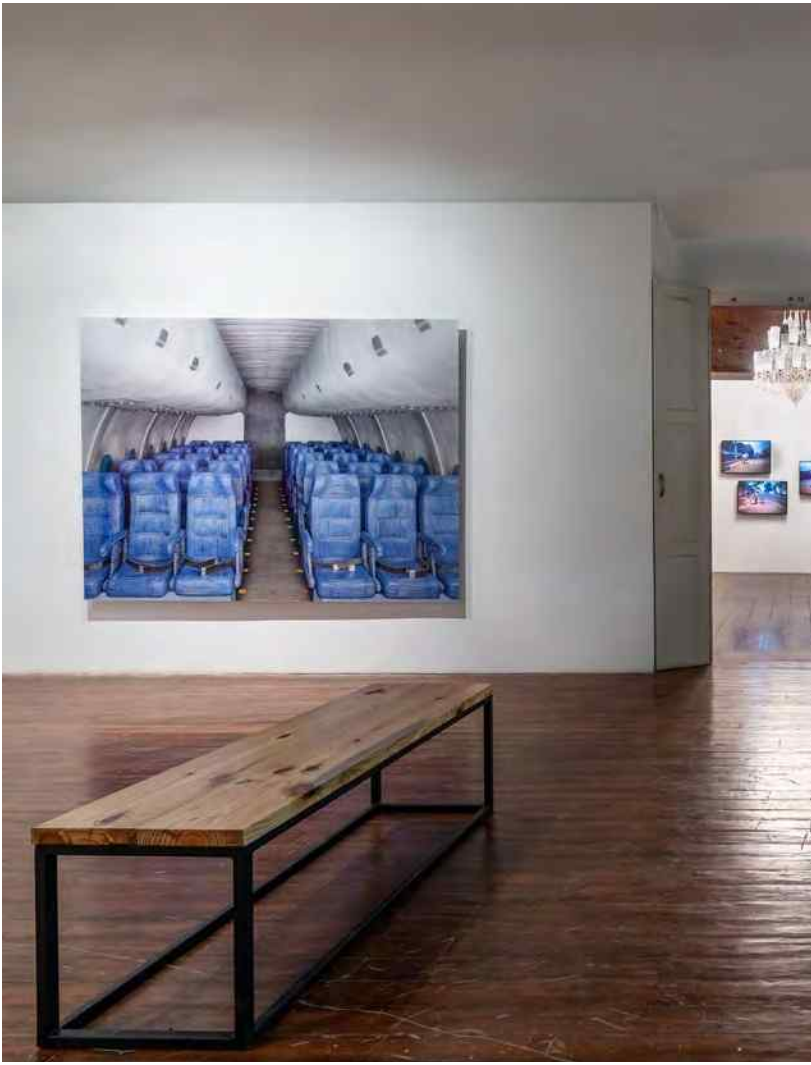
glaring Barbie-pink, the surveillance camera is pointed at us, and the magazines are untouched. Bhupal's images are incessant reminders that in our cities today, built space is a marker of disparity. An emptiness emanates from the commercial human-less quality of the rooms that have been chosen. These are fastidious but flattened caricatures, frozen in place and time.

Prajakta Potnis is also an artist who has consistently drawn attention to the politics and possibilities of constricted space and forced transience. Growing up in Bombay, she often speaks about how her work arises from the realities of a one-BHK studio (a reality that is only growing more relevant to the middle class) and photography as a form she moved to out of necessity. Unable to store large objects, she found a sense of relief in being able to carry her work in a pen drive. But it is also in image form that her assemblages are able to take on new meaning, find slippages, the porous edges of translation. Working with discarded detritus, often sold on the station road in Thane, Potnis's lightboxes are loud, and even uncanny in their direct encounter with the camera.

Evidence of Potnis' language games is found in her reading of the kitchen as a cosmic site—endowed with spiritual, material and political concerns—in this series. In *Capsule I, 309 and 603*, the freezer, an innocuous household object that we pay little attention to, that does not enter our mind's eye, becomes a liminal landscape. After either sculpting or transforming the found pieces that will enter her fridge-set, Potnis stages them amid the thin layer of ice and uses that eerie light to homogenise these homegrown installations into futuristic scenes through her viewfinder.

When did the pressure cookers blow, screeching, whistling us into the apocalypse? Who peopled these escalators, now abandoned? A passage from Duras came to mind: "You always went home with the feeling of having experienced a sort of empty nightmare, of having spent a few hours as the guest of strangers with other guests who were strangers too, of having lived through a space of time without

Installation view of "Capsule III" (2018), Prajakta Potnis as part of "Imagined Documents" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.



Installation view of “Imagined Documents”, curated by Ravi Agarwal at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

any consequences and without any cause, human or other. It was like having crossed a third frontier, having been on a train, having waited in doctors' waiting rooms, hotels, airports".[4]

Lonely, dystopian futures: moving between Bhupal and Mehta, it is nearly impossible to remain optimistic about the present.

THE STUDIO IS AN ARCHIVE

Yamini Nayar and Vivan Sundaram are artists whose studios I have never seen and yet in my mind they glimmer with debris, I see glimpses of ruins standing still in their *kaarkhanas*, awaiting rebirth.

Sundaram's ongoing engagement with politics—the very map of his life intertwined with that of postcolonial India—is part of what makes his studio a space of reckoning with the past. As I read through the descriptions of others who have visited his *jadughar*, it seems clear how many potent worlds may reside here, collected and crafted purposefully to be mined for new meaning. *Unearthed* is one such world: a terracotta town being erased mercilessly. At first sight it is tragic, our ancestors destroyed. How did it happen? Why must these figurines bear witness to this destruction? We are turned into archaeologists lifting this moment of violence out of oblivion.

In *Unearthed (2019)* Sundaram's dynamic mastery of multimedia practice comes to the fore. Installation: the careful arrangement of thousands of fragments to present a scene which is pre-historic and yet immediate, which traverses the subterrain of postmodern life simultaneously. Painting: though what we are looking at are photographs, the arrangement of figures and space borrow their power of storytelling from the tradition of India's overwhelming and ongoing tryst with narrative painting. Photography: leaning towards the German photographic tradition exemplified in the works of Struth or Gurksy in scale, and in the capturing of sculptural elements, yet so apposite to the South Asian political circumstance. By juxtaposing these four scenes against each other, the singular black

Installation view of "Unearthed" (2019), Vivan Sundaram as part of "Imagined Documents" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

Installation view of artworks by Yamini Nayar as part of "Imagined Documents" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

and white photograph, which is devoid of statuettes, and using the photojournalistic idiom, becomes the ultimate marker of atrocity in the series.

The potsherds that lie at the core of *Unearthed's* mise-en-scene were found in Pattanam as part of the excavation carried out by the Kerala Council for Historical Research. KCHR's discoveries have been seminal in bringing our history to light, especially the discovery of the remains of the fabled town of *Muciri Pattinam*, hinted at in "classical Tamil, Greek and Latin sources as a key port in the maritime networks of the period".[5] Sundaram was one of the few artists invited by Dr. P. J. Cherian to work with 80,000 of the potsherds that would have otherwise been discarded from the site. Sundaram takes this opportunity to reveal himself as a contemporary bricoleur transforming this revelatory gift, again and again; *Unearthing* is only one in a series of works brought to life from the potsherds. In the case of the bricoleur, who "speaks through the medium of things", we are dealing with the magical mytho-poetical universe whose linguistic and visual possibilities are always pre-determined, always bounded in its vocabulary and imaginative capacity for creation by "the heterogeneous objects of which his treasury is composed".[6]

The omnipresence of the construction site and the disappearing relic are symptomatic of our age, but are rarely brought together as brutally as in Sundaram's bricolage. He uses the camera not only to document the installation but to reveal the reciprocity between the camera and the latent obliteration inherent in every landscape seen from a drone's eye view by man. *Unearthed* makes no bones with us that this, our civilisational wealth, is what is being erased and this ongoing demolition of the past will soon leave us all bereft, exiled from our own history.

The presence of this quartet of photographs in *Imagined Documents* brings the history of one port to another—Muziris to Panjim—and is representative of Sundaram's praxis. The three colour images could be seen as scenes of collective protest, the cluster of bodies allowing

us to imagine that out of the shards and splinters a movement may arise, perhaps overwhelmed by the degree of devastation around them, but maybe not just yet. The four photographs stood like pillars, large and imposing behind glass, reflecting all who stood in front of them, each of our faces becoming a part of this mythical site, our eyes able to trace the living curves in the rubble.

In the other corner of the room, Nayar's sextet of works refused the glass barrier, becoming voluble, moving and musical in how they detached themselves from their photographic confines to hover before us. In each of these—*Akhet, Come to Rest, Daydreamer (Khora), Line of Reason, Shapeshifter, Silhouette*—Nayar layers several different "rooms" together to create fragile structures. These are photographed with a large format film camera, and then either discarded, dis-assembled or repurposed. Some of these rooms are spacious, inviting and cavernous, others are poky, smudged, and incoherent, but each individual work stands as a Bachelardian vision of possibility. The mixed media assemblages that Nayar brings into being in her studio—and then deconstructs, sometimes stitching multiple frames together, sometimes taking a single image—are surreal. They are livable planets full of the potential for habitation. Blueprints for our future cities.

Nayar is careful to leave her intermedial practice open to interpretation. She does not call them rooms, I do. Why do her photographs become desirable spaces, structures that I want to inhabit, even when seen only two-dimensionally and with infinite architectural acrobatics on display? Perhaps because even with all of our technological advancement, we rarely seem to build environments that fill our soul. Though the constructions in her studio are ephemeral, these convoluted pathways, abstract planes of colour, walls made of brushstrokes, and curving sinuous lines that hold together seem somehow walkable, breathable, touchable. The effect of her images is the antithesis of standing before a concrete building, it is the recognition of a suppressed desire for a material reality that destroys the dictatorial lines imposed on us by the worst of "modern" architecture. It is a recognition of the absence of

pleasure in the architectonics of urban life.

Nayar once wrote about Chandigarh: "I walked miles through roads that led to the city after having heard from countless sources of its origins. Concrete slabs resembled sticks held upright by gravity in turn held fast to its roots. Thick grey matter packed itself into the geometry of the Museum, the Capitol, the Residencies. Its roots tied to our lives in ways that run familiar, the present a double mind belonging to our own and our grandparents' future...What has been flattened into stacks of paper leaves imprints so loud that each structure reveals itself as a reproduction. Each stands to attention... But this is a place. A city built from numbers, lines and models, and breathing through structures. We fight for openings but closure is a language through which we hesitantly whisper progress... And I wonder if what I am looking for was already found in the piles of prints that lie dormant in basements and storage bins. In the studios of architects. The libraries of institutions. In the archives at a geographic remove".[7]

I imagine her looking at Corbusier's work, at the archetypal modern, and yet able to see that she had found what she needed much before she arrived there. It is this sensibility of bringing what was "already found" to the fore in new configurations that captivates us in her work.

The erasure of the monument, the erasure of names, the erasure of the archive, the erasure of the document—when this erasure becomes quotidian, the artist's studio becomes a warehouse, a library, a workshop, a portal, an archive. Even though the dialectics they deploy seem to have no common ground, both Nayar's and Sundaram's "ground" are places that defy erasure and defy time.

THE POETRY OF THE DEAD

While visitors admire the old-world colonial "charm" of Panjim, rarely do they ask on whose backs these bungalows, balconies and balustrades were built.

Well – let me dive into the depths of time
And bring from out the ages that have rolled
A few small fragments of those wrecks sublime
Which human eyes may never more behold[8]

Paul Celan, Judah Leon Abravanel, Mahmoud Darwish, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, and Aime Fernand David Cesaire are five iconic poets rarely named together, and Achia Anzi's *Colonial Times* (2019) may mark the first instance of their poems being re-mixed. This site-specific textual project commissioned for the festival as a part of *Urban Re-Imagined 2.0* was installed on the balcony of the Adil Shah Palace as a running LED-neon prose poem. It attempted to draw out the coloniality of the very building the exhibition was inhabiting through a transhistorical sampling of the poetry of key figures in postcolonial discourse.

Two poems chosen by Anzi are now iconic, Darwish's *ID Card* and Derozio's *To India – My Native Land*, while Celan's *Corona*, Cesaire's *Indecent Behaviour* and Abravanel's *Complaint about the Time* though less well known are just as memorable. Here is the poem Anzi creates out of them, exercising his own poetic license in this collage:

Time struck my heart with a sharp arrow
And sliced my kidneys within me,
And put me to exile to wander in youth,
And roam in the world like a drunkard,
Your minstrel has no wreath to weave for you
Save the sad story of your misery!
Dirty rag night crazed tree
I am on very bad terms with Time. So what?

Installation view of "Colonial Times" (2019), Achia Anzi as part of "Urban Reimagined 2.0" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.


ent the eyes that have rolled A few small fragments o
REGISTRATION

My roots were entrenched before the birth of time
And before the opening of the eras
Before the pines, and the olive tree,
And before the grass grew
It is time that the stone grew accustomed to blooming,
That unrest form a heart.
It is time it were time.
It is time .

Anzi's is a quiet gesture that exposed these structures not only as remnants of a colonial past but as evidence of our comfort with the way coloniality is infused into our daily life. *Colonial Times* became a temporary temporal signpost pointing at the romanticised city, asking what blood had been shed in this port, reminding us that these fragments of poems can fit together so seamlessly into a narrative about time because it is a narrative that is ongoing.

This cyclical quality is also present in Azadeh Akhlagi's *By an Eyewitness*. Akhlaghi's panoramic works sometimes stretch into one image in my mind, an unspooling reel of blood. I cannot easily remember the names of those martyrs of Iran she is trying to commemorate—Azar Shariat Razavi, Ahmad Ghandchi, Mostafa Bozorgnia, Forough Farrokhzad, Mirzadeh Eshgi, Colonel Mohammad Tagi-Khan Pesyan—because I see in them other martyrs. Should it matter to us that this is an Iranian history of assassinations which has been excavated? In the chaos and pathos of these murders is a universal form of mourning. The actors who Azadeh takes such pains to imbue with historical potency and perfection become the bodies of many, not just one.

Though it is my job to describe every artwork for the reader who was not able to view the exhibition, I decided not to describe Azadeh's photographs in detail because the wounds felt too close. To describe these images would be akin to reliving the countless murders that we are expected to stomach. We have soaked in these scenes countless times, whether or not they have made it to our screens, we

have imagined them happening, the bloody encounter played out cinematically in our mind's eye.

The story that writers most like to capture about *By an Eyewitness* is that when it was displayed in Iran, these cinematic images were mistaken for "the real thing". And that even today, the Iranian government knowingly or unknowingly uses some of Akhlaghi's photographs on television as evidence of these events. "Aha! They have been fooled", these commentators seem to say; "Look, they do not know how to tell truth from fiction even when the aesthetic and the point of view is so obviously not 'documentary'". But perhaps the reason people believe in these photographs is because they want to and they need to. Akhlaghi's selection of figures and staging of not just any moment but the moment of death provides a cathartic possibility; the end is suddenly within their grasp. That end which is constantly pushed out of view, but of which we dream—one day they will come for us too—is no longer hidden.

The courage it requires is immense. To grab history by the throat, pin it to the wall, and say: "Here, look everyone, this thing that has been running from us cannot run anymore", is an aggressive dramatic gesture. And Akhlaghi is able to make it because while she does the painstaking research and direction to make these moments come to life she has no illusions that she must deliver a truth where there is none to be had. No eyewitness remembers the same thing. No government document is complete. Nobody knows what actually happened. The truth lies in our desires.

And what may be there for the taking is hope.

Installation view of "By an Eyewitness" (2012), Azadeh Akhlaghi as part of "Imagined Documents" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

Detail, "38 Sinkings" (2019), Sahil Naik as part of "Imagined Documents" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

Installation view of " Mirzadeh Eshghi – 3 July 1924 – Tehran", Azadeh Akhlaghi as part of "Imagined Documents" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

NOTES

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Biography

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PROJECTS / PROCESSES

Phenomenal Fictions

/ Alisha Sett

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