

result on the front. Jakkai had aligned and affixed stars, circles and stripes of various colours upon Burmese *loongyi* cloth and monks' saffron- robes. The Union Jack featured at the centre of one, reinforced the role of the colonisers, particularly their violence in arbitrarily drawing borders, on one hand creating divisions between people of similar language, religion and dress, on the other, urging people of various convictions to mobilise under the umbrella of nationalism. But I return with my thoughts to *78* and *Changing Room*, which, though based on regional conflicts, effectively nudged viewers to ponder on the root cause of human conflicts and our collective disengagement from decision-making authorities whilst questioning the extent of our own solidarity with those who have been disenfranchised across the globe.

All images courtesy: The author.

'Displaced: The Politics of Ethnicity And Religion in the Art of Jakkai Siributr', curated by Iola Lenzi, 1 April – 13 May 2017, Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, Bangkok.

REVIEW

01 / DELHI

Encounters of the Remote Kind: Temporal Flicker

Adwait Singh

Like archaeologists of the future, we must piece together what will have been thought

– Timothy Morton

In his essay "What is Contemporary?" Giorgio Agamben elucidates the paradox of the darkness enveloped night sky despite the presence of an infinite number of galaxies and luminous bodies. The explanation is sought in the ongoing expansion of the universe where the remotest of galaxies move away from us at a velocity greater than the speed of light with the result that their light never manages to arrive, leaving us with an onrush of darkness. In an exhibition last year entitled 'Archaeologies of the Future: Chaos and Coincidence' the artist Rohini Devasher set herself up as an 'archaeologist of new fictions and futures,' enabling us to perceive "in the obscurity of the present the light that, without ever being able to reach us, is perpetually voyaging towards us."¹ A series of recorded observations and experimentations stitched together through the trope of fictionalisation and defamiliarisation, her work makes visible the gray space between remote past and possible futures, utopia and dystopia, fact and fiction. Light played a significant role throughout the exhibition as a "medium, as a means of transportation to strangely mythic spaces, populated by instruments of both fiction and fact," confirms the artist. The light captured in her work appears to come from a faraway world at a distant moment in time, thus introducing anachronies into deep time and seated routines



Rohini Devasher, *Encounters of a Remote Kind*, photographs and drawings on archival paper, 2016. Photo credit: Amit Mehra.

of geo-planetary movements and ecological cycles which it appears to narrativise on the surface. The durational aspect of most of the works included in the exhibition was contrived to be directly conducive to the meditative space opened up by the expanding infinity and eternal recurrence of the phenomena it rehearses. The viewer found herself suddenly placed in the "messiness of the cosmos", ripe for transformation and perspectival shifts subsequently effected through orchestrated ruptures and interventions. Thus, a sudden claim by a bug to the camera lens recording the movements of clouds across the sky and the graduating degrees of its blueness, brings home a certain sense of proportion, an awareness of life as an infinitesimal speck on the monumentality of geological time.

The exhibition combined an array of disciplines — physics, cosmology, astronomy, mathematics, history — with a range of technologies — radio-heliographs, terrariums, decametre wave radio telescopes, and cameras — to stage terrains that are uncanny and sublime, presenting a panorama of ominously benign skies and deserted observational structures, straight out of HG Wells' stories. The question that one gets confronted with is what is the temporality of the subjects in these works. The artist significantly asks: "is this past? Or the uncertain future of a tenuous present?" In Wells' apocalyptic short story *The Star* (1897), the light from the alien star that suddenly erupts into the solar system as a luminous visitant, quickly devouring Neptune in its fall into the Sun, presages and broadcasts the impending doom by enabling calculations of the calamitous encounter:

'It is brighter!' cried the people clustering in the streets. But in the dim observatories the watchers held their breath and peered at one another. 'It is nearer,' they said. 'Nearer!'



Rohini Devasher, *Shivering Sands*, single channel video, 2016.

In a similar way, the luminosity that illumines Devasher's seas and skies, is abuzz with an anticipatory intensity as the viewer patiently awaits an event in the visual field. In works, such as the *Encounters of a Remote Kind* and *Field Notes* (2016), the decommissioned, dystopian tripod-like Maunsell Forts from the time of the World War II, just off the east coast of England at a place called Shivering Sands, find themselves a-wander and suddenly re-materialise near the Scandinavian coast as the artist exhorts the viewer to imagine, "what if they appeared in a desert one century, disappear for another and then reappear off the coast of the Lofoten archipelago?"

Charting the unobservable through a metaphoric and fictional plotting of the observed, the exhibition afforded a unique sense of interconnectedness of things and our complicity in it. Thus, the contrapuntal narrative of an annotated text *At the Lightning Field* ["the orbit around the earth is elliptical; other objects in the galaxy have an impact on the Earth's rotation and orbit"] written by Laura Raicovich, embedded in the video *Shivering Sands* (2016) which records Devasher's journey to the eponymous site in 2013, unsettles the reading of the work, in a manner similar to the intractable star in *The Star* whose intervention is registered as entropic in its reconfiguring of the extant orbits and ecologies in its passing:

And as the storms subsided, men perceived that everywhere the days were hotter than of yore, and the sun larger, and the moon, shrunk to a third of its former size, took now fourscore days between its new and new.³

This interarticulation of the celestial and the ecological is performed in the 59 still images that comprise *Terrasphere* (2015) where the artificial biosphere or terrarium registers changes in the levels of moisture and growth with shifting gradations of light from the sun. It is similar to the 52 shades of a blue sky rehearsed by a radio-heliograph (that captures two-dimensional images of the solar corona at different frequencies) in *Helio Blue* (2015) which re-imagines the 18th century cyanometer, an instrument used for measuring the intensity of blueness of the sky based on the amount of suspended particles in the atmosphere. The act of privileging light in her body of work is a reverent Bataille gesture that nods to the sun as the origin of all life.

In the final instance, *Atmospheres* (2015), presents a symbolic blank canvass of an ambiguous and mutable sky shot at Gauribidanur Observatory with a Canon 5D fitted with a



Rohini Devasher, *Terrasphere*, video and prints, 2015. Photo credit: Amit Mehra.

fish-eye lens pointing to the zenith, for the viewer to project her own desires and interpretations. The work is reminiscent of the first aerial photographs of the Earth taken from space, which quickly replaced the iconic mushroom cloud of the post-war era. In re-enacting the epoch-making event that changed forever the way we see our planet and our place in it, *Atmospheres* situates the viewer behind a kaleidoscope of shifting perspectives of the Anthropocene and the cosmos. By referencing Ursula Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* (1976) (which appears as wall text in one of the rooms), Devasher seemed to be invoking Foucauldian and Butlerian paradigms where utterance (verbal or gestural) is invested with the power to instantiate. *Atmospheres* explicates the instantiation of our world as a 'blue planet' through the circulation of the iconic aerial photographs and its inscription into the popular imaginary.⁴ *The Word for World is Forest* also signifies the closeness of its inhabitants, the Athsheans to their ecology so much so that the world in their language equates forest. Their world *is* forest! The power of words in rendering mental landscapes (the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as illustrated elegantly in Denis Villeneuve's recent science-fiction film *Arrival* [2016]) has long been noted by numerous linguists in the past. In the introduction to his book *Landscape and Power* (1994) W J T Mitchell declares, "the aim is [...] to change 'landscape' from a noun to a verb. It asks that we think of landscape, not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed." (Mitchell, 2002)⁵ It is precisely the juncture where Devasher's exhibition lodged itself in its attempt to re-make — through layering, fictionalising and metaphorising — familiar terrains, relationalities and perspectives.

Image courtesy: The artist and Project 88, Mumbai.

'Archaeologies of the Future: Chaos and Coincidence', Rohini Devasher, 3-19 March 2016, presented by Project 88 at vis-a-vis Experience Centre, New Delhi.

- 1 Agamben, Giorgio. "What is Contemporary?" In *What is an Apparatus?*, translated by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella, 46. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009.
- 2 Wells, HG. *The Star*, 1897, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/456> (accessed on 1 August, 2017).
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 See Matt Dyce's article "Canada Between the Photograph and the Map: Aerial Photography, Geographical Vision, and the State", <https://www.elsevier.com/connect/how-aerial-photography-altered-the-way-we-perceive-environmental-change> (accessed on 24 July, 2017).
- 5 Mitchell, WJT. *Landscape and Power*, Second Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.



Rohini Devasher, *Atmospheres*, single channel video, 2015.