



Elaeis guineensis (2020)

Call OF The WILD



Garima Gupta's work reflects her deep concern about environmental catastrophe and the loss of wildlife

Please tell us a little about yourself.

GG: I am an artist and researcher. For the past five years, I have been working in regions stretching from the island of New Guinea to the Southeast Asian archipelago. I have been documenting the micro-stories around wildlife habitats as well as wildlife markets that often get misplaced in the surveying of these lands as whole. I have been interviewing tribe hunters in rainforests, taxidermists in bazaars and wildlife trophy dealers functioning in what can now only be called a dark invisible market. My hope for this project has been to read the larger wildlife trade as more than a headline, to find crucial connections between unarchived fragments of a conflict that is pushing us into a war with the very world we inhabit.

What brought you to the world of contemporary digital/visual art?

GG: Honestly, I had never intended or imagined becoming an artist, or a researcher for that matter. I studied at a design school and most of my 20s were spent in enclosed office spaces, chasing projects. I'd long wanted to see the Birds of Paradise, which are endemic to the island of New Guinea. Late in 2014 my then partner and I decided to take the plunge and emptied our savings to go to the rainforest of Arfak Mountains in West Papua. We stayed with Zeth, who is a hunter turned conservationist in the area and had agreed to take us to the birding sites. This was already the end of mating season for the birds so the place was empty. We saw just one male bird that was still coming to the mating area. But this gave us a chance to sit idle for long hours at night, drinking coffee with Zeth and just talking to him.

His stories about childhood, the years spent hunting, and his elders who would sell birds to Holland-man (the Dutch) intrigued me. I came back to Mumbai and during my lunch breaks I would read more and more and then some more about the bird trade, markets,

and colonial history. I'd ask friends coming from the US/UK to buy me books on the subject - the whole thing was my rabbit hole of epic proportions. Soon after, I quit my job; I wanted to make a graphic novel about the episode - Zeth's life and the trade in Birds of Paradise. I wrote applications to research sites in New Guinea, asking if I could come and better understand the workings of this hunting-trade-market system.

One thing would lead to another. I think I've spent five years not knowing what next and then stumbled into one good lead and then a better one thereafter. So, this wasn't meant to be a project; I wasn't an artist or researcher but it all came together somehow.

Let's talk about your frameworks, references and creative process.

GG: Research has been the driving force behind my work. It involves both field work and studying footnotes of archives. I am interested in the micro stories taking place within what we are now calling ecological emergency or Anthropocene. Imagine a rock; imagine each layer of a slightly different color tone that was once loose sand or mud or particulate matter. Imagine the pressure from rain and wind that acted upon it, the river streams that the matter eventually rolled down, the hits it took, the shape it became - that rock is the emergency, but it's not without all that once made it or acted upon it.

Ecology is read as an emergency of today, as a phenomenon occurring out of contemporary overuse and mismanagement, but it has such a strong lineage. Within the tropics, the rainforests of Papua New Guinea, West Papua and larger Southeast Asian archipelago remain the most ravaged for resources and wildlife (ivory, rhino horns, pangolin scales, tiger skins, shark meat, bird trade, etc.). Southeast Asian wildlife markets and illegal exports of endangered flora and

fauna reach astounding heights every year, running into several billion dollars. The trade in wildlife is the world's fourth largest illegal trade after narcotics, human trafficking and counterfeit goods. And none of this came out of thin air; it has been building up to where we are now.

It is in this context that I want to look beyond the rhetoric of supply-demand, how much-how many, when-how and delve deeper into

difficult. It's working on the assumption that you can overcome the information overload and sail to the creative side without any hiccups. So usually in that moment I know I have to leave things and come back to the desk when I have cleared my mind or woken up with an 'aha' moment.

How has your practice and medium of art evolved over the years?

GG: Drawing has been the background hum



Transmigrasi (2020)

the subconscious of the region and its cultural complexities vis-à-vis a long history of colonial occupation and post-colonial anxieties through stories of people and objects.

I follow my nose as far as the process is concerned. Some of the work that I've made last year has been a direct result of the stories from the field while the others have stemmed from a deeper connection between field work and archival notes that I've been gathering over the years. The intention is to put together seemingly disconnected pieces of the narrative in a pattern that urges recognition and reading of it as part of the whole.

I usually lay down what I know on the table, and then go back and forth in terms of the ideas and images. Sometimes it is all very baffling and overwhelming, and I hit a wall. Working with research and information is

of my life. I don't remember a time when I wasn't escaping what the others were enjoying and hiding away to draw. My grandmother encouraged this quite a bit. This year, after she passed away, I found scraps of paper that she'd kept from when I was just five or six years old. In these I'm trying to teach her how to draw! Later, I attended a design school but there too my primary interest was still just drawing. However, design school definitely changed the way I perceived drawing. That drawing was now a tool to explore larger ideas and communicate complexities.

Tell us about your commitment to your current medium in art.

GG: I don't have a commitment to medium or what one would call style. This kind of commitment, in my opinion, narrows one's ability to explore and be creative. I started using graphite because I was working on a shoestring budget and low cost airlines in

Southeast Asia cap baggage allowance to 7 kg, which meant narrowing the playing field to a notebook and a pencil. Before that I worked in color, but things change, one learns to change with them.

What does the creative process mean to you?

GG: I like to think of it as peak curiosity with the stamina to see it through the highs and lows.

Could you describe your usual workday?

GG: I don't have a routine, so I usually start work at noon after I have wandered enough and got my fill of the outside. Then depending on what it is that I am working on that day, I set up the pencils or paper, find a good podcast or audio book to listen to, get the right light, water, put my head down and work till I have exhausted myself or till I have reached a certain place in the drawing where I need to distance myself from it.



From the series 'Pride of Bulolo' (2020, detail)



Thank you for shopping with us! (2020)

What is your source of creative inspiration?

GG: I'm drawn to an assortment of inputs and they are mostly not limited to the art world. I love listening to podcasts from various genres. I am just as plugged in while listening to an economist as I am into poetry readings. I love looking at plants and insects and soil and cobwebs and look at them not as a chance sighting but go to the same spots over and over to see what has changed. I like birds - a call can make me drop things, and then I want to see which bird came to the tree. I like reading peer reviewed journals and papers, and non-fiction and historical archives.

How do you overcome creative blocks?

GG: I was in the first year of design school, and I was very sure of my drawing capabilities. Every time we'd sit for the drawing session, my teacher would single me out and ask me to stand 10 feet away from my drawing. I religiously follow it even now. I get up and go away and come back to the desk and if I feel like there is still something missing, I close that work for a few days and revisit it when I feel I have the answer.



TARQ, filed under-a/muse/um, Ground Floor installation (2020)

What are you looking for in the work of other visual artists?

GG: More than what's on display, I'm always keen to know who are they as people and what is that one thing that drives them, helps them wake up, make that cup of coffee and go against all odds to narrate that story once again. In short, I'm drawn to people/artists with longer commitments because that's always a difficult game and it's interesting to see those who venture in that direction and how they do it.

Describe a professional risk that you took.

GG: I left an extremely well paying job and threw myself in a world that I knew very little of at the end of my 20s. I can't really say what helped me take that decision other than the fact that I was chasing my own curiosity. But it's been a good six-year-long journey and I have learnt a lot just from the act of falling and getting up!

Any mentor, curator or gallerist who deserves a special mention for furthering your career as an artist?

GG: I'm represented by Tarq in Mumbai, and it's been an amazing ride. Hena Kapadia has been a great support and an amazing person to work with!

Best piece of art advice, and who was it from?

GG: It was day one of the artist residency program at SVA and our mentor, Viktor, sat

everyone down and said, "The sun is out at its hottest right now in New York. There are two sides of the road. One side is always shaded. Take that one." Now this does not collude to the idea of taking the easier road, I think it means there's always a smarter way to do things and there's always a plan B waiting to give shade. A career in art can be daunting on some days and I consider this good art advice/life advice.

Is it imperative to have a visual art degree to become a visual artist?

GG: No. If I got to do it all over again, I'd study birds or oceans or fossils. Art is an expression, a skill, and it can be honed and learnt on the road or by practice. Art still requires a voice, gas for the creative engine, a certain something to spark the imagination, and that usually comes from the lived experience of this world.

Are you more of a studio artist or naturally collaborative by nature?

GG: Neither. I detest being bound by the studio, but I'm also a one woman show. I love my research practice, meeting people in the field, learning, climbing mountains, looking at birds from far.

What themes are you currently working on?

GG: Loss of wildlife and its habitat through a much tighter lens of wildlife economy and market play in South and Southeast Asia.

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(Sonalee Tomar studied at NID and worked as the Editorial Director of Pool Magazine before founding 'The Asian Curator', a platform to support creative outliers with liberating resources)