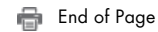


NOTICEBOARD

Unearthing histories - a critical engagement with the archive

Zahra Amiruddin

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It is common to hear the words “time heals” as an attempt to comfort a wounded mind. Is it the interval between events that lightens the weight of a hard-hitting memory?

These thoughts are explored through a collection of artworks which are part of the ongoing exhibition, *Event, Memory, Metaphor*, curated by Anish Gawande at Tarq, Mumbai. Gawande’s work usually examines the contested terrains of language, sexuality and history in South Asia and Francophone West Africa. Here, the writer/curator brings together eight storytellers to engage in pertinent contemporary debates around the allure of the archive, which is both a space of restitution and contestation as well as of reclamation and reconfiguration. The show is eponymous with historian Shahid Amin’s seminal 1995 publication on the politics of official memory around the Chauri Chaura incident that played a significant role in the trajectory of India’s independence. As a chapter of remembrance, the event lingers in the realm between fact and fiction.

As Saidiya Hartman, an American writer and academic focusing on African-American studies, has often said, the archive, particularly for marginalized communities, cannot be but a site of imagination and of intricately crafted possibilities. In an email interview with Hartman, Gawande probes this further by asking “What hope can an archive hold for communities that have had their histories prevented from being recorded or, worse, deliberately erased?” This is possibly why his focus in this show is on histories brimming with political, cultural, familial, geopolitical and minority narratives. Through elaborate sculptures, cyanotypes, paintings and calligraphy, the participating artists – Areez Katki, Garima Gupta, Muzzumil Ruheel, Parag Tandel, Philippe Calia, Saju Kunhan, Sameer Kulavoor and Saubiya Chasmawala – engage in thoughts between the sacred and the profane, investigate the perceptions of events based on their documented narratives, reject the idea of the archive as a repository of fact, and contemplate it as a generative space to explore ancestral histories.

In the two floors of the gallery, collective chronicles are lined up across white walls. Much like memory that brings together imagination, lived experience and heard truths, the show is a map of remembrances that are distinctly layered. The viewer seems to be walking through the mind of each artist, like in the meticulously rendered Urdu calligraphy of Ruheel which stands as a starting point to the show. Ruheel, who is based in Lahore, uses words in repetitive, mirrored, twisted and isolated alphabets from collected personal and marginalized accounts he found in archival texts and photographs at libraries. His seemingly patterned paintings hold within them texts that aren’t coherent to the viewer and make one feel the elasticity of memory that is simultaneously confused and empty.

In contrast, the adjacent wall is dotted with Saubiya Chasmawala’s Arabic scripts, which are more hurried and urgent, almost as if they were born out of the desire to instantaneously express her thoughts. They are described as an urge to demystify and unveil, and are the results of an introspective, almost meditative, mark-making process that questions her relationship to sacrality.

Parallel to Chasmawala’s musings are a series of wooden boxes that hold fragments of red oxide flooring from artist Saju Kunhan’s ancestral home. The five engraved pieces are Kunhan’s attempt at discovering the stories of his community (based out of Kerala’s Palakkad district) which have so far only existed as oral narratives passed down to him by previous generations of his family. Through pictographs embedded into these surfaces, Kunhan follows the migration of his ancestors from north Malabar to central Kerala during Tipu Sultan’s conquests and annexations in the 1780s. “[My drawings recount] the early periods of my family’s journey, when Kalari (a form of martial arts) ‘deities’ accompanied them to

ensure they were safe. Our stories mention that we used to be warriors, but post-migration we began agricultural activities and toddy tapping to survive," says Kunhan. As Gawade puts it, the works try to piece together lost histories amidst the debris of erased memories.

The erasure of rights and memories is evoked in another work by Mumbai-based artist Sameer Kulavoor, which seems particularly relevant in the 75th year of India's independence. The piece harks back to the protests organized in Shaheen Bagh, New Delhi, on December 15, 2019, against the undemocratic Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which was passed in both houses of Parliament a few days before that. In a bid to save the constitutional ideals of a "sovereign, socialist, secular and democratic republic", the site became a space of agitation but also one that symbolized solidarity, celebration, togetherness, courage and acceptance. Kulavoor's panoramic interpretation is an archive that captures the experiences of children learning and growing in the foreground, while their mothers fight for a place in a dwindling democracy in the background. Titled *Read & Resist*, the work was made in January-February 2020 when the artist was invited to Shaheen Bagh by the 'Read for India' team that created a day-care of sorts in the midst of the protests. "The space had books covering a range of topics (such as climate change, activism, and stories about our freedom fighters) and art materials for the kids to use/draw/paint. It was a great way to educate them about the founding principles and the Constitution of India," says Kulavoor. The image exudes an atmosphere of energy, hopefulness and bravery against the backdrop of a heavily polluted Delhi, which also stands as a comment on the climate crisis. Given that the protest site was cleared out in March 2020, Shaheen Bagh now only exists in these works, photographs and writings, even though "bulldozer politics" brought it back in the news as recently as May 9, 2022.

Kulavoor's second piece in the show is a solitary painting from July 2019 whose central image is a JCB earth-mover surrounded by hordes of people recording persecution in a pursuit to archive. Curiously, one feels the need to remove one's own phone and make a photograph of the artwork, which seems instinctive because of the quietness embedded within its resounding sound. "For me, *JCB* was a commentary on real estate and redevelopment, and a response to the #jcbmemes on social media – not knowing that bulldozer politics will be a thing in the near future," explains Kulavoor.

Artist Garima Gupta's lightboxes hold mineral samples from the collection of the Peabody Museum of Natural History at Yale University which was founded in 1866, and houses more than 12 million specimens and objects in zoology, palaeontology, entomology, ornithology, geology, mineralogy, meteorites, anthropology, archaeology and historical scientific instruments. At first glance and from a distance, the work looks almost whimsical, like fragmented hearts exploring the geology of one's figurative self. However, a closer look shows how the illustrations hold a breakdown of environmental information previously guarded by imperially funded organizations. Gupta's process involved taking several layers of drawings and using light as a medium to merge and blend them, to cloud the exactness and certainty of each layer. She elaborates on this: "Light has a tendency to peer through the smallest of gaps in a graphite drawing, and also renders the shape or form as though bleeding into another – removing the very periphery that holds the drawing." Focusing on the Indian subcontinent, one of the drawings looks at Apophyllite with stilbite, a mineral found within the rock traps originally from Bhore Ghat in Maharashtra. "The basalt that we encounter at Bhore Ghat is matter that has journeyed through earth's deepest organs during a violent furore that lasted hundreds of years. The construction of the Bhore Ghat railway line between Bombay and Pune in 1856-1863 ravaged much of this landscape and unearthed these minerals from within the basalt," adds Gupta.

In dialogue with Gupta's work is Philippe Calia's cyanotypes in *Cloud Atlas* – a set of geometrical shapes lined systematically across walls which hold within them stories of a world transformed. This piece maintains a record of our present which is overly dependent on an increasingly unsteady ravaging of rare minerals and other natural resources.

Turning towards personal histories that are intertwined with themes of spirituality, migrant identity, sexuality and the heritage of local communities are works by Areez Katki and Parag Tandel. Through embroidery on a repurposed tote bag (sewn by an unknown member of Katki's family who used material from Bombay Dyeing), and in fantastical sculptures made from fishbones cooked by Tandel's mother (that might disappear in the years to come, but for now have been fired in Bastar's termite clay), the truths of postcolonial identity and the tales of the Kolis (one of Mumbai's original communities) find space within the inanimate.

"The idea of multiple truths has a foul smell to it in contemporary politics. There's an association with 'alternative facts' and 'post truth'. But I think that rejecting the truth claims of the archive remains important. Because it allows us to look at it as something beyond a simple repository of facts," states Gawande. And in the age of excessive information, when there is easy access to diverse voices and countless platforms for conversation, it would be ignorant for us to think that a solitary narrative speaks for a rather voluminous past.

***Event, Memory, Metaphor* is on at Tarq, Mumbai, from July 14 to September 22, 2022.**