

Time and Image

The shadow trapper's almanac

Artist Tanmoy Samanta Text Ranjit Hoskote

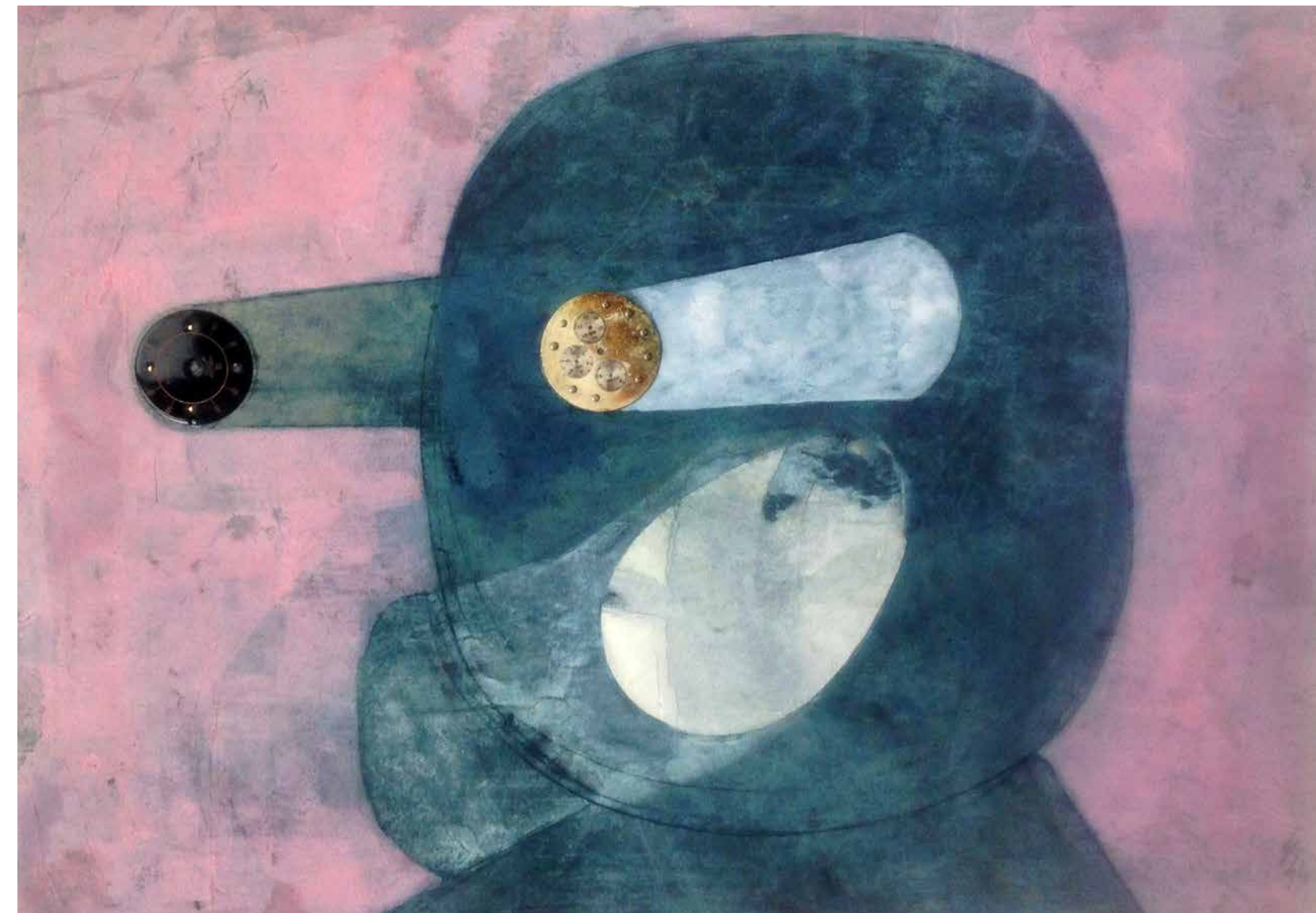
“The universe has many paradoxes, one among which is that where there’s an extensive landscape, endless sky, dense clouds, a deep feeling, in other words in a place where the eternal is manifest, there its appropriate companion can be only one person. Infinity and one person are both evenly balanced in relation to one another – both deserve to sit on their individual thrones face-to-face.”
-Rabindranath Tagore [1]

I imagine Tanmoy Samanta as a jeweller working in a cone of light, his desk secured against a darkness that spreads out in every direction and has many names: war, forgetting, genocide, fear, exile. Samanta makes images that we may set as talismans against this many-named darkness; finely tuned and delicate as they seem, observe that these images have sharp images on which unsuspecting viewers may



Tanmoy Samanta
THE GLOBE
Gouache on Rice Paper
12 x 17 inches
2013

Tanmoy Samanta
**A PORTRAIT OF THE
ARTIST AS A
YOUNG MAN**
Gouache on Rice Paper
10 x 12 inches
2014



cut their hands. The edges of rusting machines that have not lost their power to hurt or heal, serrated blades, a plough with dragon’s teeth: these occupy Samanta’s gouache paintings on rice paper. Alongside them, we find instruments calibrated to weigh infinitesimal volumes of air or sediments of gathered dust, just enough in the pans of the scale to shift the delicate counterpoise of forces that governs the planet.

Samanta’s paintings are a laboratory for the staging of enigmatic events. Here, the artist tests the balance between object and emptiness; here, also, gravity and flight contest one another’s claims. Intriguingly, given that his is primarily a painterly practice, Samanta demonstrates formal preoccupations that might seem more germane to the sculptor’s domain. He addresses the binaries of volume and void, relief and surface, container and content, in his paintings as well as in his more properly sculptural engagement with altered or recycled books. Both suites of work are represented in

‘The Shadow Trapper’s Almanac’, the artist’s first solo exhibition in Bombay.

Samanta is fascinated by the cabinet and the mirror: these act, in his paintings, as repositories of secrets, asides, the ephemera and the detritus of history. They bracket clouded memories, crystalsharp dreams and forking futures. One of Samanta’s cabinets frames the ruins of factories and the trajectories of dive-bombers; one of his mirrors holds a vertebral column belonging to the lost specimen of an endangered species, the singularly insipient and ill named *Homo sapiens*. The box, another favoured image in the artist’s visual dictionary, condenses the chronicles of erased centuries and the imprints of mountains into the briefest of moments. Samanta’s paintings encode memoirs of war and industry, doomed heroism and auguries of invasion, the predicament of the individual self confronted and overwhelmed by systems. We come upon a robot mastiff in one of the present paintings, a guard dog run amok;

another painting invites us to consider a pair of twinned weapons swimming in a glass bowl, a sinister aquarium fraught with the potential for apocalypse.

Intimate as Samanta’s paintings are, it is within them that he confronts infinity face-to-face, as Rabindranath Tagore suggests in the passage that I have chosen as the epigraph to this essay. Samanta elaborates his gouaches on rice paper as exquisite disarrangements of the everyday world and its architecture of objects, motives and consequences. He plays with latent correspondences, activates affinities among objects not otherwise closely related. Crucial to his enterprise is the need to get through the maze of subterfuges and delusions to the interiority of things. In one of the paintings in the suite, a rabbit sits outside rather than inside a loosely arranged labyrinth, as though mesmerized by the structure, hoping to enter rather than escape it. In another painting, the artist portrays himself as a cyborg or armoured



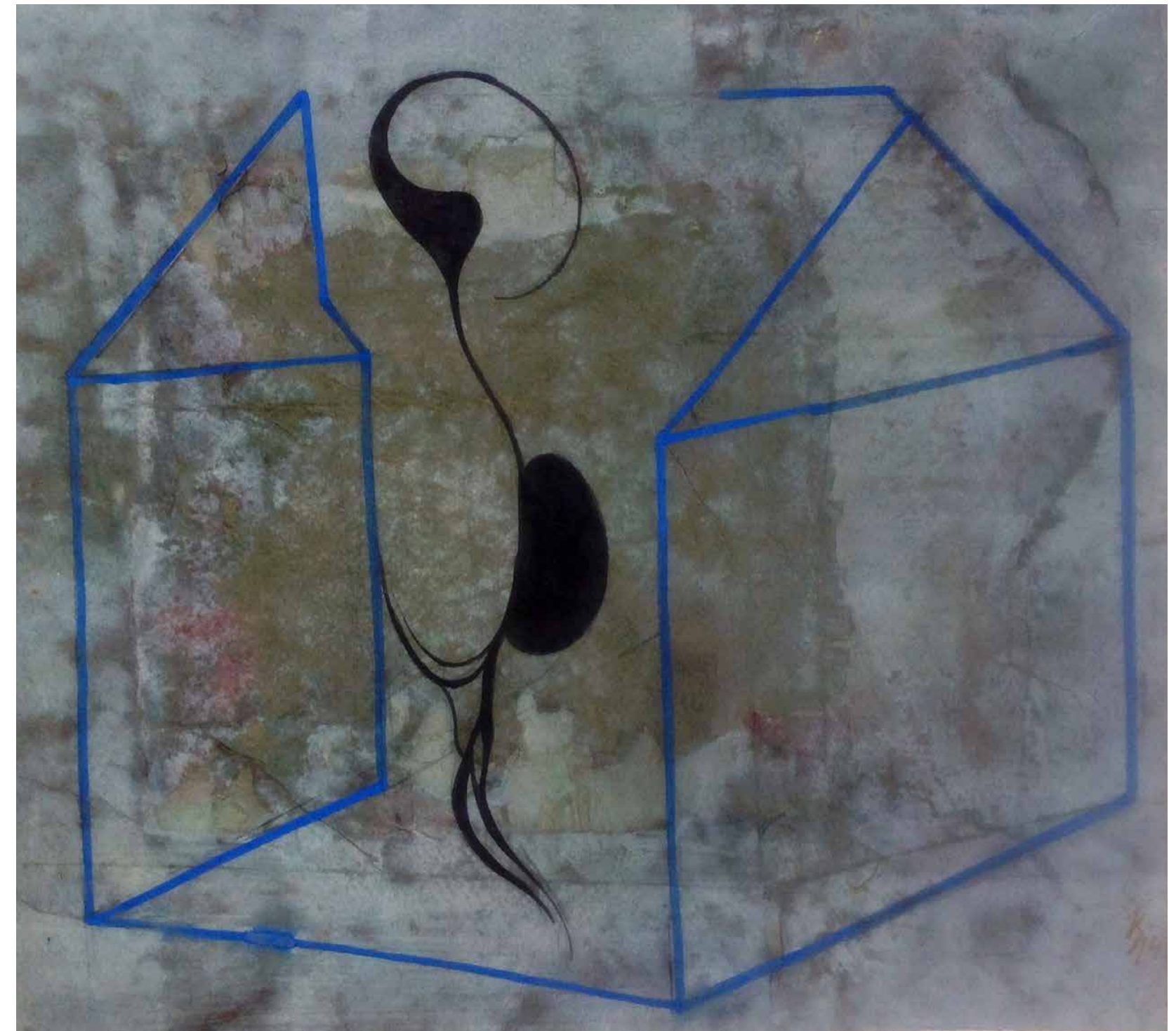
diver with periscopic eyes; wryly, too, he reduces the homeland or nation to a piece of land splintered and set afloat, an island torn from its conventional moorings.

I see Samanta as a trapper of shadows, trawling elusive sensations and fugitive thoughts, mysterious signs and half-glimpsed visions in his net. Yet, having collected these, he arranges them in what I regard as an almanac: a record of seasons and tides, schedules for sowing and harvesting, an itinerary of the sun's rhythms and the moon's, the pattern of equinox,

solstice and eclipse. The most likely derivation of the word 'almanac' is from the Andalusian Arabic *almanaqq*, a table of climatic conditions, a way of finding direction through life and its natural circumstances. It serves those who work with the hoe just as it does those who steer by the astrolabe; in Samanta's artistic practice, we discern both the farmer's patience and the sailor's intrepidity.

Born in 1973, Samanta, who lives and works in New Delhi, was raised in an environment rich in literary and artistic experience. Both

his parents were participants in the Bengali 'little magazine' movement; he grew up to savour the Tagorean ethos of Santiniketan, developing his practice there and later in the collegial setting of the Kanoria Arts Centre, Ahmedabad. Early in his career, he taught at Rajghat, the Krishnamurti Foundation's school in Varanasi. He found the philosopher J Krishnamurti's approach congenial to his own temperament, with its emphasis on a wide receptivity towards the world, the flowering of creativity without the oppression of canon or dogma, and a generosity



Opposite page, above:
Tanmoy Samanta
THE EYE
Gouache on Rice Paper
30 x 42 inches
2013

Opposite page, Below:
Tanmoy Samanta
THE VOID LAND
Gouache on Rice Paper
30 x 42 inches
2013

This page: Tanmoy
Samanta
HOUSE ON FIRE
Gouache on Rice Paper
10 x 12 inches
2014



This page:
Tanmoy Samanta
STILL LIFE
 Gouache on Rice Paper
 30 x 42 inches
 2013

Opposite page, above:
Tanmoy Samanta
Seer
 Pigment and rice paper
 on canvas
 24x30 Inches
 2006

Opposite page, below:
Tanmoy Samanta
The Time Hive
 Gouache on Rice Paper
 9 x 10 inches
 2013

of spirit when dealing with the unpredictable variety of cultural manifestations.

As an artist active in what the philosopher and art critic Arthur C. Danto memorably theorized as a 'post-historical' period, Samanta has framed his own genealogy, his own sources of inspiration and points of reference. The advent of the post-historical has emancipated artists like him from the anxiety of defining and contextualizing a practice in terms of the contention between such arthistorical phases as 'modernism' and what was for a time loosely and unhelpfully spoken of as 'postmodernism', and from the teleological understanding of art history that endowed such an unstable periodization with academic value.

Elements of cutout and collage surface in Samanta's work, persistences of Surrealist and Dada practices: he is an heir to Max Ernst, Schwitters, Chirico and Magritte. Equally, with his quiet insistence on exploring the miniature

and its potential for compressing epic narrative and psychic material into idiosyncratic signals, he draws on the legacy of Gaganendranath and Rabindranath Tagore. Samanta's sleight of scale, the sophisticated visual and conceptual games that he offers his viewers, and his philosophical preoccupation with the interplay between phantasm and palpability also put us strongly in mind of the legendary Bombay painter Prabhakar Barwe (1936-1995).

Samanta's studio practice has, also, several points of affinity with that of the classical miniaturist: dexterity, patience and epiphany are combined here in equal measure. While crafting a distinctive vocabulary of stylized forms, Samanta has also evolved a specific array of techniques. When preparing a painting, his first move is to paste the thin rice paper that serves as his pictorial surface on the thicker paper that acts as its base; once this layering has been accomplished, he builds up the painting in

a sequence of layers, beginning with dark and moving successively to lighter colours.

Through his adroit use of scumbling, the earlier, darker layers often show through the later, lighter ones, imparting both a chromatic and a textural richness to his paintings, transmuting them into palimpsests. Samanta experiments with a palette of sap green, mulberry, chalky pink, dusty metal blues, shadowy jade and celadon, and blood-pricked reds; his muted tonalities evoke the spectral presence of burnished heirlooms, inherited shawls, parchments bearing ancestral histories, and time-stained walls; the interiors, perhaps, of the grand feudal-mercantile palazzos of Jorasanko that have decayed in architectural reality but retain their vivid presence in the imagination.

The interplay between the visual and the literary has led Samanta, in recent years, to experiment with the form of the book. He



explores with various avatars of the book, including, as we shall soon see, the *kitab*, the *muraqqa*, and the *laporetto*. In another departure, he reconstructs the book through the use of altered or recycled materials, blurring the distinction between the page and other modes of recording and annotating experience, such as the map, the clock or the weather chart. These works bear an affinity with sculpture, and articulate the recurrent fascination that he demonstrates for such devices as the chronicle, the labyrinth, the atlas and the almanac.

In this context, I imagine Samanta as a librarian, a dramaturge of memory: archivist sifting among the scrolls and folios; custodian of parchment, vellum and birch bark; questor of the book as talisman promising protection from the all-too-easy descent into a contemporary savagery and ignorance exacerbated by the increasingly sophisticated technologies that make these conditions possible and sustain them. The artist experiments with various scales and formats. He presents his books as acts of homage to the *kitab* of the Perso-Arabic global ecumene that once stretched from Spain to Indonesia, laid on a rihal or traditional carved bookstand, shaped as a foldable X. Or he arranges them as a sequence of discrete images reminiscent of a *muraqqa* or Mughal album of miniatures, originally convenient to the mobile Turko-Mongol cultures and eventually integral to the hybrid visual universe of the Company School. He also draws them out in the beguiling form of a *laporetto* or accordion book, with the pictorial narrative unfolding section by surprising section.

Samanta's altered and recycled books enshrine the complexity of the experience of reading. They invite us to read together with him; which means, also, to be baffled by what seems illegible or weathered yet demands decipherment. Through this gesture, we, as viewers, become the artist's colleagues, linked to him quite literally by the etymology of this term as fellow readers. With him, we attend to the paradox of knowledge: its expansion is proportionate to the expansion of what remains unknown. In 'The Cartographer's Paradox', the more the atlas embraces, the more the continents escape its grasp; the world remains egg-like, a generative principle rather than an object of study.

With him, again, we attend to the mutability of time, its ability to inhabit a spectrum of scales from the instant to the aeon. 'The Time Keeper's Manual', a set of four books moulded in paper that has been through a baptism and remade, we confront the dials of watches, the faces of the hours, arranged to suggest different directives of visual order or cosmic patterns: the grid; the beehive; the constellation; and a pair of eyes uncannily reminiscent of those of a great Hindu deity, perhaps the Devi. Reading with him, also, we reflect on the perennial, formative tension between the works of humankind and the cycles



This page, above:
Tanmoy Samanta
The Time Keeper's Manual a, b, c, d
 (set of four)
 Old Book, Rice Paper,
 Discarded
 Watch-dials
 10 x 12 inches
 2013
 Left: **Tanmoy Samanta**
THE CARTOGRAPHER'S PARADOX
 Old Book, Rice Paper,
 Atlas Maps,
 Wooden Eggs
 10 x 12 inches
 2013

of nature: 'Melancholy Sky' 1 and 2 are laporetos or accordion books, one in red tonalities and the other in shades of grey, both mobilizing the forms of architecture and human endeavour against a gathering storm.

In 'Random Birds', we find the artist making field notes as he watches birds build nests: in this sequence of paintings, we savour stylized profiles reminiscent of the hoopoe, the kite, the duck, the stork, the macaw and other denizens of the air, rendered in parchment against textured purple surfaces. This is an extended meditation on habitation, belonging, the framing of a space to call one's own, and indeed, the gradual transformation of space into place. In terms of the mise en scene of the exhibition, it has been a stimulating challenge to devise a way of framing or hanging these works: they defy the conventional viewing arrangements of the white cube, organically connected as they are to an earlier relationship between viewer and

image, where the folio was held in the hands and admired, not located at a distance on a wall.

To my eye, 'Random Birds' not only invokes the *muraqqa*, but also constitutes an elegant homage to a specific example of the form: the memorable and historically important compilation known as Lady Impey's album, comprising more than two hundred gouache paintings on paper by Shaikh Zayn al-Din, Bhawani Das and Ram Das, the stellar artists of the so-called Company School. These exquisite and meticulously detailed studies in natural history - most of them representing birds but also including some animals, fish and reptiles - were commissioned by Mary, Lady Impey, wife of Chief Justice Sir Elijah Impey, and created between 1777 and 1782 in Calcutta.

Perhaps it is our fate, in the post-historical moment, to be connoisseurs of the fragment, to retrieve the epic through the lyric and the encyclopaedia through the episode. Even so,

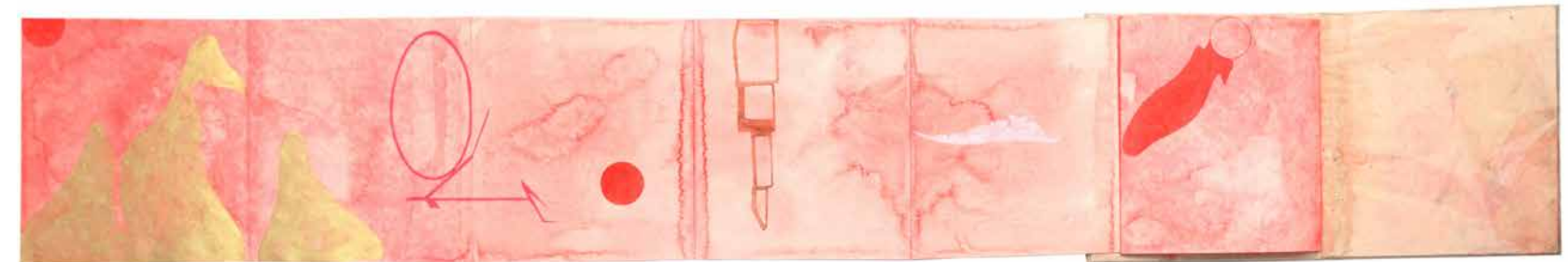
this is an invigorating and productive fate to embrace; in identifying and gathering fragments, we recreate the world through a kaleidoscopic, ever-changing set of relationships among parts that exceed the whole. In this sense, Tanmoy Samanta's works, with their combination of exhilaration and menace, formal playfulness and philosophical depth, remind us that art is not an escape from the world, but a route that leads us back, replenished by dream and vision, to the perplexities of the everyday.

(Bombay: October 2014)

Notes

1. *Rabindranath Tagore, Letters from a Young Poet, 1887-1895* (trans. Rosinka Chaudhuri; New Delhi: Penguin, 2014), p. 113.

All material courtesy TARQ Gallery.



This page, above:
Tanmoy Samanta
MELANCHOLY SKY 1
 Old Book, Handmade
 Paper,
 Watercolour
 14 x 18 x 36 inches
 2013
 Left: **Tanmoy Samanta**
MELANCHOLY SKY 1,
 detail
 Old Book, Handmade
 Paper,
 Watercolour
 14 x 18 x 36 inches
 2013