

Featured

An Island of Dreamers

Words Zahra Amiruddin



Three Times, 2024 © Philippe Calia



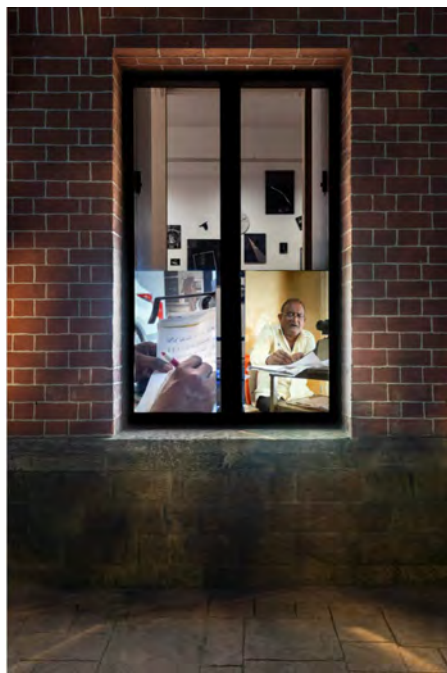
The Second Law 2025, Philippe Calia, at Tarq, Bombay, India.

In Bombay, the sunlight changes at the curb. It meanders through concrete, and mud, through trees, and horizon lines, later, settling into the sea. The keen observer will see microcosms exist beneath the shadows it leaves behind, as the city builds and breaks within seconds, to create something new. This thought is further elaborated in artist and photographer Philippe Calia's show *The Second Law*, that is currently on view at *Tarq*, in Bombay's art/legal district known as Fort. In a series of photographs made over years of observation, Calia builds his reading of the 'maximum city,' which I firmly believe exists in multiple versions of itself.

Interestingly, the title of the show comes from a law of physics according to which the distribution of particles in the universe inevitably tends towards disorder. Through Calia's imagery, which includes interventions made in daily street occurrences, we are privy to attempted order through the simplest of acts. Rows of eggs are neatly decorated by small *bindis*, watermelons comfortably sit on one another in triangular patterns, and side mirrors of auto rickshaws look back at you with googly eyes, taking the form of a fantastical creature. Inspired by Arun Kolatkar's poem titled 'The Pattern,' Calia takes himself, and the viewer on a journey through Bombay, as the poem gets translated into Marathi, Gujarati, back to English, Arabic, Urdu, English again, Hindi again, Tamil, Kannada, Konkani, Malayalam, and Telugu by translators in typing centres dotting the metropolis.



Nazir Auto's Oysters, 2024 ● Philippe Calia



The Second Law 2025, Philippe Calia, at Taranga, Bombay, India.



Decisive Arrangement (with Mahek and Kalim), 2024 ● Philippe Calia

In an essay accompanying the show, Calia amusingly writes that Kolatkar's original poem mentions a "twenty-foot-long turtle," which mysteriously disappears during one of the versions written in Kannada. In this case, the reptile is literally lost in translation, existing in the words of some, and swimming in the subconscious of others. Like in Calia's photographs of Bombay, where cats merge into painted shutters, men emerge from men, and hands carrying baskets that turn into swans- we seem to be transported by 'Dream Tours,' a van photographed by Calia on one of his street wanderings. In the same essay, the photographer also points out that " 'translation' is Bombay's official language." I seem to agree as I hear it in the distinctive way that the city communicates in chaotic parlance, as it awakens, and sounds of street vendors, the incessant JCB, and the neighbourhood screaming 'Uncle' becomes white noise to its inhabitants. Sound equally translates time, as well as the day of the week, depending on the volume of noise that seems to be emerging.

Since I've grown up in the South of Bombay, or as Calia points out, "this mysterious place known as town," I can't help but walk in the photographer's footsteps, and provide geography to his

town," I can't help but walk in the photographer's footsteps, and provide geography to his photographic reflections. It reminds me of the words by Dayanita Singh who says that photography is often burdened by the "when?" and "where?" and in this case, I fight to maintain the illusion. "This looks like the Shibuya Crossing," I instantly think as I stare mesmerized by the inaugural grid of the show. But what prompts me to this analysis since I've never visited Tokyo? This burdening of having to make sense, to give place, to build context, solely on visuals I might have witnessed in the past. But slowly, as you linger longer, Calia paints the mystery once again, as tap displays in hardware stores are flanked against poems, and a painter diligently makes a signboard that reads "Surreal Tours," over and over again.



Of Mirrors and Mirages, 2024 © Philippe Calia



The Second Law 2025, Philippe Calia, at Tar, Bombay, India.

In a poem titled "Practice of Everyday Life," written by Zeenat Nagree in early 2024, her words seamlessly intertwine with Calia's visuals that now sit as part of the show. In an act of co-creation, she so lyrically writes "...it was as simple as the displacement of air from this into that that had not been there..." which is true for Bombay too. In Calia's photographs, a person veiled by a curtain at the corner shop appears often, but it's never the same person, nor the same corner shop. And still, this silent observation speaks to the city's 'everyday,' which is in constant flux. In an evocative book set in Bombay, author Jerry Pinto explains this eloquently as he writes- "In this city, every deserted street corner conceals a crowd. It appears in a minute when something disrupts the way in which the world is supposed to work. It can disappear almost as instantaneously."

As I contemplate Calia's interventions in run-down cinemas, museums, fruit carts, and on the bustling streets of this concrete city, I realise that the show pulsates with an underlying rhythm. It carries within it reminders of the 22 million people who live in cohesion with one another, and have distinctive associations with every corner of this evolving beast. Much like this precarious city that is held by a thread, Calia's images balance with the help of one another, as we uncover his Parisian / flaneur inner self. Like the photographer who draws parallels between Bombay and Paris, I seek my Bombay within his, nostalgic for a childhood in the areas he explores. The journey reminds me of a lover who once told me "The whole city is you," and in the hidden dreams of Calia's Heptanesia, I slowly start to see it.

The Second Law is ongoing at Tarq, Bombay/Mumbai, until Saturday 29th March, 11am-6.30pm.

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