

[moneycontrol PRO](#) + [FT FINANCIAL TIMES](#)

ACCESS SELECTED CONTENT FROM [FINANCIAL TIMES](#) ON [MONEYCONTROL PRO](#)

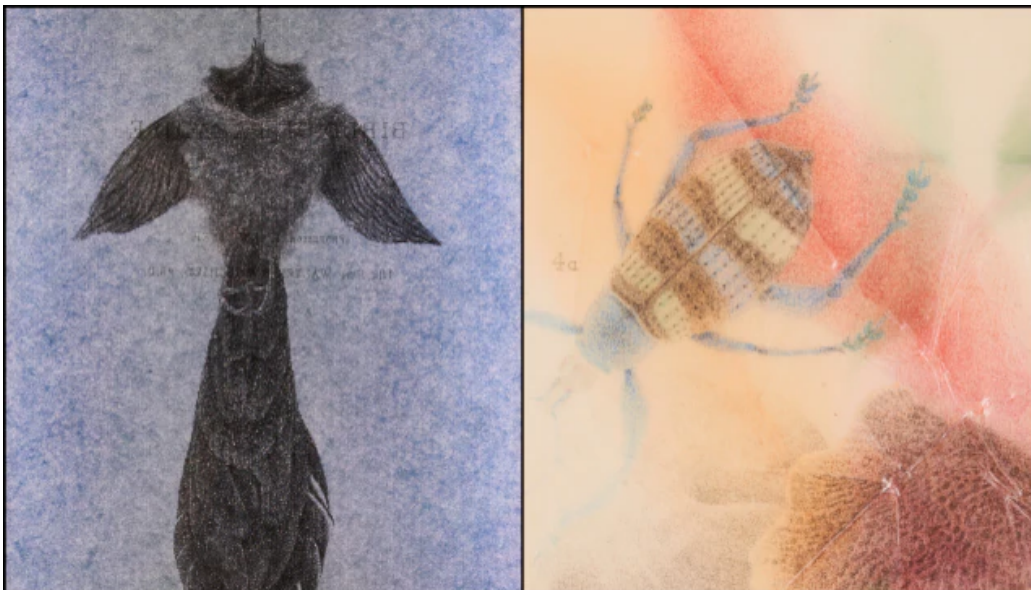
Home > Art-And-Culture News

ART-AND-CULTURE

In Garima Gupta's 'filed under: a/muse/um', an examination of the politics of documenting, archiving

Garima Gupta's detailed pencil sketches strongly overlay the connection between the land's history of colonial intrusion into its tropics and its impact on the people today, mirrored in their engagement with wildlife trade and oil palm plantations.

Tanishka DLyMa | November 24, 2020 09:53:55 IST



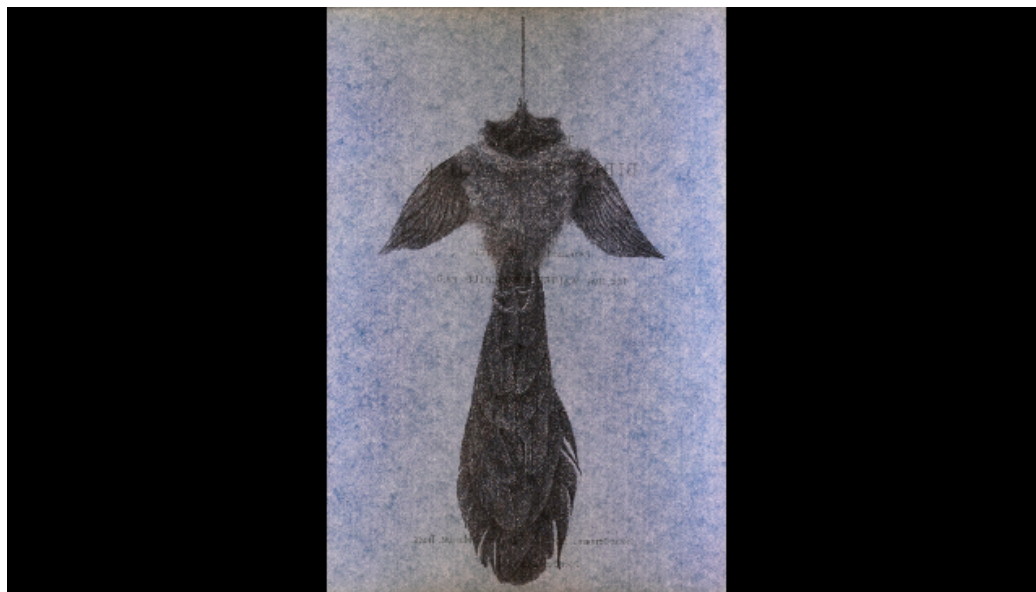
Artist and researcher Garima Gupta managed to encase the words 'exploitative greed' and 'grief' in delicate graphite drawings in her latest show, 'filed under: a/muse/um.' If you missed the now-closed exhibition at TARQ, you can head to [tarq.live](#) and scrutinise her sketches through an interactive viewing experience. The show comprised pencil sketches of birds of paradise and ravaged rainforests, among other scenes born out of Gupta's five-year on-ground research through the South-East Asian archipelago. But there's more to it.

The exhibition's significance begins with its name — filed under: a/muse/um. Gupta

tells *Firstpost* that the title is a play on the mechanism of documentation of all things living. "In this structuring of the title I see our need for hierarchy, the politics of the written and our need to seek order in this otherwise complex world."

'Filed under' immediately brings to mind the word archive. The world has been obsessed with collecting, documenting, labelling, and organising, which is seen in the latter structuring of the title — a/muse/um. This need to archive, or museum-isation as Gupta calls it, is reflected in our interaction and fascination with the 'exotic.' Have you ever collected seashells from the beach or perfectly smooth stones from riversides for the sake of their beauty or their collection?

The Mumbai-based artist sees the objectification of natural elements in the context of large-scale wildlife markets, too. This thought is encompassed in a piece titled *Rothschild's Bird* that shows a beheaded bird of paradise, probably awaiting stuffing.



Garima Gupta | *Rothschild's bird*, 2020 | Graphite & Pastel dust on blue paper | 11.7 x 8.3 inches

She comments, "[O]ne has to wonder if this state of emergency is really the price of our a-musement." Her words stand true for all actions against our environment, issues that threaten us closer to home and especially at a time when the global population size of all wildlife has witnessed an **average drop of 68 percent** since 1970.

An avid birdwatcher, Gupta says that research is a lot like bird-watching. It requires perseverance without the anxiety of what will come and sit on the branch next. Having to travel light on these research trips, her art tools consisted of paper and pencil. And so the result of research and light luggage are these restrained yet detailed drawings. The show also displays interviews with taxidermists, wildlife trophy dealers, and tribe hunters, which are pages presented unfiltered from the artist's notebook.

Which brings us to another crucial element — the notebook. Gupta uses the notebook as a symbol of power – "an information-gathering device". By offering pages from her notebook, she hopes to share an un-storied, non-linear, "nuanced telling of the exploits of our fragile biomes". Through the very act of dismantling this symbol of authority and exclusivity – the notebook – the artist questions the hierarchy of the archive and the politics of documentation.

With the backdrop of the South-East Asian tropics, the exhibition text by writer Deepa Bhasthi builds on the premise of the colonisers and the colonised. The foreign authorities in whose power it was to create archives and document the 'exotic', and the native communities.

Bhasthi begins with the line, *The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*. She continues, "[T]hey wrote with such an extraordinary sense of entitlement, that these limited men decided who we were, how limited the expression of our thoughts would be, how we would conduct the rest of our generations for untold years to come."

The tropics have been a site of archiving and interpreting for explorers and surveyors deployed by the imperial powers, as is given in the details of the show. Creating an archive includes not just surveying and categorising, but also erasure and exclusion. It requires an understanding of the land and its connection with its people, without which, it most certainly would be difficult for one to say what holds value and worth, and what doesn't.

Carolyn Steedman puts it well in her essay

Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida, and Dust. She writes, "[H]istorians found themselves able to speak on behalf of the dead and to interpret the words and the acts they had not understood". Here's another perspective by Steedman: archivists and documenters compile half of the story, captured in media res. She says the story never begins at the archive, only ends up there.

It's necessary to include that archives have merit. We need to understand our past to help deal with our future. This brings to mind a line from Hal Foster's 2004 essay

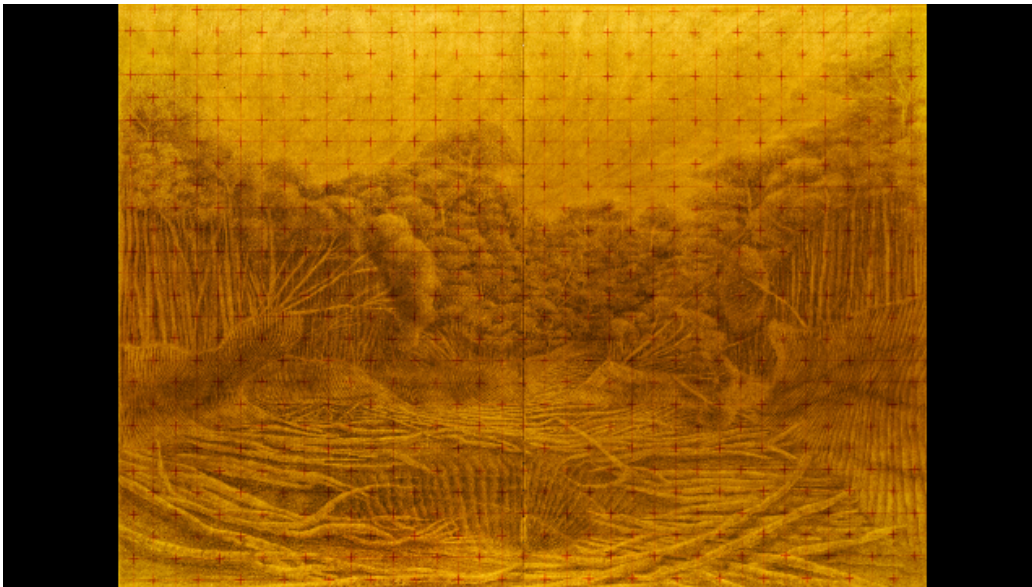
An Archival Impulse: archival artists seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present.

Of course, it does indeed work in our favour to understand who documents what and how.

At its core, the exhibition documents the fragments of this conflict. Gupta questions the politics of documentation and the subsequent impact on the socio-cultural understanding of our surroundings.

The show's detailed pencil sketches strongly overlay the connection between the land's history of colonial intrusion into its tropics and its impact on the people today, mirrored in their engagement with wildlife trade and oil palm plantations. But how else are people going to make a life in the remnants of a colonial conflict?

Let's illustrate this through one of the works.



Garima Gupta | Jalan Korea

In *Jalan Korea*, Gupta narrates, 'Jalan', in Bahasa, means road. Korea came from a Korean logging company that gained sanctions in the Nimbokrang region of West Papua, where the rainforests are targeted and devastated for wildlife, gold, and plantation grounds. The elaborate sketch shows a ravaged rainforest resting on top of a patterned red grid. This duality offers juxtaposed ideas – the natural and the surgical destruction of a rainforest for a cheap commodity – that come together to show the reality of the current situation. It documents the anxiety of a forest and its people in relation to every intrusive road that inches towards them, Gupta says.

"Personally, what is truly agonising and a great source of grief is... that we have internalised the coloniser's gaze. It is understandably a trauma response where centuries of oppression has shaped our worldview. It is a voice in our head, living and reprimanding."

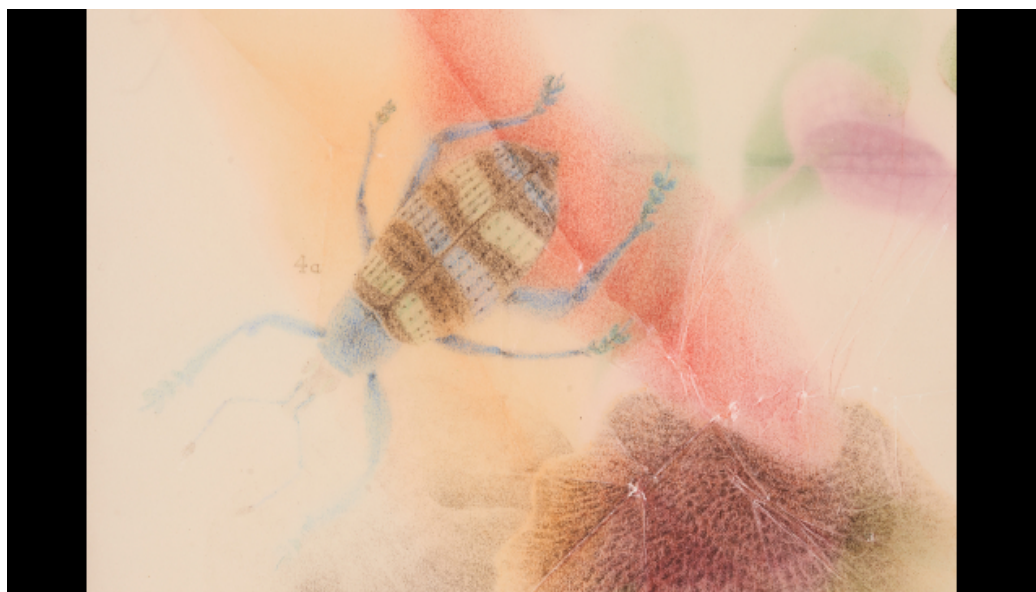
We call species in our own lands 'exotic' only because this wording is a fitting response to favour the oppressor's style of doing things, she narrates. What then remains with the people of a colonised past?

"[I]f there is any sense of agency, then it's in the understanding of our own psyche through the lens of our own historical and cultural baggage," the artist explains.

Discussing the decline of the natural world, we explore the subject of eco anxiety, a term that has gained increasing notice. For Gupta, the grief that this loss awakens is one that moves beyond pinning the blame, rather stemming from the stories of development, progress, worth, value and power that we tell ourselves as we undo our world. "In all of these stories, very few were told of being still, of looking-watching, smelling and holding and finding the quiet."

Amid stress about the environment, historical and cultural research has kept her floating. Gupta notes, "I think looking back before looking ahead gives perspective" – a lens that proves effective for many situations.

'filed under: a/muse/um' results from research and observation linked together with creative ingenuity. Foreign intrusion and documentation, ecological destruction, wildlife trade, grief, and hardship – the show brings together different ideas into one frame. And Gupta questions them in gentle works of art and interviews, chronicling a sense of loss. The work reveals itself at every turn and subsequent visit, and rewards pensive observation with new connections and relevance.



Thank you for shopping with us!, the piece that ends the exhibition, perhaps acts as a very subtle comment that leaves the weight of the commercialisation of the rainforest lingering on your mind. By the end, the ground is laid for viewers to build perspectives. You scroll to this last piece, the last page of a deconstructed notebook, but not the last thought.

Updated Date: November 24, 2020 09:57:42 IST

TAGS:

- Archiving
- Art
- Art Exhibition
- Coloniser
- Documentation

You Might Also Like



Now a term plan which also gives your premiums back
Max Life Insurance



Continuous glucose tracking so you can live your best life
abbott.in



Shop For Durable & Elegant Design Wooden Bed Online.
wakefit



Coding Classes For Age 6-18 by IIT Teachers
CampK12



Is Navi Mumbai the next best destination?
www.Intrealty.com



Premium 2, 3 & 4 Bed Residences in Kandivali (E)
projects.kalpataru.com



This 10 days Hair Oil can Help you Increase Your
10 Days Hair Oil



Ultimate Experience & Exceptional Build Quality
Dell



Losing Hair? Eat These 10 Foods to Prevent Hair Fall
Work and Cash



Own the BMW X3.
BMW INDIA



Give your Home a Luxurious Makeover, with Inspiring
Beautiful Homes



Shop For King & Queen Size Memory Foam Mattress. 100-
wakefit

Recommended by |

Find latest and upcoming tech gadgets online on Tech2 Gadgets. Get technology news, gadgets reviews & ratings. Popular gadgets including laptop, tablet and mobile specifications, features, prices, comparison.

ALSO READ