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Declaration of Originality

'I, Payal Sehgal Mahajan, hereby declare that the material presented here is the outcome of the Honours project I have undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, quotations or paraphrases attributable to other authors.'

Signed

Dated

being on the edge of abstraction

Abstract

In this report, I outline the processes I used over the last one year to arrive at a body of works in which I apply writing and photography to illustrate the idea of concurrence.

The starting point for this project is my reading, and fascination with the works of Rabindranath Tagore, an Indian poet and artist.

I also discuss the way Surrealism and Magical Realism have shaped my thinking in both art and writing.

This project has also been a process of clarifying to myself what it is that I am drawn to in photography and of bringing two of my creative outlets, writing and visual art, together.

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Introduction

A couple of years ago I read Drusila Modjeska's, *Stravinsky's Lunch*, a biography of two Australian artists, Stella Bowen and Grace Cossington Smith.¹ Around the same time my family and I moved into a 1930s house. When stripping off the old carpet we found sheets of linoleum lining the wooden floorboards and along with them pages of *The Women's Weekly* from the 1950s. Reading the magazines I was transported to that time in Australia and through it to a parallel time: one of great upheaval in the history of the Indian subcontinent. This led me to want to explore in my Honours year an aspect of life of an Indian artist in that period. And not just explore but walk into the life of this other artist, imagining time to be a continuum where the past, present and future exist concurrently.

I decided to look at poet and artist Rabindranath Tagore².

Tagore's works were created in the late 19th early/20th century period. He often referred to the notion of stepping over the boundaries of time. It was important for my project that he was accepting of the idea of realities other than the perceived.³

The project I had in mind was: to evoke a sense of conflated time where I could interact with people/events from the past, and present that in the form of photographs and writing.

¹ Drusilla Modjeska, *Stravinsky's Lunch* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).

² Amartya Sen, "Tagore and His India," in *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Culture, History and Identity*, ed. Amartya Sen (London: Penguin, 2005), 89-120

³ See Anita Desai, Introduction, Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1985), 8, Rabindranath Tagore, Kankal, reproduced in Ketaki Kushari Dyson, *In Your Blossoming Flower Garden* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1988), 164 and Dipankar Home and Andrew Robinson, "Einstein and Tagore: Man, Nature and Mysticism," in *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 527-536

I knew that the two forms of surrealism in the visual arts and magical realism in literature with their central theme of merging the real with the dreamlike held the key to exploring my idea of moving across planes of time. The question was why? And how?

Time

Time is the basic tenet of photography. A photograph exists because of time, of shutter speed, which affects the final exposure. There is an inherent surreality in photography because it captures a slice of time and preserves it. Walter Benjamin has said that film captures slow motion to evoke the supernatural. Still photography remains a step ahead by capturing the nature of the movement itself. The Bragaglia brothers experimented with photography in early 20th century to create images that captured movement as a blur. They believed, as did Barthes, that cinema did not offer the same pensiveness as photographs.⁴

I tracked the lineage of photographers who have raised the above issues in their work from Man Ray and Bragaglia in the 20th century and Francesca Woodman and Marian Drew, among others, in the 21st. There is a suggestion in their works that life is not about knowing all the answers. The works of Man Ray and Woodman, in particular, employ surrealist strategies of fracturing reality and creating dream like images.⁵

⁴See Helen Ennis, "An Optic Parable: Surrealism and Photography," in *Surrealism: Revolution by Night*, ed. NGA (Canberra: NGA, 1993), 157-59, Donna Brett, "The Surreal Aesthetic," in *Photography: Art Gallery of New South Wales Collection*, ed. Judy Annear (Sydney: AGNSW, 2007), 113, Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, ed. Douglas Kellner Meenakshi Gigi Durham (Blackwell, 2001), 61, Anton Giulio Bragaglia, Excerpts from Futurist Photodynamism, Christopher Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940* (New York: Aperture, 1989), 288 and Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 1993), 55

⁵Brett, "The Surreal Aesthetic," 117



Fig. 1 Man Ray, *Marquise Cassati*, 1922



Fig. 2 Anton Giulio Bragaglia, *Un Gesto del Capo*, 1911



Fig. 3 Francesca Woodman, *Space2*, 1975-76



Fig. 4 Marian Drew, *Bed*, 1993

In literature, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Salman Rushdie use the style of magical realism in their fiction to present the parallel universes of the imaginary and the real. A definition of magical realism is:

...here the factual coexists and interacts with the imaginary and with the paradoxes of the world of man, in a form of symbiosis.⁶

There is a blurring of boundaries between the two styles of surrealism and magical realism as also the capacity of one to influence the other. As Helen Ennis says in *An Optic Parable*, the arts practice of the Surrealists related as much to literature as to the

⁶ See Elsa Linguanti, "Introduction," in *Coterminous Worlds: Magical Realism and Contemporary Post-Colonial Literature*, ed. Francesco Casotti & Carmen Concilio Elsa Linguanti (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 2

visual arts and Tommaso Scarano in *Notes on Spanish-American Magical Realism* talks about the impact of the French surrealists on Latin American writers of magical realism.⁷

Furthermore, these European styles, with their innovative uses of time in photography and writing, which for some reason I could relate to so well, are closely aligned to the Indian tradition I grew up in. Alessandro Monti in his essay on sanskrit poetics establishes a co-relation between magical realism and sanskrit poetry, and assists me in my claim that where surrealism and magical realism refer to a subversion or alteration of reality in the western world, they represent the reality of my country of origin.⁸

It was the commonality of aims in these two forms, the capacity of one to influence the other, as also photography's stake in the former, which was the reason why I chose to begin my project from here.

The following part of the report outlines the journey I made in my Honours year to create, taking inspiration from these two styles, the final photographic images along with writing a short story to illustrate the idea of concurrence.

I have used colour to distinguish between the writing (blue) and the photographs (red). The two evolved side by side and one led to the other and vice versa. It is therefore important for me to maintain the *concurrence* of the process.⁹

⁷ See Anthony White, "Magic Realism: Mexican Women Artists in the Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection " *Artonview* Winter, no. 26 (2001)., 4-10, Ennis, "An Optic Parable: Surrealism and Photography.", 156 and Tommaso Scarano, *Notes on Spanish American Magical Realism*, 9-28, Shaul Bassi, "Salman Rushdie's Special Effects," in *Coterminous Worlds: Magical Realism and Contemporary Post-Colonial Literature in English*, ed. Francesco Casotti & Carmen Concilio Elsa Linguanti (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999)., 12.

⁸ See Satish Sharma, "Rotigraphy," *Art AsiaPacific* 13 (1997)., 84 and Shaul Bassi, Salman Rushdie's Special effects (47-60) in Bassi, "Salman Rushdie's Special Effects.", 49. and Alessandro Monti, "Representing the Worlds: Sanskrit Poetics and the Making of Reality," in *Coterminous Worlds: Magical Realism and Contemporary Post-Colonial Literature in English*, ed. Francesco Casotti & Carmen Concilio Elsa Linguanti (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999).72

⁹ In the *Never Ending Story*, Michael Ende (New York: Dutton Children's, 1997), uses two colours to distinguish between the real and the dream.

The idea of time existing in the one plane is almost impossible to grasp. It is an idea quite accessible to the medium of cinema. How possible is it to photograph this concept? And what about expressing these ideas, these collapsed timeframes in writing?

The Project

“Is it possible to photograph something which does not exist?”¹⁰ Looking at Francesca Woodman’s works (fig. 3) one says, yes. In her photographs, especially her self-portraits, the body is visible as a blur, overcoming, as Peggy Phelan says photography’s resolute stillness.¹¹ Phelan goes on to suggest a relationship between the self portrait in photography and the future, stating that the photograph brings the past, the present and the future, in the form of the viewer, together.¹²

In the series, *Space2*, Providence, RI, 1975-78, Woodman engages with the objects around her, trying to dissolve into them and the space she inhabits.¹³ Perhaps, for her, there was a need to close the gap between the body and that which enclosed it, to enable a complete understanding of self. It is as if she is mapping out the space, pushing against its limiting boundaries to make an attempt to become one with it.

I started my project by, quite literally, ‘mapping’ the space I was in. Initially, I engaged with Tagore and his works to create my own. I mentioned earlier that I was interested in exploring the idea that it was possible to move in and out of the various planes of time. Whereas [the writing](#) continued to follow this track, the visual part of the project took an abstract form of its own.

¹⁰ Rosalind E. Krauss, "Francesca Woodman: Problem Sets," in *Bachelors*, ed. Rosalind E. Krauss (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 162

¹¹ Peggy Phelan, "Francesca Woodman's Photography: Death and the Image One More Time," *Signs* 27, no. 4 (Summer 2002), 986

¹² *Ibid.*, 991

¹³ Margaret Sundell, "Francesca Woodman Reconsidered" *Art Journal*, Summer, 2003, Vol. 62, No.2, 52-67

Doodles

Tagore's visual art began primarily as doodles that he drew on the paper which he wrote his poems on. He would write and then doodle over the erasures. These would materialise into organic shapes that had both aesthetic beauty and stood as works of art on their own (fig. 5).¹⁴



Fig. 5 Rabindranath Tagore, *Untitled*

When I first started on this journey I made some photograms¹⁵ which took direct inspiration from this aspect of Tagore's visual art. The positives I used for making the photograms were of some doodles on paper (fig. 6). The works which resulted from such interactions influenced by his art retain the muted colours of his palette. I have placed these in a grid (fig. 7) playing with the notion of the grid, as Rosalind E. Krauss says, something which opposes a sequential reading of a narrative.¹⁶



Fig. 6 Payal Sehgal Mahajan, *Untitled*, 2008



Fig. 7 Payal Sehgal Mahajan, *Untitled*, 2008

¹⁴Prithwish Neogy, *The Drawings and Paintings of Rabindranath Tagore* (Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1961), 3.

¹⁵Photogram: placing an object (positive) on photosensitive paper to record its negative image.

¹⁶Rosalind E. Krauss, "Grids," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, ed. Rosalind E. Krauss (London: MIT Press, 1984), 9

The writing

At the same time, I was researching as much as I could about Tagore and the period in his life I wanted to write about: the spring of 1924 when he met an emerging Argentinian writer, Victoria Ocampo.¹⁷

Ocampo's passion for life and her tendency to exaggerate are two things which helped me immensely in the characterisation of her namesake, one of the main characters in the story. I played that against the sedate view of life that the much older Tagore had.

Again I used Tagore as the inspiration to begin my project:

The rain has held back for days and days...

The horizon is fiercely naked—not the thinnest cover of a soft cloud,
not the vaguest hint of a distant cool shower.¹⁸

I created two characters, Shantanu and Isabella. And started building around the above excerpt.

I thought that I would write my story from Tagore's perspective; in fact become his memory and change the documented version of his life. However, I found myself drawn to Victoria Ocampo, this spirited, intellectual, free thinking woman.¹⁹ So, I started to write from Victoria's point of view about the time when Tagore's short visit to her country came to an end. The two promised to meet again but as it happened they only met once and very briefly.

¹⁷ For different perspectives on their relationship, which varies between the possibilities of a passionate relationship between the two and 'hero worship' on the part of Ocampo, see Dyson, *In Your Blossoming Flower Garden*., Sen, "Tagore and His India." And Doris Meyer, *Victoria Ocampo: Against the Wind and the Tide* (New York: George Braziller, 1979).

¹⁸ Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* (New Delhi: Wisdom Tree, 2002)., 31

¹⁹ See the correspondence between Tagore and Ocampo from the year 1924 onwards, Ketaki Kushari Dyson, *In Your Blossoming Flower Garden* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1988), 373.

And this idea to 'become the memory' of someone led me to visualize a piece where I 'wear the memory'. This evolved into the works on lino.

(I believed that by evoking memory I would bring the planes of time together. I would realize in the course of the project that this was not necessarily true.)

Lino and its residue

To me the linoleum found in our house represented the link between the past and the present and I wanted to utilize it in the project to explore the non linear notion of time and also ideas of memory mentioned above. I visualized a structure (fig. 8) where the viewer could walk into an installation, cylindrical in shape, and experience for herself this evocation of memory. The idea was to envelope the viewer so there is a complete immersion in the work. In the palaces and forts in Rajasthan, India, the walls of rooms are covered in paintings with stories from the Indian mythology using natural pigments.

The artist Nalini Malani has, beginning from the Lohar Chawl: Alleyway (1991) (fig. 9), employed the idea of building a narrative in her works by using images from reality, mythology and her own fantasy to create works that encapsulate the viewer in her world.²⁰

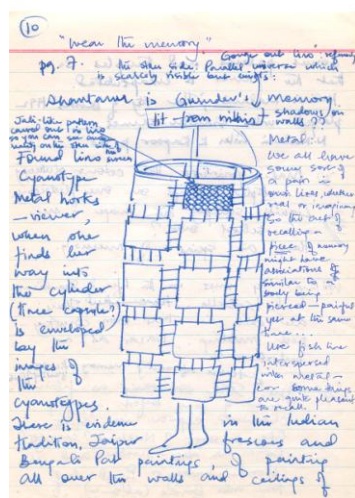


Fig. 8 Payal Sehgal Mahajan, rough sketch



Fig. 9 Nalini Malani, *Lohar Chawl, Alleyway*, 1991

²⁰ See Kamala Kapoor, Nalini Malani: Missives from the Street, Art & AsiaPacific, vol 2 no1 1995, 47

I believe that my work plays with this notion of the narrative by negating it. Like memory: each time we recall something it is slightly different. By placing images next to each other, grid like, I like to challenge this notion of the narrative which we have learned to expect, a consequence of our perceived reading of time as a linear event. To go back to Rosalind Krauss's article on the grid: "The grid announces, among other things, modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse."²¹

However, I quickly moved away from the cylindrical shape towards the idea of a square panel hung on/near a wall (fig. 10) because the former seemed too claustrophobic and I wanted to recreate the sense of open space reminiscent of the vast palaces.

The idea of the installation to evoke memory remained though; especially those aspects of memory which are fuzzy, incoherent,²² and, I believed that the lino installation would do just that.

I cut the lino up into pieces, approximately A4 size. I coated them with cyanotype chemicals on the canvas side, and then exposed them to the sun, with and without an object. The resulting images, photograms of feathers, which my younger son loves to collect, once installed together in a grid form (see fig. 10) recall Anna Atkins and 'the first published book printed and illustrated by photography'.²³ To me, the feather image

²¹ Krauss, "Grids.", 9

²² Geoffrey Batchen, quoted by Bronwyn Clark-Coolee, "Time-Memory-People," in *Photography: Art Gallery of NSW Collection*, ed. Judy Annear (Sydney: AGNSW, 2007), 251

²³ Larry J. Schaaf, *Sun Gardens: Victorian Photograms by Anna Atkins* (New York: Aperture, 1985), 7.

plays with the notion of layers of memory, which can be seen as fleeting, and is a reference to early photography itself. Feathers, with their tendency to finely transmit light, were used by Anna Atkins and others as photograms in early photography.²⁴

On the reverse side, I carved out curvilinear shapes using the pattern on the lino as a guide. This allowed light to pass through, highlighting the blue from the cyanotype. When viewed against light it was possible to appreciate the presence of another reality (fig. 11).

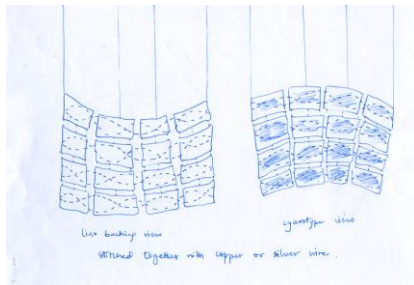


Fig. 10 Payal Sehgal Mahajan, *sketch of installation*

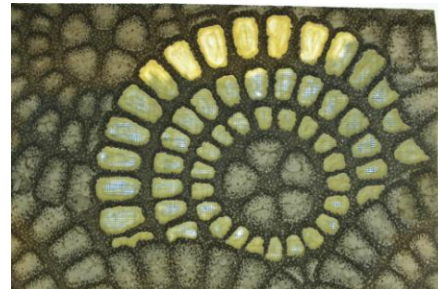


Fig. 11 Payal Sehgal Mahajan, *gouging*, 2008

I have used metal clips to join the pieces together in a grid like installation. The metal suggests a certain *pinching* of the fragments, a slight discomfort that one can sometimes feel when recalling bits of best forgotten moments.

I ended up with 25 such pieces and will link them to form an installation piece. This piece will be hung against a wall placed with light passing through the gougings so that shadows form on the floor/wall. On the ground below will be the residue from the carvings in the lino: fragments of time past.

However, whereas this piece worked in the evocation of memory, it was still too firmly ensconced in its own materiality, its pastness. When I showed it to some fellow students, they could not look beyond the image of the feather and the lino itself. I had to keep going in my quest for that work which would contract time.

²⁴ Ibid.

Meanwhile the writing was progressing as memory as well: Ocampo's. I was writing from her perspective, imagining a past for her with a multitude of characters. Marquez's magical realism was guiding me along.²⁵

The next stage

I then used the lino as an object in itself and photographed it against light. This resulted in images, which to my mind took me closer to that idea of coexistent realities (fig. 12). In the image it is possible to imagine that something else exists beyond the visible. I liked that. But I continued to experiment.

Next, I placed the lino on photographic paper under the enlarger in the darkroom to record its negative image: photogram on paper (fig. 13). I recorded its negative image, its absence; it was still very much about the material though.

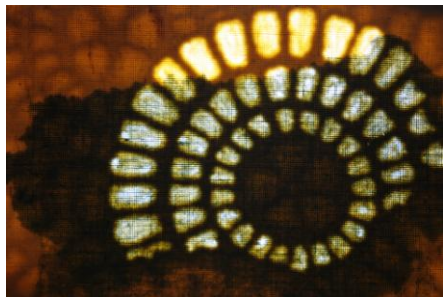


Fig. 12 Payal Sehgal Mahajan, *Untitled*, 2008



Fig 13. Payal Sehgal Mahajan, *Untitled*, 2008

This was all very interesting but I knew I had to keep going still. The works had to be about more than memory; they had to speak about the concurrence of time.

Contemporary artist Marian Drew paints with light bringing the photographer's gesture into the image, she uses photography's representational ability to make works which

²⁵ Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Of Love and Other Demons* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995).

reveal the magical in the quotidian, much like the surrealists did. “Concrete reality is a construction”, she says (fig. 4).²⁶ I was struck by her use of time in her works; she is an artist whose conceptual thinking and style is similar to mine.

I visualized some images where traces of my skin could be seen along with the lino pieces I had made. I used Drew’s style of painting with a torch to make long exposures, 2.5s, to make the photographs in fig. 14.



Fig. 14 Payal Sehgal Mahajan, *Untitled*, 2008

The works had become about me; and, in the image in fig. 14, I did just that, bringing a little of myself in: my arms. I was, in these images, trying to capture the sense of sifting through the layers of time. However, whereas this leap that my work had taken was quite encouraging, it still wasn’t what I wanted to say. And, knowing quite well that the exposures in the above photographs weren’t correct (they needed more light, longer exposure), I moved on.

It had dawned on me that one reason why the photographs I had made so far weren’t working was because I had to be in them. Growing up in India, my siblings and I often performed in front of the camera. I go back to this childhood game when I make the

²⁶Anne Kirker, "Turning the Camera Inwards," in *Marian Drew : Photographs + Video Works / Foreword by Geoffrey Batchen*, ed. Marian Drew (Bulimba: QCP, 2006), 38

following works. It is a part of the process that I turn to this impulse much later in my project. This performative instinct was a reflection of the use of photography in the wider community where photo studios presented options for the common man to recreate his own reality: they provided clothes, painted backdrops and even over painting of the photograph.²⁷

Interestingly, the writing had taken an autobiographical turn about 20 days prior to my coming to the realization that I had to physically bring myself into the photographs: *to record the gesture*, as Drew would say.²⁸

I replaced the names Shantanu and Isabella with Tagore and Victoria, respectively, and introduced a third character, Nazar (an Arabic word meaning seeing, insight, reflection)²⁹, who can look into Victoria's past, consequently flattening time.³⁰

Nazar looks and peers through Victoria's eyes, much like a photographer looks through a lens. The idea was to create visual pictures with words; and in the visual images to draw my ideas into pictures.

Having established that I needed to be bolder about bringing myself into the photographs, I collected all the other pieces I had created over the last few months, and

²⁷ See Gayatri Sinha, "Pursuit of Dreams: Contemporary Contexts in Photography and Video Art in India," in *India/Public Places, Private Spaces: Contemporary Photography and Video Art*, ed. Brian Drolet (New Jersey: Newark Museum, 2007), 22.

²⁸ Marian Drew, "Projecting Voices," in *Marian Drew : Photographs + Video Works / Foreword by Geoffrey Batchen*, ed. Marian Drew (Bulimba: QCP, 2006), ———, *Marian Drew : Photographs + Video Works / Foreword by Geoffrey Batchen* (Bulimba: QCP, 2006). 89

²⁹ <http://www.seekbooks.com.au/book/Nazar/isbn/9781931788854.htm> accessed 12/10/08

³⁰ This phrase is taken from the title of Robert Finch, "Flat Time," *The American Scholar* 75, no. 1 Winter (2006). Robert Finch

interacted with them physically and materially, as layers placed on a mat, stuck on the wall, and strewn on the floor (fig. 15):



Fig. 15 Payal Sehgal Mahajan, *Untitled*, 2008

I took these photographs in my house. There still was not enough light, so I moved to another room. In this room, the sun comes in through the grid shaped window and lights up each corner. I moved the furniture in the room and framed the picture so one could not see any personal belongings. But I still placed some lino pieces in the grid of the window (fig. 16).



Fig. 16. Payal Sehgal Mahajan, *Untitled*, 2008

The final works

A number of artists use the self in their work. In *The Navarasa Suite* (fig. 17), Pushpamala N. relies on performance to depict the nine ideals of womanhood enshrined in Indian Classical Writings.³¹ Artist Nasreen Mohamedi uses the abstraction of self to create works which talk about, in a sense, the mystical triumph in the way of becoming. Her images are about the self by their very absence from them (fig. 18).³²



Fig. 17 Pushpamala N., *Bibhatsa*, 2000-3
The Navarasa Suite

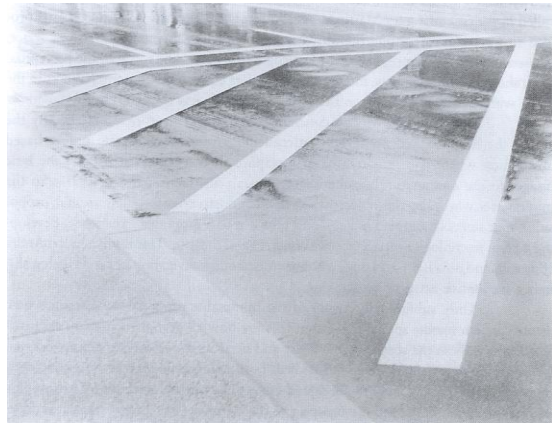


Fig. 18 Nasreen Mohamedi, *Untitled*, 1975

However, the images that worked most for me were the ones that came immediately after, where I removed even those traces (of the lino). And then it was just the window and I. I used long exposures of 2.5 seconds to record the movement of my body in front of the camera, this enabled me to be in front of the camera while at the same time not be.

³¹ See Gayatri Sinha & Paul Sternberger, "Playing Inside: Photography, Video and Identity," in *India: Public Places/Private Spaces*, ed. Brian Drolet (New Jersey: Newark Museum, 2007), 104

³² Geeta Kapur, "Elegy for an Unclaimed Beloved: Nasreen Mohamedi 1937-1990," in *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, ed. Geeta Kapur (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000), 62

In my images (fig. 19) human activity is perceptible as marks on the surface; the self visible as but a trace. The sun streams into the room to light up every corner of the interior. There is even a hint of other planes whenever a dark form, like an erasure, appears on the glass.

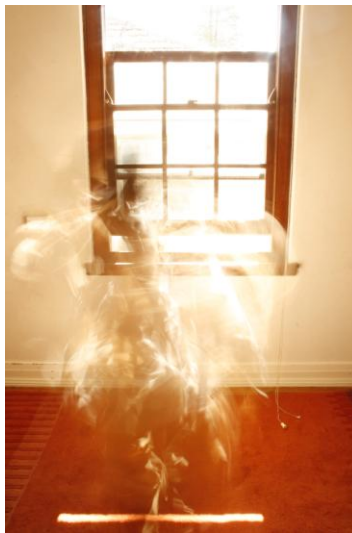


Fig. 19 Payal Sehgal Mahajan, *being on the edge of abstraction #1*, 2008

The images worked for me because of their abstract nature, which were yet rooted in a literal reading with the room and the cords from the blinds recognizable, grounding the scene in the now. Another reason I was pleased with these images was because of the appearance of the grid in them. This time though it had a symbolic function as opposed to the prior one which was to deconstruct the narrative structure.

Some fellow students reacted to the images in fig. 19 as spiritual. This was something I had been trying to move away from all along in the project, even though it was evident (to all but me) that by trying to fuse layers of time I was doing just that. I went back to investigate this aspect of photography. A number of contemporary artists have utilised

the ability of the photographic film to capture traces of the non-existent. Woodman resurfaced and I also saw John Baldessari's Strobe series, an image of a woman with flowers flowing out of her mouth magically.³³

The Grid

The grid, by its very nature, plays between the two states, secular and spiritual, all the time maintaining a fine balance.³⁴ Where on the one hand it constricts, limits; it can also, on the other, release the mind into the realm of a space which is endless. The window appeared in the symbolist art in the form of a grid. Its purpose is again two-fold; one to transmit light and the other to reflect one's image.³⁵

In my images in fig. 19 the window makes an appearance as both a centripetal and centrifugal grid form. So as Krauss says,

The centrifugal reading suggests the work of art as a mere fragment in an infinitely larger fabric whereas the centripetal hints at its existence apart from the world.³⁶

Both the readings are important to me and work as a toggle between the infinite possibilities of the universe/mind mentioned above.

Once I had these images (I used a digital camera and could see the results instantaneously) I had a sense that I had achieved what I had set out to do: to communicate a sense of finding and at the same time losing myself, the blur conflated time, while the grid enabled a sense of illusion – the sense of the dreamlike.

³³ See Alison Ferris, "The Disembodied Spirit," in *The Disembodied Spirit*, ed. Alison Ferris (Brunswick: Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 2003), 40.

³⁴ Krauss, "Grids.", 12

³⁵ Ibid., 16

³⁶ Ibid., 18

However, sitting in my room, with my back to the window, I saw light falling across the room onto the opposite wall. The pattern it formed was grid shaped and once again I took out my camera to capture that moment.

I danced with the light falling on my body, but this time it did not matter if the furniture in the room was in the frame. I believe that having achieved a sense of immaterialism with the photographs in fig 19, I was more comfortable with coming down to earth again to enjoy the materialistic comforts openly. The bed, the tall boy and the door-handle, all appear in these pictures (fig. 20). They ground these images in a place, where the images in fig 19 did not. I plan to place 18 images from this last series (fig. 20) in grid format, 3x6.



Fig 20 Payal Sehgal Mahajan, *the day I danced with time #1*, 2008

Unwittingly, my project had taken a leap into the realm of the spiritual. The placement in a grid format is appropriate here because these images are about the recognition that the work of art is, and by extension, I am, to quote Krauss again, a mere fragment of an infinitely larger fabric.³⁷

³⁷ Ibid.18

The clothes I wore in figures 15, 16, 19 and 20 are the salwar-kameez, one of the traditional costumes, which women wear in India. I believe it is my way of getting in touch with my heritage. I am also Nazar, who is the narrator of the short story I have written.

Nazar's Story

Meanwhile, the writing had found its direction as well. It was definitely autobiographical. Nazar's curiosity about the past leads her into it only to find that it is the present where she belongs.

I toyed with the idea of placing images in the body of the text. However, I realized that where on the one hand any of the photographs I had made for the project would sit in quite well with the story, on the other, they might prove to be a distraction. I want the story to be as abstract as possible and do not want to steer the reader into a predetermined direction. This was also the reason why in the final editing I decided to delete any reference to Nazar. Only the unnamed I narrator remains in the final version.

Delia Falconer has suggested that in the 1970s Australian writers were influenced by magical realism. Whereas some continued to write in that style, others like Murray Bail took a different path.³⁸ My story, *the memory hereafter*, has also taken a different direction from where it started, which was a complete reliance on magical realism.

I will present the story in a book format. The text will be placed within a dust jacket,

³⁸ Delia Falconer, "Estrangement in Paradise," in *The Australian, Online*, ed. Associate Editor Cameron Stewart (2008).

which is a fragment of a photograph from *being on the edge of abstraction 1*(fig 18). The story and the images complement each other but also work as individual bodies of work.³⁹

Conclusion

When I first started my Honours year, I did not know where or how to begin making the images I had set myself out to make. I did not know how to start writing my short story. I only had my previous art practice to rely on, where the journey becomes as, if not more, important than the final works themselves.⁴⁰

I allowed myself to experiment both in my writing and art making, sure in the belief that the process would lead me to the end, which it did. Only that I think it is another beginning. I believe that this project will feed into the next project as the work from my last project found its way into this one.

The project split into two parts; whereas the writing continued to move in the direction of my original thoughts: becoming the memory of another, bringing the past into the present, the visual works jumped off into the next dimension. I realized that it was not enough to make works about memory, but to make works which evoked something more, works that flattened time so I could believe that what I was seeing in them was time captured.

However, the last body of work I made, *the day I danced with time*, brings the short story and the visual works together again: in both I have returned to reality after my flights of fancy.

³⁹ Here is a reference to the fact that the protagonists, or at least their counterparts in real life, were writers. And there is also the tradition of illustrating text which dates back to ancient times in Persia and India. See Michael Brand, *The Vision of Kings* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1996), 80.

⁴⁰ Caroline Jordan, "Feeling Your Way: Inside the Landscape," in *Marian Drew: Photographs and Video Works*, ed. Marian Drew (Brisbane: QCP, 2006), 11

The short story, *the memory hereafter*, is a documentation of the voyage I made back into time to bring it into the present. I explore the idea of different planes of time co-existing, and, fascinating as it is, I find real life much more inviting.

I propose to hang seven large works (142.5x95cm) from the series “*on the edge of abstraction*” in a rectangular space in the gallery. There will be a series of works *the day I danced with time* placed in a grid format on one of the walls (381x120 cm), (fig. 19). Opposite this grid and mirroring it, will be the lino grid installation. The book will be on a plinth across the room from the seven large works.

When I started on this project I imagined that I will try and reach out to the past that is; challenging the idea of memory being linked to a past that once existed as opposed to one that exists concurrently with the present and the future. I wanted to explore what might have happened, the possibilities that could be presented.

*But real life is so much more labyrinthine than we think*⁴¹ and I have come to realise that I do not need to fictionalise anything. It is all in front of me; all I have to do is to grasp it, so it comes closer to my interpretation of it.

⁴¹Dyson, *In Your Blossoming Flower Garden.*, 98

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Addenda

Curriculum Vitae

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Education

Current Honours year in Bachelor Arts (Visual), the Australian National University(Photography and Media Arts)

1990–94 Bachelor of Fine Arts (Printmaking), University of Punjab, India

Awards

2007 Artist in residence, PhotoAccess, Manuka Arts Centre, Canberra

2005 One of 11 artists selected to work on a Megalo Access Arts project to commemorate the 2003 Canberra bushfires

2001 ACT Arts Program grant for *imperfect, impermanent, incomplete...* exhibition

2003–1998 Grant recipient for various exhibitions by the group MultiFocus from artsACT, ACT office of Multicultural Affairs, ACT Multicultural Council and a Pat Corrigan Grant from NAVA

Exhibitions curated

2006 Disposable, Theo Notaras Multicultural Centre, Canberra

2005 Rotary Youth Awards 2005, Tuggeranong Community Arts Centre Gallery, Canberra

Separate Realities, Tuggeranong Community Arts Centre Gallery, Canberra

History of Migrants, National Multicultural Festival 2005, University of Canberra Café and Gallery, Canberra

2004 Refuge?, ACT Legislative Assembly, Canberra

Solo exhibitions

2007 *les bleues et les rouges*, Huw Davies Gallery, PhotoAccess, Canberra

2003 *imperfect, impermanent, incomplete...*, Huw Davies Gallery, PhotoAccess, Canberra

1997 *as it is...*, PhotoAccess, Canberra

Selected group exhibitions

1997-2008 Access All Areas: The PhotoAccess Members' Show, Huw Davies and other galleries, Canberra

2006 Shrine, ANCA Gallery, Dickson, ACT

Visage, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Manuka, ACT

Wildside? What's going on on the hilltops of Canberra?, Huw Davies Gallery, Canberra

2005 Biennale Internazionale dell'Arte Contemporanea 2005, Florence, Italy

Site and Soul II, Canberra Printmakers interpreting sites of significance, Canberra Museum and Gallery & Belconnen Community Arts Centre, Canberra

Art Aid, ANCA Gallery, Dickson, ACT

2003–04 Megalo Members' exhibition, Megalo Access Arts, Watson, ACT

2003 CCAS and the Art Store Prize, 2003, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Canberra

Refuge?, ANCA Gallery, Dickson, Canberra & Steps Gallery, Melbourne

2001 Madonna, an exhibition exploring motherhood, touring exhibition, Canberra School of Art Foyer Gallery & Spiral Arm Gallery, Canberra

Ephemeral Phantasies, ANCA Gallery, Dickson, ACT

Panoramas of Uriarra, Canberra National Multicultural Festival 2001, touring exhibition, Belconnen Gallery & Tuggeranong Community Arts Centre Gallery, Canberra

Honours Proposal

1.Aims

A) What are you aiming to investigate?

I aim to investigate the potential of the Photogram in exploring ideas of concurrence for my Honours Project. The images that I end up with at the end of the course could be B&W, colour, involve traditional/alternative techniques of printmaking or use other means like digital scanning etc.

I am drawn to the Photogram for its simplicity and luminosity, a quality that makes it seem to shine from within, the fact that there is simplicity in its finely defined outlines and yet there is a lot more that can be read into it. Objects placed on a sensitised surface leave behind traces that hint at their presence in their absence: presence, absence, memory, longing, a sense of place, history, time.

In addition to the above I intend to explore creative writing as a way of contextualising my visual work. I have done that in the past with most of my work and to a greater degree in my latest exhibition, *les bleues et les rouges*. To quote from David Chalker's essay in the catalogue for the exhibition, *'Payal Sehgal Mahajan's cool blue and rich red images are pure self-portraits, made without disguise, free of hubris and preaching. They show a woman in the throes of seeking or perhaps reeling from the emerging truth of her identity. The chair, their unifying element, is a stage for the writhing, painful progress of the journey, a journey well illustrated by this excerpt from Interspersed: "... she drew the curtains tighter and when a streak of light threatened to slice through an opening she viciously forbade it any access, firmly shutting the curtains of her eyes to ensure that that which was out there could never find its way back to her and into her heart."*

Please find attached a CD of images and an excerpt from the manuscript of the work, *Interspersed*.

B) How are your previous work and experience relevant to the proposed project?

I have often made use of 'camera less photography' in my work. For the work, *Vingt-Huit*, 2006, (see digital file) I used direct scanning techniques to create the images. The scanner was at the receiving end of images much like a sensitised sheet of paper in the darkroom.

I have also made some B&W photograms using the enlarger in the past and this project would give me the opportunity to expand on previous ideas that I have worked with.

I have worked with the Cyanotype for my solo exhibition, *les bleues et les rouges*, at the Huw Davies Gallery in Griffith.

I have written a piece of text, *Interspersed*, which explores the aforementioned idea of concurrence and I would like to extend that same idea to my visual works.

2. Methods and Materials

A) What working/research methods do you intend to use? Also include here an indication of how you will begin your studio investigations.

The idea of concurrence, of realities other than the perceived, of events happening alongside each other, perhaps in parallel universes, has often intrigued me; of paths that move side by side but never intersect; of the world as planes that float above or below each other. There is a story to be found in everything, everywhere. That which would have occurred here in say the 1940s, would not have taken place at another time, but another story would have unfolded there, at the same time. How would it have been if the two lives had collided...

I am going to India in Nov 2007 and aim to research my family history through photographs, letters etc with the intention of perhaps making use of these markers in my work, both visual and written.

B) What materials will you use?

I intend to use found materials and text in the images to evoke a sense of history, my own and another's. I believe the use of negatives as contact prints and text, which appears in my work on and off, will add a personal dimension to the pictorial work.

C) If you will need to develop new skills, please detail.

I need to continue working on my skills in the darkroom and look at other, alternative techniques of printmaking.

I also work a lot digitally, in photoshop, and would like to have access to expertise to improve my skills in that area.

D) Are there any special resources you will need to carry out the project?

I will use the B&W and colour darkrooms as well as the digital labs. It will be important for me to have access to the chemistry needed for the various processes.

3. Context

- A) What is the wider context for the proposed research project? Please discuss how your project relates to the work of other artists and/or areas of investigation.
B) Are there key texts (visual or written) relevant to your project? Please details

The idea of concurrence has long existed in works of art, visual or written. The work uppermost in my mind is Drusilla Modjeska's *Stravinsky's Lunch*, which is dedicated to the lives of Stella Bowen and Grace Cossington Smith. These two artists were contemporaries, but their paths never crossed. Or if they did, we do not know.

Virginia Woolf in *To the Lighthouse* presented both the present and the past to take us through the same journey as her protagonist. It is not new, this idea of the present, past, concurrence; countless artists have used it in their works one way or another.

Then again this idea has oft been explored and presented in disparate ways through films. David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, 2001 is one that played with the concepts of the same life lived differently, as another reality and director Alejandro González Iñárritu and his co-writer, Guillermo Arriaga explored in *Babel*, 2006 how an event in one part of the world can have an impact on lives in other parts quite unknowingly, or unwittingly even.

Then there are photographers whose works focussed on camera less photography. Man Ray with his Rayographs, William Henry Fox Talbot and his photogenic drawings, Anna Atkins' Cyanotypes and more recently Susan Derges, an artist based in England who, among other things, employs sound waves to create works of mesmerising beauty.

Back in Australia there is Anne Ferran whose residency at the NMA resulted in photograms of old garments of haunting beauty, which explored again the idea of history, of presence and absence, through these magnificently preserved fragments of material.

4. Outcomes

Please indicate the possible form of the outcome of your investigation (e.g. installation, 12 1m x1m lithographic works, suite of 40 small scale paintings etc.)

I envisage the investigation to culminate in approximately 14 90cms x 58cms images complemented by a novella length piece of fiction.

5. Timeframe

In the first semester of 2008 (proposed year of start of honours research project), I plan to start some experimental writing along with exploring the various forms of the photogram. I also want to gather as much information as I can on the arts of South-East Asia. I believe that the first half of the year will be dedicated to a lot of research and experimentation.

I should state here that I want to go on to do a Post Graduate Research Project.

The latter half of the year will be dedicated to the actual making of images and finalising the writing that will together take the form of the exhibition at the end of the year.