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Nihaal Faizal's intervention on cover page:

Apart from TAKE's very first issue (Volume 1 Issue 1: Black), the magazine's mastheads have always appeared on the top left corner of the cover page. For TAKE's 28th issue on memory, the artist Nihaal Faizal returns the cover page masthead to the top right—a position it fleetingly and briefly occupied just once before, in its initial launch issue.

Cover Image:

One of the envelopes on which Mahatma Gandhi wrote notes at his meeting with Lord Mountbatten, 2 June 1947. Displayed as a part of the exhibition *Tangled Hierarchy* curated by Jitish Kallat at John Hansard Gallery, part of the University of Southampton, the UK. With the kind permission of the University of Southampton.

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Above: Arunima Choudhury, *Death of a Poet*, Acrylic, watercolour and dry pastel on paper, 63.19 X 98.82 inches, 1995. Photo Courtesy: Emami Art.

Inside the gallery, a complex cosmology of the organic world gradually emerges around the spectator: swaying; evolving; completing its cycle in reticence with a necessary detachment from the vigilant and cautious world. Her range of concerns is felt through her responses toward various social incidents through her paintings—*The Death of a Poet* (1995), *Nirbhoya* (2020), and *Landscape in Red* (2018), to name just a few. At the centre, one spots a garbhagriha-like sculptural entity which, the curator has designed to house a memoir of the artist on her acquaintance Bina Das's suicide and autopsy. Adajania reflects on the incident as the deceased woman's forbidden desire and her transgression of social orders and patriarchy, with a will to resist. The recreated *grabhagriha* might allude to the mandala and a reading station in the middle of the hall with pamphlets and texts about the Non-Aligned Movement that had featured in the section of the 2012 Gwangju Biennale curated by Adajania Here, there is an emphasis on creating a sacred space encapsulating a collection of different photographic series by Noh Suntag (including *The Forgetting Machines* series (2006–2007) made in commemoration of those who passed away

during the Gwangju Democratisation Movement in South Korea). In 'The Dark Edge of Green' the curator brings in a batch of Choudhury's paintings of various women that run parallel to the memoir: one sticking her tongue out to patriarchy; another excreting a foetus; the third making love to a tiger; a painting of the *lajja gouri* with exposed vulva—an exhaustive list of all kinds of deviations from female stereotypes recorded through the paintings that are encapsulated within the re-constructed 'room'. This allows the spectator to experience the memoir in an immersive space—a product of Adajania's curatorial intervention.

In Arunima Choudhury's unorthodox and restorative universe, her unwavering commitment to resurrection and regeneration, healing, and acceptance stands against a world that is violent, obtrusive, and presumptuous. It is also a world of free thoughts and resistance brought to the fore in a time of darkness, reminding one that refusal can be a powerful tool in a time when we need it the most.

'The Dark Edge of Green', Retrospective-scale exhibition of Arunima Choudhury, Curated by Nancy Adajania, Emami Art, Kolkata, 19 June-22 August 2022.

Review

06 - Kolkata

THE STREET AND THE GALLERY:1 SHAHIDUL ALAM'S ARCHIVES OF PRACTICES

Ranu Roychoudhuri



Above: Figure 01: Shahidul Alam, *Noor Hossain Mural in Jahangirnagar University Campus*, 1987, Dhaka, 40 x 26.66 inches. Photo Courtesy: Drik.

The retrospective on Bangladeshi photographer-writer-curator-activist Shahidul Alam, 'Singed But Not Burnt' provided a rare opportunity to appreciate the artist's diverse oeuvre. Curated by Ina Puri and exhibited at the Kolkata Centre for Creativity from 19 June to 20 August 2022, it looked at Alam's artistic genealogy, wide-ranging creative style and visual politics in the context of the shifting terrain of contemporary lens-based practices in South Asia. The show's narrative thread flowed in an autobiographical voice interwoven with the biography of the postcolonial nation-state of Bangladesh—a land torn between democratic values and counter-democratic realities, majoritarian identity and minority rights, the exploitation of labour and efforts at social empowerment, complaisance to power and resistance against it. In bearing witness to the historical and the everyday, Alam continuously blurs the boundaries between the aesthetic, the political and the personal. Simultaneously, the retrospective showcased Alam's critique of the Global South's erasure from the history of photography and how his prominent presence in the "West" is a corrective towards decolonizing photography.

Visitors to his exhibition might have been familiar with Alam's politics of the streets, his black-and-white documentary photographs and his contributions as an institution builder through Drik, Majority World, Pathshala, and Chobi Mela. These endeavours



Above: Figure 02: Shahidul Alam, *Woman in Ballot Booth*, 1991, Dhaka, 27 x 40 inches. Photo Courtesy: Drik.

occupied substantial sections of the show. They included Alam's much-reproduced photographs of the mural at the Jahangirnagar University campus honouring Noor Hossain, a student killed in police firing in 1987, who wrote "let democracy be free" on his chest (Figure 01) to protest the dictatorial Ershad government, and the silhouette of a woman in a voting booth in 1991 who (in Alam's interpretation) cast her ballot to avenge Hossain's murder (Figure 02). The more unusual exhibits were Alam's early experiments with infrared photography in England and Bangladesh within the ambit of salon photography. Viewers must have been pleasantly surprised by his nude self-portrait, which recalls British cultural theorist John Berger's expose on the genre of the nude and Alam's challenge to the genre. However, what Alam calls his pictorialist "pretty pictures" appear, in hindsight, as political as his larger body of documentary works.

Two sections in the show demand longer discussion: *Crossfire* and *My Unseen Sister*. In the former, Alam's visual language takes novel formal, chromatic and



Above: Figure 03: Shahidul Alam, *Riksha*, 2009, Dhaka, 30 x 20 inches. Photo Courtesy: Drik.

conceptual turns. Six of his constructed colour images (Figure 03), made between 2009 and 2010, were showcased, reflecting the horrors of Bangladeshi citizens killed in extrajudicial “crossfire” by the government’s Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) set up in 2004. Alam realised that his well-honed monochrome documentary style would be insufficient for telling the truth about these unaccounted deaths and disappearances. As an alternative, he reconstructs the scenes with objects and stories associated with the victims. While more details on the processes of construction would help to think through his aesthetic choice, the sites, objects, composition, and dramatic light demonstrate how his act of imaging is a form of resistance when ‘[t]he culture of fear ...has crept into Bangladeshi psyche...’ Despite their formal affinities with Alam’s early experimentations in pictorialism, these “constructed” images appear politically closer to his “documentary” practices, which have been his weapons of protest against state violence.

The conceptual turn in Alam’s work is at its finest in *My Unseen Sister*, which resides at the intersection of politics, aesthetics and technology. ‘Will you return Kalpana?’ This was the polemical ending to the ode introducing the section, unintentionally displayed as if

it was signage to a seemingly missing artwork (Figure 04). The blank space between the section title and the printed words underneath mimicked the absence of protagonist Kalpana Chakma, who went ‘missing’, leaving behind only ephemeral physical traces. Hailing from an ethnic minority community, the Bangladeshi rights defender was allegedly abducted from her home by the army before the general elections of 1996, and never returned. What remains are Alam’s photographic traces of Chakma’s left-behind shoe and a book on Lenin from her bookshelf. This absent presence is also palpable in *Kalpana’s Mat 1-8* (2015), an installation with photo portraits of eight human-rights activists, laser-etched on straw mats, and accompanied by a 2-minute 40-second video loop of a tree bark filtered through fluorescence microscopic cell imaging (Figure 05) to augment Chakma’s narrative trace. *My Unseen Sister* comes as a jolt to viewers as they try to grasp the historical context of her disappearance and object-images that reduced her to their constitutive elements. Indeed, the “optical unconscious” in the video poignantly unearths the information apparently missing in photographs addressing a missing individual. Human and natural histories collapse in Alam’s commentary on state violence perpetrated on the intertwined lives of



Above: Figure 05: Partial view of the installation *Kalpana’s Mat 1-8* at ‘Singed But Not Burnt’ (2022). Photo courtesy: Drik.



Above: Figure 04: Introductory note to the section *My Unseen Sister* at ‘Singed But Not Burnt’ (2022). Photo courtesy: Ranu Roychoudhuri.

ethnic minorities and the natural environment. This is foregrounded in the 40 x 27 inch print of *Kaptai Lake* (2015) as a site of marginalisation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the homeland of the Chakma and other ethnic and linguistic minorities. The accompanying text reminded viewers of how the artificial lake inundated the tropical rainforest and the palace of a tribal king. Together the mats, the video, and the photograph of Kaptai, hauntingly demonstrated Alam’s lifelong commitment to voicing “truth to power.”

Singed But Not Burnt, Solo show of Shahidul Alam, Curated by Ina Puri, Emami Art, Kolkata, 19 June–20 August, 2022.

¹ Shahidul Alam, “The Gallery Versus the Street: An Exercise in Engagement,” *South Asian Popular Culture* 5, no. 1 (April 1, 2007): 45–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746680701210329>.

² Shahidul Alam, “Tolerating Death in a Culture of Intolerance,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 50:12 (March 21, 2015), 12.

³ Shahidul Alam, “My Unseen Sister,” *Trans-Asia Photography Review* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2017), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7977573.0007.203>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Shahidul Alam, *Truth to Power*, 8 November 2019–4 January 2021, The Rubin Museum, New York, <https://rubinmuseum.org/events/exhibitions/shahidul-alam-truth-to-power>.