

Art Radar

Contemporary art trends and news from Asia and beyond

11 Indian artists explore personal and collective memory in "Lapses II" – interview

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In another iteration of "Lapses", presented at the Harrington Art Centre, Kolkata in April 2017, "Lapses II" has been organised by Sakshi Gallery in Mumbai, in collaboration with Shrine Empire.

Art Radar talks to the curator Anushka Rajendran, who is also Assistant Curator of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2018. "Lapses II" is on display at Sakshi Gallery and Sakshi Salon until 12 May 2018.

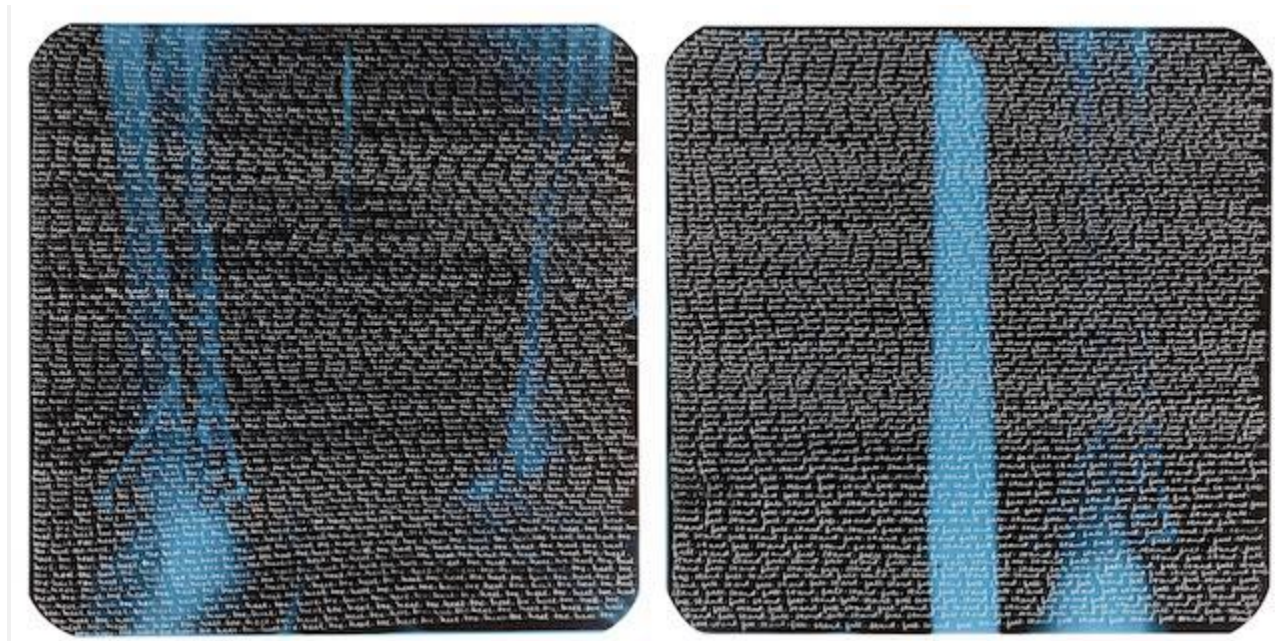


Subrat Kumar Behara, 'Stories from My Grandmother', 2018, watercolour & gouache on paper, 38 x 59 in.
Image courtesy the artist, Sakshi Gallery and Sakshi Salon.

Lending memories their object-hood

"Lapses II" at Sakshi Gallery and Sakshi Salon consists of a series of artworks that, according to curator **Anushka Rajendran**, "lend memories their object-hood". The exhibition is the outcome of her research into the role of art in dealing with personal, political and cultural trauma specifically in the context of turn-of-the-20th-century India. Rajendran believes that the processes of memory are random and tangled. Neuroscience has discovered that the pathways in the brain that are linked to memory are not as systematic as we would have once thought; instead our brain has, according to Rajendran, "an absurd process of cataloguing unrelated objects in a hoarder's den".

The 11 artists whose works are on display in "Lapses II" at **Sakshi Gallery**, explore various aspects of memory – individual, collective, communal and historic – while trying to understand how the environment could help unleash or trigger such memories. The exercise is not an easy one, as science itself has been unable to thoroughly understand that part of the human brain that defines our personal recollections. As Rajendran says, despite all the scientific and technological developments of the 21st century, "memory is yet to yield anatomical diagrams in biology textbooks, unlike other mystical phenomena such as the heart that pumps blood". While the best example of permanent records of historical memory for our generation would be the museums of the world, for personal memory it would be a collection of seemingly unrelated objects, more like a cabinet of curiosities. In "Lapses II" it is this transformation of the complexities of human life and experiences into objects and things that has been effectively captured by the artists' keen eye.



Neerja Kothari, 'Ode to a False Stance', 2018, pen and ink on X-ray plates (diptych), 12 x 12 in. Image courtesy the artist, Sakshi Gallery and Sakshi Salon.

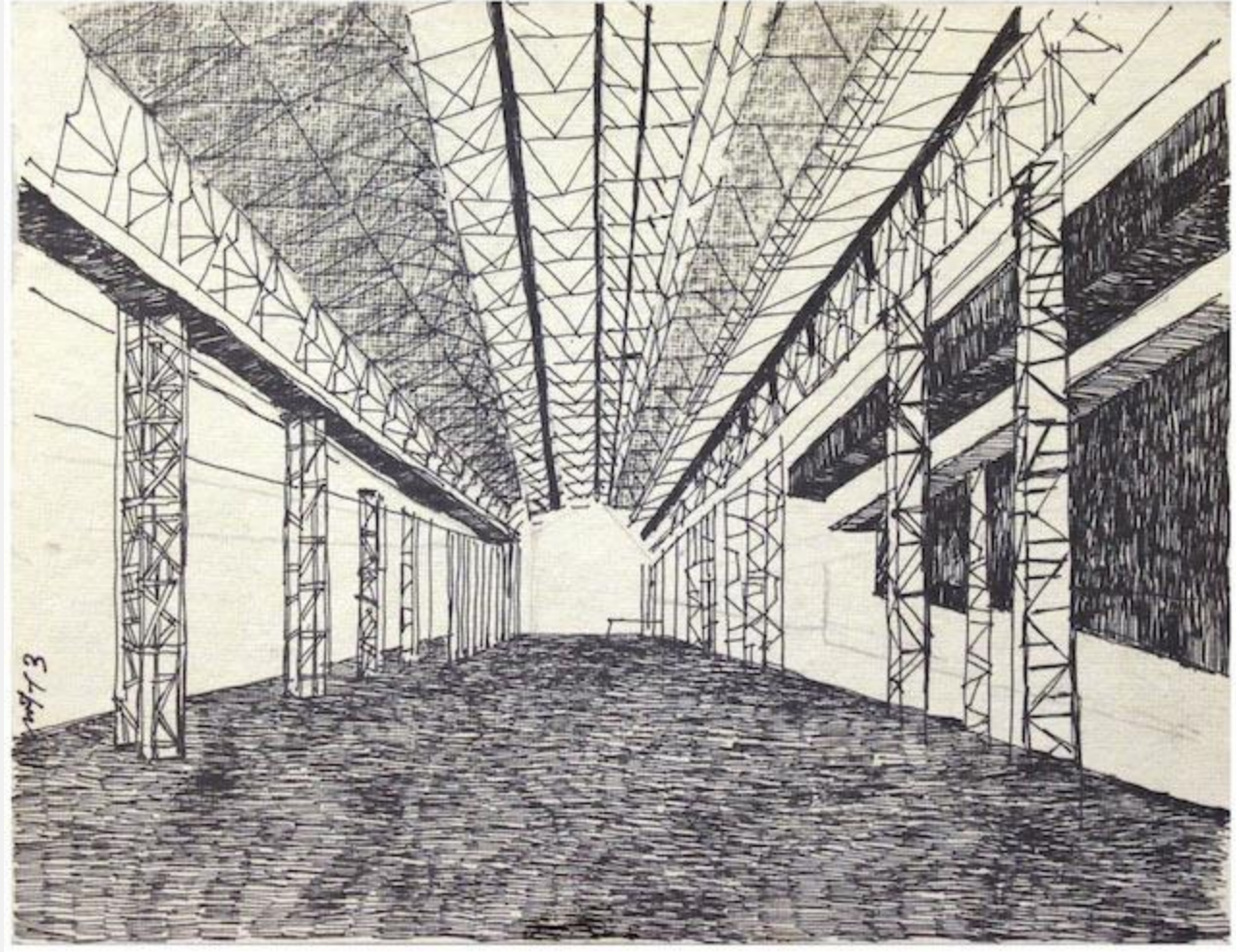
Exploring memories of a lifetime

While **Neerja Kothari** recalls her own personal experiences with physiotherapy and uses x-ray plates for *Ode to a False Stance* (2018), **Kartik Sood** adds another dimension to muscle memory through his research on traditional dance performances in Manipur in multimedia works such as *The Dancers* (2017). Inherited memory and tradition also inform **Subrat Kumar Behera's** work, such as in *Stories from My Grandmother* (2018), which is a homage to his grandmother and her endless capacity for story-telling. **Anoli Perera** and **Raj Jariwala** on the other hand, look closely at the trauma of migration. In her installation *Long Walk – Logbook of Absence* (2018), Perera imagines the whole world of social and personal attachments that immigrants leave behind on their journey away from home, navigating political and social obstacles along the way. Jariwala uses satellite maps as a resource in *Reconstructed Memory 1 & 2* (2018), to tap into spatial and geographic memory that systematically gets erased and rebuilt.



Tayeba Begum Lipi, 'Unveiling Womanhood', 2017, single channel video, ed: 1/3, duration of video: 5 min, variable. Image courtesy the artist, Sakshi Gallery and Sakshi Salon.

In an untitled video installation, **Gautam_Kansara** takes us on a trip to his great-grandmother's ancestral house in Khandwa (Madhya Pradesh) with stories about his family narrated by his grandmother despite her struggle with dementia. The other video installations in "Lapses II" include **Tayeba Begum Lipi's** *Unveiling Womanhood* (2017), a performance by the artist in response to the effect of radical Islamic movements in Bangladesh on the everyday lives of women, and **Ranbir_Kaleka's** *Bound* (2018), in which a man hovering between life and death is projected on a burnt surface, roughly the size of a coffin, indicating perhaps the transience of life.



Samit Das, 'History of the Undivided Line', 2013, graphite, pen and ink on paper, 7 x 9 in. Image courtesy the artist, Sakshi Gallery and Sakshi Salon.

Also on display in "Lapses II" is **Samit Das**' series "History of the Undivided Line" (2013), based on the artist's study of various archival images from the Bengal region pertaining to the pre-partition era. In another series of drawings entitled "Between Adela and Dr. Aziz" (2018), Puja Puri reconstructs Adela's rape at the hands of Dr Aziz as depicted in the cinematic adaptation of E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, in an attempt to throw light on racist colonial attitudes in the original literary work. In a similar vein, **Samanta Batra Mehta** uses the autobiography of Krishanlal Sridharani, *My India, My America*, in her installation *What I Lost Was Not What I Found* (2018) to explore the role of literary narratives in sublimating cultural experiences. *Art Radar* spoke to Anushka Rajendran about the exhibition and her own curatorial vision in its conceptualisation and implementation.



Samanta Batra Mehta, 'What I Lost Was Not What I Found', 2018, antiquarian book, collected imagery, thread, glass and brass box, 10 x 22 x 2 in. Image courtesy the artist, Sakshi Gallery and Sakshi Salon.

The theme of memory and identity and how the latter evolves from the former has been explored by Indian artists in the past. How is "Lapses" different and what was the genesis of this exhibition?

"Lapses" was partly informed by my previous research on the role of art in dealing with personal, political and cultural trauma in the Indian context, with specific focus on the 1990s-2000s. A compelling aspect that emerged during this work was the transience and impermanence of memory, especially when processing trauma, and the complex processes of taking into account the uncertainty that will always cloud remembered accounts. Relying heavily on empirical evidence that might contradict remembered narratives could be deeply damaging to the individual who has probably endured unspeakable horrors, and have overlaid them with a version of what happened as a psychological defence mechanism. Further reading revealed to me that memory has for long been an elusive area of study for neuroscience. The inadequacy of the empirical in capturing an intimately human experience is highlighted by the efficacy with which art is able to delve into phenomenological realms to lend memory and its erasure an accessible narrative that is also able to account for the mutual unknowing of each other's experience.



Gautam Kansara, 'Untitled (Khandwa)', 2015-16, single channel HD video installation, ed: 1/3, 11min:1sec.
Image courtesy the artist, Sakshi Gallery and Sakshi Salon.

In your curatorial note you mention that that the artworks in "Lapses II" "lend memories their objecthood". What exactly do you mean by that and in what way do you feel the works that you curated achieve this?

As mentioned in the answer to the previous question, I have been thinking about the role of art, and what it has the potential to do in the face of trauma. This curatorial exercise was an extension of this work, and an attempt to understand whether art can lend tangibility to the liminal space between silence and testimony, and give the fluidity of memory a form. Lending narratives to overwhelming experience is a significant part of catharsis and healing. The question I asked myself was, how can art communicate an experience – inherited, personal or vicariously accumulated – that eludes the language / the spoken word? The artworks presented in the exhibition are such articulations – be it through Raj Jariwala's second-hand, passive consumption of (social) media-driven narratives of the crisis in Syria and his helplessness at this encounter, or Subrat Kumar Behera's memory of a childhood that was more in harmony with natural forces around him that he is now removed from, or Ranbir Kaleka's dejected figure lying on the ground in burning anguish, while life moves past him, oblivious to his condition. Kaleka's work captures the overall arch of the exhibition effectively, as it depicts the condition of being 'bound', without words.



Kartik Sood, 'The Dancers', 2017, archival print, hand printed with watercolour, gouache and pencil, 35 x 35 in. Image courtesy the artist, Sakshi Gallery and Sakshi Salon.

In this exhibition, you have 11 artists exploring varying aspects of memory – from personal and community to those of marginalised groups and the nation. How did your choice of artists and individual works come about?

The artists who are part of this exhibition were chosen for the sustained engagement that their work has maintained with the ideas that informed the curatorial premise. In several cases, the artists chose to respond to my text with fresh works. But they have all been invested in the processes of memory in various ways. Needless to mention, I have relied on my familiarity with their practice, and tried to ensure that each work introduced a different point of view.



Ranbir Singh Kaleka, 'Bound', 2018, single channel video (Edition:1/5), 5min:5sec. Image courtesy the artist, Sakshi Gallery and Sakshi Salon.

What is the common thread that runs through the works in "Lapses II"? One that may not be evident to a visitor but was your curatorial intent?

Besides the common thread introduced in the text displayed next to each of the works, it was important to build a narrative that tried to maintain dialogues between the various works, either aesthetically or conceptually. For instance, Neerja Kothari's work looks at the precariousness of muscle memory and facing it is Kartik Sood's work which is about memory that is inherited through the body vis-a-vis tradition, through the lens of a ritual performance from Manipur. And adjacent to Sood's body of work is Subrat Kumar Behera's painting, which picks up on the idea of tradition to add to it through references to oral history and story-telling. Raj Jariwala's articulation of his condition of distance from Aleppo, and the trans-human memory-narrative that is the custodianship of satellite imagery are contrasted with Anoli Perera's deep empathy and desire to relate to the plight of migrants through experiences present in her immediate context. It was important to establish dynamics between the various works through the display so that the exhibition held together as a project and the viewers' encounter with each work was not isolated but cumulative.



Raj Jariwala, 'Reconstructed Memory 1 & 2', 2018, watercolour, charcoal, ink pen on photographic image, 28 x 42 in. each. Image courtesy the artist, Sakshi Gallery and Sakshi Salon.

As an independent curator and art writer, and as *Art Radar* mainly focuses on contemporary art across Asia, how do you feel contemporary artists from India fit into this diaspora?

There isn't a singular definition for Asia, or what it means to be Asian, beyond geographical markers and its location as the 'other' to the West. The category, however, especially in the arts, is an opportunity to write non-hegemonic histories and it would be wonderful to see more initiatives such as *Art Radar* that explore cross-roads and conversations between distinct histories in the region, bound by similarities of experience. Challenges faced by artists and institutions across the continent are similar in terms of limited infrastructure, lack of sufficient support from the state, and generally speaking, comparatively emerging art markets. South Asia is a crucial point in this constellation, with fresh and innovative initiatives that are committed to its context, while being able to identify a unique location for the region in the global context.



Puja Puri, 'Between Adela and Dr. Aziz', 2018, drawing on Fabriano paper, 10 x 14 in. Image courtesy the artist, Sakshi Gallery and Sakshi Salon.

How receptive do you find audiences in India to contemporary art and installation art that depicts subject matter such as that of "Lapses"? With our own personal and national histories being steeped in loss, dislocation, trauma, separation and change – does this help or hinder the intent of the artist or the curator?

Gradually, over the last few decades, artists, curators and exhibition models in India have been extending beyond conventional understandings of art practice to include performance, site-specificity and relational aesthetics through the support of platforms such as biennials, non-profit spaces and also private museums and galleries that are not afraid to push their own limits. This has helped build a larger, sensitive audience for contemporary art in India than ever before. Greater attempt to build discursive spaces from the various networks in the arts have also contributed to this. The shared 'affect' of dislocation, history and trauma – especially in the current polarising political scenario globally, built on narratives of contestation and suspicion – helps to build an accessible, intuitive vocabulary for the arts, and strengthen its role as a critical, contemplative space. But that does not mean that the role of art is limited to these particular narratives, of course.



Anoli Perera, 'Long Walk - Logbook of Absence - Page 4', 2018, print on watercolor paper, acrylic, pencil, ink, wax, tracing paper. Set of 8 units, 11 x 8 in. each. Image courtesy the artist, Sakshi Gallery and Sakshi Salon.

You are assistant curator of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2018, which has tread new ground in engaging the local public in art. You have also been involved in various initiatives to search for new and engaged publics in India. How far have you seen success in this area?

Kochi-Muziris Biennale has been an exceptionally successful model when it comes to activating engaged publics in its local context in Kerala, and creating a platform to look at the world from the Global South, creating alternative narratives in the process. It is wonderful to be part of the curatorial team for the upcoming edition, and have a small part in continuing that legacy. My interest in public engagement stems from my ongoing research that looks at artists, curators and exhibition models that have been building new publics for art in India, as I feel that in order to take the work they have been doing forward, it is important to understand what has come before: What has been public for art in the region? How can we further expand this? Work by artists such as Vasudha Thozhur, **Shilpa Gupta** and Navjot Altaf has been especially influential in finding answers to these questions. Besides this, I am also curating the programming for **Prameya Art Foundation**, a recently established non-profit initiative in Delhi, which has been developing innovative art education programmes in its effort to make an impact on the remoteness that art for the most part assumes in our context. Each project is also in many ways an experiment, and a learning experience.



“Lapses II”, 12 April – 12 May 2018, installation view. Image courtesy Sakshi Gallery and Sakshi Salon.

The earlier iteration of “Lapses” was in Kolkata and “Other Voices, Other Cities” concluded in December 2017. What can *Art Radar* readers look forward to in events and exhibitions that you are curating in 2018?

Kochi Muziris Biennale will keep me busy this year. Alongside this, I am currently working on a curatorial project with Prameya Art Foundation, which by loosely following a workshop model attempts to create a makeshift lab/studio in a gallery space with artists working together to develop a sustained vocabulary for resistance through art practice for the times we live in.

Amita Kini-Singh

<http://artradarjournal.com/2018/05/08/11-indian-artists-explore-personal-and-collective-memory-in-lapses-ii-interview/>