

13 SEPTEMBER TO
17 OCTOBER 2023

CYMROZA ART GALLERY,
MUMBAI

THE PARTING OF WAYS

SUKANYA GHOSH

CURATED BY
RAHAAB ALLANA

There was another life that I might have had, but I am having this one.
—Kazuo Ishiguro

In early cinema, scenes of psychodrama were shot using a kaleidoscopic lens in order to present subjectivity as multifocal and non-centred, to suggest the scrambling of inner certainties, and to project a mirage-like external ethos of the unstable and uncanny. Similar processes of overt and subtle disaggregation underpin the visions of family, location, friendship and sociality that Sukanya Ghosh maps along varied axes of space and time in her compelling image-mosaics and other recreations of the picture plane.

The Parting of Ways presents an array of new work by the artist and signposts Ghosh's formal training in fine art from M.S. University, Baroda and in animation from the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad. The artworks featured here underscore her affinity for bricolage and the graphic layering of analogue and digital. Since 2016, she has also focused on the construction of what she calls 'optical collages' that through a formal itinerancy interrogate how we visually perceive/read ever-changing inner and outer environments. This part of her journey may well have provoked questions surrounding the popular art canon, or ways to engage with radical arts movements in the subcontinent. Could they have led to questions such as: Is practice always allied to a political subject?; Can decolonial labour be expressed through montage and which potential histories are enabled by it? This scrapbook mode Ghosh deploys is infused with the elusive quality of personal diaries and photograph albums of the previous century, wherein selfhood is encoded and preserved as trace – scribbles, brief marginalia, doodles, secret foldouts, cryptic notes to the self. The enigmatic elisions and ligations central to the artist's conceptual, self-ethnographic, cross-media work can also be observed in her archive of ephemera.

The triangular relationship between an artist, an artwork and a viewer is orchestrated differently in today's post-digital context where images can be so efficiently 'computed', with algorithms enabling a quick and precise assembling of the image from diverse sources, and then seamlessly synthesized into new meanings. In Sukanya's case, groups of these image collages, augmented by a single animation, are often arranged in grids in the exhibition space, to be perceived as a single unit. Integrating various formats – small, medium, Polaroid and 35mm, later scanned and manipulated, and subsequently printed in variable sizes – Ghosh's equivocal works juxtapose the random with the purposive, the accidental with the intentional, the coincidental with the causal, the bound with the liberated. A boldly free-associative mode, *in medias res*, asserted through divergent trajectories, annuls the scaffolding of design. Logic is fragmented; intangibles are compelled into form, order is made unruly. Deft handling of borders and seams and angles, which enables the viewer to traverse the liminal spaces between exteriority and interiority, results in richly poetic, ambiguous new translations of mapped personal micro-narratives.

Sukanya's oeuvre in this show combines reworked archival images, primarily sourced from her home in Calcutta, the port city through which, circa 1840, photography entered the subcontinent and was at once deployed as a powerful instrument of the colonial regime. Both known family members and anonymous characters present themselves in casual/domestic or more formal settings. The work 'Smriti's Dream' re-inscribes the figure of her grandmother's outline overlaid with cityscapes and Bengali text from her diary, drafted at the time of the Quit India Movement in 1942 and during World War II. The excerpt on the image speaks of the courage and resilience of the (Indian) people in the face of authoritarianism. Her great-grandmother (Binapani) and grandfather (Dadubhai) appear in other frames similarly transformed, vacillating between a past life and an impossible future.

The array continues to question authorship/authenticity/originality/self-identity through the internalisation of time – three women wade into the sea, seeking a distant shore inverted onto the lower plane of the image; four men, some dressed in typical working-class garments stand above an opaque pool, cataclysmically ruptured in two by another embedded landscape, perhaps signifying an emotional rift and future separation. We may ask, are they part of Sukanya's real or fictive biographical imaginings? In another composition, two women lounge against a false surface, while in the distance, their imagined home, now inverted, sits atop a rocky landscape. These uncertain horizons and ambivalent destinations summon an existential poignancy, the *unheimlich* as Ghosh intimates – of the familiar becoming unfamiliar, of loss and retrieval, of circular journeys, of beginnings always already sutured to their ends. Morphing her visions of the real and the surreal and repeatedly staging arrival and departure, the artist interrogates the many symbolic valences of 'location' and psycho geographies. 'Visions of Nara' for instance is a combined work which includes stock images of Japanese landscapes, sold in the market, which

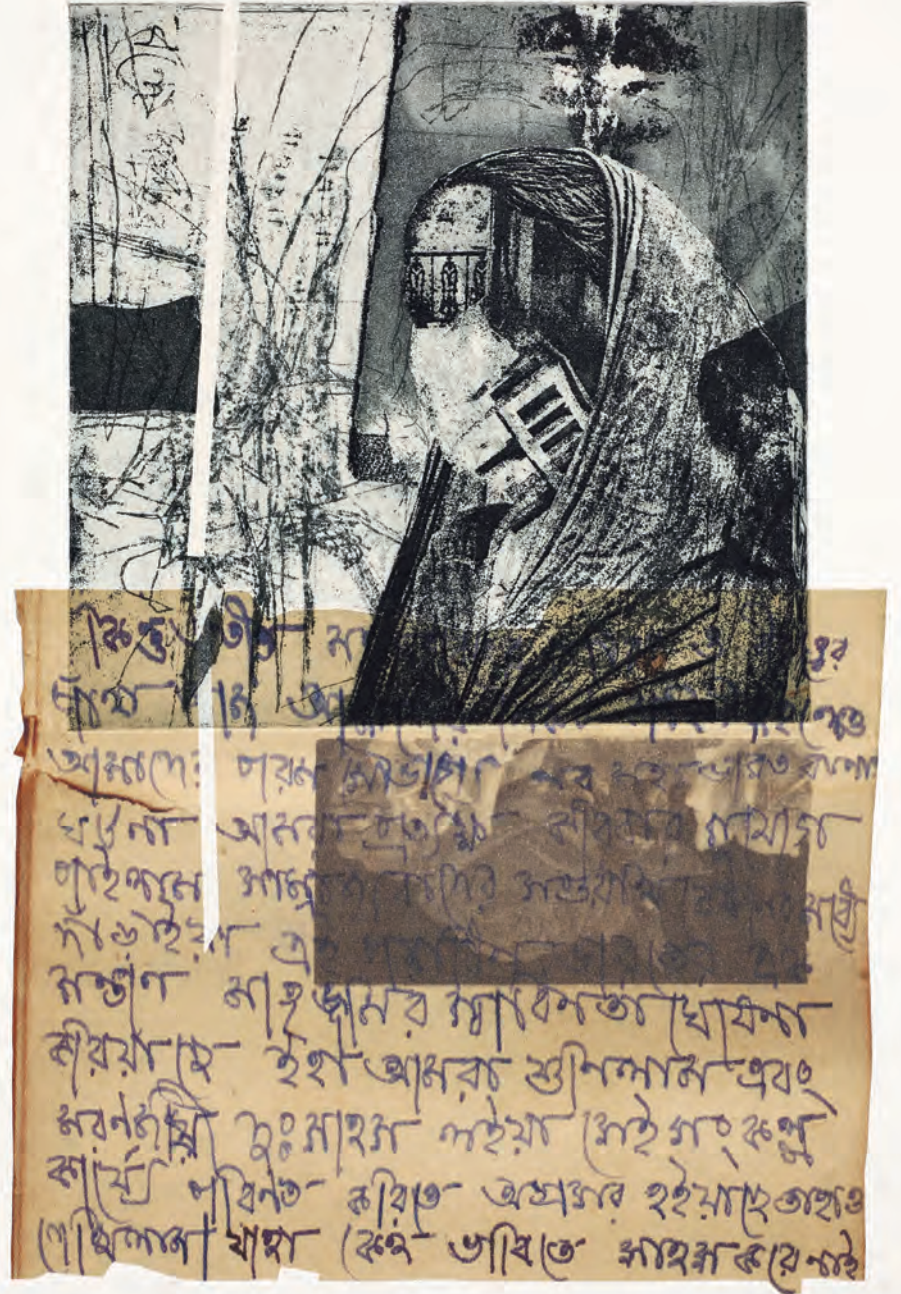
the artist believes was probably purchased from a stall in Calcutta rather than on a visit to the country.

Recombinant techniques – digitally sutured montages, grids, reiterative image sequences – also underpin 'Man, Reflecting' and 'The Falls', and seem to urge one to contemplate different ways of understanding the 'fragment' and its varied creative uses across the arts and all other fields. Can the fragment be seen as an autonomous form? Emerging through a process without predictable outcome (in contrast to willed and systematic partitioning), the fragment is detached, individuated, self-sufficient, self-conditioned; a signifier total in itself yet, paradoxically, indicating a missing, unified totality. Freud considered dreams to be condensed collages of thoughts, with manifest content (the recalled dream fragment) selectively accessed from the mass of latent content (dream-thoughts pressed together in the subconscious). For Lévi-Strauss, the resilient narrative structure of myths emerged from the amalgamation of their smallest fragments, the generic units he called 'mythemes'. From proverbs and aphorisms, pottery shards, bones, jigsaws, emoticons and memes, to dismembered sculpture and fossils, to DNA gene-edited with molecular scissors, to quarks, asteroids, moons and planetary rings, it is through the 'part' – the indomitable fragment – that the fractured 'whole' tantalizingly endures.

Why are we so drawn to the 'trace' and its evocation of severance, loss, imperfection, schism, rupture, absence? Is it because we are always in a state of yearning for the larger sublimities that we fail to experience, the broader humane systems that we fail to implement, the full array of rights and freedoms that we fail to ensure for everybody?

These reflections bring to mind Sukanya's other work, 'Breathing Stones', juxtaposing an inverted Taj Mahal dome with a chest X-ray above it – that offers the forensic evidence of polyphonic testimony and alludes to the present, collective unrest caused by communal disharmony. They nudge me in the direction of her object pieces outside the ambit of this show – open/assembled boxes and suitcases as mnemonic evidence and memorials – which again, for me, bear witness and seek epistemic justice for the ongoing migrant experience of violent upheaval, individual and mass uprooting, displacement and exile.

Sukanya's assimilative aesthetic suggests that no matter where we locate ourselves, and whatever interior and exterior distances, thresholds, interstices and interfaces we navigate, within each context, our consciousness is a shifting middle world. In other words, perhaps we are no more/no less than contingent, interdependent, transient, mutating assemblages: linked fragments of sensation, perception, ideation and memory, continually coalescing and disaggregating. *The Parting of Ways* then urges us to stay aware of at least one core function of the existential particle in any form: it serves as a potent reminder that we *can* remain satisfied with understanding the 'part', since the truth may well be that, despite our efforts or desires, we can never really know the 'whole'.





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Photo by: Philippe Calia

Rahaab Allana is Curator/Publisher, Alkazi Foundation for the Arts (AFA); Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society (London) and was previously, Honorary Research Associate at University College, London. He is on the editorial board of *Trans-Asia Photography Review*, and the Arts and Culture Committee, Asia Society (India Chapter). He has recently published a Reader on lens-based media titled *Unframed: Discovering Image Practices in South Asia* (HarperCollins Publishers India and Alkazi Foundation, 2023). His forthcoming edited volume with Tulika Books (Delhi) and West Heavens (Shanghai) is based on photography in India since the 90s.

Cymroza Art Gallery was founded in 1971, in south Bombay's Breach Candy precinct by Dr. Pheroza J. Godrej (née Shroff), when she was in her early twenties. Her commitments spanned a range of cultural domains, including the visual arts, literature, music, theatre, and civic participation. Cymroza adopted an inclusive approach, showing painting and sculpture as well as textile art, ceramics, printmaking and photography, at a time when these practices received little support.

The gallery completed its 50 years in 2021, and presented a series of exhibitions and talks/panel discussions, celebrating its contribution to Mumbai's art world as well as its founder, Dr. Godrej's life in art. Over the next 50 years, the gallery endeavours to continue to host a range of seminal exhibitions. Dr. Godrej remains a leading figure in the arts ecosystem: not only as a gallerist, but also as a collector, a philanthropist, a patron, an art historian, and, lately, a policy-maker.

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Pheroza J. Godrej

01. Asha Jaowa
Giclée print on canvas
with acrylic and ink
40 x 52 inches, 2023

02. The Sea Inside
Giclée print on canvas
with acrylic and ink
40 x 52 inches, 2023

03. In Medias Res
Giclée print on paper, archival
photographs, ink and acrylic
40 x 60 inches, 2023

04. Smriti's Dream
Soft ground etching with chine-
collé on Zerkall Koperdruk
15 x 10.4 inches
Edition 2 of 6 +2 AP, 2023

05. Shadow Lines 04
Archival silver gelatin
photographs with mixed media
11 x 14 inches, 2023

06. Cigarette, Untitled
Digital collage using archival
photographs
19.5 x 27.5 inches
Edition 1 of 6 +2 AP, 2016/21

07. Traces 02
Photopolymer etching on
Somerset Velvet
6.2 x 6.2 inches (Set of 6)
Edition 1 of 6 +2 AP, 2023

08. Untitled
Series: Isometries
Archival silver gelatin photographs
with mixed media
Set of 9 prints, 6 x 4 inches each
2018

07



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