The Remains of the Day: re-tracing archival art through Dayanita Singh and Ali Kazim

By Sharanya

The history of modern South Asian art has been fast-moving, but art that is about modern South Asian history is still in its infancy. While the art of the post-Independence era continues to wrest with the legacies of colonisation, fractured nationhood, majoritarian politics, and weakening secular legacies, there is a strain of this art preoccupied with the historical gaze: the tendency to look back constantly over the country's past. Western archives have often been explored for their potential in helping to re-think the historical past. But the value of archives in the Global South, arguably less grand and more informal by comparison, offer uncertain value in hegemonic conventions of western art and academia. Sonal Khullar has argued for a powerful reconsideration of what an art archive may look like, taking into account 'almirahs and godowns', a greater variety of spaces where archives are created and held. She notes that 'the archive of modernism in India was everywhere and nowhere in particular' (31). This more relative and open attitude toward what constitutes an archive, its locations and its users, has come to animate recent approaches to art practice in India. This is art that does dual service by acting as an archive in itself. The results are lively and speculative, and can be highlighted with the benefit of just two examples from India, and Pakistan: Dayanita Singh and Ali Kazim.

In October 2019, at the MoMA in New York, Dayanita Singh presented a tall, teak structure embossed with glass panels containing a series of 164 monochrome photographs. At first glance at this work, there appeared to be no immediate connections among the photographs, but in fact, here were many narratives threaded together. For one viewer, it had 'something to do with breezes, white curtains, rooms full of dusty files, Bollywood actors, musicians at rehearsal, night phantoms' (Cole 2015). When I watched, I saw Singh effortlessly pushing at one of the wooden panes, using both hands, so that the pane swung inwards, revealing even more images. The installation offers the pleasure of movement, through the labour of continually moving its parts. Its panes are like wooden wings, foldable like a storage screen, which function as an archive of images. Each photograph was accompanied by a photo-box, a storage facility which could be hung on a wall, with the photographs inside offering the potential for being rearranged, as in a photo album and thus exhibited in myriad ways, subject to the will of the owner of the box. This was Singh's 2013 work *Museum of Chance*, one of the Museum series she developed as a form of photo-architecture, where the circulation of images arrives archived as a fluid and affective form, rather than in any

sort of fixed narrative. The installation developed, due to what she felt was the 'frustration of exhibiting in museums and galleries'. She asked 'how do I get away from the wall?' (2019).

The genesis of this preoccupation with portable architectural forms, which began in 2013, can be seen in other works too. According to one description, these installations 'allowed [the images] to be shuffled and re-combined in a wide range of possible relationships to one another, thus opening the possibility for multiple narratives in the mind of the viewer based on the ever-shifting juxtaposition of the images' (Powers 5). Along with a reconsideration of the installation-as-archive, this involves a reshuffling of dominant archival readings too. It draws attention not just to what images we read, or the order in which we read them, but to the very process or hermeneutics of reading images. In an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Singh explicitly names the different value-systems associated with making, buying and exchanging art in the culture market. Speaking of her 2008 photo-diary work *Sent a Letter*, enclosing coded photo-volumes within a cloth-covered box which she handmade with specific friends in mind, Singh says she enjoyed seeing how the piece could be understood independently from the usual contexts for bringing art to the public. The consumer of the art, or to put it more properly, the proprietor of the artwork (in this case Singh's friends), could choose to explore it in the privacy of their homes, amounting to what she explained is 'an exhibition of my work that is completely separate from the art world, the museum world, the gallery world' (2016). The aesthetic of this work draws on the performance of archival labour. When the artist allows such a viewer to curate their own bespoke exhibition at home, she does so on the premise of a friendship, which is iterated affectively. Meanwhile, the diary continues to circulate, online and offline, in those very economies of projection and reception, or artist and audience, that are typical of the art world, museum world and gallery world. The artwork-as-archive is domesticated but still institutionalised. It retains its logic of accumulation, preservation and curation but in softer, more domestic settings. The agency of its audience is evident in the roles audience members may play, of curator or archivist. As the piece is curated, its images are put into an individualised, eccentric, and pleasing order, thus preserving the art and its commercial value, perhaps differently to how one might preserve a work that was purchased but akin to how one might preserve a friendship.

In her 2012 work *File Museum*, the first of Singh's museums, however, we witness an even more tender and intimate approach to the practice of archiving. Wooden structures, similar to the aforementioned exhibits, contain photographs of India's document archives. This is a labour-intensive ode to the value of archiving. On the walls in the photo-boxes are images of what Isabel Stevens calls 'the custodians' of the archives, 'lost in activity, sorting, retrieving, or rummaging; their heads are dwarfed, peeking over mountains of files or framed by gaps in piles' (2013). Singh documents these protectors of the files – the archivists whose labour preserves these paper records for future use. Archivists are situated in their workplace, recorded in Singh's photographs amidst the records of their labour, aging alongside the files. And this labour is continuous. Even as the files and sheaves of paper crowd the images, creating an impression of managed chaos, the photographs situate their fragility and duration in relation to the efforts of the archivist. The photographs emphasise the density of the work. Their sharp monochrome saturations isolate each

bundle of white or yellowing paper from the dark of the furniture; time almost drawing to a halt as viewers are invited to consider the loneliness of archival labour. Their whereabouts are not specified, but Singh does list various court and library archives across India (2016). The photographs re-possess the romantic but uneasy quality of the archives, invoked by the high contrasts and the immaculate rendering of *pastness* as an element within them, enhanced by their frames.

Seen together, these images indicate a hazy historic weight that rests upon archives as they decay over time. Still, the simultaneity of these images – how, taken together, they all occur at once – also suggests that the time draining through these photos is mirrored outside the frames, by way of how the images are consciously placed and assembled as archives in and of themselves. Through this process, Singh seems to suggest that what is of interest within archives is not simply their contents but the very forms they may take. Certainly, such archives can muddy dominant colonial attitudes towards notions of access, discovery and historiography. As Aveek Sen acknowledges, what we see in *File Museum* are 'living archives. They are not dead collections of paper. They are about people's lives. There are real people who keep these archives alive' (2016). When the archivist is pictured in the frame, such archives perform as punctum, rupturing any sense of being self-maintained in the present. This strain is retained in Singh's structures and their perpetual mobility, indicating how archival memory is being reorganised and the chains of formal and informal labour involved in their continuity.

Singh identifies herself as a bookmaker in part. She organises her images within structures that are either themselves archival forms (such as the book), or representations of the archive (such as the teak installations). Deborah Schultz describes Singh's 2016 *Museum of Shedding* at Frith Street in London, an exhibit that documented domestic enclosures, as an architectural format where 'Singh's photographs are presented on the walls of the gallery and [73 images] in two wooden storage units together with wooden furniture' (32). This suggests a world where the exhibition is portable, subject to upheaval in boxes like a domestic life. Still, when accompanied by the wooden furniture, Singh has created a world where 'the photographer as archivist lives and works' (32).

It is notable that the performance of archival labour here is collaborative. As Shultz has pointed out, 'the gallery staff are instructed to swap photographs during the course of the exhibition with those on reserve in the storage units' (33). Additional furniture is put with the exhibit: a bed, a desk with the sign 'director', a chair. These spaces are suggestive of the endless ways to engage with such artworks, including, of course, as the bed indicates, working and living at the site of labour. There is also a suggestion, then, of archiving as the kind of domestic labour, such as care work, which in modern India has blurred the line between waged and unwaged work. This train

of thought produces an archive that is distinct in its genealogy from the archival logics of the Global North. On the finale of the Delhi edition at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, the images were restored to storage, with only the empty frames in sight, resembling a space actively cleared of art, but one that kept open the possibilities for future performances by Singh. The archive may be the future, seemed to be the suggestion, but its shape is not fixed in time or space. Indeed, Singh's archives travel – they are frequently in transit but they also allow different readings, political or otherwise. This Brechtian feature of Singh's practice (to instruct us on the politics of forgetting by training the lens on the historic dust that collects on archives, by drawing attention to their composition and how they may be used for instruction) is the most potent feature of them. 'For there is a quarrel between histories, the narratives and counternarratives, that disturbs the archive as a place of infallibility and a place of proof,' argues Holly Shaffer, referring to how Singh's interest in archives such as in *File Room* seems to emulsify this tension (447). Through a durational cultivation of her photo-architectural practice, Singh emerges as a working historian-archivist too.

Figure 3: Dayanita Singh, *File Room,* **2012. 3 archival pigment prints, each 45 x 45 cm. Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London.**

Singh's Museums mount a performance of archival labour where the movements of the installations facilitate an audience-artist relationship premised on the creation of novel image-choreographies. The Museums expand and contract, literally opening up or closing the archive. Thus, they perform the use-value of the art-object as its exchange value: the art that we take home to assemble as commodity is valued because of the possibilities of it being materially transformed. In the case of *Sent a Letter* they are even exchanged as friendship. Not only are we witness to Singh's photographic works, we are also shown evidence of her working. The wooden installations remind us of the endless curatorial possibilities of the work, and hold in view the labour of performing the role of gallery worker who, in addition to maintaining the images and receiving

visitors, manually swaps the images regularly. In theory, any viewer of the work may request that the gallery attendant undertakes such a change. That said, when I did so in 2019, at Singh's *Pothi Khana* exhibit at Frith Street in London, I was told that the images could only be moved if I were to buy one of the boxes of images and take it home.

Singh's attitude toward the market for her art is one of ambiguity, a relationship that becomes part of her creative play, according to Aveek Sen (84 in Powers 119). This is situated too, I would argue, within the broader global circuit of art-making that tends towards the archiving and re/presentation of photographs as original works of art. Possession of the art commodity is what leads to play, Singh may be saying. Her practice of gifting such works to friends seems to push back against the traditional readings of her installations as responding solely to the neoliberal nexus of art and capital, as do her performances of rearrangement. But it is worth considering how difficult it is to own this art, in the sense of having a stable commodity, and with the images set in any single or specific arrangement. At the Goa and Kolkata exhibits of Singh's 2004 *Privacy* series, which involved portraits of her family and friends as well as the domestic help in their homes, 'Singh allowed her subjects to physically remove their own portraits from the gallery walls in the shows' closing week. By the conclusion of the exhibition, the walls were nearly bare.' (Powers 119) Powers reads the presence of the domestic workers in the photographs as recognition of their subjectivity as labourers, as compared to their middle-class and caste-privileged employees (113). As Brahma Prakash reminds us, 'the Indian caste system is deeply entrenched in the performatives of corporeality which get exhibited in forms of purity, untouchability and unseeability; transgression is allowed but within the structure' (191). The structure is also the visual frame, and Singh's photographs document this caste-divide, seeking to address 'unseeability' by recording the visual labours of experiencing caste and class oppression. Archival and cultural value are generated through Singh's interest in self-referentiality, which is palpable through all stages of art-making from photography to the insertion and removal of photographs from the installation. At the same time, the labour of assembling the images is 'visible' – represented – at every turn of image-making, but the labour of continual re-arrangement is less so, rendering artistic labour itself the performance.

An equally coruscating politics of archiving is borne out by Ali Kazim's *Untitled (Ratti Tibbi Series)* from 2017-18. Exhibited in 2022 at Sadie Coles HQ, London, it comprises of nine sheets of white paper, each individually framed, that form a grid that extends across an entire wall. At a distance, it appears as though the work consists of a single image; a white landscape speckled with dark

brown fragments, sparsely scattered at the top, and heavily concentrated in the bottom row of grid squares. In the centre, a circle appears to form from a set of fragments, but it remains broken at the top, as though a giant potter's wheel in pieces. Looking closely, it is evident that any resemblance to a potter's wheel is not incidental: every dark brown portion is a careful rendering of a shattered terracotta fragment, painted with painstaking detail. Each white sheet contains a material and object history of the Indus Valley Civilization (3000 BCE – 1500 BCE), and gauging from the title, these are the ruins at Ratti Tibbi – a red mound, in translation – in Sahiwal District in Pakistan, created from watercolour pigments. The terracotta fragments that appear in this work are represented with forensic attention, a response to physical artefacts that the artist found in the Indus Valley. Without eliding their differences, the landscape also signals an interest in historical time, both that of the distant period of ancient India, and the contemporary archival impulse.

Figure 4: Ali Kazim's *Untitled (Ratti Tibbi Series),* **2017-18. Watercolour pigments on paper; 56 x 76 cm, each. Image courtesy Ali Kazim and Jhaveri Contemporary.**

In Kazim's rendering of this historical landscape, the ruins dot nine squares of paper, an arrangement which performs, one might say, as 'a site of transmutation between temporality and historicity' (Ross 5). The terracotta pieces are flecked with colours: grey, beige, and turquoise. Each

square reckons with the specific and changing nature of these ruins. Yet, when they are put together, the effect is to remind the viewer of epochal change. The pieces are not archival evidence but instead the focus of the imaginative work of artistic historiography. That work explores questions about how one sees historical ruins, as well as how various ways of picturing ruins have emerged over time. Ultimately, this artwork brings a more critical look at what material culture and heritage, especially examples from national borders, and how the bureaucratic management of them seems unconcerned with the ecological passage of time, favouring instead a narrow demand for preservation.

The grid that Kazim has used may seem to convey a neat snapshot of history, however there is much more in the way of interpretive work going on here on the part of the artist. What may be called the historicity of the period, represented in the watercolour, is suggested by its constituent parts. They are jagged and dissimilar, even chimeric, and the rust-coloured pigment used to stain them is in deep contrast to the bright white colour that enlivens the ruins. Watching the panels catch the midday light streaming through the windows of a bustling gallery in central London, I felt a moment of disquiet. Does the cultural specificity and the profound sense of loss which is captured in these works erode in the circuits in which they travel when being shown at international galleries? I thought back to my sixth-grade history exams in Mumbai, where I sat answering questions about the Harappan Civilization, a subject taught as part of a survey of pre-Vedic South Asian history. When I was studying it, the wave of Hindutva saffronization crystallised in its contemporary form had not yet come; it was before the history of the Indus Valley became misconstrued as Aryan-Vedic (Anonymous 2016; Shahane 2019; Bhattacharya 2022). The history we studied, perhaps erroneously in my memory, appears enchantingly free of communalism. We studied the habits of the people in the Valley; how they built their homes and coped with the rains; where they worked and how they lived. Kazim's panels retrieved that history as a collective one, and an older, more poignant one. They precede the one that has come to be hegemonic in national and international art narratives: of the Partition of India and Pakistan, and British colonialism.

Works such as Kazim's are important for setting themselves outside the prevailing ideology. As Kevin Chua points out, 'the archive may be most effective when it is *out* of time', since 'the radically different kind of time' made manifest by certain types of archives 'can take us outside the dominant linear or secular time of the present' (64). There are, Kazim's work seems to indicate, other routes into comprehending historical time, and other ways of archiving such notions of time. Some of

these routes necessitate a fiction, a remembering of facts but an attempt to exceed them, showing how the stories of archival detritus have value, but without being beholden to them.
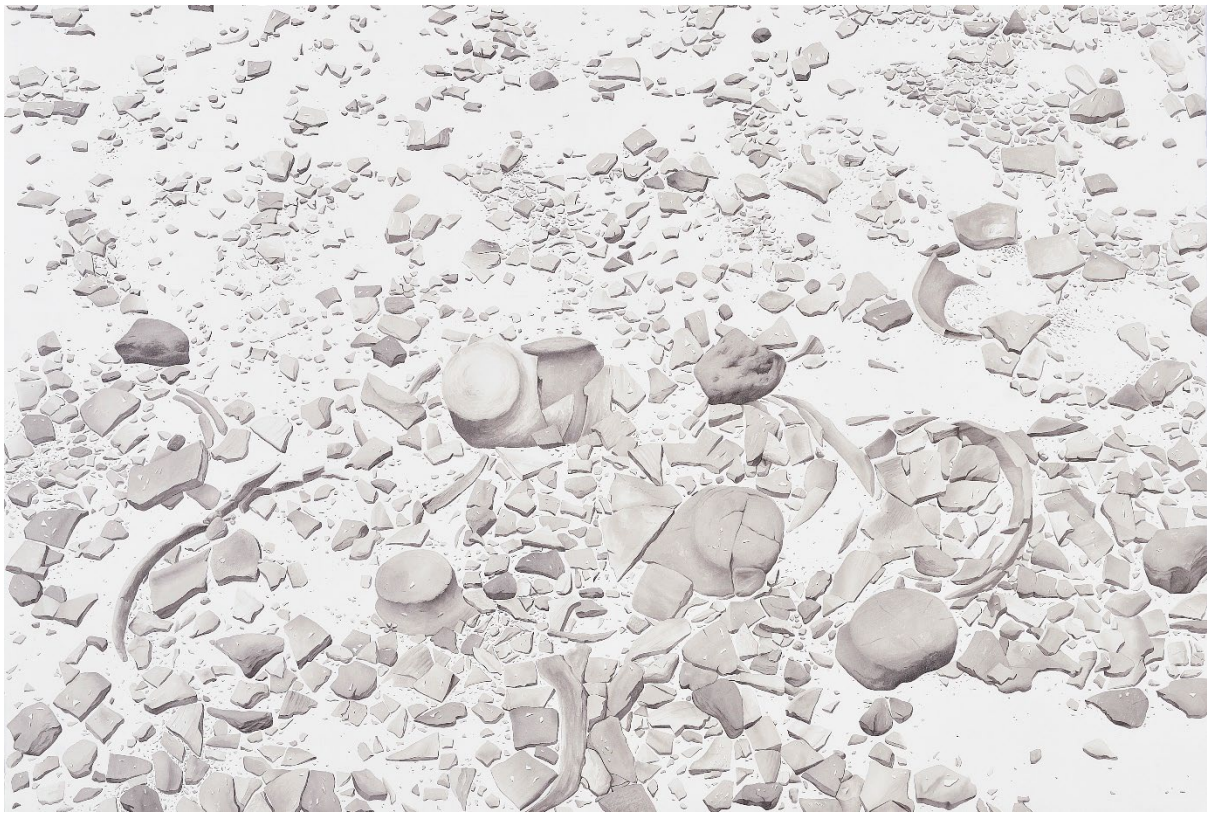
In another set of panels from the *Ruins* series, displayed at Oxford's Ashmolean Museum in in 2022, is a deserted landscape. Almost celestial, across large three monochrome panels is a reference to an abandoned city in the Indus Valley, at a location not named in the title. Accompanying the work – of *Untitled (Ruins Series)* in 2018 – are two monochrome watercolour works, *Ruins II* and *Ruins III* (both 2016), consisting of close-ups of the ruins in the landscape. Here, the pottery shards represented in the painting are created from physical records of historical objects, actual pottery fragments encountered by the artist in the Indus Valley. To create these representations on Mylar (polyester film) the artist has used tracing paper, followed by Mylar, which is placed on top of each fragment in order to sketch the pieces. Kazim compared the process of engaging with the sherds to 'time travelling', in that the past materialises in the present as an unstable reality (2020). As Emilia Terracciano observes, 'the result was a visual rendition in which each sherd retains a semblance of its past use' (28).

The *Ruins* landscape, however, does not map on accurately to any specific Harappan site. It is grey, abandoned and abstract, if not planetary. A glimmer of dust comes through them in streaks invoking the debris of the past – the remains of the day and its people. Adnan Madani has remarked on Kazim's use of abstraction as 'uncanny', in the spirit of 'being deliberately un-homed', urging the viewer to read the works in the method of allegory, 'not as a section of reality, but as objects in relational play with reality, and with a not entirely defined (or as yet undefined) worldview' (6). The landscape Kazim creates, or what the viewer sees as a landscape, is therefore 'the result of piecing together photographs of sherds and landscapes – a composite of hundreds of images' (Kazim 14). The paintings perform a phenomenal trick with the viewer's eye and to look for archival data within the art is therefore misguided. Even so, the impulse to do so is revealing of the desire for factual content in what artists produce when they engage with archives.

In all of these works by Kazim, the white spaces amidst the greyscale wash create gaps of air and summon a solitary atmosphere. This stillness is reconstructed from Kazim's own ethnographic trips to the unexcavated Harappan sites. His mode of reconstruction, transmuted in the artwork, can be seen in a nine-panelled grid that makes up *Untitled (Ratti Tibbi Series)*, where the viewer is dwarfed by the scale of the ruins and invited to enter the landscape of the painting and become a traveller among the ruins. Terracciano notes this relationship with the viewer, remarking on the phenomenological impact of its accurately rendered sherds, which serve to cast the viewer as 'an inquisitive archaeologist who can speculate about the clues on view, advance conclusions about the shape the complete object once held and be prompted to imagine the relationship between part and the whole' (28). The painstaking creation of the artwork from the template of an archival artefact results in a representation of history that is far from historically accurate. Clearly its aim is not to cater to historians. Instead, it is speculative, emerging from a place of loss and yearning for historical detail by re-inventing the conditions for the archive as well as the archive itself. When there are traces of the past we cannot know or understand, but must acknowledge as evidence of that same past, what is the precise knowledge that we are left with? It is the knowledge of ambiguity; ambiguity invoked by and subject to the fragments carried in Kazim's art. As responses to the past, these artworks are not direct '"translations" of emotional conditions or concerns', they are never 'instances and sites of translation' and as such Kazim's work allows its viewers to take a step back from the paradigm of textuality, which has come to dominate in postcolonial art histories (Wainwright 125–6). There is an emotional undercurrent to Kazim's art that, above all else, startles one into looking closely, wordlessly. The work is melancholic, the vastness of the time contained in its frames exceed our ability to comprehend exactly how far back it goes. But it does not, notably,

make any claims towards sentiment, either patriotic or personal. It does not translate anything. It simply observes and speculates, and allows its viewer to join in.

The fragment, retraced multiple times on different surfaces, but especially in Mylar, conjures up the past as a ghost: as a faded presence, in pigment and in memory. However, this artistic fragment, in being fantastical, is also a literal figment of artistic projection, produced through layers of imagining the past as a necessary condition of our future. In doing so, Kazim's works re-imagine the circumstances of the actual ruins in Pakistan too, positing them as weathered by the time and space of temporal passing, of civilizational climate time, and change at the hands of humans, as well as being a space of preservation and retrieval. Each layer of natural pigment, 'ground, oxidised minerals and metals' (Terracciano 29), is painted with large gaps of time built between them. The process is 'slow and considered' (Dawood 9). According to Virginia Whiles, Kazim's portraiture technique 'is perhaps the closest to traditional miniature styles':

> 'Working in watercolour on a *wasli* support, he draws his image with pencil before going over this line with *siyah qalam* (black pen) . . . It is in the elaborate layering of colour (watercolour mixed with gum Arabic), which he then washes several times in water, either running or applied in a trough, that allows a textured surface to arise through the fragments of pigments. The final rendering is applied with *pardakht* (dots of paint).' (157)

For the watercolours, a similar technique is followed. The time built into the artwork is temporal in a narrative sense, in terms of the landscape the work re-imagines. Yet there is a parallel deep-time vined into the process. Each layer of pigment sinks further into the hard paper, deepening the effect of time on – and in – the image created.

Figure 6: Ali Kazim's *Untitled (Ruins)*, 2018. Watercolour pigments on paper, 184 x 342 cm. Image courtesy Ali Kazim and Jhaveri Contemporary.

Preserving the memory of the ruins as markers of urban history, and as historical record-keeping, turns Kazim into an accidental, wayward archivist. He seems unafraid to look back at the fractal edges of a broken past. In intimate detail, over and over again, with each layer – each pigmented coat painted over – he turns to artistic conception in order to annotate the past and its humanity. 'For Kazim, the sherds are physical memories of people who shaped the clay with their fingers, leaving imprints for future generations to find,' write Chaitanya Sambrani and Mallica Kumbera Landrus (69). The deserted landscapes of the *Ruins* and *Ratti Tibbi* series invoke the sense of an enormous past, where the absence of people allows the viewer to contemplate the role of erosion. These works help us to confront our own mortality, and to see ourselves, or what might remain of ourselves, the way someone in the distant future may see us.

In this way, Kazim's art practice takes the act of looking and transforms it into an archival 'regard'. The viewer looks to historicise, to find the detail in the larger puzzle, to categorize, to wonder what might remain in the future. What Kazim offers is in opposition to the colonial archive of collected objects – Gandharan birds, a playing dice, a terracotta bird from China, all artefacts that surround Kazim's art at the Ashmolean, with their labels intact. Such objects can only but remind us of another hegemonic practice for materialising the historical past (one less imaginative and thereby more violent). Kazim's artwork *Ruins*, looming large ahead of the glass cases, insists on an equivocal re-telling of the past and shows another way to the future.

In theorising the relationship between the archive and (its) performances, Rebecca Schneider argues that witnessing history as 'a set of sedimented acts that are not the historical acts themselves but the act of securing any incident backward – the repeated act of securing memory – is to rethink the site of history in ritual repetition' (104). Across Singh and Kazim's artistic enactments, we see a playful preoccupation with the past that is macroscopic and micro-personal all at once. Threaded, too, are attempts to untangle how these histories come to be accepted as commonplace. Singh's re/presentation of art as archival in form is inseparable from their performativity as fluid photo-architectural formats. Such viscosity in practice challenges well-worn paths and narrative logics, showing that we need not read images from India's past according to colonial or sectarian outlooks. Kazim's methodological meticulousness coats the melancholic landscapes of Pakistan with a startling levity. The process of layering pigments, and the precision of his tracing practice, are folds in a swathe of time that is minutely textured in its historical detail and scope.

Singh and Kazim present artworks that formulate a case for modern South Asian archival art that is about personal, institutional, and inter/national archives, but archives that are contemplative and alive to the possibility of silence, gaps and restless narratives. At present, the architectural safeguarding of the National Archives of India is subject to nationalist sentiment and whimsy, and the merger of publicly-funded Indian film archival units with for-profit institutions leaves Indian cinema archives facing an uncertain future. Archives emerge as a brittle but essential link in the battle for national identity. This force of discontent and anger ripples through contemporary art too. The art of Singh and Kazim is impossible to articulate to narratives of the nation, demanding instead a collective, patient effort at artistic historiography. We may not know how or where to rest our eyes as the teak chambers open or as images of ruins rise up. But we are hardly alone in our ignorance. Could not the same be said of all endeavours to archive the remains of the day?

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