

LOSS FOR WORDS

NALINI MALANI RADHIKA KHIMJI RAGHAVA KK TARA KELTON TUSHAR JOAG CHITRA GANESH SARNATH BANERJEE ADIP DUTTA

curated by
Avni Doshi

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The Names and Notions of Things

“Thus they went on living in a reality that was slipping away, momentarily captured by words, but that would escape irremediably when they forgot the value of the written letter.”¹

So wrote Gabriel Garcia Marquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, to describe the effects of a particular illness that had beset the village of Macondo. After suffering from debilitating insomnia, Aureliano Buendia and his father Jose Arcadio noticed that they were beginning to lose their memories. To protect the village from the loss of important knowledge, they devise a plan to label the objects around them. Writing the name of each thing on a piece of paper, they felt sure that they would not forget. This was a useful exercise until the day they thought that these names might be helpful, but what if they forgot the use of each thing? Descriptions became necessary. Such as “*this is a cow. She must be milked every morning so that she will produce milk, and the milk must be boiled...*”

This rendering of the daunting task of naming and describing all that is in existence for the sake of remembering is almost comical in its impossibility, until Marquez leaves us with a terrifying thought: what happens when the letters are forgotten? And when we see the symbols *c-o-w*, but cannot remember their sounds – what then? We might mirror the reaction Michel Foucault had when he read a similarly evocative text by Jorge Luis Borges. Foucault suggests that, “The *uneasiness* that makes us laugh when we read Borges is certainly related to the profound distress of those whose language has been destroyed: loss of what is ‘common’ to place and name.”² The loss of words is more tragically a loss of *the names and notions of things*, and therefore a loss of the way in which we understand ourselves in relation to these objects, places and the moments that attend to them.

Needless to say, the connection between Borges and Marquez is not simply incidental, for Marquez’s writing was deeply influenced by his predecessor. The brand of writing practiced by both authors, often-called magical realism, is “a literary mode that contributes to the rewriting of a history peopled with the ghosts of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism.”³ Forgetting, for Marquez, and remembering act simultaneously as responses to moments in history, as a resistance to normative narratives, where social amnesia as a form of repression finds a response in personal memorials, and the elevation of subjective recordings of the past.

If fiction were purely fictive, then Foucault would not have laughed so uneasily. The archival impulse manifests itself in numerous ways. It is present in the desire to encode even the most rarified knowledge into a readable system. And it is there in the necessity to know each thing, down to its most obscure detail and complex physiognomy. The quest to capture the uncharted, to find its difference, and characterize its edge, is palpably compulsive. The anxious act of labeling and preserving the most heterogeneous concerns subsume the object/place/feeling itself. It becomes a potent indicator of historical moments and personal identity. And yet, it

is an archival law of sorts, that while some knowledge emerges in the front, some gets pushed to the back. This knowledge always resists being known.

Loss for Words is a curatorial experiment, where a group of artists were given the conundrum of an amnesia described in Marquez’s text as a point from which to embark. Tara Kelton explores the temporality of representation in a video work which overlays disappearing portraits. KK Raghava offers children and adults a new way of reading historical text, where fact and fiction are indecipherable. Nalini Malani sees remembering and forgetting as a function of archival violence in her painted work. Radhika Khimji remembers her childhood home and the constant shifts of a familiar geography. Sarnath Banerjee considers the conceptual distinction of the singular apart from the whole, as an exception to a rule. Tushar Joag underlines the difference a label can make in perceiving meaning in his drawings. Adip Dutta notes the minutiae of objects with an almost compulsive attention to detail in his series of works. Chitra Ganesh returns to the texts themselves to explore the way narratives in poetry often defy those of logic.

Marquez had his own inventions for the troubling problem of how best one ought to remember time and place. To counteract the threat of forgetting, Jose Arcadia Buendia creates a magical memory machine, which, on its spinning axis, recounts its contents to the user every day. Buendia writes the entries himself, and attempts to be the author of his own history. Memory and knowledge, in these terms, undo any monolithic reading of the past. Instead, they are the fluid, imperfect mummings of individuals, unflinchingly biased, and unquestionably selective in their ordering of things.

Avni Doshi

December, 2011

¹ Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Penguin, 1967, pp. 48-9.

² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, New York: Routledge Press, 1969, p. xx.

³ Susana Vega-González, “Memory and the Quest for Family History in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Song of Solomon*,” University of Oviedo, Spain, 2001.



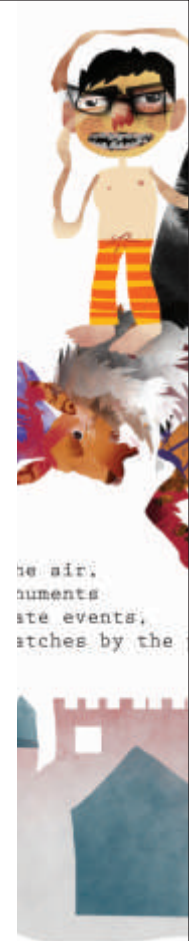
RAGHAVA KK

'PORTRAIT POP-IT' - INK, WATERCOLOUR & ACRYLIC ON PAPER - 18" x 59", 2011

"Naming is part of the human rituals of incorporation, and the unnamed remains less human than the inhuman or sub-human. The threatening otherness must, therefore, be transformed into figures that belong to a definite image repertoire."

- Trinh T. Minh-ha

For Raghava KK, history and identity are tied together in an inextricable way, informed by personal recollections and mythologies. The artist creates a child's storybook to illustrate the tale of King Babur, who ruled in the 16th Century, and whose story is often considered today because of his role in building the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. This place is often cited as fueling communal violence in recent history. The textual reference in Raghava's work come from a TS Eliot poem, where a young man considers a relationship he once had with an older woman. Emerging throughout the artist's narrative is a sense of history being alive, constantly in a state of revision, where imaged and identities are fragmented, and various struggles for power inform both word and image.





CHITRA GANESH

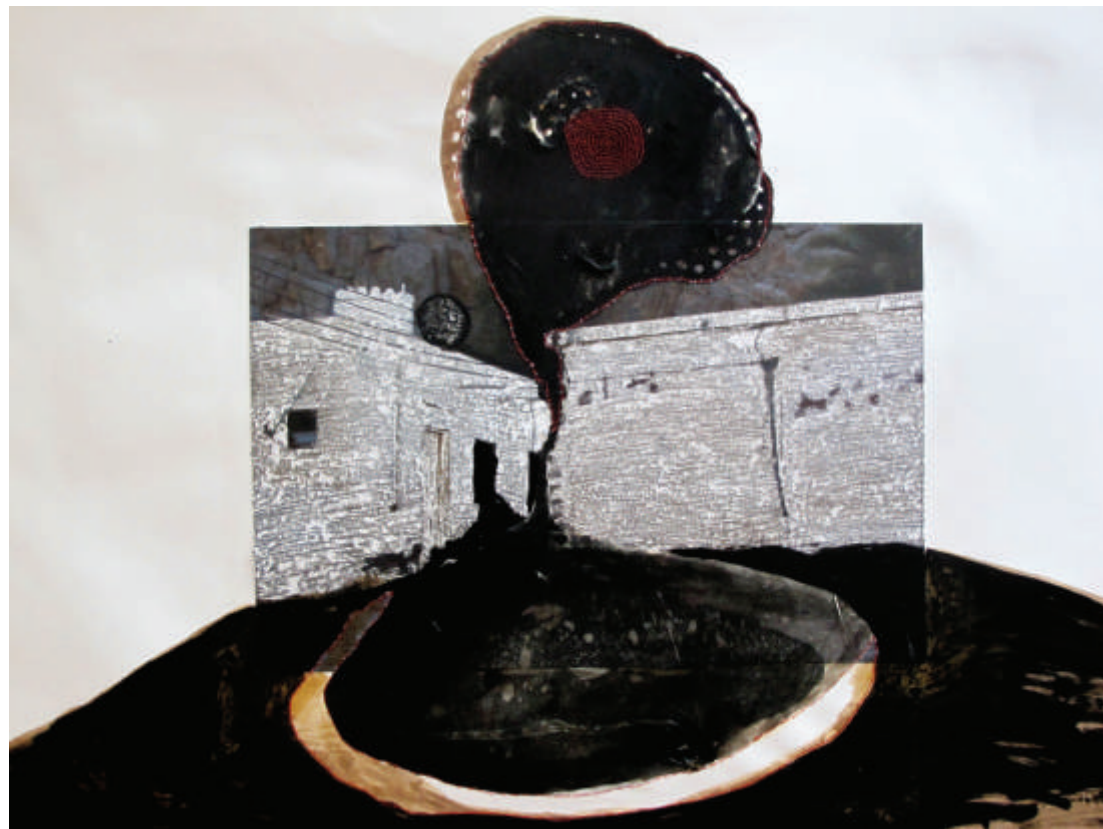
'OVERLOAD' - MIXED MEDIA ON HANDMADE PAPER - 14" x 14", 2011

"The sick mind continues to infinity, creating groups then dispersing them again, heaping up diverse similarities, destroying those that seem clearest, splitting up things that are identical, superimposing different criteria, frenziedly beginning all over again, becoming more disturbed and teetering finally on the brink of anxiety."

- Michel Foucault

Chitra Ganesh delves into the text in her works which unfold through the visions of dreams and a non-linear aspect of time. She uncovers the mystery of words which are in "groupings that are intricately connected in poetic content but seem only marginally related in the left brain logic of language." Both prophetic and esoteric, the works fluctuate between anguish and revelation.





RADHIKA KHIJJI

'SCRATCHING THE SURFACE OF THE CITY' - MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER - 21" x 29", 2011

“Thus, between the already “encoded” eye and reflexive knowledge there is a middle region which liberates order itself; it is here that it appears, according to the culture and the age in question, continuous and graduated or discontinuous and piecemeal, linked to space or constituted anew at each instance by the driving force of time...”

- Michel Foucault

For artist Radhika Khimji, the experience of geography as spatially interactive is vastly different from the clinical mapping of a region. Khimji, who spends her time between the UK and Oman, considered the region of the Gulf, and the constant changes and upheavals it has undergone in the recent past. A black substance that permeates some of her images references the oil wealth of these nations, which is a prized resource and can be seen as the core of many problems. The gradations of the land are ever changing, and Khimji documents the area using photographic collage with the intervention of drawing, a means to perpetuate a recording of this space that is based on personal recollections of change.



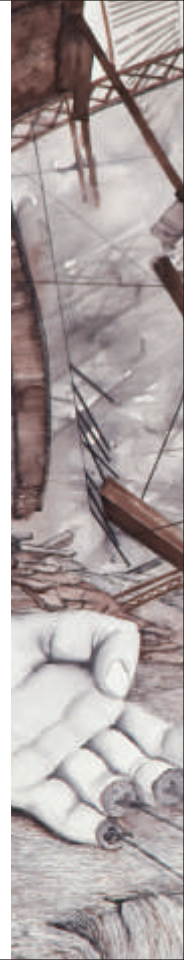
TUSHAR JOAG

'REGIME CHANGE' - PEN & INK ON PAPER - 43" x 63", 2010

"In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*."

- Michel Foucault

The names by which we call things are the most powerful indicators of how we perceive them. Words are symbols, with numerous meanings, subtexts and innuendos. Tushar Joag's works *Fluid Dynamics* and *Regime Change* offer distinct views of a particular incident. Both images show the wreckage and violence of terrorism, where buildings burn to the ground, exposing their insides, and bodies are strewn across the landscape. For Joag, the question of difference emerges when one considers the perspective of the viewer. What story is being told? And who is the protagonist? He explains that "one man's terrorist is another man's liberator/freedom fighter. It depends on who writes the history."





NALINI MALANI

'NURSERY TALES - 6' - ACRYLIC, INK & ENAMEL ON ACRYLIC SHEET - 60" x 30", 2008

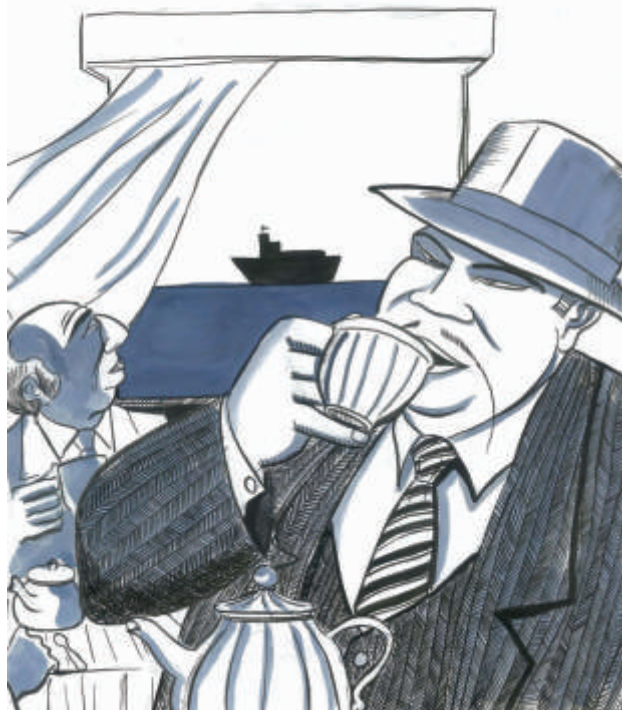
"Naming, like a cast of the die, is just one step towards unnamng, a tool to render visible what he has carefully kept invisible in his manipulative blindness."

- Trinh T. Minh-ha

Nalini Malani's colors are rich and deeply human in their extreme bodily suggestion. She paints animated scenes, creating colors and textures that vary between transparent and opaque, often seeping in to one another. There is often no distinction between the black of the outlines and the red of the blood. Thus the written text, the black sign, is often placed in a complex relationship with the red event. Spattered bodies and spilled ink enter into a multifarious relationship, extracting questions and exacting answers from one another. Both divergently expressive, the painful event and the written history are complexly interwoven. And what of the individual stories, the unofficial numbers? They are lost after a time, or no longer taken into consideration. The practice of forgetting, already a kind of violence in process, continues onward.



AN ISLAND IS WHERE CHARLIE CHAN, THE NOBLE CHINESE-AMERICAN
DETECTIVE FROM HAWAII DRINKS LONG TEAS GAZING AT LONG SHADOWS.



SARNATH BANERJEE

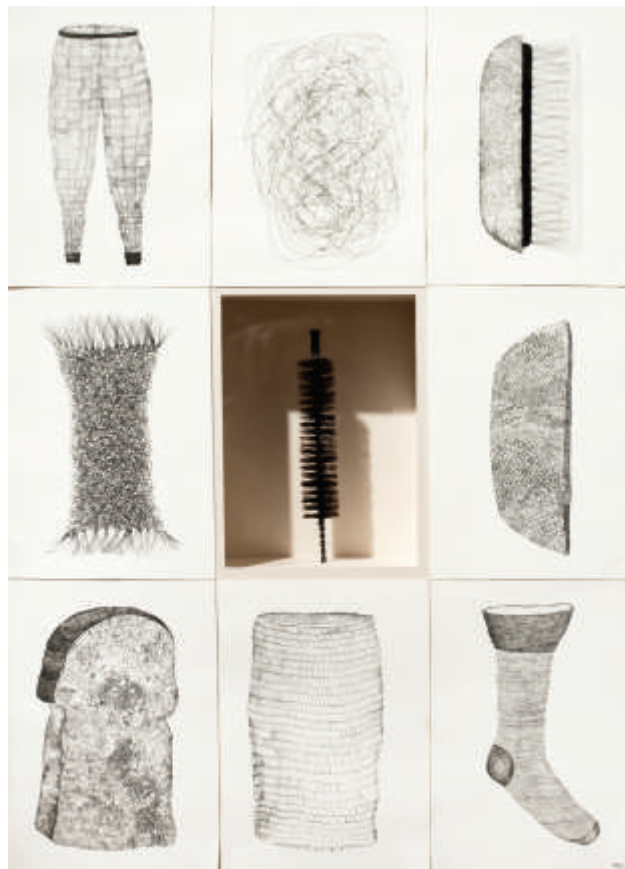
'TEMPORARY AUTONOMOUS ZONES 7' - INK & BRUSH ON PAPER - 16.5" x 11.5", 2011

“The aphasiac will create a multiplicity of tiny fragmented regions in which nameless resemblances agglutinate things into unconnected islets... the field of identity that sustains them, however limited it may be, is still too wide not to be unstable”

- Michel Foucault

Sarnath Banerjee's works ponder the stand-alone island, and what it means both physically and metaphorically. The integrity of a single object, idea or feeling is difficult to imagine in a real world setting, but has powerful implications in resistance to superstructures of government or nationhood. Like the figure of Melquiades, the prophetic gypsy from Marquez's story, Banerjee's islands exist outside of the directives of time in a heterotopic autonomy.





ADIP DUTTA

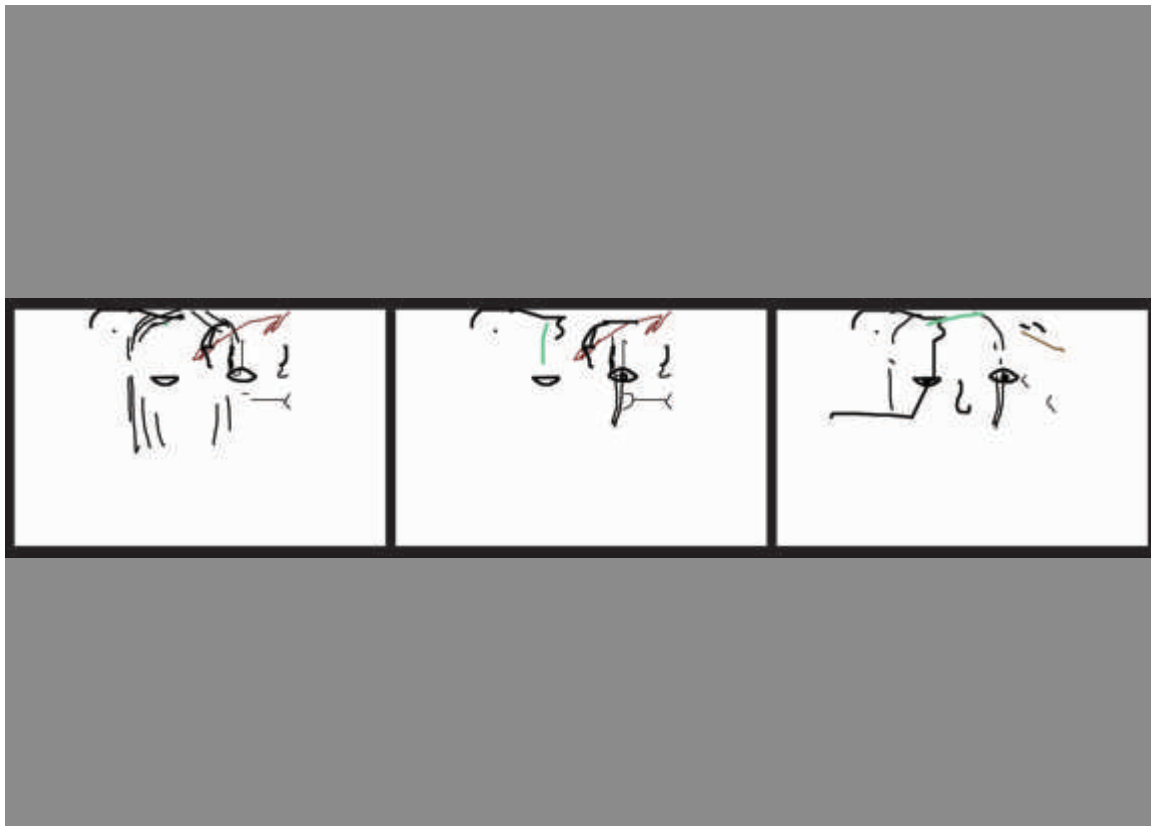
'PROTAGONISTS' - BRUSH & INK ON ACID FREE PAPER, STAINLESS STEEL & SYNTHETIC FIBRE, 2011

“One cannot seize without smothering, for the will to freeze (capture) brings about a frozen (emptied) object.”

- Trinh T. Minh-ha

Adip Dutta's work *Protagonists* plays with the boundaries of objecthood. Within the walls of the frame or box, each object is a carefully drawn representation of the thing it represents. Placed in no particular order, the drawings form intimate relationships to one another, while still remaining separate classified specimens. However, camouflaged among the detailed drawings, are actual objects placed within a box that fit in to the system of the whole, while being conceptually distinct. Dutta's playful collection of object/images questions what makes an image. By confounding the viewer, these readymade objects veer into representations, and send their drawn counterparts to the edge of objecthood.





TARA KELTON
'AUTOPORTRAIT' - VIDEO WORK, 2011

"Jose Arcadio Buendia then decided to build the memory machine that he had desired once in order to remember the marvelous inventions of the gypsies. The artifact was based on the possibility of reviewing, from beginning to end, the totality of knowledge acquired during one's life."
- *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez

Tara Kelton explores remembering and forgetting through a video work which uses the self-portraits of those she does not know. By hiring mechanical turks anonymously online, the artist instructed them to draw themselves, even though she herself has not seen their faces. Using specially made software, the artist superimposes the different portraits upon one another, with some disappearing as others appear. The impermanence of representations is highlighted, as the images are difficult to remember and incorporate into a complete whole. In *Autoportrait*, Kelton plays with the boundaries of authorship, as she hands power over to others to choose the way in which they are represented.



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