HISTORIA DENATURALIS

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Curated by
Damian Christinger

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Immersion. Emergence

In 2006, Ravi Agarwal completed Immersion. Emergence, a photographic, conceptual, as well as spiritual engagement with the Yamuna River that unfolded over several years of repeated visits, observations, and dialogues with the river's shifting ecologies. The project revealed the river not as a passive backdrop to urban life, but as a living, wounded, and historically saturated body. It documented ritual immersions and the material debris of modernity; it also charted the river's capacity to reappear — silently, insistently — as a force of relation and memory. Agarwal expressed his relationship to the river as a "personal ecology," a trope which has continued to inform his worldmaking, as a relationship of nature and the self.

Seventeen years later, Historia Denaturalis returns to these questions while expanding them: from riverbanks to global watersheds, from the archives of natural history to the lived entanglements of species, from Delhi's local ecologies to planetary instabilities. Marking Agarwal's first solo exhibition at Gallery Espace in a decade, the exhibition reframes his longstanding environmental practice within a new conceptual lens: the idea of a denaturalised history, a counter-archive to the long tradition of historia naturalis.

From Historia Naturalis to Historia Denaturalis

Pliny the Elder's Naturalis Historia — one of the earliest encyclopaedias of the natural world — attempted to catalogue everything from celestial bodies to minerals, plants, and animals under a single cosmological order. Centuries later, Carl Linnaeus refined this ordering impulse in Systema Naturae1, introducing the binomial nomenclature that restructured global life into a scientific hierarchy.

These gestures of classification were also gestures of power. As European empires expanded, Linnaean taxonomy travelled with them, becoming an epistemic instrument of colonial administration. Plants and animals from the Indian subcontinent were renamed in Latin, reorganised according to European taxonomic grids, and detached from the relational cosmologies, medicinal systems, and vernacular naming practices through which local communities had long understood them. Once translated into this new nomenclature, these beings could be circulated through colonial reports, plantation blueprints, and scientific societies as depersonalised entities — entries in a world-vocabulary written elsewhere.

[1] Carl Linnaeus, Systema Naturae, 1735.

This logic was not limited to the subcontinent. It extended across the tropical belt wherever European power took root. The history of cacao offers a telling parallel. Indigenous Mesoamerican cultures had cultivated cacao for millennia, embedding it in ritual life, medicinal practice, and cosmological meaning. But as Spanish and later British, Dutch, and French traders recognised its economic potential, cacao was wrenched from its cultural matrix and recast through the language of natural history. Reclassified as Theobroma cacao — "food of the gods," from the local 1000 BCE Olmec term Kakawa – a name bestowed not by the cultures that revered it, but by the European taxonomic imagination, the plant became legible within imperial botany. Linnaean naming naturalised the extraction that followed: cacao was no longer a participant in Indigenous social and ecological worlds, but a portable crop, a commodity, a botanical resource awaiting optimisation.

Once uprooted, cacao travelled along the violent circuits of empire. Botanical gardens in Kew and Paris received seeds and specimens, documenting them as imperial possessions rather than as the displaced kin of disrupted landscapes. Plantations were established across the Caribbean, West Africa, and Southeast Asia, each one erasing the complex ecologies and human relations that had shaped cacao's being in its original homeland. The plant's new identity — fixed, Latinised, universalised — helped to obscure the brutality of the systems that sustained it: enslavement, forced labour, monoculture, and ecological simplification. Industrially processed, cacao transformed into the 'virile' and 'sensous' chocolate. In his work Homage/Retribution Agarwal seeks to address this ongoing violence through artistic practice, performatory healing, and reverential gestures.

Natural history was never merely descriptive. It was a world-making operation: an attempt to stabilise life into legible units whose meaning and value could be controlled from imperial centres. What appeared as neutral classification was in fact a profound geopolitical act — a way of reorganising relationships between humans and the nonhuman world so that they aligned with the demands of extraction and capital. Species were not only named; they were thus claimed.

Historia Denaturalis seeks to invert this gesture. Instead of ordering life into transparent categories, it foregrounds opacity, relationality, and the limits of human knowledge. It insists that beings — whether riverine plants in North India or cacao trees in West Africa, whether Himalayan herbs or urban birds — cannot be reduced to the grids through which empire once sought to read them. A denaturalised history refuses the fantasy of mastery. It attends to the worlds that classification obscured: worlds shaped by kinship, by Indigenous knowledge, by resistance, by multispecies entanglement. It proposes that to understand a plant or an animal is not to name it, but to recognise the histories and relations it carries — including the histories of violence that have rendered it visible in the museum and invisible in its place of origin.

Édouard Glissant's insistence that "we demand the right to opacity"[2] offers a starting point for this counter-archive. Opacity becomes a resistance to the classificatory gaze, asking not for obscurity but for the acknowledgement that life — animal, human, riverine, glacial — is more than what can be named.

Natural History Museums: The Specimen as Rupture

Natural history museums remain the most visible monuments to the classificatory tradition. They present rows of glass cases filled with pinned insects, taxidermied mammals, pressed herbarium sheets, preserved riverine creatures, and geological slices. These specimens are framed as neutral facts, removed from time and place.

Yet each specimen marks a rupture: a life displaced, arrested, recontextualized into a scientific and colonial narrative. A river dolphin lifted from the Ganges, a Himalayan plant pressed between sheets, a bird taken from a floodplain — all become objects of study rather than participants in an ecological world.

Central to this exhibition is a meditation on perception: not only how humans see nonhuman life, but how nonhuman life perceives us. As John Berger wrote, the relation between human and animal is one of looking — a crossing of gazes that reveals a "narrow abyss of non-comprehension."[3] Animals perceive us without the metaphors and symbolic frameworks that shape human vision; we appear to them as blurs, through movement, scent, vibration,posture. Yet the encounter still registers: both beings sense the other, but not in equivalent ways.

This asymmetry does not negate relation; it animates it. The animal's gaze unsettles the human one. As Berger argues, animals possess "secrets … specifically addressed to man," secrets of presence and relation that resist assimilation into human categories. Their opacity is not emptiness but a form of meaning.

Jacques Derrida, standing naked before his cat, remarked that "the animal looks at us, and we are naked before it,"[4] suggesting that thinking begins when the human recognises itself as the one who is seen. This reversal destabilises the human claim to perceptual sovereignty. It opens a space in which the human becomes accountable to another being's attentiveness.

Agarwal's practice embraces this reciprocity. Whether photographing along the Yamuna, documenting industrial-waste ecologies, or observing riverine movements, he foregrounds perception as a shared — though asymmetrical — ecology. He acknowledges that multispecies encounters exceed human understanding, and that the world is not only seen by us, but also seeing us.

[2] Édouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 189.
[3] John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?", in About Looking (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 5.
[4] Ibid., p. 9.

Riverine Lives: Dolphins, Currents, Glaciers

The exhibition extends the question of perception into aquatic ecologies. On the Indian subcontinent, the Ganges and Indus River dolphins (Platanista gangetica and Platanista minor), cousins, once thrived across the region's great river systems. Today, they survive only in a few numbers, threatened by dams, pollution, sand mining, and habitat loss, physically separated by new nation state boundaries.

Dolphins navigate through sonar, inhabiting a world of sound rather than light. Their sensory field is thus radically different from our own. Yet they exist within the same waters as us, altered by human engineering and industrial flows. Their diminishing presence signals not only ecological degradation but the collapse of perceptual worlds.

Agarwal hears these sonic utterances as expressions of a desire to reunite with their evolutionary roots — the oceanic whale, unwilling to continue in the human world.

Agarwal's engagement with riverine life — both human and nonhuman — asks us to consider what it means to share ecological spaces with beings whose modes of sensing remain opaque to us. Historia Denaturalis refuses to turn these beings into specimens; instead, it approaches them as agents with their own histories, vulnerabilities, perceptual agencies, and voices.

The exhibition also gestures toward glaciers — massive bodies of ice that once symbolized permanence but are now melting at unprecedented rates. These glaciers feed the veryrivers whose ecologies Agarwal documents. Their retreat transforms entire watersheds, reshaping flood cycles, sediment flows, and the availability of freshwater.

In the melting glacier, the classificatory logic of natural history reaches its limit. Glaciers challenge the idea of stable specimens; they are dynamic, responsive, and volatile. Their collapse signals the collapse of a worldview anchored in stasis.

In a series of conversations, between the artist and Dr Paulina Lopez (glaciologist from Patagonia), they delve into the limits of scientific logics and the way indigenous communities perceived and lived with glaciers for centuries. By linking glaciers to watersheds, rivers and local multispecies perceptions, they examine the pedagogic limits and failures of current climatic actions.

Toward a Denaturalised Ecology

Erin Manning has written that "bodies are never alone; they form through their tendencies toward each other."[5] Ecology, in this sense, is not a collection of discrete units but an ongoing choreography of relations. Agarwal's practice embodies this insight. His work is less about cataloguing life than about attending to the ways in which lives touch, alter, and respond to one another.

Historia Denaturalis proposes that the traditional natural histories — Pliny's cosmology, Linnaeus's taxonomy, the colonial museum — are insufficient to describe a world of interdependent transformations. Instead, it calls for a history that recognises opacity, relationality, and the limits of human knowledge, alongside an alterbative gaze located in registers of mutuality.

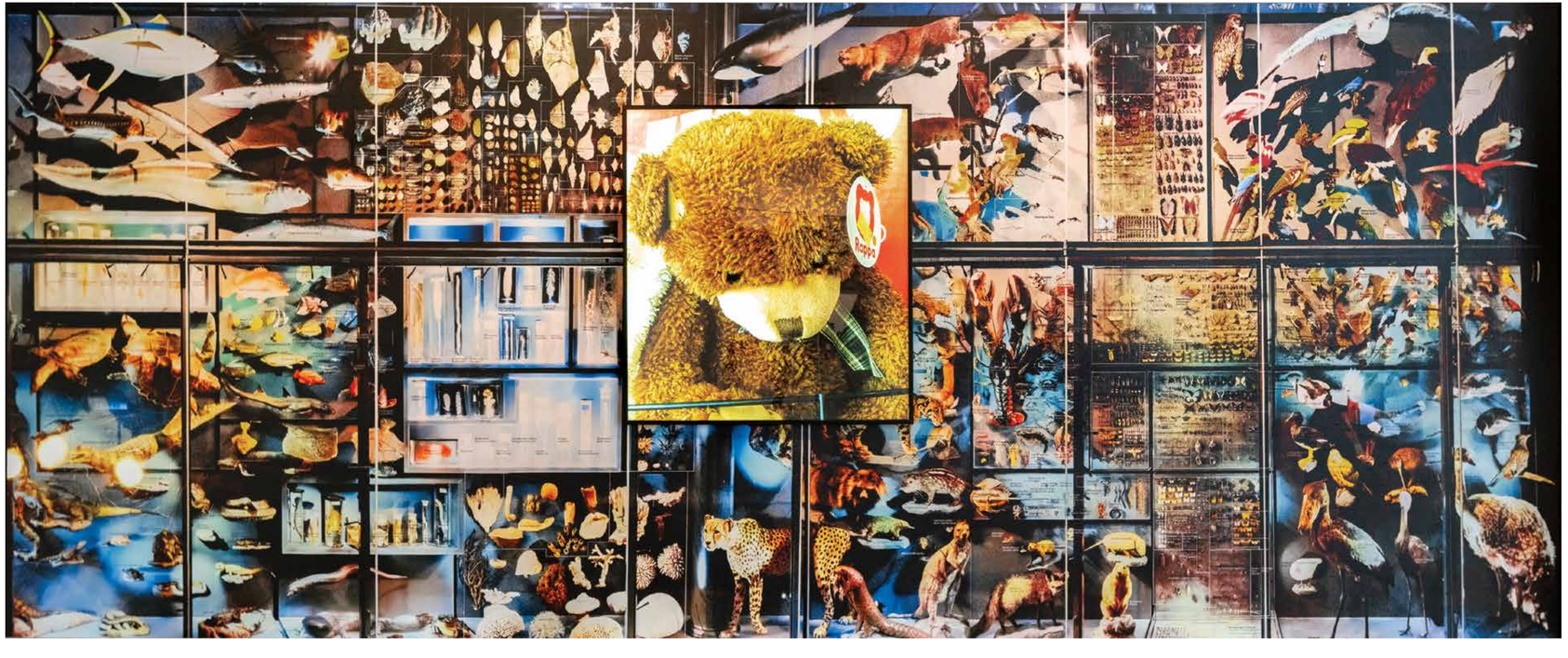
This is not a rejection of science but a critique of its historical entanglements with colonial domination, ecological simplification, and perceptual hierarchy. It is an invitation to imagine another kind of natural history — one that embraces uncertainty, acknowledges difference, and insists that the world is always more than what the human eye can stabilise.

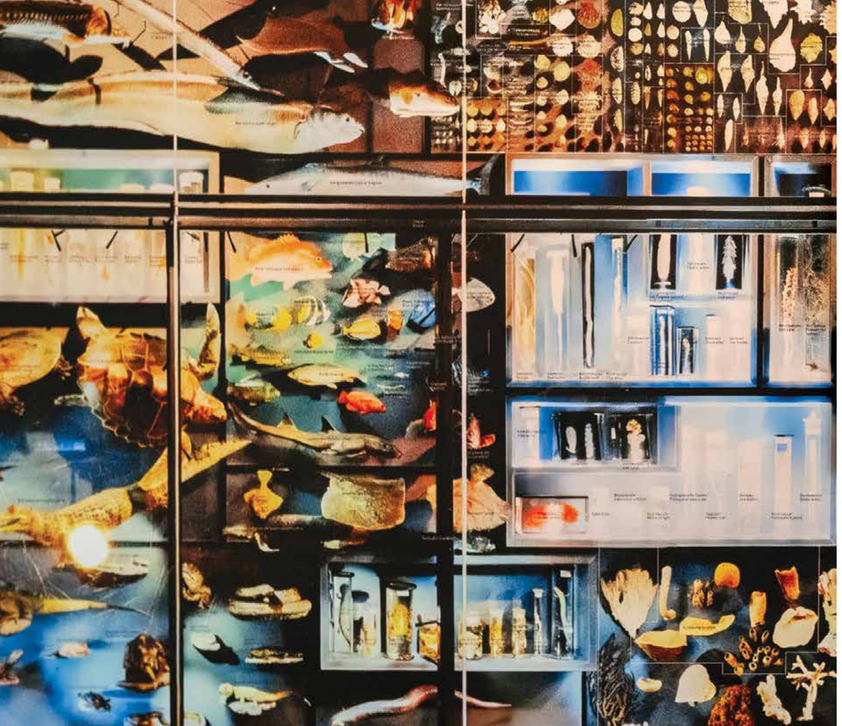
As Agarwal returns to Gallery Espace after ten years, Historia Denaturalis synthesises decades of artistic engagement with ecology, labour, urban space, and multispecies life. It offers neither a taxonomy nor a narrative of decline. Instead, it unravels our received frameworks of understanding the world, and suggests new fields of entangled perceptions: a world that resists full knowledge, that demands humility, and that continues to exceed the systems meant to explain it.

The denaturalised history proposed here is not meant to serve as an alternative catalogue of nature — it is a recalibration of attention. It asks us to encounter the world not as a series of objects but as a network of relations. And in this, it restores the possibility of seeing, and being seen, anew.

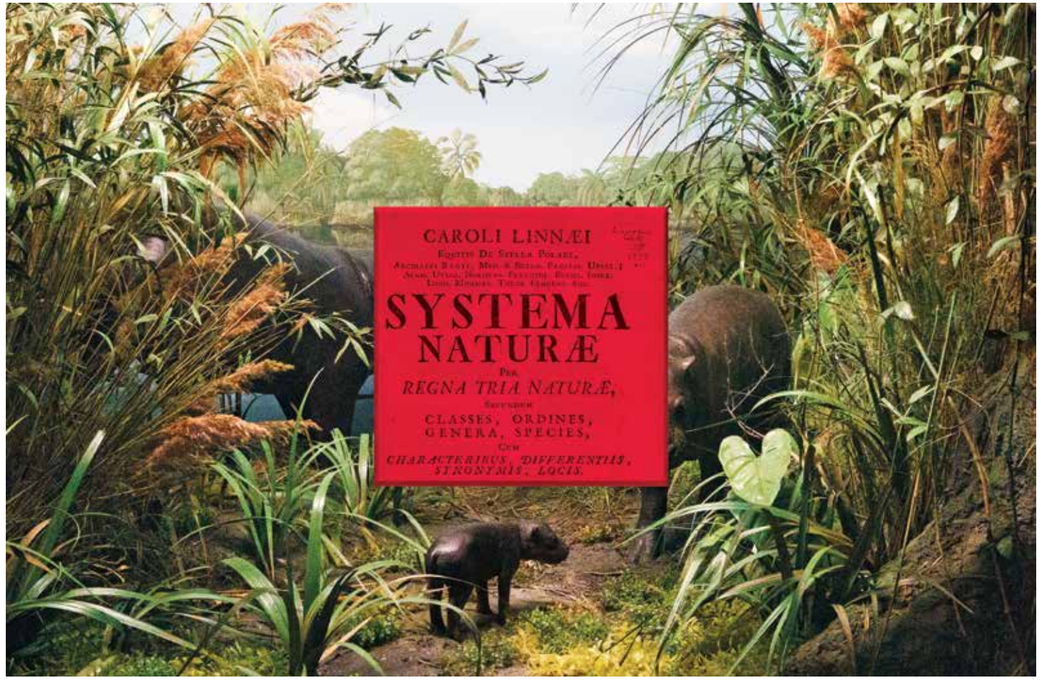
[5] Erin Manning, Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), p. 27.

Stuffed! 2026
Installation (wall paper and light box)
Light box 30.5 x 27.5 inches
Ed. 1/3



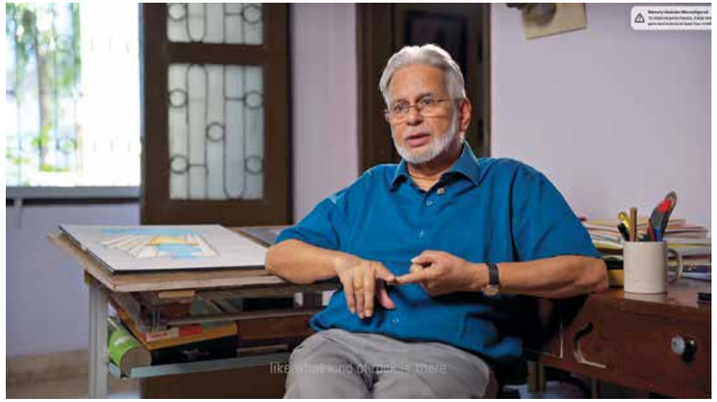


Nature Culture 2026
Digital print on archival paper
20 x 30 inches (each)
Ed. 1/3



Made to Order 2026
Digital print on archival paper
20 x 30 inches (each)
Ed. 1/3

Dystopic Connection 2026
Digital print on archival paper
20 x 30 inches (each)
Ed. 1/3

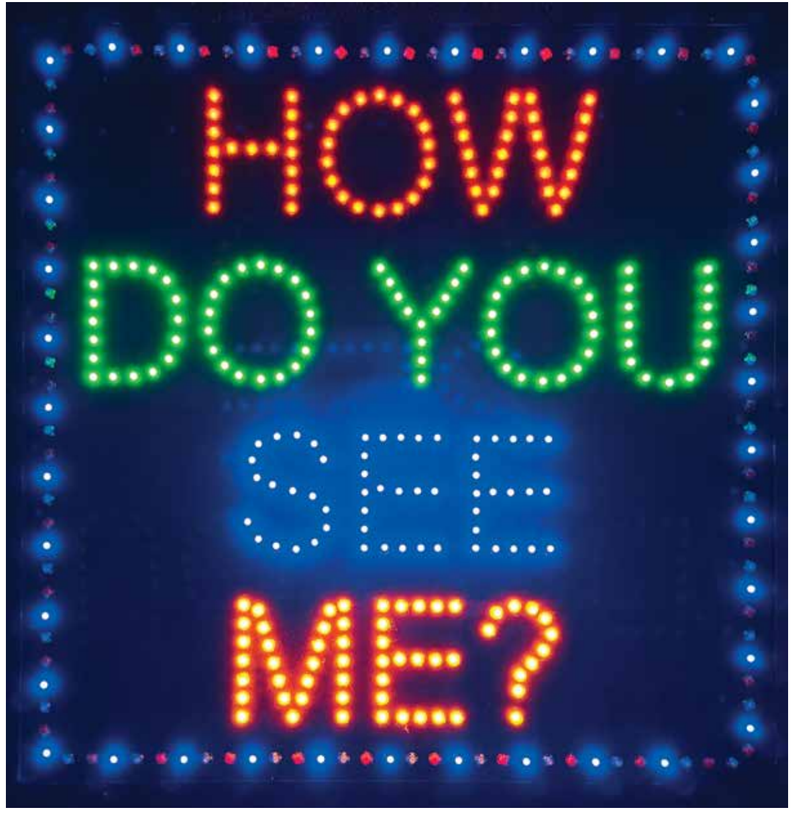


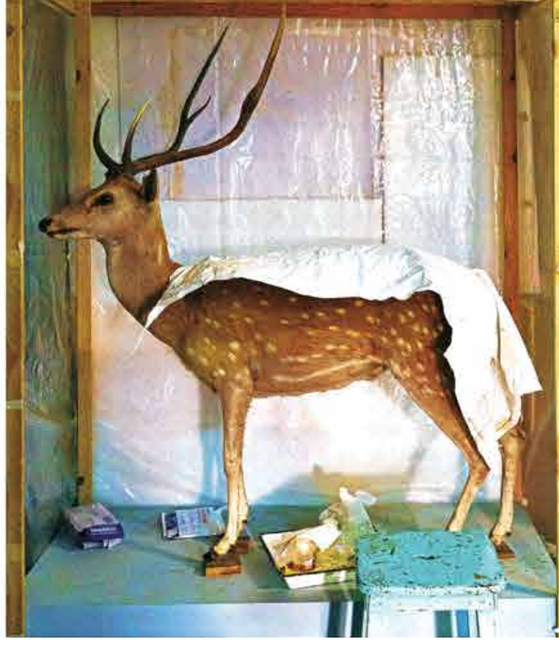
Research Table 2026

Videos with Audio
1. Dilip Ranade 1:25 min
2. Manoj Chaudhry 48:38 min
Ed. 1/3

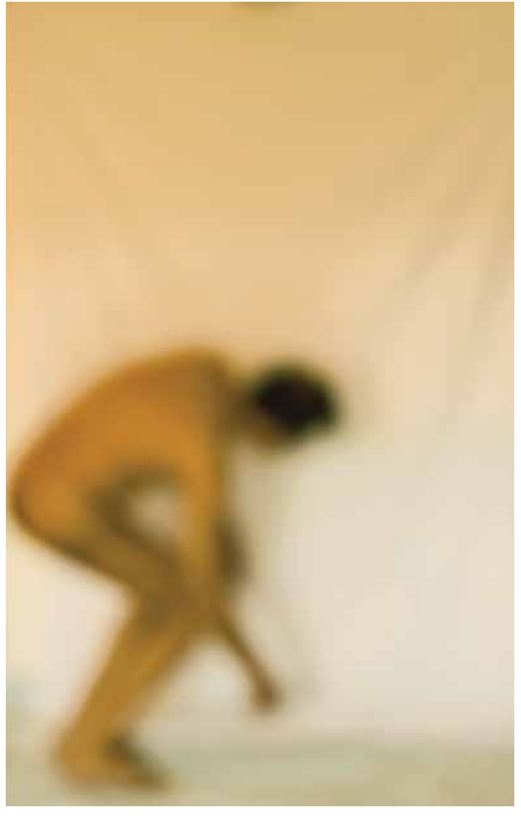
Solidarity 2017-2026
Digital print on archival paper
20 x 14 inches
Ed. 1/3

How Do You See Me? 2026
Metal box and LED Sign - two sided
24 x 24 inches
Ed. 1/3





Constructing. Deconstructing Nature 2026
Digital print on archival paper
L:16 x 20.6 inches, C:48 x 20.6 inches, R:18 x 20.6 inches
Ed. 1/3



Rising Not Falling 2009-2026
Digital print on archival paper
15 x 10 inches (each)
Ed. 1/3

“The colonized, underdeveloped man is a political creature in the most global sense of the term” Frantz Fanon — The Wretched of the Earth.

“Oh! I so wanted to own some earth.” (Jean Toomers)

“Trapped in historical conditions of capitalist production, labouring bodies have toiled for centuries, as miners, waste pickers, leather tanners, cotton workers, factory workers etc. as part of those multitudes engaged in nature’s transformation for the new economies, but never gained by it. Lodged in histories of the slave trade or in lowly caste communities, they define histories of oppressions.” (Mukul Sharma)

In 1946 W.E.B Dubois, the leader of the Black Movement exchanged letters with the Dalit leader B.R Ambedkar, acknowledging the commonality of their respective struggles. The synergies continued with the Black Panther and Dalit Panther movements. The term Environmental Justice emanates from toxic dumping of waste on Black communities. Mukul Sharma writes about how nature was produced differently from caste locations, that “Caste has historically been naturalized in nature”. To examine nature from this perspective is to enter the belly of the beast — of social hierarchies and histories of oppressions present everywhere.

I am leather - I am cotton (2024)
Triptych - Archival Digital Prints
20 x 30 inches (2nos) and 20 x 16 inches
Ed. 1 /3 + 2 AP
(Text from - Joothan - A Dalit’s Life Om Prakash Valmiki and Reapers by Jean Toomers 1923)

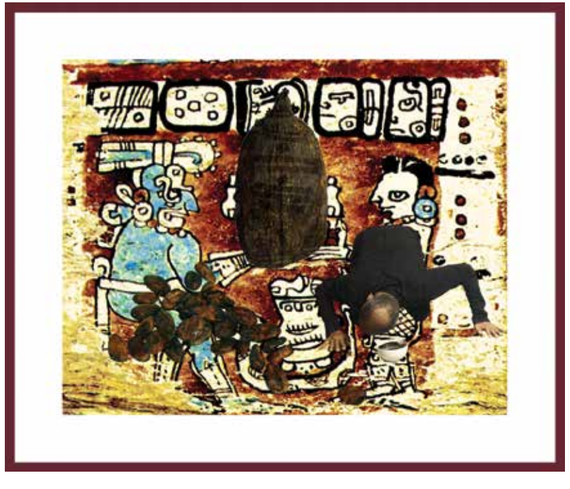
Icetime I 2026
Light box
21 x 48 inches
Ed. 1/3

Icetime II 2026
Light box
21 x 48 inches
Ed. 1/3

Redemption/ Homage (2023) refers to the metamorphosis of the cocoa seed, from an ecological entity to a symbolic species, extracted from its original landscape and purpose. Initially revered and held in high regard in ancient Amerindian societies, the cocoa seed underwent a transformation into a coveted commodity associated with sensuality, virility, and desire, transported to new transatlantic environments. The works signify an act of homage and seeking redemption for our continuing colonisation of nature.

The project explored cacao growing in, Kerela, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, through the lens of smaller independent cocoa producers. It explores the colonial history of cocoa cultivation in India, as well as the recent demand for chocolate.

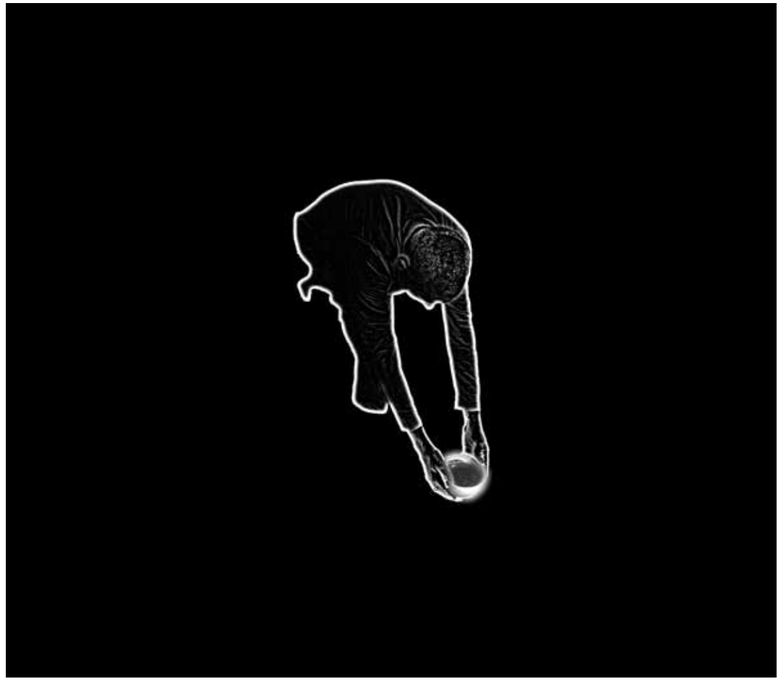
The work repurposes the artist's photographs with found images of postcards, entwined with the performatory body, in the form of the traditional Indian Aarti — to pay homage to cacao as nature, desecrated by man.



Redemption/ Homage (2023)
Series of 6 archival digital prints, each 24" width unframed
HD video
Ed. 1/3 + 2AP

Redemption/ Homage (2023)

Redemption/ Homage (2023)



Homage 2023
Video
Ed. 1/3

Kakawa 2004
Gum oil printed
18 x 21 inches
Ed. 1/3

Immersion.Emergence 2006
Digital prints on archival paper
11 x 9 inches (each)
Ed. 2/7

Note
Immersion.Emergence is the final work in the series Alien Waters, a text and photographic depiction of the polluted river Yamuna in Delhi over the period 2004-2006.

This work is a ‘personal ecology” depicted in few hours long photographic performance by the artist on the banks of the river. It is an exploration of the idea of immortality, rebirth and death in Hindu mythology and depicts the relationship to the idea of a cosmic ‘self.’ A non-western view of ‘selfhood’ it reflects on the duality of the material and the immaterial as coexisting in how the river is viewed — a place of timeless continuity along with its material and physical reality — to contest the idea of a post enlightenment idea of one nature.

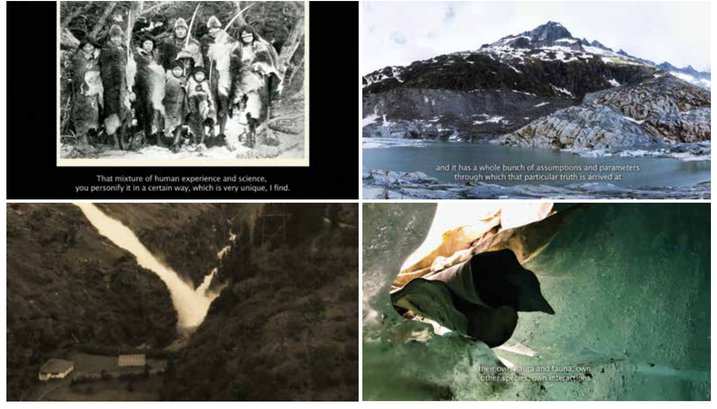
Snow and ice are part of a planetary hydrology and climatic system. They are also locally experienced, as landscapes of extremes — where human existence is pushed to an edge. Glaciers as special bodies of moving ice became part of an universalising scientific terminology only in the eighteenth century. Earlier, they resided in varied cultural and mythological memories of explorers and travellers as well of local spirits and folklore, containing ways of knowing these massive, frozen, flowing, bodies as gods and protagonists. Subsequently these readings were rendered as less important. In this moment of climate crisis, despite centuries of expeditions and scientific studies, the knowledge of glaciers is still limited.

In this collaborative work, done largely online across India and Chile, barring a field trip in the Swiss Apls, the overarching field of science and the epistemology through which knowledge of glaciers is constructed, is freely discussed. Experiences, ideas, and knowledge from the Himalayas to Patagonia are shared in long dialogues.

Both collaborators are, despite their primary designations, also interchangeably artist and scientist, through ideas, images and reflections. From this fluid space, they seek to raise critical questions about the limits of our ability to know “nature” and attempt to open the possibility for other narratives to coexist: external perception, and ways of examining entanglements of politics, experience and culture. Other than science, other than human.

Dr. Paulina Lopez is a glaciologist, and water and climate change expert. Her field of work is particularly focused on Patagonia region and she has worked as a researcher, consultant, and expert in research centers, universities, international organizations and governments in Europe, Latin America, and South Asia.

Yech'n Time (2024)
Ravi Agarwal and Paulina Lopez
4 Videos HD with Audio, single channel
Ed. 1/3 + 2AP
Research Table materials - Photographs, Maps, Drawings, Texts etc.



Research Table 2026
Wooden table with
Glacier research materials

Erased Histories 2026
Gold toned gum oil prints-speculativey generated by Mid Journey
13 x 13 inches
Ed. 1/3

Erased Histories 2026

Erased Histories 2026

The critically endangered Indus and Ganges River freshwater dolphins have been swimming sightless in the dark muddy waters of rivers emerging from the icy Himalayas, which have flown through three major channels of South Asia, the Indus, Ganges, and the Brahmaputra, for millennia. Evolving from the South Asian Dolphin, 25 million years ago, in the sediment-filled waters of the shallow Tethys Sea, as the Sub-Continental plate was colliding with the Eurasian plate, they long precede their human counterparts and nation-state histories and rivers now politically controlled by water treaties between new nation states.

Indus dolphin (Bhulan, Platanista gangetica minor), largely now found in the Indus in Pakistan, and its Gangetic counterpart (Susu/Shushak, Platanista gangetica), are genetically diverse but visually similar toothed whales — and evolved into two separate species, only about 550,000 years ago. Their unique echolocation navigation through high frequency clicks has been severely hampered by anthropogenic sounds of machines and motors.

These sightless, yet all-seeing deep time planetary beings, original South-Asians, nudge us to reflect on our very recent violent histories causing their extinctions, and urge us to listen to their more-than-human voices to return to more peaceful pasts.

Credits:
Text: From Jalāl al-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, # 1823, Kuliyat~e Shams, 8 vols.
(Teheran: Amir Kabir Press, 1957-1966)
Image Sources:
a) Spectrogram - Dey, M., Krishnaswamy, J., Morisaka, T., & Kelkar, N.
Interacting effects of vessel noise and shallow river depth elevate metabolic
stress in Ganges river dolphins. Scientific Reports 9, 15426 (2019)
b) Internet
Sound design by Padmanabhan and Ravi Agarwal
a) Sound scripts - Source Couplet from Rumi
b) Narration: Persian - Siena Fakhroddin Ghaffari
c) Echolocation recordings of Gangetic River Dolphin - Internet

“I am going to the sea, clear the path” 2024
Digitally printed vertical canvas banners (with surround audio)
108 x 36 inches | 108 x 18 inches (each)
Ed. 2/3

“ART IS AN ACTIVE PARTNER…. A CONVERSATION WITH MYSELF WHICH CHANGES ME ALL THE TIME”

RAVI AGARWAL IN CONVERSATION WITH GARGI GUPTA

Take me through the discrete bodies of work in this exhibition. What is the thread running through it?

This show continues my long-standing inquiry into how our ideas of ‘nature’ have come to be.

I’m interested in how the histories of colonization, of destruction, of classification, have reduced nature to one thing. Such an understanding undermines our possibilities of how to proceed in this ‘ecological crisis’. The current trajectory is to examine technologies to deal with this crisis — while I believe we need to re-think our relationship with nature. Or, if you like, how do we recover that relationship? When we look at a tree, for example, we may feel a certain connection. At present, we’ve lost this idea of the affective, since such subjectivity is outside the scientific Western canon. I think it reduces what we are in the world, how we imagine or make meaning. That is the core idea of my questioning. Through that I explore various framings, in order to critically examine them.

For instance, we accept very easily that the tree is something we call ‘nature’. I question this kind of acceptance, because the tree is not the same for everybody. For an indigenous person, the forest has a certain field of meaning; for a city bred person, the forest has a different meaning. In fact, nature comes into our lives through how we relate to the more-than-human.

I have been visiting Natural History Museums for a very long time. To me they are like a theatre of the absurd. Here are these static, dead animals, probably violently killed, now stuffed to look alive, through taxidermy. Very often the only encounter we will ever have with these animals is in these Natural History Museums, which shapes our view of them. Who, for example, in Norway will see a Royal Bengal Tiger except in these museums? So the way we look at these dead animals determines our relationship with them. It’s nothing to do with the animals themselves. It’s the way we have created this idea of what they are.

There are colonial histories of these museums too, as of other museums. They have been created by mass killings of animals, and started as large collections of animals and plants, stolen from faraway lands, from the 15th century onwards. These museums were carved out as repositories of such collections. Later, the museums became funded in the name of education. If that had been really effective, then it implies they would have been educating people for almost 200 years — so why are there still extinctions? Have they changed anything in the way we look at animals, or have they merely re-affirmed our gaze towards them?

There are an estimated over 3 billion such specimens lying in the storehouses of Western museums, while as a contrast the handful of Indian museums have a couple of hundred specimens in their stores. This is reflective of the mass transportation of flora, fauna into the West, as a pre-cursor to colonization.

What really intrigues me, is how we have “ordered” nature, in a definitive way. In the 18th century, Carl Linnaeus, a Swedish biologist, established the scientific classifications order for living organisms; and since then heir this has been the only way we can see plants and animals. Their connections to ecosystem have been lost and forgotten. Take the exampleof Bishnois in India — there’s a picture of a Bishnoi feeding deer which I took in the early 90s, in this

exhibition. The Bishnois live with animals, especially deer, which have religious and cultural significance for them. Such ideas are completely lost in Natural History Museums. These are science museums — in the category of “nature,” separate from “culture,” and personify the nature-culture divide. There are no stories told about these animals, or even how these specimens were collected, and they tell us very little about the networks of life they lived in. There is a total erasure.

If one examines how natural history dioramas are made, which flora and fauna are included in them, or how these are imagined as ecosystems, it is clear that they are a figment of the imagination. The artists who create them have little or no relationship with the field. Generations of children have grown up looking at them as if these are real, that this is how the natural world is. But this is largely untrue.

In the book “Botany of Empire: Plant Worlds and the Scientific Legacies of Colonialism,” the author Banu Subramaniam writes about how we’ve imprinted the human world, its sexual and familial divisions, on the animal world. I took a picture of a ‘family’ of lions in one of the National History Museums. The idea of this beautiful loving family is not necessarily the order of nature, where the male lion can be in competition especially with an older male cub for dominance over the pride and for territory. We have turned the animal world into the human world, without knowing that actually we, as humans, are just one of the many social orders. I felt the need to say something about these mistaken histories, as a visual artist.

The show also has a series of prints on the history and commercialisation of the Cacao plant. It is a story of how a plant associated with ancient South American civilisations, as one of nobility and health, was converted into chocolate, marketed as a product representing virility and sensuality in 19th and 20th century Europe. This change, aided by product advertisements, is how we now know Cacao, a far cry from its healing and spiritual lineage.

There is also an installation on the two remaining species of South Asian river dolphins, which are critically endangered, their terrains now divided by nation state boundaries. It is an interesting tale, of how these blind mammals, separated from the whale 50 million years ago, are struggling to survive. I speak on their behalf, metaphorically through Rumi’s verse, of their desire to return to the sea as cosmos.

All these works have different stories — but a key question to my mind is, how do the animals see us, humans? There are important texts by scholars like John Berger, “Why Look At Animals” on the enquiry — how do we see animals? Or how do they see us? What is that gaze? How have we locked into our own frameworks, and how deeply have we anthropogenized the world?

You mention Linnaeus, but there’s also Pliny, whose Naturalis Historia you reference in the title of your exhibition.

While Pliny the Elder, started this thought very early on, during the first century AD, Linnaeus came up with the order much later. Its binomial nomenclature was scientifically accepted, but there were alongside several influential thinkers in that era, 16th to 19th century — Francis Bacon, Immanuel Kant, Charles Darwin, for example, — where such ideas found acceptance. There were many questions floating around then in society, especially in scientific intellectual circles. These ideas did not appear out of the blue, but was part of the pedagogic framing and endeavour to understand the planet from a particular perspective and to control it. It justified and aided the colonising instinct, through the positioning of nature as separate from, and in the service of man.

When we use the now hollowed word ‘decolonization’, it should be more than just a way of bringing back land or objects. It should really be about bringing back the complexity in the way we are in the world. It is to recognise that we have many, many relationships with it, and all are equally valid. I think for a holistic human life one has to embrace everything; everything has a different purpose.

What about the glacier works?

The glacier work is again very similar to all these ideas. It grew partly from my interest in climate change and its frameworks of global hydrology.

This work is a collaboration with Dr. Paulina Lopez, a glaciologist from Chile, Patagonia. As we were at a distance of more than 10,000 miles from each other, the project was largely carried out on-line — a complex way to work! She informed me that though glaciologists visited glaciers for a long time, they never thought about what was there before they came, who lived there, what was their indigenous knowledge. In fact the word glacier is a recent 18th-century Latin term, even though they have existed for millions or billions of years. Indigenous people lived in these glaciers; they had different names for it and a relationship to these ice water sheds. Who were they, and what did they think about it? What did the glaciers tell us? The question is not only historical, rethinking what we take for granted and the locality of these landscapes, but also induces us to think about what these glaciers mean in climate change.

The work consists of four video conversations between Paulina and me, and two anthropologists. One of them comes from the local Machua community in Patagonia, though trained in the Western academy. He contests how Western anthropology doesn’t recognize his experiences growing up with the icy landscapes. There seems to be a denial of any knowledge system that doesn’t fit into the scientific knowledge system. It’s why we have lost the ability to know nature in different ways, as heterogenous and not one thing.

I believe that unless we recast this word — ‘nature’ — we will not be able to solve the ecological crisis. It will not be solved by symptomatic fuel choices only. In fact we have made scarce real progress in the climate change negotiations. We seem to be in a structural bind — my constant attempt has been to work on finding ways to unlock this fixidity.

The exhibition traces a wide arc in your practice, including a 2006 work, ‘Immersion. Emergence’ (2006), from the Yamuna series.

The arc is an attempt to relate to the continuity of ideas in my practice. In the performative piece ‘Immersion. Emergence’ (2006), I was already thinking of natural relationships I have with the river and not about the state of the river alone There is a word for such a relationship which I then coined and still use — ‘personal ecologies’. I think nature is a personal

ecology. The manner in which we bring it to our lives is not as an object but as something we relate to. That is what gives it meaning for us.

Of course there are questions of what is 'objective' because science itself is not decided on what reality is. It's a big, complex, conflicting question — the nature of reality. But how we act upon it, is a relationship question. Climate change is not only about nature as an objective reality alone, but also about whether we will survive in that modified space. And that to me is a relationship question. It is about us. I believe nature exists as it is. We've had ice ages, glacial ages, volcanic ages, meteors striking the earth. The planet survives as long as it will. But will we survive?

And they are also connected by structures of capitalism.

There is a diptych in the Natural History Museum series — one image of cheetahs in a diorama and the other, of a quarry. The thought behind it is about how capitalism and conservation are connected. We've destroyed the landscapes in which animals live and the only way they 'live' now is as the immortally dead in Natural History Museums. It's a bizarre idea that we're preserving something but destroying their homes at the same time.

Both are structured by capitalism, which does not allow us to interpret or listen to other kinds of cultural spaces. If we go to an indigenous community, for example, we may not have the mindset or the posture to understand what they're saying. We interpret it in our own cultural language. But sometimes we have to understand that we don't have the glossary of terms to participate in a different ethical and ontological space. And in India, where culture is in transition, it is not like we have to go to the Amazon to see other cultures. These are all around us. We just have to go to the ground and start listening differently and not reject everything we see. I think we have many possibilities. All is not lost and somehow it's become my internal mission to change something.

How would you say that your practice has changed since the last show? Conceptually and in terms of the concerns they foreground. What are the continuities and departures?

I think one of the interesting things about art for me is that it allows me to observe what I'm seeing in the first place. Art is thus also revealing myself to me. Why am I going to the museum recurringly? Why did I visit the river repeatedly? It takes me time to understand this because it is also guiding me in a sense. So art is an active partner. It is not a passive production, but a conversation with myself which changes me all the time.

I started in the early 90s looking at street labour. Then I started actively working on ecology and on environmental activism. For me this is consistent because in it I see the idea of inequity and labour, social hierarchies of caste, race and class, and their different social and political relationships with the outside world — as part of the broader ecological problem.

Looking back at all these works... every time I react, I learn more, and I get more insight into these questions. For me, insight is not only about reading a book, and I've read a bit on the subject, but experiencing.

My five years of experience with the fisher folk off the coast of Pondicherry, taught me much more; it taught me how to listen, and understand better the nature of what we call 'entangled lives'. When people are in the space of belonging,like the fisher folk with the sea, then there's no separation between culture and nature. The culture-nature separation is when you're outside. When you're inside, you're immersed-like the fish in a body of water. I'm really interested in this experience. Once you start experiencing it, it changes you from inside. You understand better what it means.

So what I'm tracing, in all my work, is how these experiences shape us inside ourselves. And ultimately how we get shaped inside is who we are. I'm interested in who we become, rather than merely what we know.

Is there a way in which this show, in terms of process and technique, take your practice forward? For instance, the 'Cocoa' series signals a return to performance.

I've used my body in photographic performance, for example my two early series, 'Impossibility of Being Feminine' (2007) and 'Mechanical Man + Metal Man' (2008). These are ways in which I bring the idea of relationships back to myself, as ultimately I feel I am responsible. Placing my body means I can talk about myself most authentically.

The Cacao work is a departure because I have rarely done collages; but I felt the need to do it with these works. And it converged with the performative body. The whole work, the six images, took one year to do. I research, read — for example on the history of cacao, or explore through my visits to the cacao farms. I like to let it sit, to discover what I want to say through this.

The performative Cacao piece is also like a prayer, on the lines of the aarti. When I am doing the aarti in the Cacao works, it's also recognising that this is bigger. It is also an apology 'Redemption/ Homage' to the plant. In some ways, it is a deep listening, because I think we need to listen more and presume less. It's a posture of listening which becomes really important; the bodily posture shows ones posture in the world. You have to take permission from the world before you do something to it. Prayer is akin to taking permission.

Your curatorial essay for the Bergen Assembly read almost like a critique, a manifesto of what art must be today. You write: "It is my belief that making new connections, transgressing pedagogic boundaries and enacting deep listening could present possibilities, etc. However, these are difficult and complex paths and raise questions such as: how can we truly listen to those whose worlds are different from ours, or to the more-than-human." How are these ideas embodied in these works?

With the Bergen Assembly, I recognized that it is a publicly funded public-facing event, in a foreign land. Anything I say will need to be a two-way conversation. And so the Bergen Assembly was based on collaboration between artistic and pedagogic practices, between art and science, between historical differences, yet a neighbourliness, between ways of thinking about, say, land and tools from Nagpur, and ways of thinking about land and tools in Bergen. I wanted to open up the space to look at heterogeneity, at multiplicity and open our minds up. As a public-facing event, it has to be accessible to people. We cannot just speak to ourselves. So I believe the curator's job is to create the forms in which ideas and complexities become accessible. Many projects of the Bergen

Assembly were long-term collaborations and it took a lot of work to build them — such as between research institutes and artists because they don't normally work together. Part of my work was to propose the value in working together, with love, caring and empathy.

You operate in and negotiate, very different art economies — the gallery system here and the museum and biennale ecosystem in Europe fed by public funds. How do you do this? What are the lessons for us in India?

One has to negotiate the system in different ways, depending on its possibilities and allowances, while keeping ones ideas and processes central I feel. However, one cannot jettison critique because critique is important for us to unlock what we don't see. It's only then you can see what potential there is of change. The dolphin work, for instance, is listening to the dolphins speak through Rumi. But it's also repositioning the human vis-a-vis the world. Through the critique, I am also saying that one has to reposition oneself.

Do you feel somehow that these conversations become more limited here within the gallery system in India? The possibilities that one can achieve are limited.

I feel we are still a very conventional art space. We are also hesitant in being more experimental or radical, since the market doesn't support it. The larger weight of society is still traditional, as are our structures. I hope this may be slowly changing, as the contemporary questions which art needs to address are critical.

Modernity, for all its contestations also shows ways of breaking out of structures. We are also in a place where we can today combine what it teaches us and reject where it goes wrong. It is work in progress. This I feel is true contemporaneity, the ability to combine, evolve, not merely follow. To create conversations because they are valid, equal, and on equal grounds. I think it's a complex but necessary process.

We have to deeply recognize the moment we are in. We try to seek identity in the past, and try to project that in the future. But what's happening in the world is not dependent on our identity alone. What are the values I learn from my cultural heritage, which I can bring to the contemporary moment? That is important for me, as a person, as an artist.

Look at questions about Artificial Intelligence today. What is the relationship between AI and the ecological question? AI is the big disruptor right now, but it is also very energy intensive. With Chat GPT, we're taking the energy needed by a city to do a simple iteration. We are mining lithium, rare earth metals, heavy metals, devastating the earth. So besides the other cultural, spiritual and consciousness questions about AI, we have this other intersection between AI and ecology which we are not talking about enough, and hardly in the art world, where AI seems to be a new toy. However by the time these technologies come into our everyday lives, these are already a decade old.

How do you reconcile your curatorial practice with making art and activism?

My curatorial practice has been spread over time - I've curated only some shows. They're largish shows, I admit, and, and I've enjoyed all of them. They have been a way in which I gather a community of like-minded practices and listen to them. They are interesting because they gave me an opportunity to say something more than just through my practice. It's not just me saying it, we are all together expanding the idea. Every show is a way to create a community of ideas in which I believe. So there is a continuity from 'Yamuna-Elbe' (2011), to 'Embrace Our Rivers' (2018) to 'New Natures' (2022) to the 'Bergen Assembly' (2025) and the Serendipity Art Festival exhibitions.

Is 'Shared Ecologies', the Foundation you have started, a part of this change?

Shared Ecologies is part of a desire to support, in a small way, the ecosystem of how artists form communities of ideas and comradeship. Shared Ecologies arose from a belief that artists come from very genuine spaces, but need support to think that they are connected to a larger worldview, and that when they are connected, they get confidence in their vocabulary and know that they can move something together. I think that's the power of art. It allows a much deeper change which culture brings in.

And I hope people come in and see the exhibition actively.

That is something which no artist can control. The only thing one can do is be honest with one's own practice. And I try to do that. Visual language has a great potential and power because it unlocks something deep inside you.

These are all challenges one faces because there are many ways to say the same thing, even artistically. I'm really interested in whether I can make sense of something for myself, when I'm really challenging myself.

Last question, what is the role of aesthetics in your practice? Aesthetics follow, you had said. Do you still believe that?

For me, aesthetics, as a way of experiencing is at the core of art. It is an approach which opens up a portal inside ourselves, and allows us to access a completely different language, critical to human consciousness.

Let me phrase it differently - Does the beauty of a picture hold privacy for you or is it the message?

Part of the reason for my fascination with the theatre of the absurd in the Natural History Museum, is for me these dioramas are filled with pathos, as they are beautiful. It is literally like entering a theatre set. Without beauty, there is no life. Any art work is not a construction of ideas. It has to come from somewhere. So these engagements bring the work. Sometimes it is successful, sometimes it is not.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Ravi Agarwal (www.raviagarwal.com) is an interdisciplinary artist, photographer, environmental campaigner, writer, and curator whose work bridges art and activism. His practice addresses the complex relationship between nature and its future through photography, video, text, and installation. Ravi's work has been exhibited at major biennales including Lahore (2024), Havana (2019), Yinchuan (2018), Kochi (2016), Sharjah (2013), and Documenta XI (2002).

He has curated large international public art projects like Yamuna-Elbe (2009) and Embrace Our Rivers, (2018) and served as photography curator for the Serendipity Arts Festival (2018, 2019). He curated New Natures, A terrible beauty is born at the Goethe Institute and CSMVS Museum, Mumbai (January 2022), and Imagined Documents at the Les Recontres d' Arles (July 2022). He was the curatorial advisor for the exhibition Carbon (2025) at the Science Gallery, Bengaluru, and Co-Convenor for the Bergan Assembly 2025, Norway.

Ravi is also the founder of the environmental NGO Toxics Link (www.toxicslink.org) and The Shyama Foundation, (www.sharedecologies.org) which supports initiatives at the intersection of art and ecology in India. He recent projects include Samtal Jameen, Samtal Jameer (www.multispeciesart.org) and a photobook The Power Plant – fragments in time. He is a recipient of the UN Award for Chemical Safety and the Ashoka Fellowship.

GALLERY ESPACE

Established in 1989 by Renu Modi, Gallery Espace is among the foremost arts spaces in New Delhi, recognized widely for having nurtured the contemporary moment in Indian art with its ambitious and expansive programming. It has presented large format exhibitions such as Drawing ’94, Sculpture ’95, Miniprint ’96, Bronze (2006), and Video Wednesdays (2008-09 & 2011-12) which sparked commercial and critical interest in these hitherto over looked art categories, and also pioneered cross-disciplinary approaches to exhibitionary practices with The Self & The World (1997), Kitsch Kitsch Hota Hai (2001), and Lo Real Maravilloso (2009). Gallery Espace has worked with several generations of Indian artists, starting with legendary modernist painter MF Husain, and has also presented fresh talent and supported experimental practices.

The gallery’s eclectic and nuanced aesthetics is reflected in its roster of artists which include Zarina, Nilima Sheikh, Manjunath Kamath, GR Iranna, Ravi Agarwal, Manisha Gera Baswani, Chitra Ganesh, Waswo X Waswo with R. Vijay, and emerging artists such as Ishita Chakraborty and Purvai Rai, whose works reflect changing concerns and tastes.

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