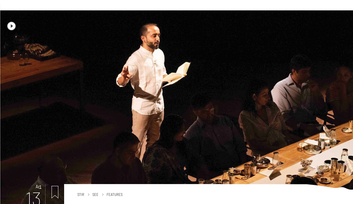

AUG 13 2022

Empty frames of 'All That We Saw' by Amitesh Grover stimulate viewer's memory

In the last part of a three-part series, interdisciplinary artist Amitesh Grover speaks with STIR about his project, *All That We Saw* for the third edition of the Chennai Photo Biennale.

by Dipneet Bhullar | Published on: Feb 01, 2022

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When an array of words takes refuge in an empty frame', it is an invitation to recall a missing photograph by invoking the memory of the viewer. Here, the presence of those who are reading and interpreting an Imaginary photograph' is important here. Delhi-based conceptual and Interdisciplinary artist Amitesh Grover, imagines a novel visual taxonomy to create the series *All That We Saw* for the third edition of the Chennai Photo Biennale. Succinct words in an empty photoframe work excitatively to bring images to the viewers' minds and activate their memory to recall a photograph that has been intentionally removed from the frame. In times when the ability to suggest a new perspective on images has been foreclosed by their exponential rise, *All That We Saw* urges viewers to probe the conditions within which we encounter a photograph. Antithetical to the didactic meaning enforced by photographers in the digital-driven world of images, Grover paves the way for viewers to witness the unfolding of a photograph as event, and he employs the vantage point of personal memories to create this series.

Grover is an award-winning interdisciplinary artist whose work moves beyond theatre into visual art, film, installation, digital art, and text-based art. He is the recipient of RADA F.C.A. Award, Prohelvetia Arts Residency Award, Stomlihan Hran National Award, Charles Wallace Award, and was nominated for Arte Laguna Prize Italy, Prix Ars Electronica Austria and Forecast/HKW, Germany. Currently, he teaches a course on Theatre at National School of Drama, and talks about his work at several Art Universities, including NYU Tisch School of the Arts, New York.

In an interview with STIR, Grover talks about the making of the series *All That We Saw* as well as the themes defining his works, which include the tension between what is absent and what is present, the necessity of remembering, and the performance of resistance to keep on living.

All That We Saw #12
Image Courtesy of Chennai Photo Biennale

Dipneet Bhullar (DB): *All That We Saw*, currently part of the third edition of Chennai Photo Biennale, navigates the world of both private and public spheres to map the intimacy and tensions experienced by citizens. Could you walk us through the journey of its making from the period of conceptualisation to final execution?

Amitesh Grover (AG): I had been in conversation with the curators of the third edition of the Chennai Photo Biennale (CPB) – Arko Datta and Bhooma Padmanabhan – about what kind of work I could create for a photo biennale, given the fact that I am not a professionally trained photographer. I have never created or shown any photographic work before. So, I was a bit curious when I received this invitation from them. I am more of a conceptual artist, and I like to think more about ideas than about objects. I began by thinking about the question: What is the idea of a photograph? And this simple inquiry sowed the seeds for the series *All That We Saw*.

I also began from personal experience. I discovered that having clicked thousands of photographs over three decades, I struggle to locate a photograph that I am searching for. For example, a photograph in my family album differs from the way it is lodged in my memory, and it seems to me that my memory is always acting against the photograph. When I do find the photograph that I was looking for, I get disappointed, because it does not align with the contours of my memory, or how I recollect it. Photographs leave me yearning for more; in a sense, I am always left wrestling with a photographic image – adding to it, resisting it, rejecting it – with my memory. This personal moment became the starting point for conceptualising *All That We Saw*.

In a sharp contradiction to the belief that photographs are, in fact, memories, I was keen to propose, with the series for CPB, the photograph as a site of conflict between memory and image. To start working on the series, I gave myself an exercise: to recollect a photograph by writing its description, and assessing if I had captured its essence. I continued this exercise for a few months, and I kept refining this loop of collecting images and translating them into language, till I felt that I had created a personal method to make a photograph visible by employing text only. Eventually, this is how the series began to take a visual shape.

I wanted to use an effective font type on ivory background within a white photo frame to invoke a minimal aesthetic. This, I did to help the viewers focus on the imaginative work of recalling the image that words point them towards – there is little to see' in the frame, but so much more to project onto the frame. To develop the final aesthetic, I worked with a talented typographer, Sijia Gupta, to refine and give shape to the series as it exists now, as part of the CPB.

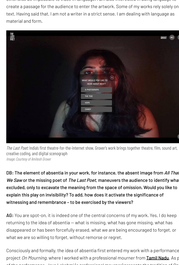
All That We Saw #13
Image Courtesy of Chennai Photo Biennale

DB: If it could be said that your art dismantles the conventional genres of disciplines in the pursuit of complicating what is taken for granted, *All That We Saw* is a continuation of a similar act to reconfigure the creative tools of expression as well as representation. Curious to know what prompted your interest in Interdisciplinary art practice, and if you could illustrate your answer by citing the example of *All That We Saw*.

AG: I have always been drawn towards interdisciplinary practice, though I never thought of developing it consciously. My interest as an artist is to reflect on how I see the world, and why I see it that way, and to create art to invite people into my shared contemplation. As a conceptual artist, I work on an idea in the same manner as a painter or sculptor works with their craft – an idea is an object that I play with. It is really the idea that decides its own possibilities, its own shape and form. Once I am in the process of creating something, I have very little control over it.

I do not hesitate to learn a new skill or to train myself in a new medium should an idea need to find a new expression. I am constantly working beyond my comfort zone – working with art disciplines and forms, which I have not been trained in as a student of art, in one decade of art practice. I have explored several new terrains, and it is perhaps this curiosity and excitement that has taken the form of an interdisciplinary practice.

To answer the second part of the question, as I mentioned, I am not a photographer, but I still wanted to work with the concept of photography. The question What is the idea of a photograph?' led me to several other curiosities: Do I take the photograph to be an object? Do I take photograph as a substitute for memory? Do I take the photograph to be a presence of what is not there? With such interests, I created this concept of an Imaginess photograph'. I would say that *All That We Saw* draws from my artistic practice that is built on poetic and philosophical wonder. The series does not carry an image, but a nudge cajoles the viewer into producing a response to it. *All That We Saw* is a continuation of my what I call, an ephemera-driven practice.

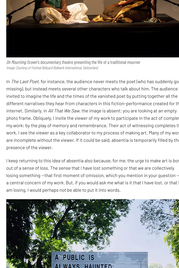


Wavelike - Grover reproduced photographs from his family archive by breaking the code that visualises them.
Image Courtesy of Foundation Kala Chhaayaa Ltd.

DB: The act of writing, written word and spoken language are seminal to your art practice. Be it cyber theatre, *The Last Poet*, the public installation, *100 Velocity Pieces* or the image text series, *All That We Saw*, the string of words have their share of consequences on the final artwork when presented to the audience. Would you like to elaborate on the presence of words in your work and the importance they hold for you as an artist?

AG: A very honest response to this would be that I do consider myself to be a failed poet. I used to write poetry as a child, and I do not think I have the courage to pursue a career as a poet. But the liking for writing has stayed with me from childhood. Even during my foundational years of training in the theatre, and later while pursuing the visual arts degree, I was always driven to both the written and spoken word. I have dozens of personal diaries in which I have written thoughts – while rehearsing for theatre productions; during travels; in the middle of daydreaming. These personal diaries have transformed into a repository of ideas that I dip into for creating my new works.

But I use language to push at its edges, to express that which might not easily captured in words. I use language as a compass to point towards experiences, which might otherwise be impossible to trace in language. I am also interested in using language to create a passage for the audience to enter the artwork. Some of my works rely solely on text. Having said that, I am not a writer in a strict sense. I am dealing with language as material and form.

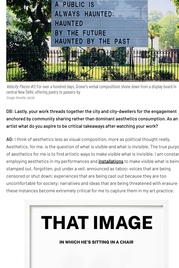


The Last Poet (solo). Kiri Theatre for the Internet (Now, Grover's work brings together theatre, film, sound art, creative coding, and digital scenography)
Image Courtesy of Amitesh Grover

DB: The element of absentia in your work, for instance, the absent image from *All That We Saw* or the missing poem of *The Last Poet*, maneuvers the audience to identify what is excluded, only to excavate the meaning from the space of omission. Would you like to explain this play on invisibility? To add, how does it activate the significance of witnessing and remembrance – to be exercised by the viewers?

AG: You are spot-on. It is indeed one of the central concerns of my work. Yes, I do keep returning to the idea of absentia – what is missing, what has gone missing, what has disappeared or has been forcefully erased, what we are being encouraged to forget, or what we are so willing to forget, without remorse or regret.

Consciously and formally, the idea of absentia first entered my work with a performance project *On Mourning*, where I worked with a professional mourner/presenter from Tamil Nadu. As part of the performance, Jaya Lakshmi (a professional mourner/presenter) the tradition of Oppari – the practice of mourning and remembrance that has existed for centuries – and talks about how she has inherited it, learnt it, and earns a living from performing the tradition. That experience moved me in unfathomable ways and changed me as a person. Since then, a powerful sentiment of loss, and of ways to remember what is lost, has stayed with me, and it has shaped my art practice in profound ways.



On Mourning Grover's documentary theatre presenting the life of a traditional mourner
Image Courtesy of Festival Boulevard Bucharest International, Switzerland

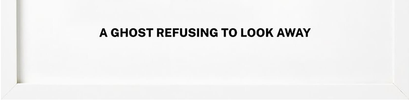
In *The Last Poet*, for instance, the audience never meets the poet (who has suddenly gone missing), but instead meets several other characters who talk about him. The audience is invited to imagine the life and the times of the vanished poet by putting together all the different narratives they hear from characters in this fiction-performance created for the internet. Similarly, in *All That We Saw*, the image is absent: you are looking at an empty photo frame. Obliquely, I invite the viewer of my work to participate in the act of completing my work: by the play of memory and remembrance. Their act of witnessing completes the work. I see the viewer as a key collaborator to my process of making art. Many of my works are incomplete without the viewer. If it could be said, absentia is temporarily filled by the presence of the viewer.

I keep returning to this idea of absentia also because, for me, the urge to make art is borne out of a sense of loss. The sense that I have lost something or that we are collectively losing something – that first moment of omission, which you mention in your question – is a central concern of my work. But, if you would ask me what is it that I have lost, or that I am losing, I would perhaps not be able to put it into words.

Velocity Pieces #27 for one a hundred days, Grover's vertical composition show down from a display board in central New Delhi, offering poetry to passers-by
Image Courtesy of Grover

DB: Lastly, your work threads together the city and city-dwellers for the engagement anchored by community sharing rather than dominant aesthetics consumption. As an artist what do you aspire to be critical takeaways after watching your work?

AG: I think of aesthetics less as visual composition, more as political thought really. Aesthetics, for me, is the question of what is visible and what is invisible. The true purpose of aesthetics for me is to find artistic ways to make what is invisible, visible. I am constantly employing aesthetics in my performances and installations to make visible what is being stamped out, forgotten, put under a veil, announced as taboo; voices that are being censored or shut down; experiences that are being cast out because they are too uncomfortable for society; narratives and ideas that are being threatened with erasure – all these instances become extremely critical for me to capture them in my art practice.



All That We Saw #27
Image: Courtesy of Chennai Photo Biennale

(The third edition of the Chennai Photo Biennale 'Maps of Disquiet' runs across the city of Chennai, India, until February 06, 2022.)

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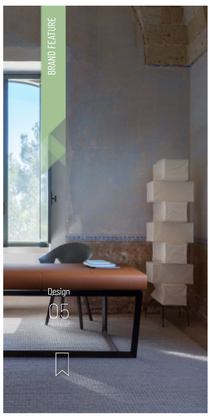

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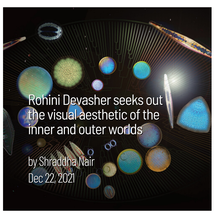

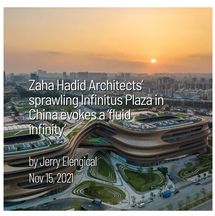

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