It’s tempting to list many of the provocations of contemporary experience—urban development, human displacement, geopolitical upheaval—as evidences when familiar artists like Gigi Scaria resist the normalization of such forces. Scaria’s historical and conceptual investigations in the medium of sculpture appear to question how the traumatic events of recent history brought home to our everyday lives.

It is fitting that this exhibition is presented at the University of Melbourne during this the Australia India Year of Friendship. Our principal collaborators in this exhibition—Asialink, the Melbourne Festival and the Australia India Institute—are all concerned with global exchange and understanding, and we are also grateful for the support of the Macquarie Bequest in fostering international exchange through the Macquarie Fellowship program, which allowed Gigi Scaria to live in Melbourne for two months this year.

Chris McCauliffe
Director, the Ian Potter Museum of Art

Gigi Scaria: Biography

Gigi Scaria was born in Kothanalloor, a village in south Kerala, India, in 1973. In 1995, after receiving a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at the College of Fine Arts, Thiruvananthapuram, Scaria moved to New Delhi where he undertook a Master of Fine Arts at Jamia Millia Islamia. Moving from Kerala to New Delhi was a significant experience that in turn influenced Scaria’s creative work. He began to make art reflecting the city’s past and present, exploring the city’s history and local architecture. Scaria’s landmark sculptures also refer to the modern city. Scaria’s creative repertoire includes a range of media such as painting, photography, installation, sculpture, digital art and video. Since 2002, he has made thirty independent films inspired by place and the people who inhabit particular locations that are imbued with different social and political conditions. The films include All day with Sohail and Marjan (2004), Home Video (2005), Raise your hands those who have touched him (2007), all about the other side (2008), and Raise your hands those who spoke to him (2010). Subjects such as the children who inhabit the streets of New Delhi, and the memories of people who have met or seen Mahamana Gandhi and Mao Zedong inspire him, while recent video work deals with the impact of the rapid growth of India’s cities and the social conditions that have been affected by this change.

Scaria’s landmark sculptures also refer to the modern city in the sculpture Someone left a horse on the shore (2007), which incorporates images of the wild horses that currently roam the beaches of New Delhi. Later, he created a sculpture that incorporated a video work titled Someone left a horse on the shore (2007), a sculpture featuring a spiral staircase. The sculpture is an invitation for viewers to step inside in order to ‘time travel’ to different locations and different times. Scaria’s work was also presented at the 3rd Singapore Biennale, where he exhibited Steps of predication (a sculpture featuring a spiral staircase), Open invitation (comprised of two paintings), and a video work titled Book yet to decipher.

Gigi Scaria’s most recent solo exhibitions include Heat: new art from South Asia at the Govett Brewster Gallery in New Plymouth, New Zealand. He also made thirteen video works in the village of Nees, Denmark. His recent solo exhibitions include Elevator from the sub-continent (2009), at Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai, 2010.

Further reading
The four films—Amusement park, Let it be, Prisms of perception and Political realism—presented in the Ian Potter Museum of Art exhibition are deliberately diverted of narrative, but not as a postmodern scramble, or a subversion or stylized cut-and-paste. Scaria denounces us, and the protagonists, for our own promiscuity of perception—how we navigate the monuments both seen and unseen around us. Individuals like Gandhi and events like the partition are each monuments, performing politics in the contemporary Indian context. The cleave that partition depicts in India, its pulling apart and pulling together, is also the kind of revivification of history that Scaria intimates in this exhibition.

The single-channel projection Amusement park (2009) is a moving collage of a city in black and white. This work, read in comparison with the work Face to face (2010), a photographic collage of overlaid vistas of Shanghai and New Delhi. That Scaria is suggesting Delhi is the new Shanghai would be a truism. But in and around the moving parts in Amusement park, Scaria builds an equivalence between the two possible cities, because Scaria asks us, do they become the one machine? The Frankenstein city.

And here’s the shot I’ve been waiting for, the shot you all have been waiting for, the shot that will make film history by claiming a country in the process of transformation could possibly leave out the contrast between the old and the new.

This is suggestive not only of progress in hyperbolic, and every city as magicy, but also of the way that we must chart our personal biographies in relation to the physiological and the physical we live, work and visit. Our centres to this is. It is perhaps a vision compounded for artists and curators, an overlord of prismatic divinities. Looking in and around the partition in Amusement park, Scaria builds an equivalence between the two possible cities, because Scaria asks us, do they become the one machine? The Frankenstein city.

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Beyond envisioning a national political portrait, Scaria’s practice is a treatise on time and distance in a forceful shaping and misshaping, in the doing and undoing of things. For Scaria, the movement of people and the city as a site of rapid change represents a collapsing of action and metaphor. Metropolitan points seem unrelated monsters. In the thrust of this, the collective and the individual and a motion. Migrants are a people who are undertaking a sentence of never-quite-home, an imprisonment of inwardness. Amusement park, a single-channel projection, communicates the ongoing distance between the city and its citizens. Neither the individual nor the crowd are visible in Scaria’s imagining of the city.

In these works, narrative is important for its occupation of time, the length of time one can spend with an individual. It is not necessarily less imperialism to say a man to do with explorative journeys. Partition was the largest single forced migration of people in history. To this day, its memory, the immortality, of its way into conversations across tables and bars, is imprinted on art and literature in contemporary India. I am affected by this significant event at two generational removes. Which perhaps means not at all. But history, like words and scents—both offensive and appealing—hang in the air it lingers.

Gigi Scaria’s move from Kerala to New Delhi (population 12 million) to study and work was a traditional kind of economic migration, a twenty-first century Bilingualism in Kochi (near Scaria’s hometowns) at the airport and in and around the town, banners and signs proclaim: ‘Kerala: God’s Own Country’. All almost every Indian city is a number of different ways, even if the names haven’t been Anglified and then repatriated again. But Kerala is different, and that geographical axis, or is it us?

In Australia our proximity is also our distance. Our idea of our country as a place of contemporary complexities is aware of its past. The comfortable nominal divisions of Old World/New World, First World/Third World, developing/developed are too categorical to be relevant or even applicable in a heterogeneous present. Scaria points to toward a different approach to social history and conceptualizing nationalism. The work Let it be, Prisms of perception and Political realism, for example, is a visual and hence historical cross-reference of images of Mao and Gandhi from childhood through to veneration. One of the recurring themes in this work compiles is the way that whole nations (perhaps via their leaders, both actual and spiritual) read as vaguely homogenous mystical congeal. Reading this work, we could feel we achieve a kind of moral high ground, or wider awareness, in a neutral (but strangely judgemental) space of secularism.

For Scaria, geopolitics necessarily plays out in content but also in materiality, where movement is broken and disembodied. Scaria says, ‘my mind works in film mode, I don’t shift the scenes, the framework is set, that is where the movement should happen’. Scaria’s work occupies the conceptual and material spaces of film, film mode, video work as traditionally defined by cinema, television, exhibition and museum environments. A film is an act of working in these gaps between different practices. Scaria achieves this very contemporary way of navigating multiple cities and multiple histories.

Art prepossesses goodness’ and virtuousness and humility. But without the anchor of the subject in these films, Scaria seems more deeply implicated in his audience. Our bad faith—our bad religion—is as much as we are to see leading along, where we seek subjectivity and narratiives, but it is a challenge to locate our position. Scaria’s films deny us this, positioning the artist as non-partisan moralist. What if we of art needed to be believed? If we the audience, determine not to seek guidance in art. Since Scaria’s work indicates that artists certainly work within structures, and employ them to push against, the mistake is for us to hold art as separate from these instructions. Scaria is not imposing correct or right thinking and right action, but rather accepting and promoting a fluid state of conjecture, an openness of debate. Here we are forced to accept a little more responsibility. The opposite of art-making is hanging around. However, art can be active but not always: artists doing the right thing. And art-making involves intense debate, discussion and regular reassessment of the precedents.
Let it be… (production still) 2012
single-channel HD video, 9:16 ratio
colour, sound
4:35 minutes
Courtesy the artist

Prisms of perception (production still) 2010
single-channel SD video, 16:9 ratio
colour, sound
4:25 minutes
Courtesy the artist
Political realism (production still) 2009
single-channel SD video, 4:3 ratio
colour, sound
3:35 minutes
Courtesy the artist
Gigi Scaria

Let it be... 2012
single-channel HD video, 9:16 ratio
colour, sound
4:35 minutes
Courtesy the artist

Gigi Scaria

Prisms of perception 2010
single-channel SD video, 16:9 ratio
colour, sound
4:25 minutes
Courtesy the artist

Gigi Scaria

Amusement park 2009
single-channel SD video, 16:9 ratio
black & white, sound
5:24 minutes
Courtesy the artist

Gigi Scaria

Political realism 2009
single-channel SD video, 4:3 ratio
colour, sound
3:35 minutes
Courtesy the artist

Curated by Bala Starr and Natalie King
Published by the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, on the occasion of the exhibition Gigi Scaria: Prisms of perception, 13–28 October 2012. The exhibition is presented in partnership with Utopia@Asialink, in association with Melbourne Festival.

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ISBN 978 0 7340 4798 4

Design by Marianna Berek-Lewis
Printed in Melbourne by Vega Press

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