GIGI
SCARIA
DUST
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The Ian Potter Museum of Art is delighted to present Gigi Scaria: Dust, a project of new work by celebrated contemporary Indian artist Gigi Scaria. Comprising a series of video works, photographs and painting, this major solo exhibition is the result of the artist’s ongoing working relationship with the Potter and the strong connection he has established with Australia in recent years. The parallels between the Australian and Indian continents revealed in this body of work are the result of Scaria’s experience as a Macgeorge Fellow at the University of Melbourne in 2012 and his subsequent participation in an artist cultural exchange program organised by the Australia India Institute in Jaipur in 2013.

As the Potter’s 2012 exhibition Prisms of perception testified, Scaria’s previous work eloquently and often playfully interrogates some of the most complex issues of the twenty-first century—the voracious force of urban development, political instability and upheaval, human dislocation, and the impact of urbanisation on social and cultural frameworks. Dust, however, returns to the landscape, presenting shimmering and spare images of salt lakes and desert expanses that could depict the Australian interior, but are in fact taken in Kutch, a district in the far western state of Gujarat in India, near the Pakistan border. Continuing the artist’s investigation of the complex and fraught relationship between notions of ‘progress’ and the environment, Dust also reflects upon solitude, the passing of time and the revelatory power of nature.

This handsome publication includes new writing on Gigi Scaria’s work by Indian poet, art critic, cultural theorist and curator, Ranjit Hoskote, and an interview between the artist and curator Bala Starr. Ranjit’s essay both captures and reflects the extraordinary poetry of Scaria’s work, and we thank him for the generosity of his contribution and the insights it contains. Acknowledgement is due to the Australia India Institute and especially its director, Professor Amitabh Mattoo. We also thank our colleagues at Asialink for facilitating Bala’s first professional visit to India in early 2011, which was the genesis of this exhibition and the Potter’s ongoing relationship with and commitment to contemporary Indian art.

Thanks are due to Bala Starr for her work on the exhibition and this publication as well as to all Potter staff for helping to ensure the exhibition’s success. Finally, we congratulate Gigi Scaria and warmly thank him for his work and enthusiastic collaboration with the entire Potter team.

Kelly Gellatly
Director, the Ian Potter Museum of Art
1. The violence of mobility and settlement

Gigi Scaria’s ensemble of twenty-four works, *Dust*, bears eloquent testimony to his continuing meditation on the vexed relationship between human ambition and the natural world. Comprising a large-scale painting, a suite of seventeen large-format photographs, five video works, and a video sculpture-installation, *Dust*—a project developed at the invitation of the Ian Potter Museum of Art—addresses one of the primary themes of Scaria’s art: the crisis that has been forced upon the planet as a result of the reckless onslaught that humankind has visited on its surroundings at a constantly accelerating pace since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. In his paintings, video works, sculptures and installations, the artist has often dwelled on the manner in which pasturelands, commons, mountains and valleys have all been relentlessly subjugated to settlement and its inevitable concomitants: architecture, pollution, and the loss of connection with the numinous, that cosmic dimension of belonging in space which might underwrite our brief and transitory passage in time. In the single-channel animation video, *Amusement park* (2009), he proposed a vision of the metropolis as the triumph of real estate over communitas: in the course of a 5:24-minute loop, a variety of architectural excrescences, all examples of the sort of glass-and-chrome futuristic kitsch that is globally favoured by contemporary developers, spring up and colonise the landscape. As they creak, groan and grind to life, these gimmicky constructions erase all prior forms of terrain and habitation, and even the memory of these. Instead, they impose on the locale and on our gaze their own impersonal, alienated and alienating presence.

In the 2006 animation video, *Panic city*, Scaria had already calibrated the rapidity and violence with which the character of a cityscape can be altered by urban expansion, as new buildings rise and rip through old neighbourhoods in staccato polychrome bursts. By this date, Scaria had explored the psychological effects of such a process of rampant urbanisation through a poetics of amnesia and dislocation in his 14-minute video work, *The lost city* (2005), in which it is not the city, but the citizen who is lost: baffled by the erasure of landmarks, baffled by the sudden but constant changes in topography, he becomes subject to a radical disorientation of which the image of a compass rose, pointing to an elusive north, becomes the ironic symbol. Varied as they are in tonality, scale and affect—as is evident, they range widely, embracing melancholia and grim humour, elegy as well as fantasia—Scaria’s works offer his viewers a sense of aperture, an opening that disrupts the fabric of what we assume, from cynicism or resignation, to be our normality. Looking through it, we may situate ourselves in relation to those larger questions of which we have perhaps lost sight, in habituating ourselves to the limitations of normality.

‘The ancient travel accounts will some day be as precious as the greatest works of art; for the earth was holy when unknown, and it will never be that again.’
Elias Canetti, *The human province*
Amusement park (production still), 2009
video, 16:9 ratio, black & white, sound
5:24 minutes
Courtesy the artist
I have invoked these earlier video works of Scaria’s in order to frame, not a new video work, but rather, the large two-panel painting that dominates Dust. Intriguingly titled Persona (watercolour and automotive paint on paper, 2013), it takes, as its protagonist, the formidable sandstone formation that rises above its low-lying surroundings in Central Australia, south-west of Alice Springs: Uluru/Ayers Rock. In geological terms, Uluru is an ancient inselberg or ‘island mountain’, an isolated rock formation in an otherwise flat area. In cultural terms, it occupies a place of importance in the sacred lore and mythology of the Aboriginal Dreamtime: it is sacred to the Anangu people from that region (or ‘country’, in Indigenous usage), for whom it is associated with creator ancestors.

A locus sanctified by millennia of shamanic ritual practice, Uluru is an archetypal example of the fémenos, or sacred precinct; and yet it has been the subject of considerable dispute, in recent decades, between the upholders of Aboriginal religious belief systems on the one hand and the votaries of the tourism and heritage industry on the other. The question of who may have access to the rock, and for what duration, has become a volatile political question. Those who regard it as a fémenos treat the visits of pleasure-seekers and leisure trippers as a violation of holy ground; those who see it as a natural wonder have sought to make it accessible for hikers and those who follow nature trails. An operational compromise has been achieved through discussion between the various stakeholders in the issue. Scaria, while alive to local sensitivities around Uluru, lifts it from its specific cultural and political context and renders it into a universal symbol. In Persona, he skews the Narcissus myth into a dystopic, Kafkaesque anti-myth: in this painting, Uluru looks into a pool and sees, not its own reflection, but a semicircle of high-rise buildings. The future lies, not in the self-image as focus of adoration, but in a self transmogrified beyond understanding or remedy, and ripe with the potential for catastrophe.

In viewing this painting, we must also consider the reference, in its title and structure, to Ingmar Bergman’s 1966 cinematic classic, Persona, featuring Bibi Andersson and Liv Ullmann. Bergman’s Persona is developed around the violent, disruptive twinning, the simultaneous pulling apart and near-identification between two women, Alma (played by Andersson) and Elisabet (Ullmann). I am tempted to read the Bergman film and the Scaria painting in adjacency—the logic of a simultaneous fusion and scission plays out in both works—although the artist observes that the film was not uppermost in his consciousness while he was working on the painting. ‘Bergman’s Persona is more of a psychological drama which deals with emotional complexities’, writes Scaria. ‘My idea was more about the persona of nature and the way the Uluru rock reflects the “persona of a geography”’

Scaria’s preoccupation with the ‘persona of a geography’ points toward a significant aspect of his practice: his approach to landscape, to the moment when landscape-as-such is born from the bodied encounter between nature and the mobile observer’s gaze and agency. Trained as a painter and active as a filmmaker, Scaria adopts the assumptions and techniques of both disciplines when he engages with the givenness of nature and the landscapes that are teased, crafted or wrested from it. In previous suites of work, he has emphasised the confrontation between nature and the observer/intruder by shifting our viewerly attention, as it were counter-intuitively, from the former to the latter. In the wittily titled sculpture, Someone left a horse on the shore (wood, mirror glass, metal wheel and paint, 2009), he presents us with a Trojan horse cast as a mobile city, complete with rows of windows. Similarly, in the more pointedly named sculpture, Settlement (wood, mirror glass and paint, 2009), he offers us an excavator, its clamshell bucket seemingly poised to drive a trench in the earth and dig out its resources; however, we see that the machine is, again, a moveable city, equipped with pleasure terraces above and the roller-shutters of storefronts below.

These sculptures achieve a seemingly surreal, even whimsical fusion of the apparently opposite mandates of mobility and settlement; in actuality, they symbolise the processes of ceaseless destruction that underwrite and quite literally undergird our metropolitan present. Scaria’s recurrent image of the tidal waves of identical, cookie-cutter apartment blocks intended for occupation by a new and burgeoning middle class reminds us poignantly of what has been lost: precisely that ‘persona of a geography’, disregarded by a policy of expansion that neither stops to develop an organic engagement with the site it has fastened upon, nor pauses to calibrate its effect on the complex entanglements of soil, water, rainfall and the seasons. Scaria’s engagement with mobility, and the manner in which it can poison the earth, creating and dissolving landscapes at whim, springs from his conviction that humankind’s transition from an ecologically responsive, rural way of life to an environmentally exploitative, urban mode of existence has provoked into being an inexorable logic of devastation. The activity of habitation involves the acts of demarcating territory and taking possession; soon, these acts are amplified into gestures of expansion and conquest, and the conquistador mobility of the modern self recognises no limits to its will, no horizons to contain its desire.

Indeed, as though in reaction against this, Scaria turns largely away from the world of habitation and the aggravations of collective life in Dust. He chooses to embrace, in dramatic contrast, such uninhabited and inhospitable tracts as still remain on this planet: the Rann of Kutch, a salt desert situated on India’s southwestern border with Pakistan; and the sands that stretch around Jaisalmer, a city in the Thar Desert in Rajasthan, also on India’s border with Pakistan. While both the Rann and Jaisalmer incarnate the condition of the border, the site of dispute,
hostility and—several times since 1947—of warfare between the two major rival
nations in South Asia, the artist’s choice of these zones is not political in any
topical sense; indeed, his exploration of these classical loci of solitary retreat and
sudden revelation is more introspective in tenor. It would not be too far-fetched
to suggest that Scaria’s quest, especially in the video works that form a major
part of the constellation of Dust, is inspired by the possibility that one might
usefully search for that holiness which the earth’s as-yet uncharted regions seem
to protect and promise to the attentive questor, as Elias Canetti indicates in the
passage quoted at the head of this essay.

2. The journey and the desert

The crunch of boots on salt-encrusted ground; the cloud mirrored in brackish
water; the onrush of wind barely stopped in its track by rock outcrops; the expanse
of drought-fissured fields: we are seized, in the suite of video works that form part
of Dust, by the sensory richness of austere experiences. Whether he is crossing
a salt desert, traversing scrubland, or negotiating a stretch of sandy wasteland,
Scaria invites us to attend to such entries, recorded in a journal of furrowed earth
and salt desert. The auditory, as much as the visual sense, dominates these
works. It prompts a hallucinatory participation in micro-level happenings that are
rendered with all the enigmatic resonance of momentous events.

These works summon us to a threshold of alertness where we apprehend every
rustle and quiver in observed reality. At the same time, by reducing the conditions
of representation to a spare minimum, Scaria deepens our temporal sensitivity.
He conveys a visionary awareness of the intimations, more subtle than apparent,
that reality offers to a sensibility tuned to its cryptic language of signs. In the
solitude and estrangement from normality that the wilderness imposes, the weight
of events is felt more clearly and sharply than when one is carried along on the
current of normality. Everyday events do not evaporate but settle in the mind as
precipitates, assume the pensive gravity of the pause, become foci for meditation.
Consider, for instance, the 3:14-minute single-channel video work Followers (2013),
set at the edge between scrub and desert in Jaisalmer, Rajasthan. Shown on a
large screen, this work is restful, seemingly an excellent example of the deceptive
‘documentary aesthetic’5 that characterises this suite of works: a flock of sheep
follow their leader, the bell-wether, across the frame; when the bell-wether stops,
they stop; when the bell-wether sits, they sit. An unremarkable moment in the
millennial history of nomadic grazing takes on, for a brief moment of illumination,
the gravity of a parable about societies and their unthinking adherence to
uncritical conformity. Inverted (2013), a mysterious 3:20-minute single-channel
video, does not yield up a moral so easily: it captures our attention with its single
capsized boat floating on a pool of brackish water, which we recognise to be water
only through the sign of the boat. Left to itself, it would be a cauldron in shades
of brown and tan, set in the midst of crystalline salt accretions, as if in
a phantasmagoria conjured up by Coleridge.
Scaria’s travels into these difficult, climatically hostile regions were not made on the spur of the moment, in some Romantic act of turning away. They involved careful planning and preparation, and the company of an expert who could guide him through the physically and psychologically demanding experience of being far outside the zone of comfort within which a city dweller sustains himself. As he entered the Rann and scoured the dune lands of the Thar, though, he found himself absorbed into the solitude of the questor. He found the distinction between space and time dissolving, without any firm features in relation to which he could anchor the miles or the hours; he re-figured it through gesture, by running into the zone, or towards the camera, by striding purposefully towards an island of vegetation in the far distance, by circling around a rare pool of water. These gestures were traced on the surface of impermanence: they left no mark on the uncharted terrain, which is governed by its own infinitesimal rhythms of periodic change; they made sense only to the extent that they allowed the artist, Crusoe-like, to map, measure and memorialise his own activity in the face of the natural expanses in which he found himself.

His situation was not unlike that annotated by Bruce Chatwin, indefatigable connoisseur of the anatomy of restlessness, in The songlines: ‘Any nomad migration must be organized with the precision and flexibility of a military campaign. Behind, the grass is shrinking. Ahead, the passes may be blocked with snow. Most nomads claim to “own” their migration paths (in Arabic Il-Rãh, “The Way”), but in practice they only lay claim to seasonal grazing rights. Time and space are thus dissolved around each other: a month and a stretch of road are synonymous.’ The encounters that Scaria stages with the natural elements in Dusk remind us that the desert, the expanse of seeming nothingness, has historically been identified as a place of solitude and revelation. Classically, in the Abrahamic tradition, it is the site of prophecy and revelation, gnosis and self-discovery.

Across the spiritual traditions and wisdom lineages of the world, too, it has been one of the requirements of shamanic initiation or Gnostic retreat for the questor to step outside his or her zone of comfort, to risk the Self in the face of the Other or in the presence of Elsewhere. Whether the questor is a pilgrim, an explorer, a shaman or, more modestly, a tourist, to go on a journey is to invite the risk of transformation through the hermeneutics of encounter, by entering a threshold space, a liminal situation where one’s identity might be transmuted or redefined.

Travelling, especially over long distances requiring prolonged exposure to nature at its most direct, can prompt an access into meditative states. Such travel also encourages a profound investigation into the assumptions of belonging: does one belong simply and unproblematically within such regular frameworks of definition as ethnicity, nationality, sectarian or civic affiliation; or must one lay these aside to demonstrate a responsiveness to a larger, more inclusive, even cosmic dimension of life? Such questions inhabit Scaria’s new performance video works, Hour-glass and Once upon a time.

3. The terrors and consolations of the horizon

A moving figure occupies our attention in the vacant expanse that fills the frame in the 4:48-minute video projection, Hour-glass (2013). Its movements are staged against the horizon that marks the border between a salt desert and an acetylene sky. It’s close enough to arouse our interest in its fate, but too far away to tell whether it’s approaching us or moving away. On balance, it seems to be moving away. Or is it? Clearly, this is a human figure, in all its indecisiveness, anxiety and vulnerability in the cosmic scheme of things. In fact, it is the artist himself. Scaria’s moving figure, its performance set in the Rann of Kutch, can trace its descent from a genealogy that begins with Caspar David Friedrich’s celebrated Rückenfigur, the figure seen from behind: a figure of mystery, melancholia, embodying a profound longing for the infinite, a nostalgia for some cosmic state of being and belonging from which, it would appear, humankind has been decisively exiled.

At once vatic and disenfranchised, the Rückenfigur has fascinated Scaria over a considerable period. It recurs in Wanderer above the sea (watercolour on paper, 2009), his riff on the famous Friedrich painting, Wanderer above the sea of fog (oil, 1818), Friedrich’s hero with his coat flapping in the wind—adopted by the votaries of Romanticism and still frequently cited in an array of cultural productions including post-apocalyptic science-fiction movies—is replaced in Scaria’s version by a man costumed in the regalia of a prince of British Raj vintage. Instead of the fog-carpeted mountain ranges of the original, this visitor from the colonial past gazes out at a vista of built form, sierra upon sierra of high-rise apartment blocks at the edge of some Indian metropolis. The Rückenfigur leads the viewer into the space of uncertainty and mystery, which invites exploration: terra incognita. If Scaria has been disposed to subject it to affectionate irony in earlier works, he follows it, in Dusk, as a guide pointing to out-of-body feelings of awe in the face of an overwhelming, once-lost totality, a recognition of the Sublime.

The presence of the Sublime suffuses the entire action of the 32-minute video, Once upon a time (2013), which consists of the artist’s sighting of, and approach towards, an island of vegetation that manifests itself like an apparition in the middle of the salt desert. Is it an oasis? Is it a mirage? The horizon communicates itself here as an edge, a limit etched against the blankness of the desert. It sets a limit for endurance, beyond which may lie unnamed terrors; yet it also promises the consolations of a destination etched against the blankness of the desert. It sets a limit for endurance, but also a boundary condition to be hoped for, a goal whose accomplishment may be anticipated. The distant vegetation of the island, at first illusory and unreal, gradually gains definition and reality as it comes into view, and is finally arrived at; the island’s orange mass stands out against the crystal-veined surface of the salt desert. The title clues us to what the mythologist and scholar of world religions, Mircea Eliade, would have described as the in illo tempore character of this work: barely camouflaged by the tonality of documentation, this is a fabular composition, a quest narrative; its temporality is that of the myth of the heroic journey.
In his video works, Scaria has returned constantly to another obsessive articulation of the horizon: to the movement of the eye as it follows a vehicle moving across the landscape, along yet also against the line of the horizon. In his five-channel video, *Prisms of perception* (4:25 minutes, 2010), for instance, a train travels from left to right across five screens, shifting seamlessly from one avatar to another as it goes; it switches rapidly from the temporality and speed of the old-fashioned freight train through various and increasingly sophisticated stages of locomotive innovation, until it shoots across the last screen as a *shinkansen* or bullet train. The origins of this recurrent image of the train as vehicle, symbol and subject of irrevocable historical change in Scaria’s oeuvre lie in a childhood memory; in Kothanalloor, his childhood home in the southern Indian state of Kerala, the railway tracks ran behind his home, so that the sight and sound of passing trains are encoded into his recollection. In *Dust*, Scaria articulates his fascination with the horizon—which sets up a limit, marks a perimeter of anticipation, and invites transgression in the form of exploration, all at once—in the hexagonal video sculpture-installation, *Against gravity* (2013). Its 3:10-minute loop, circling across six monitors, follows the routine of a truck carrying a freight of salt across the adobe and umber tones of a flat, relatively featureless landscape. The truck breaches the continuity and eternity of the horizon, replacing it with a metronomy of its own.

Whether by re-enacting the questor’s mythic journey or re-activating the shock of historical transformation, Scaria refastens the wandering consciousness to an awareness of beginnings, a reverie of renewal and replenishment, a drama of anticipation.

4. Finding the way by losing it

The title of Scaria’s exhibition, unadorned as it seems, carries the resonance of a familiar yet ominous biblical phrase, which occurs in the fate that God spells out for humankind while expelling Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. As mortals on earth, the cycle of strenuous labour is to be their lot, from which the only amnesty is death; as the Lord phrases it in Genesis 3:19, in the standard King James Bible version: ‘In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return’. This awareness of the transitory nature of human existence, combined with the permanent effects of human intervention in the planet’s life, informs Scaria’s project: as he surveys the evidence of ecological devastation in the zones he explores, he appears to perform a palpation, to borrow a term from medical practice. Palpation is the procedure employed by a medical practitioner while physically examining a patient, during which s/he may probe by touch, using degrees of gentle pressure, to feel and define the location, contour, size or firmness of an internal object, usually an organ.

*Wanderer above the sea*, 2009
watercolour on paper
152.4 x 213.4 cm
Private collection
In his suite of seventeen large-format photographs presented as part of *Dust*, Scaria performs a palpation of the terrestrial expanses that open before him, probing them at the scale of intimacy by adroit means of the detail. He pauses to record the endless overhead electric lines that cross the wasteland, the poles anchored by stone weights to hold them in place during sandstorms; in one place, he stops to mourn a pole that has been hurled to the ground by the wind and broken. Elsewhere, his camera registers birds among heaped mountains of salt being readied for processing and transportation to depots in distant cities. The well-worn circular tracks of lorries in the sludge suggest a ritual order when they are merely evidence of industrial processes; a channel hacked through brackish land gives us the impression of water surging like electricity whilst, in fact, it must struggle to articulate itself against the choking residues of summer drought and monsoon freshet. Dune, dust, salt, sand, silt, sludge, mud: lavishly rendering the striated, sedimentary textures of the unpromising materials found in ditch, trench and pit, Scaria’s photographic images seem to spell out the alphabet of another planet, a planet that discloses itself to those who would journey across it without maps. We have no names for the places he shows us.

By this circuitous detour through western India, with its marked affinities to the Australian outback, Scaria leads us to confront a question that has been central to the political imagination of the Australian nation: that of cartography, its use as a scientific instrument and its abuse as a mode of ideological fantasy. Too often, the map does not underline what exists in nature so much as it naturalises cultural associations that have been invented. We are reminded, by these images, of Australia’s specific history of cartography, and the intensity with which the map has served as combat ground between settlement and mobility, colonialism and justice. In Australia, the European explorer’s map embodied the expansionist imperial desire to make sense of the earth and fix that sense in stable definitions. Western cartography, and its claim to absolute dominion over all the world’s territories and their inhabitants, was only one aspect of the colonialist project. Australia’s colonisers visited unspeakably violent trauma on the island-continent’s Indigenous people, subjugating them to the economic and political dictates of empire while denigrating and attempting to erase their systems of belief, knowledge, value and being. Colonial cartography served the interests of those who used it to chart, justify and consolidate imperial power in territories that had originally been the homelands of Australia’s Indigenous people. Meanwhile, the colonial complex of power, knowledge, education and control ensured the eclipse—for several centuries—of the intuitive modes by which the Aboriginal people divined the voices, shapes and memories accreted into a landscape generated through song, rite and story. In Indigenous Australian culture, the earth continually renewes its enchantment by disclosing itself to the travelling imagination; simultaneously, it reaffirms the traveller’s coordinates of belonging through a sequence of epiphanies.

The historian Paul Carter, meditating on the interval between the existence of a place independent of foreign observers who arrive with their imperial ambitions and their establishment of dominion over it in name, fact and brutal intervention, observes:

*Before the name: what was the place like before it was named? … The sound of voices calling to each other out of sight, displaying the invisible space, making it answer. Birds with human voices. The legend of giants. What we see is what the first comers did not see: a place, not a historical space. A place, a historical fact, detached from its travellers; static, at anchor, as if it was always there, bland, visible. Standing at this well-known point, the spatial event is replaced by a historical stage. Only the actors are absent. Even as we look towards the horizon or turn away down fixed routes, our gaze sees through the space of history, as if it was never there. In its place, nostalgia for the past, cloudy time, the repetition of facts. The fact that where we stand and how we go is history: this we do not see.*

In Gigi Scaria’s understanding of the world, you travel best when you put away the map, embrace the land most completely when you have no names to navigate by and no names to bestow: you find the way only by losing it.
Notes

2 Gigi Scaria, email exchange with the author, 22 August 2013.
3 The phrase is the artist’s. Gigi Scaria, email exchange with the author, 22 August 2013.

Ranjit Hoskote 2013

Ranjit Hoskote is a cultural theorist, curator and poet; he curated the first Indian national pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2011), which included Gigi Scaria’s interactive video installation, *Elevator from the subcontinent*.
Cat. no. 5
Divided by accident I, 2013
inkjet print
66.7 x 100 cm

Cat. no. 6
Divided by accident II, 2013
inkjet print
66.7 x 100 cm
Previous pages
Cat. no. 7
Divided by accident III (detail), 2013
inkjet print
66.7 x 100 cm

Cat. no. 9
Exiled I, 2013
inkjet print
66.7 x 100 cm
Cat. no. 10
*Exiled II*, 2013
inkjet print
66.7 x 100 cm

Cat. no. 11
*Exiled III*, 2013
inkjet print
66.7 x 100 cm
Cat. no. 3
Crushed to the ground I, 2013
inkjet print
66.7 x 100 cm

Cat. no. 4
Crushed to the ground II, 2013
inkjet print
66.7 x 100 cm
Cat. no. 17
Time out (detail), 2013
inkjet prints
diptych, each sheet 100 x 66.7 cm

Cat. no. 14
Persona I, 2013
inkjet print
66.7 x 100 cm
Cat. no. 15
Persona II, 2013
inkjet print
66.7 x 100 cm
Previous pages
Cat. no. 8
Dust (detail), 2013
inkjet print
66.7 x 100 cm

Cat. no. 12
Land faded, 2013
inkjet print
66.7 x 100 cm
Previous pages
Cat. no. 13
Overflow (detail), 2013
inkjet print
66.7 x 100 cm

Cat. no. 1
Camel and the needle (detail), 2013
inkjet print
66.7 x 100 cm

Cat. no. 16
Systems of support, 2013
inkjet print
66.7 x 100 cm
Cat. no. 2
Clueless, 2013
inkjet print
66.7 x 100 cm
Cat. no. 23

Against gravity (frames from the film), 2013
Cat. no. 20
Followers (frame from the film), 2013
Cat. no. 18
Hour-glass (frames from the film), 2013
Cat. no. 21
Salt (frame from the film), 2013
Once upon a time (frames from the film), 2013
Cat. no. 22
inverted (frame from the film), 2013
Cat. no. 24
Persona, 2013
watercolour and automotive paint on paper
diptych, each sheet 199 x 146 cm
AN INTERVIEW WITH GIGI SCARIA

BALA STARR

Bala Starr: In spring last year while living in Melbourne as a Macgeorge Fellow, you travelled around Victoria and also by road to Canberra. What took your interest in the landscape on those journeys?

Gigi Scaria: The observation I’d always made about Australia was that it’s a land that has got many characters in the same place. Those two months in Victoria made me aware of many things in connection with the land—especially the gold rush and what happened before and after gold was found, and how people from other parts of the world moved to Victoria and camped. It was occupied and then they started digging the land and actually … almost, you know, upturned it. Each and every inch of the land was dug and the geography of that region changed drastically to something else. You can see that different people came and settled with their own culture and habits. The fruit they brought carried seeds of a different geography. You can see the European trees standing close together, among the existing characters. It’s a very weird landscape in one sense.

And as well there were other kinds of inputs in the way in which politics, power and the landscape worked together. Because things are uprooted, taken from somewhere else and planted—obviously not a very normal, natural process—the landscape gets affected by certain kinds of interventions. It is informed by a cultural logic, which may not be the logic of nature. So I was quite fascinated by and interested in the look of this landscape and by the people who interpreted that.

When you travelled to central Victoria, was the story of the changes particularly apparent because of the evidence in the landscape?

No, as an outsider, I couldn’t make out the story behind the landscape while looking at it, and that’s precisely the point.

It’s hard to recognise what has happened without experience or local knowledge.

I wouldn’t have known without being informed. Of course I recognised that certain trees and plants were not native. Like when I travelled to TarraWarra Museum of Art; that landscape, the vineyards, is typically European. It is absolutely constructed. The natural formations have been aesthetically altered to please the vision of those who settled there.
You don’t see much of this kind of intervention in the Indian landscape. Or rather, these days it happens at a very different level because of the economic and construction boom, which has nothing to do with beauty or aesthetics. India’s interventions are more about power and accumulation and occupying places for material benefit. When you look at the landscape in Europe, you see the way it has been ‘beautified’ according to specific concepts, where each and every detail is considered—the location of a plant, where a tree is situated, how trees are pruned or a branch removed. There is a vision behind this intervention, and if you frame it you get perfect pictures.

So you’re interested in the motivations behind changes to the landscape as much as the evidence of those changes?

Yes, the politics of the landscape in one sense. But I find it particularly interesting where different kinds of landscapes are formed in the same geographical plateau or arena. And then what kind of culture has formed or informed or developed in and of that landscape. Because any landscape is very much a part of its inhabitants. You cannot extract a landscape from a person who lives in that particular geography.

Although I’ve lived in Delhi for the last eighteen years, the landscape of [my home state] Kerala, its water and lagoons and coconut groves etc., remains inside me. When you explore places that are distinctly different, which have no connection with your past or your childhood memory, then you invent a landscape within the landscape that you have in your mind. It’s a kind of comparison, like a dialogue with new personalities or ideas. You compare ‘your’ landscape with the new landscape that you find in front of you.

We make this comparison when we move from one city to another, one territory or nation to another. We have something that is close to us, within us, and we’re comparing that place with the place that we are encountering for the first time.

You have returned to Kerala regularly while you’ve been living in Delhi. Kerala, its water and lagoons and coconut groves etc., remains inside me. When you explore places that are distinctly different, which have no connection with your past or your childhood memory, then you invent a landscape within the landscape that you have in your mind. It’s a kind of comparison, like a dialogue with new personalities or ideas. You compare ‘your’ landscape with the new landscape that you find in front of you.

When I came to Delhi I slowly began thinking about its impossible systems, size and mechanisms. That was when I discovered that these are huge issues. Because there are millions of people living in Delhi—it is not one person and their house and the surrounding area as it is in my village—it’s about millions coexisting.

This has become a problem to be solved. Industry has failed on so many levels. I don’t think there is a lack of awareness in India about these things. And neither do I think that it is some sort of a civilisational lack. It is troubling that we can’t treat our environment properly, but I don’t know what the answers are. Clearly we cannot trade our environment.

I’m interested in the difference between very specific responses and ways of living in dissimilar places. Also the sense of how each place is in some ways the same as another. One of the things that immediately struck me looking at your photographs for the first time was that these images might depict Russia, or part of the United States, or South America, or part of Australia. There are many familiar elements. Partly it is the ubiquity of the man-made elements in the landscape that suggests the landscape could be anywhere.

Yes.

The horizon line also unifies these works. How did these particular places in India close to the border with Pakistan have this extraordinary effect on you while they also ‘could be anywhere’?

That’s actually a very important point in the whole exhibition. This is where the mystery happens. I am fascinated by this non-identifiable locality. It is like if I say that right now [while we are speaking on the telephone] I am neither there with you nor exclusively here. I am also neither a Keralaite, nor a Delhiite, because I’ve spent equal amounts of time in both places. That doesn’t mean that I have created a non-existing space. It’s rather that I probably operate in both spaces with the same intensity.

I am also hinting at a spiritual space, which has something to do with the purpose of making images like this. It’s a space of non-existence where you have neither certain information nor a sense of belonging. Rather, at any moment your sense of belonging gets divided and is dispersed in different directions. But finally, wherever you are, you belong to that place.

It’s about perception, and when I encountered the vastness of Kutch, I felt very comfortable with that space. Of course people live wherever I have taken photographs but I don’t show them. In the past when I have generated images of landscapes or cityscapes it can feel as if I have depopulated the spaces, although I haven’t actually ‘done’ anything to them—if there are no people in a photograph, I haven’t ‘deleted’ them, they were never there.
So when it comes to this particular place and land where there are few people, the work actually takes you to another point all together. The photograph Camel and the needle shows on the horizon the camel cart that carries you and then drops you at a place in the desert from which you must continue on foot.

May I also ask in relation to photographs like, say, Crushed to the ground, or Overflow and even Time out, there are no people in these works as you’ve said, and yet they convey evidence of enormous industry. And you can almost feel the presence of the cities that these industries are feeding.

Yes, most of these places have an effect of decay. They are decadent spaces on many levels.

If you look at the substance in these photographs, the salt, nothing else can grow or exist in these places because of it. While salt is a central ingredient for the industry here, you see how people also become dependent on their conditions. In order to survive you use something that is going to grind you to the ground. That is the human way of taking things on. So obviously these places haven’t got enormous populations and, except for some parts where salt is cultivated, they are abandoned or empty.

Some of the images also depict the remnants of ancient well-organised societies—the Harappan civilisation which existed around 4,000 years ago—in the same frame as the contemporary industry.

I’d like to discuss the shift evident in this new series of works. With your previous work, we might talk of the architecture and of cities as much as humour and irony and commentary about urbanism and civic ideas. There are curators, including key international curators like Hou Hanru, for example, whose work engages with urbanism in parallel to your practice, adopting a term like ‘post-planning’ to describe what happens when modifications occur in architectural thinking, in relation to mega-cities, in order to repair or better suit the speed of change. These sorts of scenarios seem to link to your previous work especially. With your current work, I’m interested in the absence of architecture, as much as the presence of a new landscape. Can you talk about the contemplative character of Dust, a body of work that is devoid of these architectural smudges?

It’s very interesting that you mention the absence of architecture in this work, because an exhibition I had in 2007 was titled Absence of an architect, which was all about New Delhi [laughs].

A major area of interest for me has been ideas about cities and urban spaces. But thinking along those lines in connection with the absence of an architect in a city, and then, as you say, the absence of architecture. I am of course going to continue to use architecture. It’s not like I’m deviating from those urban spaces to go somewhere else.

I have been shocked by the things that I’ve seen and learned in my beloved city Delhi. And we have witnessed drastic changes brought about by the economic boom and globalisation, but after a point one realises that these changes have not improved life in the city. Being critically engaged in my work with cities like New Delhi can make one feel empty at times, because social change takes place as a result of so many factors. It’s not as though artists can drastically change a system. But at the same time, you always give work a certain kind of ‘hinge’ so as to expand the way in which you look at certain things and provide different viewpoints. This is what I think an artist can do in this particular area. But it is limited, and politicians or activists can do much more.

When I travel—for instance my time visiting Melbourne last year—there is a space in which I look around and see whether I can connect this urbanism to something else, something outside of where I am living or understanding or connecting specifically to my own experiences and references. So in one sense, Dust is part of a journey that has taken me a step outside from where I’ve comfortably placed myself. The geography and the structure in these new works expand, accommodating a certain set of ‘outside’ spaces with which I was not previously familiar. This is how I look at this body of work in connection with my previous work.

Your last solo exhibition was in 2009 and you’ve participated in many different projects since then. I imagine that this current exhibition and your time here in Australia last year has provided quite a different context for your thinking.

Obviously there are enormous changes in these works in a visual sense but if you think in terms of the concept on which they are based, there isn’t a major shift. I think we are neither at the beginning nor at the end. It’s a constant process of expansion.

The visual changes are a great achievement.

I’m not sure I can always be completely optimistic about ideas of civilisation and progress [laughs]. Rather, we are somewhere and we can’t ever be sure where that might be. So in the conceptual sense, the place we cannot identify or locate is actually the mental space in which we live. I mean it may not be that ‘confused space of existence’. It’s more like we are aware of being somewhere, but we have no clue where exactly that might be. So I won’t call it a confused space; it’s a space of nature and that is probably the only way we can ever quite understand it.
Gigi, can we now turn away from your experience of the land and place, to talk about the development of your practice? From the very first time I saw your sculpture and videos, it struck me that your work was quite different from other contemporary art I was seeing at the time [early 2011] in India. It stood apart from a lot of work, whether that was because it wasn’t so involved with the kinds of identity thematics or cultural thematics that were then prevalent. There was a difference in tone and a remove from those sorts of issues.

It is interesting too to consider Chaitanya Sambrani’s conversations last year about the generation of Indian artists to which you belong. I noticed myself, during those trips to India, how twentieth-century politics looms large in the new art of the twenty-first century. In his remarks at the opening of your Prisms of perception and Jitish Kallat’s Circa exhibitions at the Ian Potter Museum of Art last year, Chaitanya discussed a generation of artists under forty, who could be described as pursuing ‘anti-nation building’ practices rather than the ‘nation building’ ethos of earlier generations. Do you think of yourself as part of a different or new generation of Indian artists?

That is actually a very complex issue on many levels because when I think about the generation to which I belong, I think of myself as a cusp between the burdened past and the disconnected future.

For instance, it might be as simple as mentioning how the advancement of technology and the prominence of social media has changed the behaviour and lifestyle of a younger generation. But the issue of associating with a national identity can be problematic when thinking about the way in which the state machinery acts in different regions of India. It is also interesting to observe how the new generation differs and deviates from a particular sense of nationalism, how then this particular identity of connecting with nation has not progressed any further. These feelings come with a certain level of disillusionment and I suppose this is what Chaitanya was describing.

I think this sense of disillusionment is shared by an older generation of artists as well as the younger, for different reasons. Or perhaps I associate myself with the aspirations of the post-independence generation, as I’m quite interested in that history and how it has been shaped or formed. At the same time I connect very well with the present, its ambitions and aspirations.

What these generations share is a kind of freedom and at the same time questioning the authorities and their practices, which largely have been entrenched in the Indian scenario. What followed independence was more like a transition of power from the British to the upper caste and the feudal lords who then maintained the status quo in India. So you are not actually bringing about an alternative more equitable social system, but you’re always being assimilated by the existing system without changing it. So the idea of India as a democracy with equal rights for everyone etc. is not now as evident as those who fought for freedom imagined it would be.

Are the ideas Chaitanya Sambrani describes around identity and nation in part a concern for a broader sense of questioning around the state and its capacities, including a sort of post-identity phase to contemporary art thinking?

When you actually come to deal with art, in one sense you also understand the limitations artists have in connection with a social system or the role art plays in changing the social system. You actually doubt the effect art has in society; how much it can reach the people and how much it is accommodated in mainstream activities of any sort. You want to think past a patronage of cultural certainties or nationalities and obviously art has a very limited audience. It probably circulates directly to an international audience without gaining traction in the location where it was born.

We haven’t yet discussed the new performance videos, Hour-glass and Once upon a time. Is this the first time you’ve made performance videos of this kind?

Yes, I performed, but I have no history that connects with performance. Performance art has its own historical lineage. I would rather understand this particular work by its sense and feeling of space—a photograph would not have been enough to capture that vastness. I don’t think you could ever otherwise get that feeling.

I was amazed myself. There was no landmark with which I could orientate myself and I think that’s precisely the point. I thought, what if I fix the camera in one position and try to experience the vastness? It’s obviously been framed and the focus is very clear. So I would say it’s more like capturing the space rather than performing in it. I am locating myself in a kind of measurement device. The act of experiencing cannot be transferred. So the attempt is to make sense of an action which translates the experience into a tangible mode.
Gigi Scaria was born in Kothanalloor, a village in southern Kerala, India, in 1973. In 1993, after completing a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at the College of Fine Arts, Thiruvananthapuram, Scaria moved to New Delhi where he undertook a Master of Arts at Jamia Millia Islamia. In the mid-1990s, while establishing his career as a professional artist, Scaria also illustrated children’s books and taught art at an experimental school in New Delhi.

By 2000, increased international exposure was accompanied by prestigious residency opportunities and solo exhibitions in India, Germany, America, Hungary, the Republic of Korea and the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. In 2002, Scaria was awarded an Inlaks Scholarship, and was artist-in-residence at UNIDEE, Cittadellarte-Pistoletto Foundation, Biella, Italy. That year, he also participated in his first exhibition in Australia, Indians + cowboys, at Gallery 4A, Sydney.

Scaria’s creative repertoire includes painting, photography, installation, sculpture, and video. Since 2002, he has made over thirty-five video works including: A day with Sahai and Maryan (2004), Home: in/out (2005), Raise your hands those who have touched him (2007), All about the other side (2008), and Raise your hands those who have spoken to him (2010). Subjects of early videos include the children who inhabit the streets of New Delhi, and the memories of people who have met or seen Mahatma Gandhi and Mao Zedong, 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 first project for an American museum, Gigi Scaria: City unclaimed, was held in 2013 at the Smart Museum of Art, the University of Chicago. A large photo-based mural of an imaginary cityscape, and a 3.6 metre high water fountain were sited in the museum’s reception for twelve months. Scaria’s recent solo exhibitions, in 2013 at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, Parkville, Vic., and presented an exhibition of video works at the Ian Potter Museum of Art as part of the Melbourne Festival. In January 2013 Scaria was a participant in the Australia India Institute artists’ retreat in Jaipur, India.

The following year Scaria was one of five artists (with Zarina Hashmi, Sonal Jain, Mriganka Madhukailiya and Praneet Soi) to represent India at the 54th Venice Biennale in the exhibition Everyone agrees: it’s about to explode, curated by Ranjit Hoskote. Scaria exhibited a major installation, Elevator from the sub-continent, which created a simulated space representing an actual elevator that the audience was invited to step inside in order to ‘time travel’ to different locations in India. In 2011 Scaria’s work was presented at the 3rd Singapore Biennale as well as in Crossroads: India escalate for the Prague Biennale.

In 2012 Scaria participated in the OzAsia Festival exhibition The needle on the gauge: the testimonial image in the work of seven Indian artists, Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide, and he created a sculptural installation for the exhibition Topical heat: new art from South Asia at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth, New Zealand. His work also appeared in Critical mass at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, the first major exhibition to introduce contemporary Indian art to the Israeli public. Gigi Scaria was a 2012 University of Melbourne Macgeorge Fellow, and presented an exhibition of video works at the Ian Potter Museum of Art as part of the Melbourne Festival. In January 2013 Scaria was a participant in the Australia India Institute artists’ retreat in Jaipur, India.

Further reading


Kirpalani, Amita, ‘Bad religion’, in Gigi Scaria: Prisms of perception, the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, Parkville, Vic., 2012.


www.gigiscaria.in
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All works courtesy the artist.
Gigi Scaria: Dust

Curated by Bala Starr

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The Ian Potter Museum of Art
The University of Melbourne
Victoria 3010 Australia
Email potter-info@unimelb.edu.au
www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au

Patron
Lady Potter AC

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