Born in 1973 in Kothanalloor, a village in the southern Indian state of Kerala, Gigi Scaria lives and works in New Delhi. *Dust* is an exhibition of new work produced especially for the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, on until 2 February 2014.
Displayed over three galleries, the exhibition takes as its subject the geography of the Rann of Kutch and the Thar Desert, located on India’s border with Pakistan. In April and May this year, Gigi Scaria travelled to this far western part of India to experience the landscape on foot. His photographs and videos record the seasonally affected terrain of salt marshes, quarries, distant ‘islands’ of vegetation, and endless horizons. It is a landscape that is at the same time unusual and familiar, evoking associations with many other desert regions including those in Australia.

Scaria describes the places he visited as ‘non-identifiable localities’ and ‘spaces of non-existence’; places in which we might be most present by means of our imagination, memory and perception as much as by analysis of the physical evidence we see before us.

While Dust marks a visual departure from the animated architecture and modified cityscapes of Scaria’s previous work, it continues his address to what catalogue essayist Ranjit Hoskote describes as one of the major themes of his art: ‘the crisis that has been forced upon the planet as a result of the reckless onslaught that humankind has visited on its surroundings’. How did your awareness of our effect on the land first develop? Was it in Kerala or only later when you moved to New Delhi?

Gigi Scaria: 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 civilizational 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.

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?

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This following is an excerpt from a longer interview between the exhibition’s curator, Bala Starr (in Melbourne), and Gigi Scaria (in New Delhi), which took place over the telephone and via email in August 2013.

Bala Starr: You have returned to Kerala regularly while you’ve been living in Delhi. Kerala is densely settled, but also verdant, tropical. In his essay for this catalogue Ranjit Hoskote describes one of the major themes of your art as, ‘the crisis that has been foisted upon the planet as a result of the reckless onslaught that humankind has visited on its surroundings’. How did your awareness of our effect on the land first develop? Was it in Kerala or only later when you moved to New Delhi?

Gigi Scaria: 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 civilizational 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.

BS: 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?

GS: 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 where I have taken photographs but I don’t show them. 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.