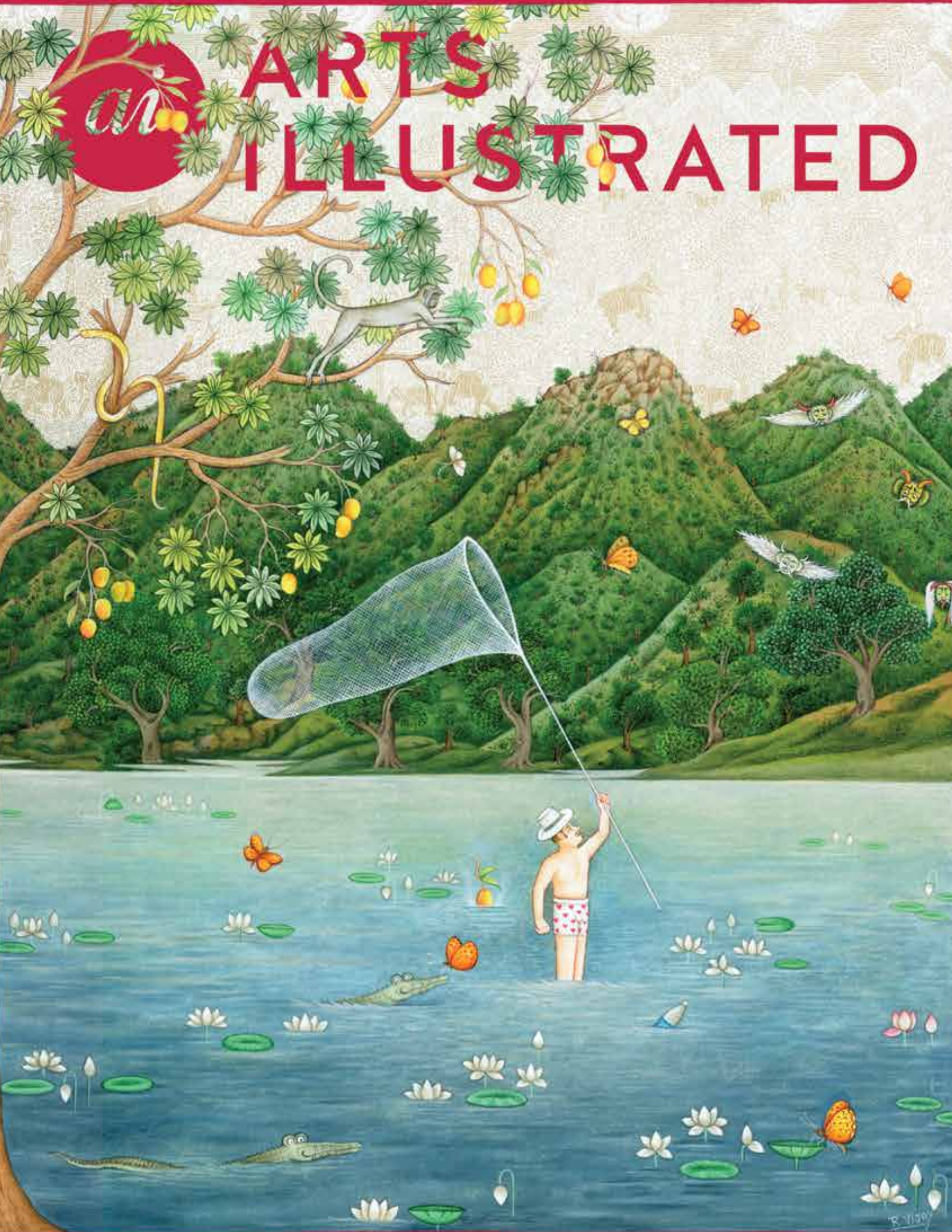


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Publisher's note

The realms of imagination that surround us give us unexpected glimpses of otherworldliness, often sandwiched between the moments of ordinariness. This world is delicious because it allows you free interpretation; but it is also tricky because, once discovered, it follows you around like a shadow.

This issue of Arts Illustrated, we take on the big, squishy, shape-shifting word – Fantasy. We look at artists who have this capacity to not only clearly see and feel the pulsating throb of reality around them but also have the ability to look deeper, look beyond, to see and feel the steady thrum of magic. Not the magic of fairytales, but that of thought, dialogue and expression wrapped in a cloak of flamboyance.

Vincent Adaikalraj



Editor's note

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, an American fantasy sitcom called *Out of this World* would become my first conscious brush with fantasy. I remember watching sporadic episodes as a child, utterly fascinated with the half-human-half-alien protagonist, Evie (later, *WALL.E*'s 'Ee-vah' would bring back strong memories), who could freeze time on earth. *Small Wonder*'s 'Vicky' suddenly paled in comparison. Magic was accessible and did not have to be a robot (even if only half human), and that became such an indelible part of an internal reality that I couldn't un-magic it away. Something in the fabric of the world changed; a broken needle that had to be cast away but could be replaced with a shinier, more malleable version. If we chose to. Much later, I would discover the *Lord of the Rings* – and then, of course, there would be no looking back.

This act of choice is what sets the world of fantasy apart. It isn't forcing you to believe or even benignly accept. It simply exists by virtue of its ability to remain, to float, like a lost petal content to settle anywhere. And, for me, that sense of magic which defines this space isn't so much about spells and wizards, but about the relatability of it all, filled with the hope that we invest in an eyelash carrying a wish.

We found that all our stories this issue were conscious acts of choice by the artist(e)s to enter realms of the absurd, the theatrical, the glamorous, the glitzy, the ordinary, and the narrative patterns we are constantly seeing and unseeing. Sometimes the results are surprising, almost giddily so, and sometimes introspective, like a neglected switch that is suddenly found and switched on. It is also about beauty, this issue, of a kind that leaves you breathless while holding your hand.

Would I still be just as mesmerised by Evie and her time-freezing superpower, and ignore the messy politics of gender and identity that it had, that I can now see? Maybe not. But does that take the idea of the fantastic away? Also, maybe not, because, there is always Tolkien. And then, this issue.



Praveena Shivram
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Cover Artist



A Day of Possibilities, Gouache on wasli, 2018

Sometimes our work is dismissed as simply 'whimsical', but a closer look with a bit of thought always reveals a deeper meaning. In the work titled *A Day of Possibilities* that we made for the cover of this issue of *Arts Illustrated*, our oft-seen 'Everyman' (wearing a white fedora) 'fishes' for butterflies, knee-deep in a lake. He is oblivious to the practical need to catch fish, his mind probably filled with the desire for knowledge and specimens for evidence. Is he hoping for the fragility of a precious butterfly? Or does he seek the horned demons with white wings? A falling mango has nearly missed him, a viper is in the tree, and two crocodiles are dangerously near. It is a day of possibilities, and yet our protagonist is fixed upon only one of them. It is as if a self-imposed tunnel vision has left him almost sightless, to his own immediate dangers and a plethora of opportunities.

And, yet, there is peace in this image, too. Perhaps our fedora-man knows fully well what he is doing. As we ourselves are merely spectators, viewing this scene with our own perceptions. The lush mountains recede into a puzzled sky, a jungle-sky that hints at myths and archetypes and consciousness that extends beyond our own time, place and understanding. The *sadhu*, who is in a way a mirror to the protagonist, seems to have it all figured out. He balances the universe on his fingertip. But we are left really not knowing the reality. Has the *sadhu* truly found enlightenment, or does he only imagine it so? After all, the ball he holds can only be a partial universe. Meanwhile, our protagonist perseveres: be his way of knowing foolhardy, or patiently wise.



Waswo X. Waswo

Cover Artwork by Waswo X. Waswo with R. Vijay
Cover and sub-covers curated by Rahul Kumar



Elsewhere 1, Ink and Thread on paper, 2016–2018.

Q&A
Arts

The Realm of Reimaginings

Contemporary artist Pallavi Paul is interested in the inter-relationships between reality, fantasy and experience, and often relies on illusion. Pallavi's works focus on the philosophical enquiry of social movements, especially those absent from history, using material, image, sound and archives that are reassembled into a new fantasised world of counter-truth.

RAHUL KUMAR

What are the ideas and concerns that you are dealing with right now with respect to your art practice?

For me, a continuing curiosity has been the role of truth systems in producing the world. By 'truth systems' I mean a very specific arrangement of gestures and possibilities *vis a vis* knowledge. Of course, we know as witnesses of history that these arrangements can work both as barricades or openings. The story of truth, then, is a story of both power and imagination. It is this story that I am interested in. So, in a way, 'truth' is like material. In my work I am thinking about it like I would think about light, space, sonority, and so on. My recently concluded solo show at Project 88 was titled *Not a Simple Disappearance but a Slow Dissolution*. Here I was trying to think through artistic labour, but more importantly the image produced via that labour in a procedural sense. The essential inability of the

image to convey the tussle between the lived and the represented becomes the ground on which different registers of the visual converge. This becomes the zone of fantasy. So, there was a three-channel film titled *The Dreams of Cynthia*; a piece of woven tapestry titled *Terra Firma*; and a series of drawings called *Elsewhere*. For the forthcoming show at Khoj, too, I am dealing with similar questions via research material from the Bletchley Park Archives. For this work I am thinking about sound.

It is interesting that often the curatorial premise is extremely different and yet the same work fits in. How do you see this contextualisation of some of your works?

It is always interesting to be able to move with a certain kind of lightness of step across different conversations. This becomes all the more fascinating when the same work is repositioned within

different curatorial gestures to yield varying purposes. To take the example of the most recent work, *The Dreams of Cynthia*, it was originally commissioned by the AV Festival in Newcastle whose curatorial premise drew from George Orwell's book, *The Road to Wigan Pier*. This festival was about questions of disparity, political alternatives and located critique. The Contour Biennale, on the other hand, which was also the co-producer of the work, mobilised the film within a dialogue about justice, polyphony and juridical processes. Earlier this year, the work travelled to a show in Rotterdam where it was placed within a contemplation on identity and memory. In January 2019, Savvy Contemporary at Berlin will be hosting it around the questions of gender fluidity and collectivity. It is then the wide embrace of the world which always layers works beyond just the site of their production.

How do you source from your formal education in literature on the one hand, film-making and academic research of history on the other? You are in the final stages of completing your PhD that focuses on the philosophical notion of reality and fiction. How does this help your art?

The absence of a formal arts education has somehow worked to my advantage. The ignorance of certain canons saves me the ennui that can often creep into systematised knowledge production. However, on account of having been a literature student at Delhi University and then studying film production at Jamia Millia Islamia, the ideas of aesthetics have always been an important part of my education. My academic research work at JNU has only deepened this engagement. My dissertation is called *The Trouble of Testimony* and is a staging of the encounter of non-fiction methodologies with various social and discursive sites like the courtroom, the documentary film, contemporary art and the institution. Here, I am looking at not only the history of the documentary image but also of the philosophical notions of indexicality.

You have often used poetry in your works. What is it about poems that you find productive? Do they offer an insight into the world of the improbable and that of imaginary ideas?

Poetry is very important to my practice because it works like a rigorous distillery of ideas. As a form of cultural production, I find it a useful provocation for the visual. The dilation of time,



Still from *The Dreams of Cynthia*, HD, 3 Channel 44 mins, 2017–2018.



Under Controlled Circumstances V, Archival inkjet, Dimensions variable, 2015.

space, geography and location is something I really enjoy while dealing with poetry and the fantasies it produces. There is also a certain kind of contest with the image, which is at the heart of the works of Garcia Lorca, Vidrohi, Anish Ahluwalia and Jack Spicer. There is a recessed kind of imagery that all these artists work with. The question for the film-maker then becomes how to keep the surface relevant. How can what the audience sees retain the sensate thickness of the world of the poem and yet be able to move freely to commune with other materials and tones.

Talk about your collaboration with artist Sahej Rahal for the 'Mars-One' project. Was the absurdity of the very concept of

settling people through a one-way ticket to Mars intriguing?

The *Mars-One* project inspired Sahej Rahal and me to make a film which we called *The Common Task*. The film explored the prospect of a one-way trip to Mars, what that actually means for those applying for the mission and also for a civilisational imagination at large. The project was generously supported by the India Foundation for the Arts (IFA), which is a unique funding organisation where independent practitioners are encouraged to produce work. The process of making the work was also very immersive because Sahej was able to bring the charge of his performance practice to it. His work around



Star Gazing, Installation of Hindi, English Dictionaries, monocular, chair and customised carpet, Dimensions variable, 2018.



Terra Firma, Woven Carpet, Dimensions Variable 2018.



Under Controlled Circumstances V,
Archival inkjet, Dimensions Variable, 2015.



The Dreams of Cynthia (Installation view),
HD, 3 Channel 44 mins, 2017–2018.



Still from Nayi Kheti, HD 10 MINS, 2013.

meta-fiction and fantasy helped us set the tone for this encounter with the future. The visual world of the film is dotted with animation, documentary footage shot by the characters themselves, home videos, archival images, text and photographs. The two incredible characters Rowena Mathews and Kamesh CV also bring their own electric imaginations to the narrative. Just think about it; earlier, to make an irreversible exit from the earth meant death. Outside of

mortality there was no permanent exit from the world. But now, with the possibility of a one-way ticket to Mars, a second innings in outer space can push the conception of the human.

While this work looks into the future, your trilogy of films, 'Nayi Kheti' (New Harvest), 'Shabdkosha' (A Dictionary), and 'Long Hair Short Ideas', investigates events in history. What was the conceptual positioning you tried to achieve

through this work? Actually, when I began working on them, they had occurred to me as individual works. It was only in retrospect that I saw them working together and contesting one another. In 2012, I had encountered a most fascinating book called *After Lorca*. The book is a very moving collection of letters written by poet Jack Spicer to Garcia Lorca twenty years after his death. As I got more immersed in Spicer's queries, I began to

imagine a fantasy scenario where Lorca could write back to Jack. This is where the poetry of Vidrohi came in handy. His poems traverse the Himalayas, ruins of Mohenjodaro, Pamir plateau, and so on, and became in some ways the most suitable vectors for this untimely meeting to happen. Further, the stories of cinema, magic, technology and history also got pulled into this scenario. The second film, *Shabdkosha*, happened when I

had already finished recording most of Vidrohi's poems on camera. His oeuvre is mostly oral and once we had recorded most of it, the question of what happens after became important. What comes after the document? Is sensation a remnant of history or is it the premise for history to be written? Here, I staged a conversation between the silence that follows Vidrohi's poems and Salvador Allende's last speech as the Chilean

presidential palace was being bombed. Both moments are in some way about the belief in the archive. Alongside this there is also the understanding that this belief must be performed socially. What does such a performance mean for documentary practices? The final film of this trilogy was *Long Hair Short Ideas*. Here I was looking at the political culture that Vidrohi's poetry resonates with from the outside. This film features his



Pallavi Paul.

estranged wife. She is the kind of figure who is absent from any discourse around revolutionary politics. The revolutionary's wife is a historical absence. Here, *Shantiji* fills that void with conversations around domesticity, labour and sexuality.

In your non-moving image work, document is the object that you experiment with. You have used photographs and carpets in your installations. How does this converse with the films you make?

The status of the object in my practice is very much at par with my moving image work. There have been various junctures at which using objects has been integral to draw attention to the

philosophical challenges of my material. To give you an example, when I was in the United Kingdom researching the story of Special Operations Executive secret agent Noor Inayat Khan, her story became a story of absence. To be a good secret agent, it was important that no trail be left behind. The only surviving document of her life was the official personnel file housed in the National Archives in London. To try and make a video image for this kind of a story would have been counter-intuitive to the experience of that absence. So, I reproduced the file itself as a long unwieldy scroll where the official entries about her life and her eventual death (of which there are multiple contesting versions in the same file) are transcribed into Morse. This paper object

became both something I displayed at various shows and also a script for performances I did at the Imperial War Museum and at the Delfina Foundation in London. I have worked with photographs, drawings, and, most recently, a carpet, too, as a way of pushing the imagination of the cinematographic without necessarily working with the camera image.

And, finally, given that your process is rooted in the conceptual, how does the idea of truth and verifiability impact your work? Does it matter how you approach the creation of your art?

I think we know by now that to think of the conceptual and the material as discreet processes is limiting. While both methods of reading the world have had their own specific histories, we have seen both artists and art audiences moving openly between the two. This has, of course, led to disruptions in the somewhat reactive notions of the 'genius master artist' who was, by default, mostly male. The technological turn has lent an exhilarating velocity to this alternative material perception of the everyday. The fantastical and the mundane are now intertwined. The conceptual notions of 'truth' and 'verifiability' work as playful material surfaces in my work. The premise for something to happen. It is not any essential truth or revelation that is on offer – it is the weave of the document and its movement in the world that I invite people to observe.

**THESE ARE
MY LAST
WORDS.
I AM CERTAIN
THAT MY
SACRIFICE WILL
NOT BE IN
VAIN.**

Still from *Shabdkosh*, HD 19 MINS, 2014.

All Images Courtesy of the Artist and Project 88, Mumbai.



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