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Back to the Future

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It could be said that the 20th century was preoccupied with the business of the future. Everything from art and design movements to politics parlayed the idea of utopia, a future perfect world imagined variously. But future-thinking was also the downfall of the previous century. Catastrophic wars and the reality of life under enthusiastically-conceived new societies steadily wore down the optimistic belief in a better tomorrow. The disintegration of the Soviet Union in the 1990s is commonly considered to mark the death of the last of the great modernist projects for utopia; an event thus of great symbolic rather than merely geopolitical import. The mourning work attending the "fall of the wall" took the form of a reverse millenarianism as intellectuals in a left tradition grappled with the situation that Francis Fukuyama famously teased as the end of history. The recently concluded show *A Time for Farewells* curated by Premjish Achari places itself within this line of thought. It is named for Derrida's famous preface to Catherine Malabou's volume on Hegel that debated the future of the teleological thinking inaugurated in the latter's philosophy; the future of the future, as it were. *A Time for Farewells* takes up this ambitious mandate - this desire to retain futurity as a concept and a hope - to delineate a programmatic vision for contemporary art practice. The results, however, are mixed.

The show opens, rather poignantly, with the graphic paintings of the late Tushar Joag. The short illustrated narrative recounts a process of reverse evolution on earth, populated initially by a race of superhuman beings visiting from a distant galaxy, whose only remaining trace are the discarded earthly skins left behind at their departure. These alien garbs are discovered over the ages and taken apart in factories and research facilities to prepare them for re-use. Joag's work, belying its lighthearted comic book trappings, indicates the thoroughgoing colonisation of even fantasy which partakes of the real world military industrial complex. Science-fiction as a futurist form *par excellence* appears more than once, and apart from Joag, Zoya Siddiqui's *To God Shall the Alien Return* is another sci-fi themed work rooted in earthly concerns. While Joag's work punctures the evolutionary thrust of science fiction narratives by imagining a process of retrogression from an advanced past, Siddiqui's film uses the trope of the extra terrestrial as a thinly veiled metaphor for human migration; the alien-refugee as the signal figure of our times. The inclusion of Joag's work in the show becomes even more significant in the light of the artist's premature death, in the midst of organising the Artists Unite initiative to coordinate political struggle among a community of painters, writers and filmmakers. Joag's critique of capitalist subsumption is mirrored elsewhere in the single-channel video installation by Michal Martychoweic's *The shrine to summon the soul*, with its depiction of a natural world overcome by the rhythm of humdrum human lives. Set to the soundtrack of Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1963 *La Rabbia*, Martychoweic replaces the original's documentary footage of wars and revolutions with the mute violence of cherry blossoms being trampled underfoot. Their petals, longing to return to earth, come up against unyielding concrete. In both Joag and Martychoweic, we find indications of the devastation wrought on bodies and landscapes as they are enlisted into the productive regimes of capitalism.

Several of the works seem calculated to precisely guard against the runaway enthusiasm for technology and the naïve faith in progress that drove the messianic thinking of modernity. A number of works accordingly engage the idea of ruins, of futures that will soon be past. In Vivan Sundaram's *Astral Vision* and *Meteoric Debris*, terracotta fragments arranged in cosmic constellations conjoin archaeological time with astronomical time. The earthiness of the terracotta is deliberately contrasted with the antiseptic lines of a matrix grid to open up a spectrum of time encompassing ancient pasts and projected futures. In a similar vein, Julia Christensen's photographs of e-waste, *Technology Time*, exposes the venal logic of planned obsolescence underpinning consumer culture that renders cutting edge technology outdated overnight. Quintessentially modern monuments, piles of non-biodegradable plastic and silica, these remnants of past utilitarian needs persist as problems of disposal rather than majestic projections into the future. Atul Bhalla's *The Excavated Distance* and *Anhedonic Landscape* explores the idea of memory itself as a ruin, existing only in fragments. Bhalla's images, of pixelated landscapes with empty squares indicating a loss of information, seem to specifically address the status of memory under conditions of digital storage. Even the digital archive, with its promise of endless storage, is inadequate against the vagaries of memory. But on the other hand Bhalla seems to suggest that it is precisely these gaps - the evidence of loss, the presence of an absence - that constitute the really reliable documents of history.

In Gigi Scaria's works, the future is doomed to certain failure. In *All about this side*, the desire to segregate urban space is undone by obstinate encroachment. A mesh partition fails to obscure the ungainly sprawl of low-cost housing lying just beyond the concrete expressway. Development efforts cleave to the limits set by the boundary wall, concentrated on "this side" including the space occupied by the viewer of the photograph, implicating her in its critique. The houses, set at right angles to the road meant to facilitate the smooth and high speed movement of vehicles, confront the desire for mobility with the reality of underdevelopment. In the video *On this Way* a ghost train repeats the same dead-end route again and again, while behind it, unfinished high rises loom against the horizon, ruins before their time. The motif of a train going from here to nowhere is repeated in Sumedh Rajendran's short film *Half Return*, signifying the experience of impotence in exile.

But one could alternatively argue that the trick of survival is precisely in constant movement, momentum itself generating life. Works by Julia Christensen and Markus Baenziger emphasise principles of mutation and adaptation required to sustain vital forms. In *Upgrade to Proxima B*, Christensen envisions the artwork as a speculative object projected into the future beyond the death of the artist, and perhaps even humanity, with the artwork having to autonomously update itself to remain intelligible to the future forms of life that will emerge in its stead. Christensen's, then, is an attempt to conceive of a post-humanist art practice that can reckon with subjectivitiesbeyond ourown. But the imperative to prolong existence, even beyond recognisable forms of life, betrays a uniquely human preoccupation with mortality. Baenziger's simple assemblage of pots *Then Again* draws a continuum between the plasticity of organic clay and the potential for re-use of inorganic plastic waste. The simplicity of Baenziger's work belies its profound message, drawing attention to the moral panic associated with a material - plastic - and suggesting a simultaneously easy and radical solution to fears of a plastic apocalypse - the overhaul of existing cultures of throw-away consumerism with traditional practices of recycling. Omer Wasim's triptych *Component No. 14* weaves together concerns with materiality and post-human subjectivity, but in a largely impenetrable work.

A Time for Farewells certainly delivers on its premise; a multiplicity of dreams of/for the future jostle enthusiastically alongside each other in the any-space-whatever of the art gallery. But the curatorial vision, in its eagerness to admit even competing propositions, is hard-pressed to justify untenable contradictions as radical openness. Too often, fusty commonplaces of Marxist theory run against equally uninterrogated notions of the Anthropocene. Also missing are works that provide an insight into the experience of time in the contemporary, considered to be a collection of undifferentiated instants without division into past, present and future. This is the waning of historicity, first posited by postmodern theorists Jameson and Baudrillard in the 1980s, but exacerbated by the widespread dispersal of digital technologies in our time that assume the functions of memory previously discharged by human

subjects. Freed from the task of remembering and equipped with new digital capabilities, we partake of an endless present. Further, the ability to store and retrieve data at will means the past is no longer that which goes away, troubling traditional notions of historical periodisation. Such is "the tyranny of the now" that has led to the emergence of the future as a vexed philosophical category, but is inadequately addressed in the show. The lack of a sustained critical look detracts somewhat from an otherwise intriguing exposition of artists and works which one might not usually think together. In the event, the show succeeds not so much in creating a radical rupture in thought, but in calling forth unexpected connections, making random discoveries, and cultivating a rare expansiveness of the spirit.

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