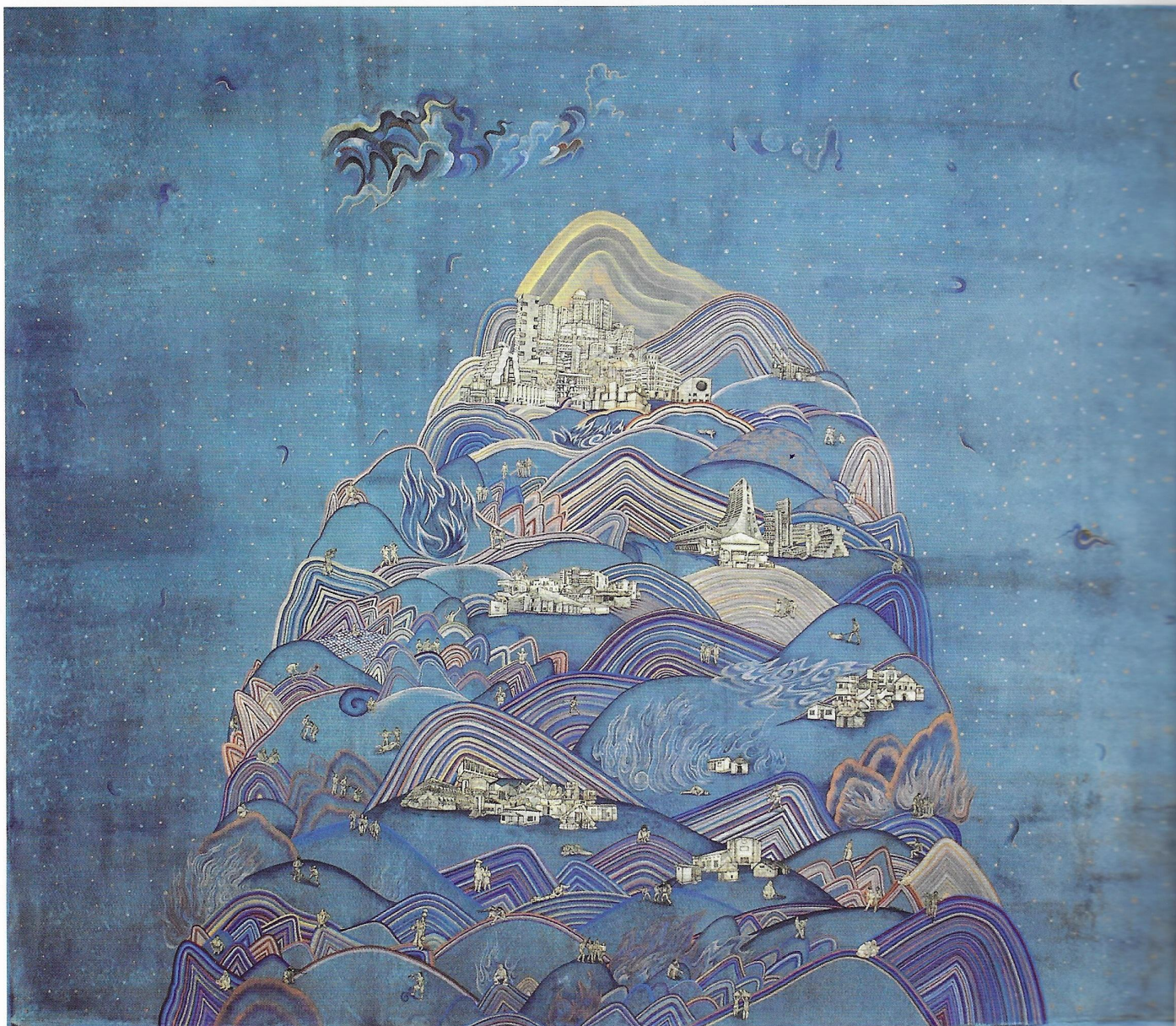


Fractures and Borders

A show curated by Yashodhara Dalmia features many symbolic depictions of violence, notes **Mila Samdub**.



Varunika Saraf. *Nothing Happened Here.* Watercolour on Lokta paper pasted on unprimed canvas textile. 7'x6'. 2018. Image © the artist and Shrine Empire Gallery.

There's a cliché that fish can't see water. Often the most effective way for representation to approach violence is obliquely, focusing not on the act itself so much as the fractures it leaves in its wake. *The Edge*, a group show of 17 South Asian artists curated by art historian

Yashodhara Dalmia, from the 7th to the 22nd of September at Bikaner House, Delhi, follows the fractures and borders that divide our world. At a moment when politically motivated shows tend towards the documentary and the archival, this show comprising drawings and

paintings is pervaded by a sense of the unreal. This show marks the tenth year of Shrine Empire Gallery, Delhi.

A high-rise development is depicted in a dizzying puzzle of perspectives in Nataraj Sharma's *Orchid Platina Phase 2*. Each of the competing perspectival orders, with its Cartesian edges and vanishing points, offers the possibility of the same, rational world, shifted only by degrees to the left or the right. Surrounded on all sides by these competing rationalities, a lone lung-clad construction worker eats a jalebi. The man and the jalebis are the only 'unstraight' things in this grid-like world. Undergirding the critique of the gated community is an unrushed examination of the role of representation – of the cutting straightness of these lines – in creating an inhospitable, divided everyday.

A particular focus on the built environment runs through the exhibition. In Varunika Saraf's *Nothing Happened Here*, clusters of buildings pile up on a mountain in a mythic fashion. Look closely and you see small figures clawing at one another, carrying pots of water, aiming rifles, dying. The buildings are familiar too: the failed colossi of Nehruvian modernism, flanked by ramshackle huts. The painting has a fabular quality, but its moral is unclear: rather than opening a space to work through the violence enabled by modernist architecture and its driving philosophy of the bureaucratic state, the buildings are vague symbols. The disavowal in the title seems to refer to a structure of power. But is it possible to speak of violence *in the general*?

As in Saraf's painting, many of the works gesture towards a cosmology expressed through the placement of subjects in horizontal bands, and the sense that there is an ordering logic to the world. In Gigi Scaria's *The Truth About Gravity*, the architecture of a city is organized into a series of strata around a flagpole. Anoli Perera's charcoal drawings likewise divide the world into layers, with crowds of demon-like humans struggling to

avoid falling into the dilapidated buildings of our contemporary world. These are all recastings of a well-known visual trope and turn on the deft placement of the unexpected in a familiar order.

Even the most documentary work here, *Land of Undefined Territory* by Munem Wasif, comprising photographs of the border between India and Bangladesh, resists any referential function. The spaces the photos show are empty, rocky landscapes nearly devoid of human trace. Their washed-out banality attests to nothing more than the fact of the land's existence. This seems a wise choice, for while it shows up the possibility of national borders, it discloses another edge, one that the show mostly skates over: the aporia that comes up when representation is faced with violence.

The lines in Karan Shrestha's suite of five drawings transmogrify from hair-like thinness to huge ugly smudges, like the rapid urban and ecological changes they depict. These are ravaged worlds, full of gulfs, impossible hybrid creatures and blood. But the horror is matter of fact. In one drawing, while people drown and animals find shelter in the branches of trees during a flood, one man fishes placidly in the corner.

Where is the edge in Shrestha's drawings? It is expressed variously as a river, a field, a surreal, transcendental passage between worlds, a bridge, a hillside. Everywhere, it has depth: not the mathematical line of the border, nor the division between the heavenly and the hellish, it is a passage to be traversed. This is a welcome change from the edges in the other works, which are abstract, structured and aestheticized.

It is unusual for a political show today to be committed so thoroughly to unreality. Dalmia's proposition is compelling, but perhaps the show suffers from an overly literal reading of the concept of the edge, leaning too heavily on symbolic violences to the detriment of the real, everyday violence that surrounds us. /