

Speculative Vistas

Curated by Pujan Gandhi

“During this month of (Shravana), the rivers meet the sea making a pleasant scene. The creepers (freshened by rains) have clung to trees. The lightning meets the clouds and shines all around. The peacocks (listening to the thundering of lightning and knowing the rains around) make happy sounds announcing the meeting of earth and sky.” — *Keshavdas, excerpt from the Baramasa (The Songs of the Seasons)*

The drama of the Indian Monsoon has long proved a wellspring of artistic revelation. To celebrate the spirit of a season marked by contemplation and transformation, *Speculative Vistas* brings together a group of international, intergenerational artists who have developed distinct methodologies to reframe our gaze, proposing novel ways to reflect on and relate to the outside world.

Systematizing the process of "slowing down," **Ian Malhotra** (b. 1991, Birmingham, UK) depicts apparitions of awe-inspiring landscapes reminiscent of 19th-century masters like Constable and Church, but does so with an approach that presupposes mankind's instinct to impose order. Malhotra's drawings coalesce through a painstaking mode of mark-making that mimics digital systems of reproduction, such as inkjet printing. By demonstrating the inherently fluid nature of static imagery, the artist blurs the boundary between the window and the screen, ultimately reminding us that the wonders of the natural world remain uncaptured. In a similar vein, **Constantin Flondor** (b. 1936, Romania) has developed a rigorous, observation-based practice in which he sees "nature [as] a partner, contemplated with wonder and also a reliable guide." A key figure in developing the integrated, Bauhaus-inspired pedagogy at the Timișoara school of art, Flondor immerses himself in his subjects to such a degree that his portraits of flowers appear to deconstruct the very processes of photosynthesis and local microclimates. Through compositions as lyrical as they are scientific, we witness an artist who has arrived at union with the world. **Hiroe Saeki** (b. 1978, Osaka, Japan) ventures even further spiritually in her exploration of space, eschewing the Western Euclidean model in favor of the Buddhist notion of the void. Adopting this state of emptiness—from which all arises and dissolves—engenders a mindscape upon which the artist layers subtle cosmological associations. Beginning with comet-like wisps of graphite, she leaps to a crescent sun applied in gold leaf, all while luminous washes of multiple moons float in an iridescent sky.

The monsoon is also a season of jarring contrasts: a confrontation between our built environment and the forces of nature; torrents of rain that are as nourishing as they are destructive; and pangs of anticipation followed by pensive retrospect. Within these opposing forces, the nuances—or follies—of human behavior reveal themselves too.

Ian Davis' (b. 1982, Indianapolis, USA) crisp vistas invite us into a realm that is both hyperreal and surreal—visual snapshots that suggest an event that has either just taken place or is about to happen. At first glance, *Procession* is an orderly composition marking human progress: a newly constructed bridge

forges a river, its banks hemmed with a thermoplastic silt fence to curb erosion. A single line of caparisoned elephants suggests a grand durbar, but the celebration, by most metrics, feels anemic. The animals are directed by anonymous, minuscule men—one of Davis' signature subjects—wearing fedoras that hint at colonial sympathies. Here, socio-political critiques of labor, empire, and progress are couched in layers of quiet suggestion. In *Tower*, a hulking skyscraper, possibly a prison, stands amidst a brooding purple sky. Emergency lights glare as guards stand watch on the terrace, leaving the viewer to wonder: *who is protecting whom?* If there is a sliver of hope to be found, it is in the humor, not least of all the lush and verdant rendering of the trees. Conceptual artist **Waswo X. Waswo** (b. 1953, Milwaukee, USA) also adopts a self-reflexive, historically informed mode of image-making. He leverages the traditions and resources of his adopted home in Udaipur to elicit the wonder and whimsy of Mewar court painting on contemporary terms. His recent series, *The Arrival of Mangoes*, evokes the summer heat and the impending monsoon. In South Asian art history, mangoes have long symbolized fertility, wealth, and India itself. Waswo's paintings are created in collaboration with an atelier of artists trained in the classical miniature tradition. Luminous, gold-ground paintings depict the flora and fauna of the iconic Aravalli Hills, within which we see a troop of monkeys using mangoes as their *vahana* (mythical vehicle). In one painting, they fly through the forests in a manner reminiscent of the *Ramayana*; in another, the mangoes are set to sail like a fleet of arriving foreign traders. In each, we see Waswo's iconic "fedora man" playing the role of observer—a motif the artist employs to critique the Orientalist gaze while acknowledging his own position as an empathetic outsider.

Embracing the spirit of speculative narrative, **Edouard Baribeaud** (b. 1984, Paris, France) describes himself as a "storyteller who draws." Equally attuned to the principles of color and balanced design, his versatile compositions demonstrate a reverence for a range of art historical traditions, including the great painters of India's Rajput courts. Like them, he translates the vivid poetics of Keshavdas' *Baramasa* into visual form. *Peacock in the Rain* espouses the essence of 18th-century Bundi painting, in which a *nayika* (heroine) is on a palace terrace seeking shelter from the storm. In the traditional canon, the scene would serve as a metaphor for the heroine yearning for her absent lover; instead, Baribeaud depicts her bravely shielding her infant child from the gusty monsoon. The romantic metaphor is replaced by the bond of mother and child. Rather than a prescribed romantic tryst within an enclosed, moonlit garden, the heroine nurses her child under a tree, and later, we see a dutiful son assisting his mother up the steps of their Indo-Saracenic home. Like the court painters before him, Baribeaud captures the emotive essence—or *rasa*—of love, but does so by expanding narrative possibilities across time and space.

As the artists of *Speculative Vistas* invite us into realms of heightened creativity, we, too, find ourselves experiencing a renewed state of mind:

"This we call the artistic temperament; he likes to stand and stare, the world stands transformed, as tantalizing as a dream... in an artist's vision there is no sharp dividing line between fact and fantasy." — *K.G. Subramanian, A Matter of Perspective, 1992*

Paying homage to the spatial and temporal leaps of printmaker and antiquarian Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778), **Arthur Lemaitre** (b. 1994, Burgundy, France) fuses architecture and landscape in ways that further blur the boundary between reality and the romantic sublime. What first appear as exquisitely

pressed engravings are, in fact, meticulous ink drawings on textured Khadi paper. Architectural ruins drawn from a range of periods and styles co-mingle with fanciful, often disproportionately scaled vegetation; evocative titles, such as *The Lunar Frontier*, point to supernatural heavens and the limits of human reason. Left unpeopled, Lemaître's visions offer an unencumbered lens onto a fictive utopia. This aspiration is shared by **David Brian Smith** (b. 1981, Wolverhampton, UK), whose hallucinogenic, color-burst landscapes honor the pastoral painting traditions of his rural upbringing. The imagery of the London-based artist arises from a sense of longing—for a place from Smith's past or a site where he wishes to go. His meticulous brushwork and complex sense of pattern are indebted to the late 19th-century Divisionist style of painting, whereby bold colors are placed directly on the canvas to optically mix in the viewer's eye. The paintings remind us of the inherently magical, if not alchemical, properties found in nature: landscapes constellate in the sky while colorful clouds come thumping to the ground. This sense of otherworldly radiance is also achieved by **Santiago Giralda** (b. 1980, Madrid, Spain), for whom fantasy and the contemporary implications of image-making go hand-in-hand. He begins his process by taking photographs of natural environments within urban landscapes, which he then compounds with digitally sourced, broadcast imagery. The resulting storybook-like compositions are complete with mountain peaks, dense jungles, and alluring grottoes. Delineated with flashes of metallic paint, Giralda tantalizes us with a contradictory worldview: one in which the "contemporary landscape is a cultural construction," and our "moment for contemplation away from the noise of the media" is a precarious position borne out of our self-made, hyper-sensory world.

For artists, the landscape offers a parallel universe—a playscape to explore emotion, memory, and allusion with each stroke. **Ross Taylor** (b. 1983, Northumbria, England) lives and works amidst the Macedon Ranges of Australia, dramatizing its rocks, streams, trees, and skies with drenches of color "stitched" together to suggest emotive states of change. Drawn from memories of his morning walks, his work is as much a testament to the poetic process of painting as it is to the landscape itself. Works like *False Spring* suggest a barren earth with encroaching sweeps of green. One can read the season's promise in the heaps of fluorescent sprouts, but in Taylor's vast palette of shifting perspectives, we are reminded of Matisse's conceit: "To paint an autumn landscape I will not try to remember what colors suit this season, I will only be inspired by the sensation that the season gives me."

To arrive at this rhythm—between the subconscious and the outside world—**Masoom Kshetrimayum** (b. 1985, Gujarat) observes patterns of perception via a flurry of marks, layering colored pencil and engraving to create works in constant movement. In a fluid dynamic of winds and grasses, *After The Rain* captures the contrast between cooling waters and scorched earth, and in turn, the flux between atmosphere and *terra firma*. Amidst a sea of flowering wheat, *where was I* conjures a contemplative space where one can no longer distinguish between the real and the imagined, affirming that the landscape remains ever ripe with human metaphor.

In a season of extremes, artists and nature offer a template to reassess how we exist in relation to our material, ecological, cultural, and psychological environments. Moments of interruption can become catalysts for reassessment, rejuvenation, and reimagination. **Michael Kunze** (b. 1961, Munich, Germany) has long countered the prevailing arc of European Modernism, establishing a historically inflected, painterly approach that embraces the possibilities of metaphysics and mystery. In his recent painting,

Hairpin in front of a Tea Light on Quicksand, Kunze bisects the picture plane into light and dark (akin to Giorgio de Chirico), laying out a continuous narrative that suggests an implausible experiment, a metamorphosis, and a couple's embrace amidst what could be a celestial event. As a great white dove flaps away, streams of light reveal ovoid portals—perhaps into an alternate realm? While we cannot know what has happened or what will occur, Kunze's work elevates us into a realm of higher consciousness, reminding us of the wisdom acquired by acknowledging the unknown.

Sanket Viramgami (b. 1988, Gujarat) also paints toward the enigmatic, with all-over dreamlike compositions suggestive of Gond painting but interspersed with vignettes depicting contemporary urban life. As a caricature of a man swings a golf club on one side of the picture, an outline of Nainsukh's famous trumpeter emerges nearby, while a couple practices ballroom dancing in another corner. With no clear beginning and no end, Viramgami presents the pageantry of life, where past, present, and future slip and centrifuge amidst the foliage. But like all of the propositions presented by the artists in *Speculative Vistas*, the rewards are most reaped by those who pause.

-Pujan Gandhi