

AGE
OF
SATURN

OMAR
CHOWDHURY
DR.
SHAHIDUL
ZAMAN

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SATURN

25 January — 12 March 2016

Daily Star-Bengal Arts Precinct
The Daily Star Centre
64 - 65 Kazi Nazrul Islam Ave.
Karwan Bazaar, Dhaka 1215

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EXHIBITION

25 January 6:00pm — 12 March 2016
12:00 – 20:00 Monday to Saturday

Daily Star-Bengal Arts Precinct
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64 - 65 Kazi Nazrul Islam Ave.
Karwan Bazaar, Dhaka 1215
Bangladesh

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Bengal Foundation

INTRODUCTION

Bengal Foundation is very pleased to both support and present *Age of Saturn*, the first solo exhibition in Bangladesh by Australian-Bangladeshi artist Omar Chowdhury. Created in close collaboration with the political and economic historian Dr. Shahidul Zaman, the show explores important questions of how one can experience, or re-experience history and one's own past. Constructed through several years of dialogue and research, Chowdhury and Zaman deploy autobiography, narrative, and concept to create an ambitious and intricate survey of key moments and controversies in the history of Bengal. Working in a diverse range of media including film, text, sculpture, photography, electronics, installation, performance and action the artist and historian present a rich, alternative language of inquiry into how the past creates the present and the present can create the past.

Sadia Rahman
Bengal Foundation

MEMOIRS OF SATURN

Longing is the agony of the nearness of the distant.

— Martin Heidegger, from “Who is Nietzsche’s Zarathustra?”
in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Pfullingen, 1954

I first met Dr. Shahidul Zaman, the political and economic historian, and a cousin of my father, for the first time in New York in 1990. I don’t remember anything about this meeting, I’ve only been told that it happened. It was about four years ago that we reconnected here in Dhaka with the encouragement of my father. I did not know then that our second meeting, in a characterless apartment building in Wari, would consume my thoughts and my work for the past number of years and produce this show which he and I have jointly (and sometimes contentiously!) conceived. Without the incredible hospitality that Dr. Zaman has shown—into what is an intensely private life—by opening up his home, archives, writings, and spending many afternoons with me discussing both his own life and that of his people and geography, there would be no show.

At first, the story that he told me and which, moreover, I saw laid out on his tables, bookshelves, and from watching the way he spent his time, seemed unremarkable. Just a thoughtful, obsessive man living quietly alone with his historical esoterica. Yet I couldn’t shake off the details he’d reveal: about this thinker that I hadn’t considered to be relevant to South Asia, or that Muslim politician from the 30s who now seemed terribly instrumental. I heard him talk about my grandfather and other family members who had been like ghosts to me when I was growing up in Sydney. I was also struck by his aura. He would, no doubt, raise his eyebrows at this, but there was a sense of timeless delimitation when I was with him. A sense of drifting in history and a bodily re-experiencing that unsettled my sensorial certainty. It felt like I was listening to a virtuoso storyteller who traversed ages and different epistemological universes. Compared to my then dissolute life of waking up next to people I did not know very well, this ambience of the past, of theory, of fictionality and



enigmatic narrative was intoxicating. I began to believe in his halting, hushed recollections. I began to believe in him.

Eventually, after discarding the other research (a euphemism) I'd been working on, I decided to do something about what he was uncovering for me. I asked him if he would be open to this and that I'd perhaps have an actor playing his role if I could use his story to make an exhibition, that I would try to reify his autobiography and thinking with objects. Considering how guarded he is with the world, and even many who are close to him, I was shocked to see flickers of excitement behind his rimmed glasses. He agreed and said that he wouldn't mind being photographed or filmed himself, that he'd done things like this at University. He said that he'd need some time to collect together his archives and that he and I should start meeting at a regular time. Those times, our afternoons together in that waning yellow-grey Dhaka light—I remember them. I remember the timbre of his voice like a persistent yet faded dream.

Now

It is as though subjective life in the form of consciousness consisted in being itself losing itself and finding itself again so as to possess itself by showing itself, proposing itself as a theme, exposing itself in truth.

— Emmanuel Levinas, 1968



Dr. Zaman seems to do the same things every day. We filmed him and I swear that we could cut alternate days together perfectly. The same schedule, clothes, the same food, classes, the same archives and libraries, the same desk. The same bus everyday! He's actualising the 'eternal recurrence.' Yet, there was something the matter. I can't say I saw it but I felt it. I thought it: in the notes that he'd spent his years collecting; in the atypical ideas that he pursued; and the unnerving detail of the things he recollected and systematised. There was something significant going on in his quiet approach of a phenomenological politico-economic history which was idiosyncratically personal, even ontological. His was an affective view of what had happened to his country and his family. Unexpectedly, it came into focus through the story of what had happened to him.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays he teaches English and English Literature at a small private 'university' here in Dhaka. It's essentially a college mill. For the reasons of his history, and the current political situation in Bangladesh, he cannot be offered the professorship that would be commensurate with his learning and experience. I went to a number of his classes and the least one could say is that he is underemployed. What he teaches, with so much care, is not what is needed. Students are more interested in Business English. What they want is the employment and safety of commerce. But I assume that the job is convenient for him, with the low contact hours and access to a network of libraries and archives as a researcher. And it's in these libraries

and archives that he seems to live out his real life. What he does there was initially a mystery to me. He seems to traverse history physically, running his hands over old newspapers and books and speeches in a concentrated trance. I found him staring out windows and doors often. Yet, there is a very specific and vast repository of narrative that he is trying to pattern-match. He collects photographs, letters, articles, ephemera, and he makes notes. When I first read some of these notes I was shocked.

Some of the notes were just what you'd expect: references, paraphrases, ideas, links etc., but there were other things that he was incorporating: the realities and memories of his past. He seems to be as happy to mix stories from his youth, what he has heard about his father, or his laments about his time overseas and juxtapose these with the historical and economic research and thinking that he is collecting. The feeling of these separate pieces, both private and public, both inner and outer, and other unclassifiable things, come together to give a vibration on the page that I found to be very new. He has many large notebooks full of permutations and combinations of the past. He told me that he had begun to write a book but that as time went on the idea seemed increasingly absurd. Yet, even after he gave up on that idea, he couldn't stop the process of construction, he kept on collecting things and remembering and trying to feel out and put down History. There didn't seem to be an exit plan.

After some time apart from him, I now wonder if that's the whole point. That by living through the process of reassembling his history, without a purpose, without an endgame, he is surfacing a kind of Zen or Beckettian ontology of being. This is not something he ever acquiesced to. The only thing he'd say is that his work wasn't about putting together a puzzle, rather, it was about taking one apart and that the history of Bengal (or his own history for that matter) isn't something that you try to see, but something that you try to unsee. Eventually, I found out more about what he was trying to unsee.

Exile

Having borrowed money from his maternal uncles to fly to New York, Shahidul Zaman spent the decade from 1982 to 92 mostly in America (with various trips abroad for conferences and seminars). His proposal to begin a Ph.D. at Rochester was accepted in 1982.¹ He had travelled to India before but never on an aircraft and the initial years were lonely to be sure. Dr. Zaman and Mita had only recently been married and although he left very soon after, he does not remember his time away being particularly difficult. Many men left in those days, and many wives stayed behind for years and years until a visa and airplane ticket would arrive to carry them away. He remembers being quite happy those first years, doing a lot of coursework to catch up, and starting his research into Levi-Strauss and historical Bengal. He marvelled at the resources and the quietness of America



1. Proposed Ph.D. Abstract in the Department of History, Shahidul Zaman, University of Rochester, March 1982.

Levi-Strauss's Identity Formation of Groups and Nietzsche's Will to Power in East-Bengal's Subject-Ruler Relationships, 1900—1915.

The research reads the early history of the relationships between the Colonial Raj, its administrative systems and individual administrators, and the political leadership of various villages and areas around the Rajshahi region of Bengal. It extends Levi-Strauss's theories of the identity formation of groups using artificial mythemes and Nietzschean readings of power subconscious and volition to interpret letters, notes, news-articles and diaries and other texts to postulate evolving structures and patterns of subservience and domination amongst the key participants.

and moved in with some other Bangladeshi men and felt like he had gone into a kind of retreat. An escape from what had come before. A moment of respite from being a son, a husband, or even a father.

Very quickly after arriving he realised that his spoken English was not up to par for teaching and this gave him more time to read and think and write. He would catch the Greyhound to New York and wandered around and fell in love with Vietnamese food. He found himself in the Lower East Side often, looking 'at' these other cultures making a space for themselves somewhere new, and how fast the process was compared to what he was concerned with. He marvelled at the peacefulness, the naiveté of it, compared to what he had known. Soon afterwards he began to make friends in the faculty. He has especially fond memories of playing badminton and discussing fraudulent post-colonial theory with a number of people who became close colleagues over time, the historians: John Sebald, Sophia Myrzavik, and Mohammed Alam. Other than that not much happened until Mita came: 'I read, I researched, I ate, I played badminton and I slept. We didn't have the internet then but American television was mildly interesting.'



Mita Zaman and Atiq arrived late in 1984 and instantly disliked America, especially this quiet college town. She was part of a seven sibling family and the eery quietness of the parks and their apartment and the roads and even the middle of the city unnerved her. She had studied Materials Engineering in Chittagong and painted, but when applying to do her Ph.D. in America she was taken aback by how far behind the education that she had was. Especially in the first years, although Dr. Zaman was on a stipend, things were quite difficult financially and she took a job cleaning local bank branches with a contracting company. Within a year or two she had improved her English and took on an admin position with Citizens Bank, some of whose branches she had used to clean. The young family slowly became more secure.

Yet, something happened, or perhaps nothing happened and by the end of 1989, Mita left Rochester along with Atiq and came back to Bangladesh. She also began the proceedings for a divorce. There is a gulf of silence here and I could find out very little. In a way, I didn't really want to. This wasn't my work. Dr. Zaman submitted and defended his thesis under the tutelage of Prof. Stuart Daley. He was offered a role as an Assistant Lecturer working on 20th-century South Asian history. It was 'Ershad-time' back home, and everything and everyone seems to have been in deep freeze. His theses was taken up by Ohio University Press and published in 1990. Two of his articles were accepted for publication. He remembers that it was around this time that he definitively broke away from the phenomenologists, Bataille, and Schumpeter and became far more interested in people like Rorty, Said, Foucault and Barthes. Then, he recounts

that he fell into a lethargic sickness. Perhaps it was depression. He didn't seek treatment but began to spend a lot of time alone and in bed. He says that the way that he talked about doing history, and the way he was actually doing history and teaching it didn't align. Perhaps, he says, history is placed on the earth like a lake, and you can't uproot the impression, the shape, that holds it. I guess he also missed his child and his wife. Whilst still managing to publish widely in the early years of the 90s, Dr. Zaman resolved to come back to Bangladesh. He arrived soon after a democratic government was elected in 1992. There was jubilation in the streets.

Absence and Disillusionment

On hearing about his father Azizur Zaman's disappearance and suspected execution towards the end of 1974, the young Dr. Zaman first went into extended shock and then settled into, along with the rest of his family, a kind of communal forgetting. There was nothing to be done but they tried to do everything anyway. When I try to speak to him about this time, it's not so much that he doesn't want to talk about it, it's that he doesn't seem able to. That perhaps the way of thinking required to talk about this isn't available to him. That there is deep trauma remaining from that time is, I think, self-evident. From members of his family I've only been able to gather a partial narrative, enough to make the combines and other works in the show that deal with these periods. 'I don't know what happened to my father. I'm not even sure that he ever really was.'

Before the Liberation War, Dr. Zaman's father worked for the Municipal Water Board in Dacca which was, naturally, part of the Pakistani government at the time with headquarters in West Pakistan. Azizur, a devout Muslim, had been very quiet before the war and he had remained quiet during and afterwards. According to Dr. Zaman, Azizur had begun to attend the political rallies of some Muslim parties, as he had sporadically done prior to the war, and that maybe this was behind his disappearance. That perhaps taking a minimal stance, a quiet stance, seemed even more dangerous to the paramilitary group, the Rakkhi Bahini, and Mujib's increasingly autocratic government (who Dr. Zaman's family accuse of his disappearance), than full-throated resistance. One is easier to see. Or maybe it was just a neighbourhood feud. Or just a mistake during the writing of a list. Many mistakes like that were made. In any case, on the evening of the 10th of December, Azizur did not return home. No one had seen him since he had left work at 4pm. The people at the local mosque had not seen him for afternoon prayers, which was remarkable to them. Where he once was, there was now only emptiness.

Dr. Zaman began, for a year or two, to rebel but he soon lost interest in the pettiness of his own anger and his natural dedication to study kept him on track through his first years at Dhaka University. Initially he wanted to do science (biology he now vaguely remembers), but his reading and thinking took him in a

different direction and he fantasised about the history of this continent and especially Bengal—of the grandeur, variegation and complexity of it. He devoured novels and magazines and with his best-friend, Mustafa Golam (now a professor at King's College, London), he began to write poetry seriously. (I've read them. They aren't very good.) His results in class however were impressive and in everyone's memories it seems that there was no residual at all of the trauma of losing his father just a few years before.



The years that followed had one surprising blip, Dr. Zaman became, I strongly suspect, very involved in leftist politics. As Zia took over and internal army ructions often brought the country to a stand-still, Dr. Zaman was active in some kind of political subterfuge. The ensuing chaos and Zia's own strange yet practical political inclusivity allowed a thousand parties and groups to bloom (only to be cut down in due course). Dr. Zaman was involved in something, I say something because I can't get him to tell me what it was although friends and some documents I've found certainly hint at violent political activities. He now says 'I got mixed up in false consciousness [laughter], but I got out of it.' Photos from this period show wild, bushy hair, and a kind of mania in the eyes. A young radical in flight. But that isn't how the decade ended. The army composed itself, or enough were executed into composure, and Dr. Zaman finished his master's degree with excellent results. At the end of the decade he began to see Mita Hoque, a charming, yet melancholic young woman from Chittagong, whose father Dr. Zaman had done some research for at the end of 1979. They were married just after New Years day in 1980 and Dr. Zaman and Mita had Atiqur Azizur Zaman, their first and only child, on the night of November the 23rd, 1980. Pregnancy and the time afterward was difficult for Mita but to others their future seemed very bright.

Prehistory

I was a loyal party member for two decades before 1956 and therefore silent about a number of things about which it's reasonable not to be silent.

— Eric Hobsbawm, 'Man of the extreme century,' The Guardian, 22 September 2002.

Before the second partition, Dr. Zaman's family lived in Behrampur in what is now West Bengal. An old Muslim family who were officials of the city going back centuries, the break of the country and their state into two religiously mandated parts was a significant event to say the least. There was tension in the family. The respect for thinkers like Muhammad Iqbal and Syed Ahmed Khan was deep rooted and the fears of a Hindu-led state and of one-person-one-vote entrenching what was felt to be systemic racism were strong. Dr. Zaman's father and grandfather seemed to have been strong proponents of the two-nation theory

and were encouraging of the family's move to a Muslim nation. Yet, there must have been some doubt. To break one's country in half out of fear, how can that be done without uncertainty and doubt? It was, of course, not practically easy to uproot themselves but eventually Azizur Zaman received a transfer and they all moved to Rajshahi (in what was about to become, East Pakistan) just before Partition. Initially, they settled near some distant family members who had made the journey earlier. They were able to sell, transfer and exchange a number of landholdings and fared far better than the majority of those who moved. Dr. Zaman was born in Rajshahi in 1959. Saturn was ascendant. His first memory was of the beheading of a goat, or perhaps a small cow, for Eid-al-Adha.



After partition, state control from the west of the country and the authoritarian ideology of the creators of Pakistan seeped into law and the administrative structure. They began to question whether Bengali culture and language belonged in the new nation and how and if it could be assimilated. The dream realised, the costs were being weighed. Fatigue set in when faced with the reality of obligation and compromise. Azizur Zaman began to dim towards political Islam and moved his immediate family to Dhaka in 1957. Dr. Zaman suspects that his father began to lose hope in the rhetoric of the promises of a muslim nation. We can't be sure. There are no records. Azizur published some poetry in right-wing journals which are coded, melancholic affirmations of Partition. Perhaps it was his faith or his increasingly important government position which restricted him from taking a stronger public position. But the acrimony was deep and the topic was a fraught one between Azizur Zaman and Dr. Zaman's maternal uncles who were strong proponents of Bengali and eventually ardent nationalists and freedom fighters. Ideas had become real.

The last time I spoke to Dr. Zaman he said: 'There isn't a line between what is inside you and what is outside, nor between what is thought and what is. One must work towards coming to this understanding. It is the right understanding.' I teased him about Dögen (who he loves). The research and re-experiencing that Dr. Zaman fixates on, grew out of the seeds of this Muslim discontent and disorientation, the control and abuse of a whole diverse culture by an alien other, and the impacts and repercussions that had on the political and economic events that followed. Ostensibly, one feels a sort of postponement about his life. Yet, that his own and his family's 'history' is seemingly so intricate and echoic, and that its affect lives on through documents, ideas, narratives and bodily traumas is what seems to silently illuminate his life and gives him that tectonic energy one feels in him. The silence is a ruse, because in his very being, he is living out the vastness of history.

*Omar Chowdhury
Rajshahi, Bangladesh
January 2016*

WORKS/
INSTALLATION



Lightbox (Absence)



Photograph (Now)



Combine (Absence), Photograph (Absence)



Combine (Exile 2), Photograph (Exile), Combine (Exile 1)



Photograph (Future), Text and Tables and Chairs



Film (Now)



Combine (Exile 1)



Combine (Absence), Photograph (Absence), Photograph (Now), Combine (Exile 2),
Combine (Exile 1), Photograph (Exile), Photograph (Future), Text and Tables and Chairs



Lightbox (Exile, Now)



Sculpture (Eternity), Combine (Pre-history 1)



Lightbox (Disillusionment)



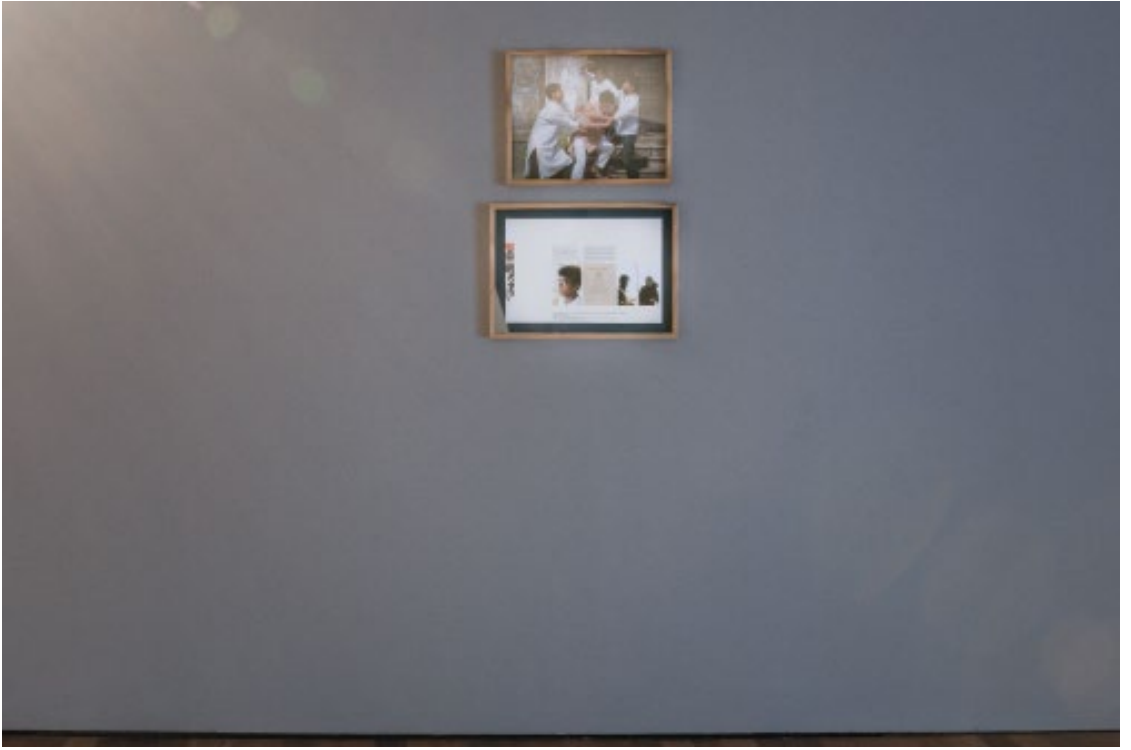
System decay and its origins



Photograph (Pre-history), Combine (Pre-history 2)



Combine (Pre-history 2), Lightbox (Now), Lightbox (Exile, Now),
Photograph (Disillusionment), Lightbox (Disillusionment), System decay and its origins



Photograph (Disillusionment), Combine (Disillusionment)



System decay and its origins, Lightbox (Exile, Now), Sculpture (Eternity),
Combine (Pre-history 1), Photograph (Pre-history), Combine (Pre-history 2)

BIOGRAPHY

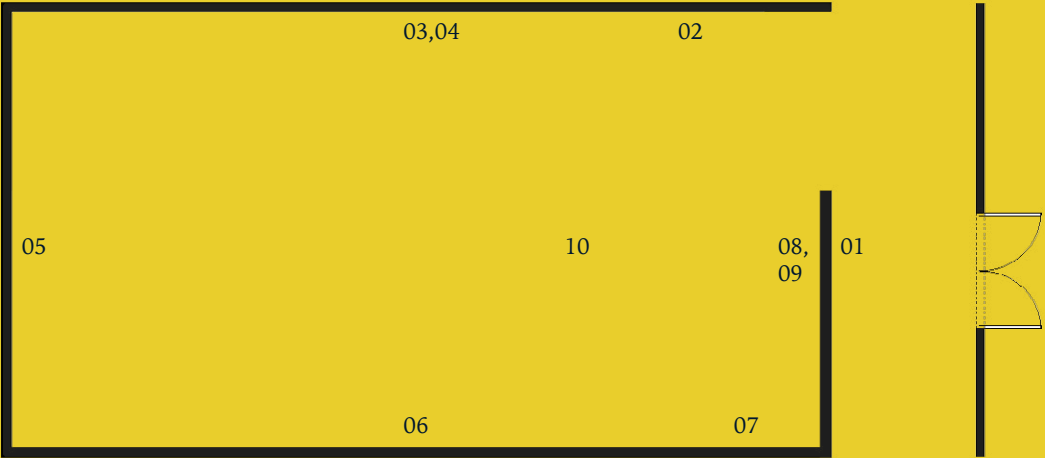
Omar Chowdhury makes moving-image, photographic, sculptural conceptual and textual installations based on immersions into contested spaces and their histories. Often mixing notions of ontology, political economy, and the spirit, they hold in uneasy tension various polarities: facts and the surreal, humour and melancholia, rhythm with chaos, weakness and power, and memory with forgetting. Out of these cohesions and frictions he produces densely woven languages and environments of moral and psychic inquiry.

In 2016 he has an upcoming solo presentations at Bengal Gallery (Dhaka), India Art Fair 2016 and Dhaka Art Summit 2016 and screenings at the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art (Brisbane) for Asia Pacific Triennial 8. Recently he has had solo exhibitions and screenings at Les Rencontres Internationales (Paris), 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art (Sydney), ALASKA Projects (Sydney) and MOMENTUM (Berlin). He is the recent recipient of a Bengal Foundation Practice Grant, Keir Foundation/4A Commission, Australia Council Skills and Development Grant, Edward M. Kennedy Grant for the Arts, and an Australian Cinematographer's Society Gold Award. He was a finalist for the John Fries Award in 2015 and the Blake Art Prize in 2015 and 2016.

Omar was born in 1983 and studied at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. He works in Sydney, Australia and Dhaka, Bangladesh.

<http://omarchowdhury.com>

GROUND
FLOOR



- | | | | |
|----|---|----|---|
| 01 | Lightbox (Absence)
6.5' x 4.8' x 7"
Inkjet print (also on reverse) on PVC,
aluminium frame, fluorescent tubes | 06 | Photograph (Future)
47" x 37" (48" x 38" framed)
Inkjet print on archival photo paper |
| 02 | Photograph (Now)
47" x 37" (48" x 38" framed)
Inkjet print on archival photo paper | 07 | Combine (Exile 1)
16.53" x 12.69" (20" x 16" framed)
Inkjet print on archival photo paper
and sketch paper |
| 03 | Combine (Absence)
17.53" x 11.69" (21" x 15" framed)
Inkjet print on archival photo
and sketch paper | 08 | Combine (Exile 2)
16.53" x 12.69" (20" x 16" framed)
Inkjet print on archival photo paper,
sketch paper, and reused pages from
old books and journals |
| 04 | Photograph (Absence)
18" x 14.5" (18.5" x 15" framed)
Inkjet print on archival photo paper | 09 | Photograph (Exile)
18" x 14.5" (18.5" x 15" framed)
Inkjet print on archival photo paper |
| 05 | Film (Now)
Variable dimensions
35 minutes, ProRes 422 (delivery in
H.264 MOV), colour, stereo,
used benches | 10 | Text, Tables and Chairs
40pp, 10" x 6.5", full colour, softcover
Old tables and chairs (variable
dimensions) |

MEZZANINE



- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>11 Photograph (Headshot)
12.5" x 12.5" (15.5" x 15.5" framed)
Inkjet print on archival photo paper</p> <p>12 Sculpture (Eternity)
4' x 3.5' x 2'
Concrete, wire frame, wood and paint</p> <p>13 Combine (Pre-history 1)
16.53" x 12.69" (20" x 16" framed)
Inkjet print on archival photo paper and sketch paper</p> <p>14 Photograph (Pre-history)
18" x 14.5" (18.5" x 15" framed)
Inkjet print on archival photo paper</p> <p>15 Combine (Pre-history 2)
16.53" x 12.69" (20" x 16" framed)
Inkjet print on archival photo paper, sketch paper, and reused pages from old books and journals.</p> <p>16 Lightbox (Now)
4' x 4' x 7"
Inkjet print (also on reverse) on PVC, double sided, aluminium frame, fluorescent tubes</p> | <p>17 Photograph (Disillusionment)
18" x 14.5" (18.5" x 15" framed)
Inkjet print on archival photo paper</p> <p>18 Combine (Disillusionment)
17.53" x 11.69" (21" x 15" framed)
Inkjet print on archival photo paper and sketch paper</p> <p>19 Lightbox (Disillusionment)
7' x 5' x 5'
Inkjet print (also on reverse) on PVC, aluminium frame, fluorescent tubes, rusted metal stand with bolts</p> <p>20 System decay and its origins
Variable dimensions
Soldiers (in uniform), microphone with stand, headphone with stand, sound mixer, 2 x media players, 40" television, plinth with texts</p> <p>21 Lightbox (Exile, Now)
6.5' x 4.8' x 10"
Inkjet print (also on reverse) on PVC, double sided, frame, fluorescent tubes</p> |
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25 January — 12 March 2016

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