

UNFIXED

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PHOTOGRAPHY AND  
POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES  
IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Edited by Sara Blokland and Asmara Pelupessy



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Jap Sam Books, Heijningen  
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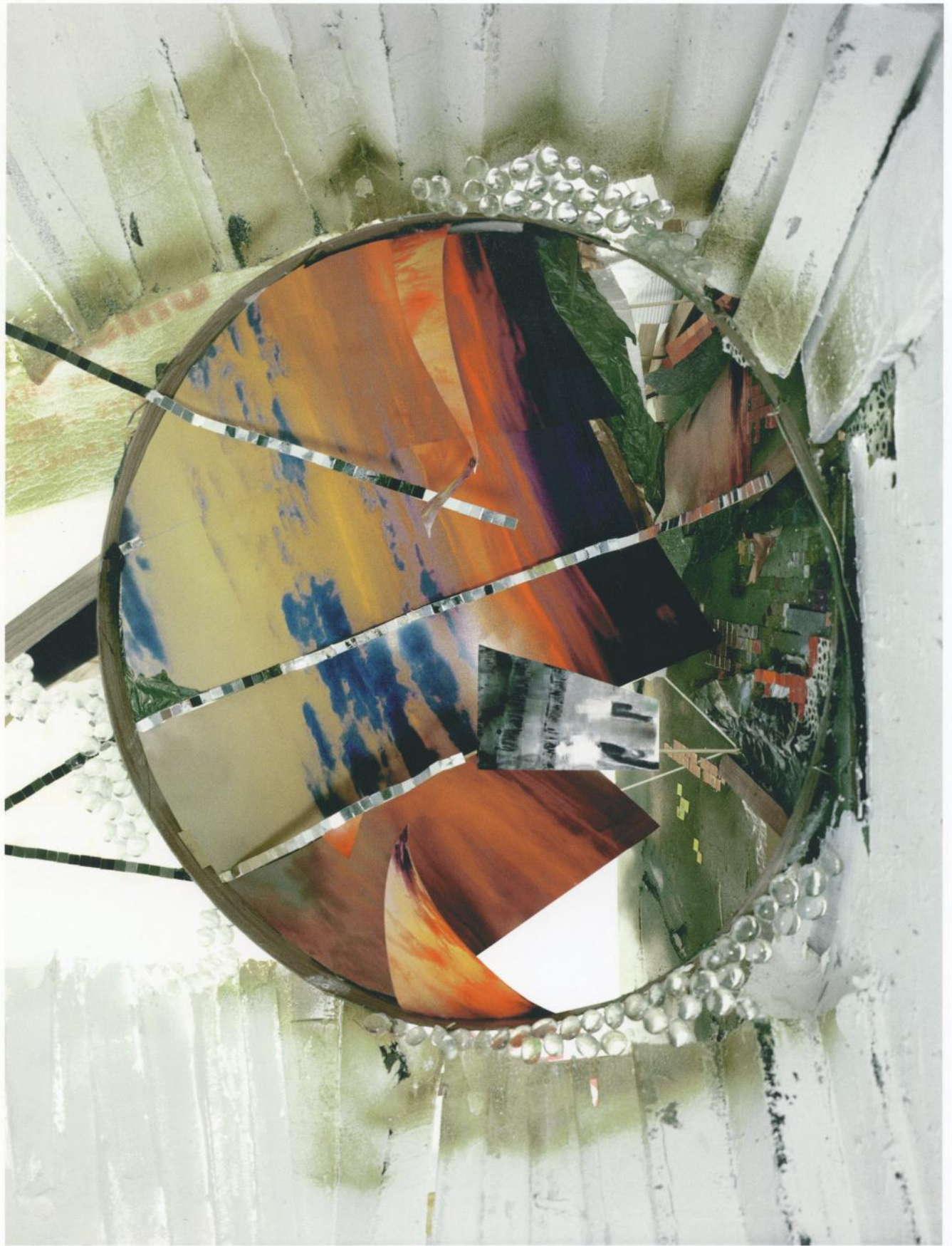
YAMINI NAYAR  
IN SPACE BETWEEN



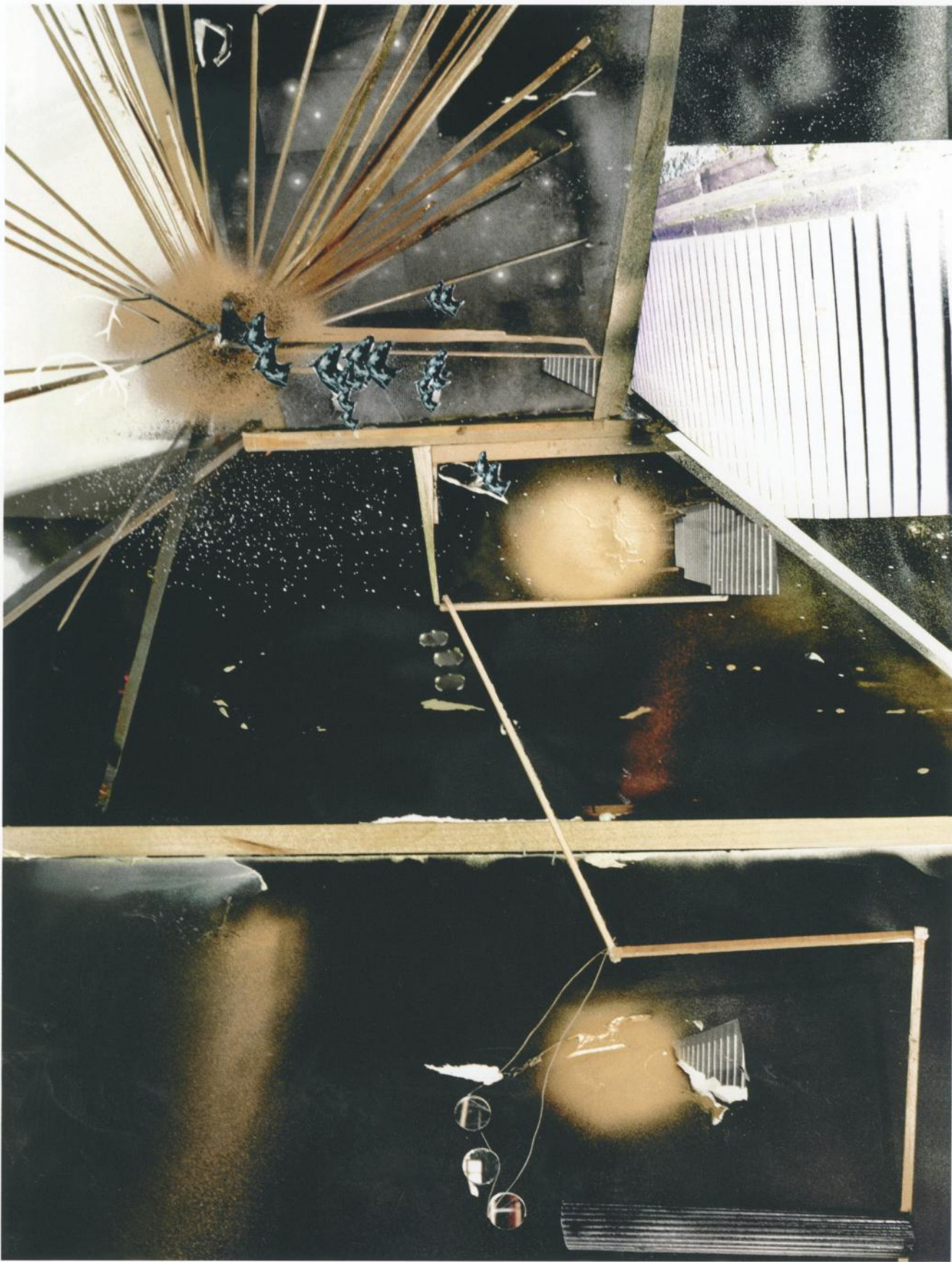
Under a Night Sky, 2009  
C-type print  
91.4 x 121.9 cm



Cleo, 2009  
C-type print  
76 x 101 cm



One of These Days, 2009  
C-type print  
91.4 x 121.9 cm



Happen, 2009  
C-type print  
76 x 101 cm

## This interview is excerpted from an ongoing dialogue between Nayar and Vali, conducted both in-person and over email chats through Fall 2010 and Spring 2011, and often stimulated by cups of strong milky tea.

At this stage I think and work like a sculptor more than a photographer. The found photographs are my anchors, the reference I keep returning to as the piece grows. Each image develops over time, accrues its own narrative, logic and sculptural process. Cycles of construction, erasure and reconstruction lead in unexpected directions, fragments of other elements and sources creep in. Each piece creates its own collection of residues and castoffs – materials and images – that are eventually incorporated. The original image is just a point of departure, a reference point, a map of a moment from the past, a fixed memory. The final photograph documents the erasures and traces of process.

I think of the sculptures as constructed moments. They are never intended to function as autonomous physical objects but are built, specifically, to be viewed through the lens.

MV: The lens establishes a perspective.

YN: Precisely. I am very interested in how perspective and scale might be manipulated to orient and disorient the viewer. The three-dimensionality of the sculpture is translated into a two-dimensional image; perspective shifts and space is flattened. The particular entry point into the scene the lens provides is what holds it all together, what ties up the loose ends. In this sense, my camera is a kind of collaborator – it alters what it looks at. The relationships that emerge in the photograph are specific to the image.

MV: The photograph also seems to seal the sculpture into a particular arrangement.

YN: Definitely. The sculptures are quite fragile. Propped up and held together by thread and

bits of tape they are impossible to move and are discarded after photographing. The photograph is both an entry point into the construction, held together by the lens, as well as a document of a destroyed object.

MV: How do you determine the size of your final prints? How does it relate to the miniature scale of the sculptures?

YN: The size of the photograph really depends on the sculpture, and what it needs to be clearly articulated. By this, I mean subject matter and level of detail. However, I am always aware that the final object is the photograph and not the sculpture. So the photograph needs to be a size that allows it to stand on its own and maintains a scale that allows the viewer to enter the space. There is no real formula. More intimate spaces tend to be smaller, quieter. Others that allude to a public or collective use may be larger, to confront the viewer in a different way.

MV: Scale shifts at numerous points in your process. The miniature, the ad hoc, the recycled are all monumentalized. Is magnification something you are interested in?

YN: Magnification is key, specifically the ability of scale to create a world that can be both inhabitable and displaced.

MV: The final photograph serves as an endpoint. It controls the chaos of process, collapsing the duration of sculptural process into a single indexical image.

YN: My photographs are endpoints but also beginnings.

MV: In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes'

suggests that death haunts all photography. Your photographs monumentalize and memorialize the fragility and decay of the sculptures, preserve the humble experiences and detritus of everyday life from which they are constructed. But preservation is also always marked by death; for example, the way museums mummify the objects they collect, which become firmly of the past. Why does a dynamic and durational sculptural process have to end in a single static arrangement? Seriality might allow this dynamism and duration to remain legible.

YN: I think I allow a level of transparency. But I am primarily interested in photography's ability to create a monumental moment, one worth remembering. I am interested in the presence and processes of memory. Walter Benjamin's writings on the dialectical image and the ruin are more influential than Barthes. The sculptures are sites of ruin, tension and dialectics.

MV: While you construct ruins, they are remnants not of structures and spaces of the past, but of those that have not yet come to be. They embody the future anterior.

YN: I understand Benjamin's dialectical image as an image that describes a space that contains strong enough versions of future and past to startle us in some way to the present. It encapsulates and conflates desire and nostalgia.

MV: This simultaneity of past and future is palpable in your images. It might be why they feel somewhat off kilter, uncanny, is the uncanny (unheimlich or unhomely) something that interests you?

YN: Yes. [...]





Pursuit, 2010  
C-type print  
91.4 x 121.9 cm

- MV: Theories of the uncanny are strongly linked to the body, to the inanimate body coming to life. How do you translate this idea to spaces without bodies?
- YN: Space can contain presence through the filtering of absence, through architectonics and the traces of activity. The methods of construction are just as important as the content. The way something is said is just as significant as what is being said.
- MV: The spaces you construct are clearly imagined, they are dreamworlds in a sense.
- YN: Yes, they often draw from utopic visions. For instance, *By a Thread* (2009) emerged from research on the Industrial Revolution; an illustration of the Crystal Palace served as the point of departure. The Crystal Palace is considered a 'beginning' of modernism and housed the 1851 World's Fair and so was a very charged space.
- MV: It showcased industrial technology and capitalist efficiency.
- YN: And the riches of colonial campaigns. So I re-imagined it as a psychological space filled with desire and nostalgia, while complicating this by introducing an alternative perspective into the conventional narrative of history, one informed by broader cultural narratives that are normally peripheral. The ceiling becomes the floor or, metaphorically, a foundation.
- MV: It resembles a spider's web, which the title alludes to.
- YN: Yes, the title suggests a sense of fragility.
- MV: Your sculptures often contain photographic
- fragments: an eye in Cleo (2009) a pair of legs in *Pursuit* (2010). What are the sources of these fragments? And do you intend them to be recognizable or function as illegible traces?
- YN: Among the numerous archives I research I am often drawn to collections of snapshots, as well as film stills. Snapshots embody the everyday, and our experience of it. They are subjective yet familiar. I like to use film stills, or fragments of stills, because of their potency within collective memory and imagination, and film has a universal reach of sorts. I am not really interested in making them completely recognizable – they function as pivots or anchors in the constructions. They may be fragmented or dislocated, but they, hopefully, act as a point of recognition in the final photograph.
- MV: Are they punctums?
- YN: Yes, they are often that detail picked up by the camera that holds the gaze.
- MV: Cleo (2009) is a fascinating image. It mirrors, in a rudimentary, schematic sense, the photographic act. There is an eye at the center of the far wall and the small clear ball in the mid ground serves as a lens. It is unnerving; the image appears to look back.
- YN: Yes, that clear sphere holds the image and a reflection of what is behind it.
- MV: *Pursuit* reminded me of artist Richard Hamilton's *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing* (1956).
- YN: I was thinking about that image, as well as Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture.
- MV: And Pop? Richard Hamilton's image is one of the earliest examples of Pop Art.
- YN: Yes, but it is also a work made at a certain point in history and the period element is more important than a reference to one work or a style of art.
- MV: Are you influenced by stage and set design? Because your camera functions like a proscenium arch, framing the sculpture, reducing it to one perspective.
- YN: Totally. I am obsessed with backgrounds, environments and interiors. I love Constructivist and Bauhaus set design. I do think of my images as sets, in the sense that they are worlds the viewer can inhabit.
- MV: Where does your desire to create space, or rather, place, originate?
- YN: I find architectural space to be incredibly expressive and have always been entranced by photography's ability to create place. I am fascinated with old family albums and the way a snapshot can stand-in for a reality or place lost or left behind. Most of my family's snapshots were of East Bengal and Kerala. And I clearly remember moving to Detroit and watching our first house being built, literally, from the ground up. First the foundation, then the basement, the wood frame, the walls, and we would periodically visit as it was being constructed. I was left completely aware of its construction and, with it, my family's identity, space and environment, their architectonics and the objects they enclose, relate strongly to identity.
- MV: Your art hovers between fixity and chaos, between location and dislocation. While it evinces a strong desire to construct places – spaces of belonging – this is offset by the sense
- that these places remain fragile, temporary and elusive, always unfixed. Does this indeterminacy emerge from your experience as a diasporic subject?
- YN: I am interested in a certain kind of dislocation. Not necessarily of a literal place but a dislocation of familiar elements into other histories, collective memories and personal narratives. Hopefully this dislocation complicates photography's indexical relation to the past, to memory.
- MV: Are you creating memories?
- YN: Both architectural space and its representations are repositories, containers as well as skeletons of sorts. I like that my photographs kind of hover around reality, draw from memories, feel familiar and strange.
- MV: Your work is filled with translations: between the mediums of photography and sculpture, between two and three dimensions, and between each distinct stage of a multi-step process.
- YN: Translation is central to my work and process. For me, translation is about the broad strokes of an original idea that serves to shift and reconstruct meaning through language. The photographs are sites of translation. The source photograph is reconstructed as a sculptural form but through broad strokes – I like the distillation. The sculptures are more suggestive of a space and moment, rather than a literal articulation. They are spaces in transition or in states of becoming. The final work ends up quite a distance away from its origin and the tension between what is intended and realized lies in this gap.



By a Thread, 2009  
C-type print  
30 x 40 cm