

ARTFORUM

Amar Kanwar

Marian Goodman Gallery | New York

By Ania Szremski (February 2019)



Amar Kanwar, *Such a Morning*, 2017, digital video projection, color, sound, 85 minutes.

To retreat into sleep during times of political cataclysm is to concede to failure, but in thus surrendering, the sleeper is ultimately able to rebroker reality in her dreams, the Egyptian author Haytham el-Wardany proposes in *The Book of Sleep* (2017). What Jean-Luc Nancy describes as the illogical, ungraspable state of slumber has become a conceptual touchstone for some interlocutors of Egypt's wrenching revolutionary experience (see Anna Della Subin's book-length essay *Not Dead but Sleeping* [2016] or the exhibition "When the whites of the eyes are red," curated by Shehab Awad at the CCS Bard Galleries in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, in 2017). The New Delhi-based artist Amar Kanwar has opened a similar inquiry with his latest film, *Such a Morning*, 2017, which premiered at Documenta 14 and made its way to the Marian Goodman Gallery in the fall of 2018. The past two embattled years have often seen art conscripted into the service of resistance, but like Wardany's talismanic text, Kanwar's *Such a Morning* enacts refusal by laying down arms: The eighty-five-minute film is a quiet, slow-moving study of inaction.

The artist is best known for lyrical documentary films responding to specific historic episodes of violence on the Indian subcontinent, such as *The Lightning Testimonies*, 2007, and *The Sovereign Forest*, 2011. *Such a Morning* is less lucid, operating more like a parable. It tells the story of a famous mathematician who inexplicably leaves the university where he's teaching and moves into an abandoned train car in the forest. He covers the windows with cloth, submerging himself in obscurity, much to the consternation and bewilderment of those he left behind.

One *reads* the story more than sees it; little blocks of text appear in the corners of the screen to push the narrative forward. The camera lingers on hushed, dozy scenes—of gorgeous plants swaying in the wind; clouds rolling over mountaintops; and the protagonist tediously moving his few belongings into the train car, where, for much of the film, he slumbers. Yet the text does not account for the sudden introduction of a woman, who mysteriously sits in a dilapidated house while holding an enormous rifle at the ready, her front door boarded up from the inside. She never fires the gun, even as a group of men start to tear her home down around her, ripping off the roof and demolishing the walls until nothing is left except her, sitting enigmatically in the daylight.

Darkness is the putative subject of the film: The mathematician devotes himself to its study, eventually declaring that there are forty-nine different types (which, he believes, must necessarily be understood in order for reality to be reformed). But light is also a main character. Smoke curls inside of sunbeams so that they appear to crawl like animals through holes in the mathematician's curtains; a hypnotically full moon glows blue; and, in one of the scholar's visions, thin hard slivers of fire shoot through stygian space. The exquisitely beautiful contrast between this carefully shaped luminescence and the film's thick and inky shadows calls to mind mystical poetry: Ibn Arabi's description of his divine lover's hair spreading like the night, or Saint John of the Cross's recounting of a nocturnal ecstasy.

Over the past year, critics and curators have struggled to decipher the film. Is the woman the mathematician's hallucination, or vice versa? What does her destroyed home represent—the institution of democracy itself? Is the train car a reference to an actual historic event, or perhaps a metaphor for the failure of the modernist machine? Kanwar has created that miraculous kind of work that anyone can read but that also, crucially, defies interpretation. I would rather sit languidly in its equivocal poetry than illuminate its symbols. Too much light induces insomnia. Current events conspire to keep us neurotically alert—closing our burning eyes, at least for a while, could be an act of subversion. Eventually we awaken, charged with the visions of nighttime.