

# Disappearing Worlds

EMILIA TERRACCIANO //

AMAR KANWAR'S LATEST INSTALLATION CAPTURES LIFE AND ITS EXTINCTION, IN RURAL ODISHA AND ELSEWHERE

**I**N LATE AUTUMN LAST YEAR, I travelled to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in northern England to visit Amar Kanwar's latest exhibition. In *The Sovereign Forest*, an installation of films, objects and texts, the Delhi-based artist and filmmaker focuses on the impact of corporate mining on Odisha's ecosystem and communities—a subject that seemed very distant from the light morning traffic and flocks of sheep congregating in the green shimmering fields of West Yorkshire. Yet, although there's no sign of it now, coal from beneath these fields in the former mining zone had once propelled Britain's ships across the seas and enabled the building of intricate railway networks in India and elsewhere. As in many other places in the world, including Odisha, coal mining here went hand in hand with conflict. Though coal had fuelled the machinery of empire for over a century, by the 1980s it was at the heart of a violent industrial struggle within the UK. Coal blackened the history of both the Left and the trade union movement in Britain, with the crushing defeat of the miners' strike in 1985 at the hands of Margaret Thatcher's government, which forever altered England's industrial landscape.

Situated in a disused coalfield in the 500-acre Estate of Bretton Hall, the Yorkshire Sculpture Park is a 15-minute



COURTESY AMAR KANWAR / JONTY WILDE

taxi ride from the Wakefield Westgate railway station. The park's landscape was developed in the latter half of the 18th century by Thomas Wentworth, fifth Baronet and the last Wentworth to own Bretton Hall, and was designed by Richard Woods, a talented contemporary of the famous landscape architect Lancelot "Capability" Brown. Woods introduced a rich variety of trees and plants, and also designed the idyllic vistas that are still enjoyed by visitors today. The park is now an archive of the extravagant botanical caprices of its former Georgian owners. I arrived there to see fig trees providing an umbrella-like canopy of lacy leaves, and swollen persimmons glowing in the sun. The foul smell of ginkgo biloba fruit permeated the air. Within this setting, the individual works of *The Sovereign Forest* take up three large rooms of the park's Underground Gallery and also spill out into the open.

The exhibition, curated by Claire Lilley and on view from 10 November 2013 to 2 February 2014, coincides with the thirtieth anniversary of the miners' strike. Its themes of exploitation and industrialisation resonate with Yorkshire's coal mining history and the defeat of its labour unions. The exhibition also involves related workshops and tours through the Sculpture Park's woodland ecology,



**LEFT: ‘The Prediction’ is a loosely bound collection of paper parchments, displayed as part of *The Sovereign Forest*, that chronicles the assassination of a union leader in Chhattisgarh.**

justice in the Indian subcontinent. He has held numerous international exhibitions—including at the Whitechapel Gallery, London (2007), the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2008), and Documenta 11, 12, and 13 in Kassel, Germany. He is represented by Marian Goodman, a leading New York gallery. Kanwar is regarded by critics as one of the world’s most politically astute artist-filmmakers. He leans towards the left, but has resisted becoming a representative for any institutionalised stream of politics, or even for India itself, avoiding what he refers to in his writings as the “fraudulent” framework of the nation-state. Kanwar’s loose affiliation with subcontinental grassroots movements, and his focus on the fine grain of lived experience, enable the small, intimate details in his work to illuminate the ground realities in Odisha. They also reflect upon a longer history of industrialisation and mining in Yorkshire.

The centrepiece of *The Sovereign Forest* is a 42-minute single-channel projection called ‘The Scene of Crime’ (2011), composed of short sequences shot in Odisha of territories that fall within industrial sites being acquired by the state government and mining corporations. In Kanwar’s own words in the exhibition brief, the film:

... offers an experience of landscape just prior to erasure. Every location, every blade of grass, every water source, every tree that is seen in the film is now meant to not exist anymore. *The Scene of Crime* is an experience of looking at the terrain of this conflict and the personal lives that exist within this natural landscape.

In the opening scene, a half-clad fisherman gracefully throws his net into the water. The fishing net impresses its shape on the grey surface of the river and gradually disappears underwater. In the shallow-water lowlands, green blades of grass tremble in the moist air. The silhouette of a fern quivers in the moonlight. An empty wooden boat tied to a log by a coarse rope floats precariously. As the water laps against its stern, the rope tangles and unravels. We see deserted paddy fields and small cryptic hieroglyphs on the sandy banks. Some human figures, perhaps lowland farmers, gather silently around the large trunk of a tree. But they are a rare sight in ‘The Scene of Crime’, which tends to show an environment devoid of people, perhaps in an effort to present landscapes through an objective lens, as pieces of evidence.

The documentation of a crime scene entails gathering evidence, securing it and preserving its integrity. The forensic eye of the camera does something similar in ‘The Scene of Crime’, where the “crime” is presumably the environmental and social destruction of rural Odisha. But the evidence Kanwar holds up for scrutiny—images of a reality that is being eroded—is of an unusual kind. Through these sequences, whose power extends beyond their evidentiary value, he challenges the logic of forensic science, pushing

which has recently been threatened by encroaching real estate developers.

**A**CCORDING TO KANWAR, *The Sovereign Forest* is an archive of a world and a way of life on the brink of extinction. First exhibited in 2012 at the Documenta 13 festival in Kassel, Germany, the installation encompasses a wide range of media. There’s a film made up of quiet scenes from vulnerable landscapes; another film capturing a romantic affair between two migrant labourers; a display of highly endangered rice seed varieties; books printed on banana-fibre paper that feature stories of resistance movements; and an album with photos of farmers who have committed suicide in Odisha. There is also other assorted material: fingerprints, land records, tax receipts and proofs of occupancy. Though *The Sovereign Forest*’s pieces vary in form, in each one Kanwar poetically links intimate personal experiences to far-reaching social and political developments.

Over the past two decades, Kanwar has—through his work in art, documentary film and new media—recorded the minutiae of life and its extinction, while also engaging with the wide-ranging implications of various kinds of in-



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**ABOVE: ‘The Scene of Crime’ (2011), the centrepiece of *The Sovereign Forest*, is a single-channel projection of sequences shot in Odisha of territories being acquired by the state government and mining corporations. RIGHT: ‘A Love Story’ (2010) recounts the end of a romantic affair between two migrant labourers.**

documentary realism to its poetic limits. “If a crime continues to occur regardless of the enormous evidence available,” Kanwar writes in the exhibition catalogue, “then is the crime invisible or the evidence invisible or are both visible but not seen?”

Kanwar’s empty rural landscapes recall the photographer Eugene Atget’s late 19th-century and early 20th-century documentation of the architectural and street scenes of the old city of Paris before they were replaced by Baron Haussman’s urban renewal projects. Entirely bereft of humans, the images operated beyond their ostensible purpose, appearing unintentionally but uncannily like “scenes of a crime”, as literary critic Walter Benjamin noted in his 1931 essay ‘A Small History of Photography’. “Is not every square inch of our cities the scene of a crime?” he wrote. Benjamin made the connection because he believed mechanical media could obscure the hand of the creator, in the same way that a perpetrator is absent from the scene of his crime and is only hinted at through evidence. The camera could “record images which escape natural optics altogether”. The political potential of Atget’s images resided in the way they presented Paris to the 20th-century viewer.

Similarly, in ‘The Scene of Crime’, Kanwar’s camera records vanishing images, focusing on what is forgotten, unremarked, cast adrift. What underlines these slow frames is a sense of impending doom, a menacing force, which provokes uneasiness. At the same time, with the slow pace of

each shot displacing the last, Kanwar defies the speed and sudden violence of the eviction and dispossession of people in rural Odisha.

There is another projection on view in the Sculpture Park’s Underground Gallery, a five-minute single-channel film called ‘A Love Story’ (2010). Part documentary, part fiction, the film provides an urban counterpoint to ‘The Scene of Crime’. Unlike that film, however, which is almost devoid of humans and human actions, ‘A Love Story’ recounts, through a series of images and sounds in four acts, the end of a romantic affair between two migrant labourers. With no hint of the luscious vegetation that fills up the screen in ‘The Scene of Crime’, ‘A Love Story’ is filmed entirely on a sprawling rubbish dump on the edges of Delhi. The film presents the never-ending cycle of migration and separation characterising the lives of millions in India forced into wage slavery and manual labour by the erosion of the rural economy.

The theme of precariousness recurs in another low-lit room in the gallery, where Kanwar has collected 272 different varieties of rice seed from the “crime scene” and displayed them serially on small, equidistant shelves. The seeds are meticulously labelled according to variety: ‘Champa’, ‘Bobbli bhuta’, ‘Kulia’, ‘Potia’, ‘Bankosa’ and ‘Benibhog’. Once upon a time, an explanatory text tells us, there were 30,000 varieties of traditional paddy seeds in Odisha, assuring very high yields. Today, the text elaborates, only 20



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high-yielding varieties persist there, all of them requiring large amounts of water and chemical fertiliser to cultivate, and also unable to withstand adverse weather conditions. For Kanwar, the seed archive is “a vocabulary of an extensive knowledge system that is being destroyed”. The enforcement of corporate patent laws upon small farmers has caused the destruction of indigenous crops and, Kanwar complains, of history too.

Alongside the display of seeds are three large volumes made of banana-fibre paper, upon which Kanwar has screen-printed various texts. These include ‘The Constitution’, made up of imagined chapters “missing” from every country’s constitution, and ‘The Prediction’, a loosely bound collection of paper parchments that chronicles the assassination of Shankar Guha Niyogi. Niyogi founded the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM), a mass movement of workers, peasants and adivasis, which he directed

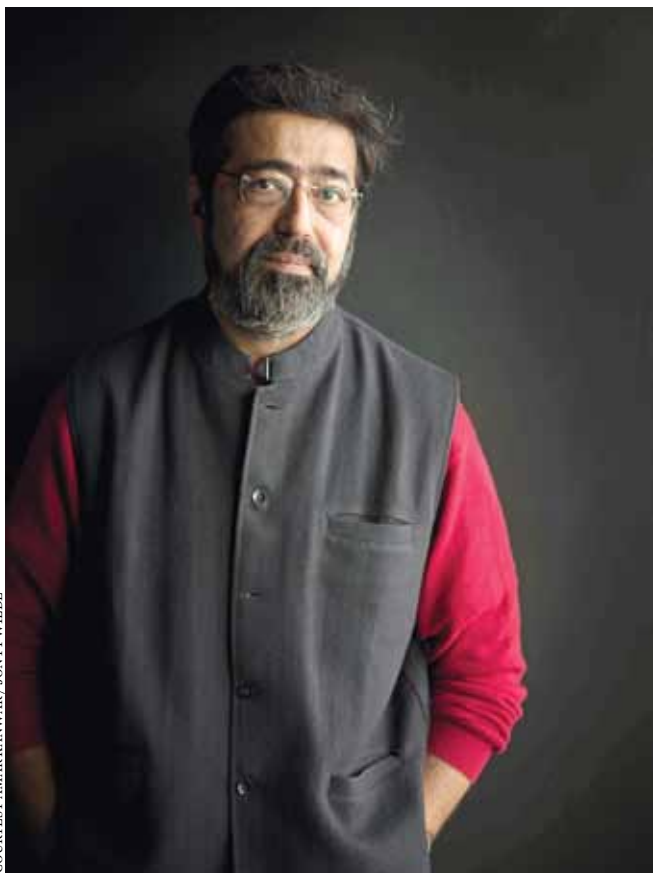
from its inception in 1977 until his assassination in 1991. A few weeks before his death, Niyogi recorded a message in which he predicted that industrialists with mining interests would come together to get rid of him. In 1997, a Madhya Pradesh Sessions Court convicted a group of local industrialists of conspiring to do just that. However, in 2005, the Supreme Court acquitted them on the basis of insufficient evidence.

In ‘The Prediction’, a shrivelled piece of paper stands out among the photographs, CMM documents, leaflets, newspaper clippings and reports in Hindi, Bengali and English. On the paper is Niyogi’s motto: “Create while you resist!” The imperative tense brings history into the present, establishing a connection between this past protest and Kanwar’s art installation. Kanwar’s inclusion of these papers suggests that resistance is a force as constant as oppression.

On the other hand, ‘In Memory Of’, a pocket-sized album that visitors can leaf through, is a chronicle of sustained oppression. It is a harrowing record of the suicides of heavily indebted farmers in Odisha over the past few years, represented through a selection of photographic portraits of such farmers accompanied by details of their deaths. The accompanying text explains the perpetual cycle of dispossession and migration provoked by the encroachment into rural Odisha of mining corporations like Tata, Posco, Vedanta and Jindal. In Kanwar’s words: “Farmers are becoming migrants. The migrants are becoming refugees. The



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refugees are becoming workers. The workers are becoming prisoners. The prisoners are sitting in the courtyards because the cells are over-crowded.”

The third room of the gallery contains a rough installation of further evidence of “crimes” perpetrated against the communities of Odisha. A multitude of exhibits line the room: fingerprints, land records and tax receipts, proofs of occupancy, maps of village land acquired for industrial projects, even a booklet of poems by a singer called the Wicked Poet.

Like Kanwar, several contemporary Indian artists have engaged with archives to deepen the institutional and political implications of their own practice. The bookmaker and artist Dayanita Singh pursues her fascination with archives by displaying her photographs in physical structures that work as cabinets and filing systems. The Raqs Media Collective looks at colonial archives to ask what perspectives they overlook. For example, in their looped video projection *An Afternoon Unregistered on the Richter Scale* (2011), the collective digitally manipulated a black-and-white photograph taken at the Survey of India office in Calcutta in 1911 to make the objects and men in the room seem to come alive on a large projection screen. In *Untold Intimacy of Digits*, also from 2011, they animated a facsimile of a palmprint made by a Bengali peasant in 1858 as part of British India’s revenue records. One of the earliest impressions taken of the human body for the explicit purpose of identification, the sample is now stored in the archives of University College London.

In comparison, Kanwar’s archives of seeds, natural scenes and legal documents are as much about exposing the fallibility of historical evidence as they are about emphasising the impossibility of narrative closure. An exhaustive inventory of the “crime” of oppression, in Odisha and elsewhere, cannot be compiled, and all the culprits cannot be indicted. Kanwar uses the evidence not to accuse anyone but to evoke a specific time and place. In not handing down sentences, his work turns from forensics and legality to the realm of poetry.

**MET AMAR KANWAR OUTSIDE** the Underground Gallery. Sitting on one of his ‘Listening Benches’, the artist’s special commission for the park with seats made from a dismantled 19th-century organ from Bretton Hall’s estate chapel, Kanwar looked pensive while sipping a cup of tea and smoking a cigarette. In his soft-spoken tone, he explained that the concept of the archive is inherently authoritative. “Most archives have or develop an intrinsic relationship with power,” he said. The kings, the patriarchs, the state—all eventually foreground, subsume, subjugate and reassert authority. For Kanwar, an archive must embrace its own inadequacy rather than claim to be authorita-

**TOP LEFT: Kanwar’s ‘Listening Benches’ are made from parts of a dismantled 19th-century organ.**

**LEFT: Over the past two decades, Kanwar has engaged with the minutiae as well as the wide-ranging implications of various kinds of injustice in the Indian subcontinent.**



**In *A Night of Prophecy*, Kanwar recorded the tradition of registering protest through poetry and music in the Indian subcontinent.**

COURTESY MARINO SOLOKHOV

tive. He told me that he had tried to emphasise this inadequacy in *The Sovereign Forest*. “Inadequacy is central to this archive ... it is fluid.”

The archive, Kanwar said, is also in competition with the powers that govern the environment. “At one level we are contesting the assumed sovereignty of the nation-state and its ownership of the forest. On the other, we open up the fact that there need to be multiple conceptions of sovereignty. Sovereignty must return to the forest.”

Kanwar’s social activism—and its intersection with his art—was sparked off in 1984 with the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the vindictive violence against Sikhs in Delhi that followed. Kanwar, who grew up in the city, was then enrolled for a history degree at Delhi University. When the university’s history department shut down in protest against the violence, Kanwar dedicated himself to relief work and campaigns to secure justice for the aggrieved. A few months later, a gas leak from the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal killed over 2,000 people and injured more than 500,000. As with several other artists and filmmakers of his generation, these catastrophic events shaped Kanwar’s worldview. In 1985, after finishing his history degree, he set off for central India to do research in the coal mining belt in and around the Shadol District in Madhya Pradesh, an area infamous for environmental disasters and human rights violations. The experience had a long-lasting impact on him, opening up “a whole country beyond my existence”, he told *Frieze* magazine in April 2009.

Kanwar soon shifted from academia to film. He joined the Mass Communications Research Centre at Delhi’s Jamia Millia Islamia university, a centre for budding subversive filmmakers. Shortly after graduating in 1987, Kanwar made two activist documentary films, *Site* and *A Wager*, which dealt with minimum wages, health and maternity benefits in India. Also during these early years, Kanwar made a film for the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, *Earth as Witness* (1994), which explored Buddhism and environmentalism. Kanwar told me about how the use of poems and prayers alongside images opened up new narrative forms, referring to the film as a turning point.

Three years later, Kanwar produced *A Season Outside* (1997), which like ‘The Scene of Crime’ is visually nomadic. Tying the political to the personal, the film attempts to make sense of the violent history of the Punjab and the rest of India, but also that of humanity at large. It starts with a raw sequence of choreographed, military machismo recorded at the Wagah-Atari border, overlaid with a spasmodic narration in Kanwar’s own voice. From this public display of violence we move to Kanwar’s own childhood memories. He recounts the stories he heard growing up of Punjabi women nailing their windows shut to barricade themselves in against the prolonged rape and murder unleashed by Partition. In another scene, two boys play in a street. The bigger one pushes the smaller from behind. When the fallen boy cries out, the bully runs away and hides behind a curtain. We are shown men cheering grotesquely



COURTESY AMAR KANWAR

**In one sequence from *The Torn First Pages* (2004–8), in which Kanwar engages with the Burmese democracy movement, General Than Shwe, then the head of the Burmese junta, scatters flowers on the Mahatma Gandhi memorial in Delhi during a 2010 visit.**

as two billy goats butt heads. As Kanwar's voiceover tells us of how humiliation follows violence, we see a puppy being tormented by a group of vicious ravens. Kanwar's voice illuminates unseen details in the images, transforming the raw footage into something more beautiful, or at least more bearable. At other times, though, Kanwar insists on highlighting the footage's unbearable ugliness. Throughout the film, Kanwar never leaves the viewer; at one point we hear him say, "I need to learn not to react to violence with violence nor to flee when it occurs."

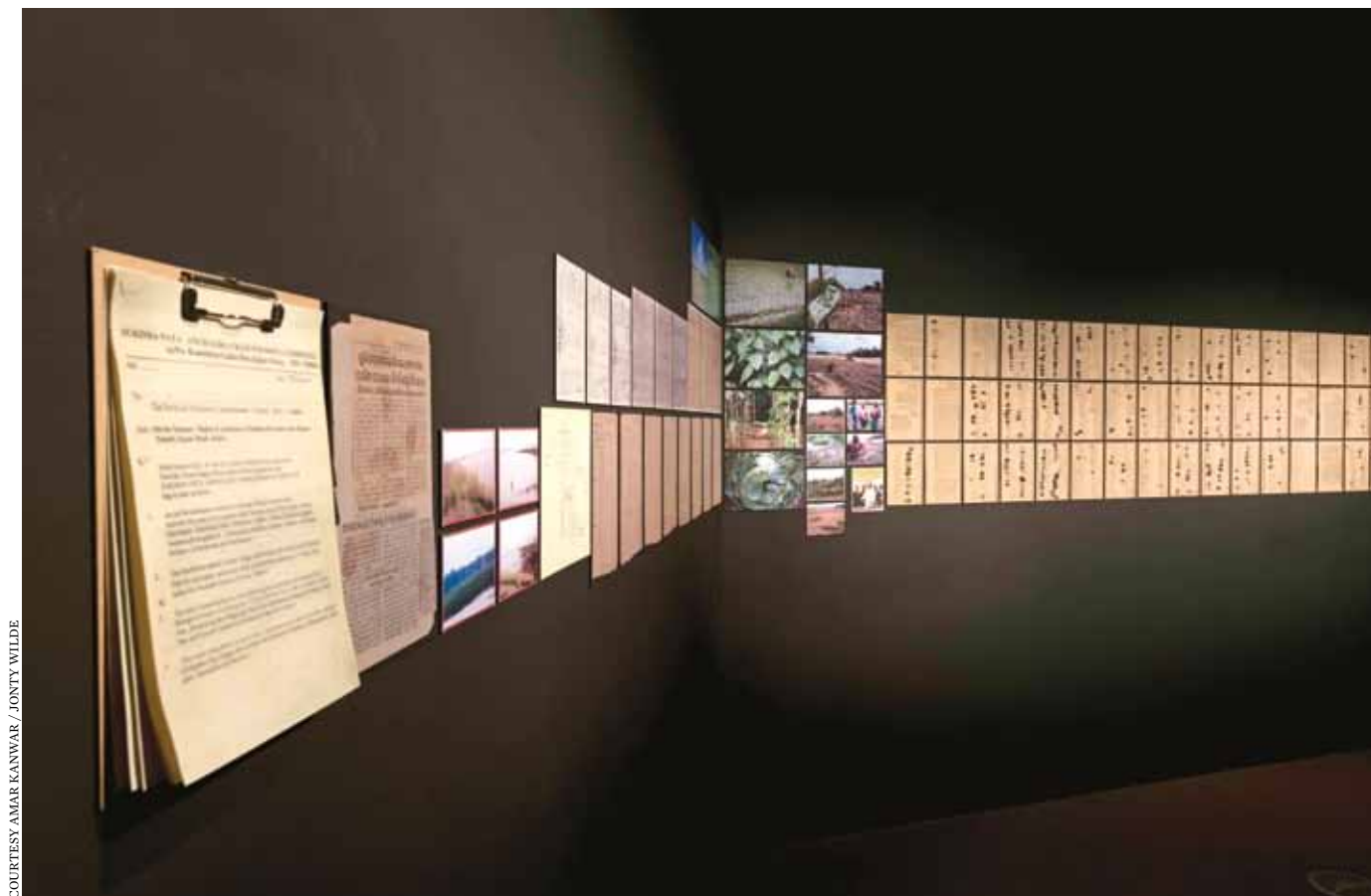
*A Season Outside* was a creative breakthrough. The film was screened extensively in India, in schools and villages and to wealthy and poor alike. After it, Kanwar told me, he looked at his work in a new light. "I started to embed things instead of locking them in. I introduced my own confusions and vulnerabilities in the film." *A Season Outside* brought Kanwar to the forefront of the global contemporary art scene after curator Okwui Enwezor discovered it on a research trip to India for Documenta 11. Kanwar began to be shown at international biennales, group shows and exhibitions.

In his work since, Kanwar has continued to explore the violent histories of the Indian subcontinent, the prophetic possibilities of poetry, the suffering of women, and the brutality of military regimes. His approach to history privileges archival sources over pedantic narration. His film *A Night*

*of Prophecy*, which premiered at Documenta 11 in 2002, was a tapestry of poetry and protest music from across the region. From the caste struggles of Andhra Pradesh to separatist conflicts in Nagaland and Kashmir, Kanwar recorded strains of resistance that are carried forward through the medium of poetry and song, by schoolchildren, church choirs, slumdweller and autorickshaw drivers.

His next film, *The Torn First Pages* (2004–8), was dedicated to Ko Than Htay, a Mandalay bookseller imprisoned for sedition in 1994. In a 19-channel video projection divided into three parts, Kanwar interwove a multitude of personal narratives from persecuted figures within the Burmese democracy movement. Premiering at the Haus der Kunst, a museum in Munich, this densely layered installation introduced the viewer to Thet Win Aung, a student leader killed in prison; Sitt Nyein Aye, a painter in exile; Tin Moe, a dissident Burmese poet; and Ma Win Maw Oo, a high-school student killed by soldiers during the civil uprising of 1988.

*The Lightning Testimonies* (2007), created in response to the Gujarat carnage of 2002, reflected upon the gendered history of sexual violence in India through an eight-channel projected installation. It journeyed from the infamous human rights violations and everyday abuses committed by the Indian Army in the north-eastern states of Manipur



COURTESY AMAR KANWAR / JONTY WILDE

Kanwar calls *The Sovereign Forest*, which encompasses a wide range of media, an archive of a way of life on the brink of extinction.

and Nagaland to the ongoing civil war in Kashmir, and also touched upon the routine humiliation of Dalit and Adivasi women all over India.

It was while filming *The Lightning Testimonies* in a remote area in Assam that Kanwar organised his first ever screening for a local community, to involve them more consciously with his efforts. It's a practice that he continues to value. "If you are not politically or socially engaged or connected with a community or a process, with some degree of depth and calmness, you cannot produce work," he told me. This belief also permeates *The Sovereign Forest*, a version of which is on permanent display at the Samadrusti campus in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, where it opened on 15 August 2012.

**T**HROUGH THE COURSE OF HIS CAREER as a filmmaker, Kanwar has continuously reconfigured visual elements to suspend the habitual relationships we form with images. In earlier works, this reconfiguring aimed at a greater narrative authority and an overarching story—often through the guttural voice of the artist himself. In 'The Scene of Crime', Kanwar the storyteller is both unseen and unheard. The wrenching commentary is silenced. For Kanwar, this conceptual reticence is an important achievement. The traveller in *The Sovereign Forest* is conspicuous by his absence, leaving few traces at the "scene of crime".

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Kanwar's new work exhorts viewers to act as historians themselves, even if they remain physically removed from the specific geographical contexts Kanwar presents. In Yorkshire's former coal country, *The Sovereign Forest* confronts UK viewers, presenting the impact of mining in Odisha and prompting consideration of the long-term implications of our reliance on fossil fuels. What is at stake in Odisha, after all, is not just coal, but an invaluable treasure of precious minerals, natural resources and indigenous systems of knowledge.

Perhaps, one can interpret Kanwar's archive as a eulogy—a moving but ultimately futile statement of loss. Yet, especially in this current avatar at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, *The Sovereign Forest* also embodies the promise of a shared sense of politics transcending the confines of the nation-state. Ultimately, it seeks to return sovereignty to the forest and, in turn, to each of us. ■