

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

documenta 14

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*Amar Kanwar*

By Kaelen Wilson-Goldie



*Amar Kanwar, work in progress for Documenta 14*

Rise early enough and the day begins in darkness. In the films, videos, and installations of Amar Kanwar, darkness is prevalent but never absolute. In *A Season Outside* (1997), a meditation on the sources of violence, division, and conflict (alongside countervailing strategies of narrative, metaphor, and retreat), darkness is the inky blue light of an early morning, street lamps glowing pink on a country road. It is a man withdrawing from the world. It is the color of memories, the wounds of partition, of India becoming Pakistan becoming Bangladesh, performed again and again in rituals that are resplendent and spectacular but also dangerous. Neither is light necessarily benevolent or divine. It is also a flash of violence, the conflagration of war, the look on a boy's face in a Tibetan refugee camp as he shoves another child to the ground.

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In *A Night of Prophecy* (2002), darkness is a blind man dropping off to sleep and the dreams to follow. In *The Scene of Crime* (2011), darkness is cinema, the rustle of wind through trees before dawn, a fisherman casting his net, palms in the breeze before a half moon. It is also the shroud over a brutal recent history of lands acquired and livelihoods destroyed for industry, resource extraction, and profit. In *The Lightning Testimonies* (2007), darkness is the secret history of sexual violence across the subcontinent. In the installations of *The Torn First Pages* (2008) and *The Sovereign Forest* (2011), darkness is a mood, a setting for the quiet study of resistance through the unfolding stories of a bookseller in Burma or of farmers and Indigenous communities in Odisha.

In the works of Kanwar, who was born in New Delhi in 1964, the course of a day stands in for a life. Fire is a wonder, electricity an enchantment, sunlight unforgiving. The height of the day yields to magic. Then the light fades to a time of potential wisdom, giving way to perception, insight, divination, belief, compassion, and, eventually, love. Kanwar's oeuvre consists almost entirely of works about violence, and yet those works do no violence themselves. Rather, they try to work through it, deal with it, and get beyond it without stepping around it. Kanwar's contribution to *documenta 14* tells another story—about a man of sciences, a mathematician. At the peak of his career, he leaves everything behind and goes to live in seclusion. There, in creeping darkness, he begins to see.

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