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Art in Review

**Amar Kanwar**

By HOLLAND COTTER

Although the filmmaker Amar Kanwar is highly regarded internationally, he's not much seen on the biennial glamour circuit. He continues to live in New Delhi, where he was born in 1964. And his documentary-based art is unswervingly grounded in what he once called "issues of justice," meaning social justice. At the same time, however dark the content of his work, he is a vivid shaper of narratives, as two ambitious pieces at Marian Goodman attest.

One, the eight-channel video piece called "The Lightning Testimonies," made its debut at Documenta 12 in 2007, and seeing it there was an intense experience. The installation wrapped around a dark, smallish room, so you had to keep changing positions to take in the images flashing by on different screens. The subject matter — the sexual violation of women during and after the 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent into Pakistan and India — was harrowing, and the accumulation of first-person accounts of rapes, abductions and murders felt relentless even when relieved with images from nature. Being shown for the first time in New York, the piece has lost none of its force, even in a somewhat lightened-up viewing environment.

But the real news is the New York premiere of an even more elaborately scaled piece, "The Torn First Pages," a 19-channel film installation, which Mr. Kanwar worked on from 2004 to 2008 and that comes in three sections, each divided into several short segments.

The subject is the struggle for democracy in Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, under a brutal military dictatorship. The show is dedicated to a Burmese bookstore owner named Ko Than Htay, who was imprisoned in 1994 for tearing out the first pages — on which were printed slogans from the military dictatorship — of all the books and magazines he sold.

Mr. Kanwar's focus is on other single and collective examples of resistance inside and outside the country. The first and most complex section has six short films playing more or less simultaneously. Two are tributes to political martyrs: a high school student killed by Burmese soldiers in 1988, and a student leader who died in Mandalay Prison in 2006. A pair of segments was filmed in New Delhi. In one, the leader of the Burmese military scatters flowers at Mohandas Gandhi's cremation site; in the other, a dissident Burmese artist carries a painting of Gandhi in an Indian political march. Finally, there are segments set in Oslo, where democracy advocates in exile have formed a small radio station called the Democratic Voice of Burma.

The installation's second part is devoted to interviews with members of a Burmese community in Fort Wayne, Ind., one of whom tracks down the émigré poet Tin Moe (1933-2007), a prison survivor. The third part is archival, with films secretly made in Myanmar of pro-democracy demonstrations. In one astonishing sequence, thousands of red-robed Buddhist monks fill city streets in silent protest.

The entire piece requires about an hour of viewing. With its three sections physically separated in a large gallery, it requires even more movement than "The Lightning Testimonies." And because several segments are always playing at once, details are easy to miss. Perhaps in anticipation of this, Mr. Kanwar has produced a little book with the basic material in condensed form.

We are not a patient culture. We want our art fast, tasty and complete.

Mr. Kanwar's art, like much of the best video art today, just doesn't work that way. You have to slow down, adjust to his time frame, and trust that he has memorable experiences to deliver. He does. HOLLAND COTTER

Marian Goodman Gallery

24 West 57th Street

Manhattan

Through April 24

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