

## Letter from Dubai

### After Darkness

While the past few months have registered for many as one omnipresent corona-moment, producing strange online experiments in sociability, it has also signalled a withdrawal from imagining futurity. If the UAE is often the place from which market-driven hyperreal imaginings arise, these were shattered when neighbouring Beirut suffered its unfathomable explosion on 4 August (see Akram Zaatari interview *AM440*). No matter how many times the city's erasure emerged in digital artefacts, the shock of collapse continues to be felt across the MENA region.

If the explosion did not discriminate in its blast, the impact of Covid-19 has – between rich and poor, old and young – and it has revealed national inequities and failing infrastructures. Our anxiety-ridden condition recalls two expansive exhibitions by Amar Kanwar at NYU Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) Art Gallery and Ishara Art Foundation in Dubai, which mapped a discursive framework centring on darkness, destruction and ominously unfolding environmental catastrophe.

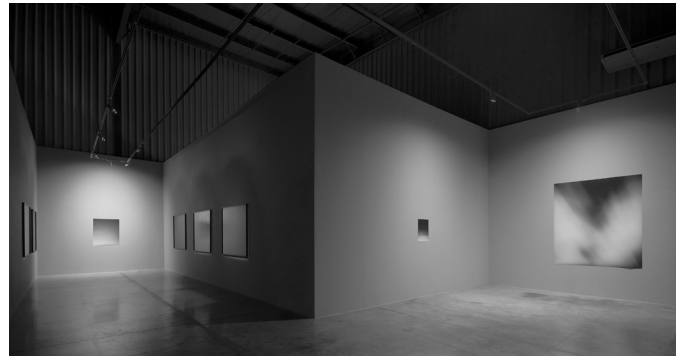
During an online roundtable in April moderated by NYUAD Art Gallery executive director Maya Allison, Kanwar said that his work responds to our inability to comprehend crisis. 'It isn't difficult to understand that if you were to put a chemical inside the soil, it's most likely going to come back to you through your own food,' the artist argued. 'But somehow this self-destructive process, which keeps accelerating, doesn't seem to make a difference, or change the way things are going ... It's reached a point that we don't know what we don't know, we don't know what we've forgotten. We don't know which senses have been extinguished.' If Kanwar's statement points to an epistemological crisis, one that cannot be untangled from ecological disturbance, he also underscores it with the absurdity of what we consider a linear technological progression.

In his film *Such a Morning*, 2017, presented at Ishara before lockdown, we see a mathematician's self-imposed isolation from work and the world. Set largely in an abandoned, blacked-out train carriage, we are given a lyrical investigation into 49 types of darkness. The mathematician is seen attempting to measure the corners of his confinement in a space where day and night are the same. As Kanwar explained: 'The point was, what do you see in the heart of darkness, and what do you see if you stay alone for long enough?'

A further study into this metaphorical gradient of light and dark was found at Grey Noise gallery in one of the first exhibitions I caught after lockdown. 'Nocturnes' by Michael John Whelan charted trajectories of light in elusiveness, where the source itself doesn't appear within the frame, only its traces.



Larissa Sansour with Søren Lind, *In Vitro*, 2019



Michael John Whelan, 'Nocturnes', installation view

The series 'Darkness has no need' depicts unobstructed night sky marked with fluorescent starlight trails and sharp silhouettes of forest foliage. His parallel inquiry into light pollution, 'And they did live by watchfires', unravels in a stream of sepia lines bleeding against petrol-blue. 'Clouds above cities', Whelan says, 'refracted the artificial light and blended together.' A burnt ochre translates Dubai's dusty pink glow at dusk.

Whelan's titles were inspired by Lord Byron's 1816 poem *Darkness*, which referenced the 'year without a summer' when a dark blanket of sulphurous clouds after Mount Tambora's eruption triggered an agricultural disaster that led to worldwide famines. Indeed, one might see Whelan's enigmatic abstractions retracing these romantic strains of Byron's relationship to the land, but the work also captivatingly presents an apocalyptic vision, which distils the anthropogenic impact of rapid urbanisation, population growth and our changing relationship to the natural world.

Recorded on large-format analogue film, Whelan sets up his camera before sunset to compose the image in the pitch dark, in remote locations considered the darkest in the world, away from artificial light. Extending what the unaided eye cannot see, our senses are heightened in these charged landscapes through long exposures. He explains that, 'depending on the conditions and time of year, each night can yield only one exposure'.

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In photographing the immaterial, Whelan shares subjects with Vikram Divecha's exhibition at Gallery IVDE earlier this year. 'Towards Opacity' documented the various failures, human or technological, in interpreting light. Divecha compares apparatuses of capture and display, from the smartphone to the museum, engaging with a larger narrative on exhibition-making, ruin and preservation. 'While the museum is this massive, powerful institution, the phone is this pervasive, palm-sized mode of accessing the world today,' he says, attuned to the fact that both ways of receiving information are inherently flawed.

*Lazy Loading* is a painterly body of work composed of images taken before they are downloaded in a visual scroll. These solid, textural blocks become colour-coded placeholders of Google image searches, displacing an already digitised reality into a series of abstract glyphs. If Whelan translates duration through the consolidation of moving light, Divecha decelerates time through mediated intervals.

Divecha's *Galley 354* is an installation that remakes a photographic darkroom, but where blank pieces of photo paper float in developing trays, seemingly as evidence of failed exposure. In an accompanying audio track, Divecha interprets darkness as an excavational experience, exploring fugitive objects, historical images which evade capture and William Henry Fox Talbot's camera obscura; he also mentions a debate between two scholars about time-travel and timelessness.

These expanded forms of 'looking' against an expanded understanding of temporality are also put under consideration in the latest audio composition by Soundwalk Collective at the Louvre Abu Dhabi. *We Are Not Alone* describes the imminent world of AI, interstellar travel and the potentialities of technology to rewrite what we might observe. While wandering around the museum's holdings of ancient artefacts we listen to actor William Dafoe narrate: 'When no conscious being

observes them [light particles], then they have no reason to manifest and can evolve in an indefinite state. That indetermination is called the cosmos's emptiness. As the universe's expansion is accelerating, all currently observable light particles will eventually appear to be frozen in time.'

At the other end of town in Jameel Arts Centre is Larissa Sansour's latest sci-fi dystopia, *In Vitro*, 2019, where an avalanche of oil-black fluid obfuscates an ancient city. Set in an underground bunker after Bethlehem has experienced this mysterious eco-catastrophe, scientists are replanting heirloom seeds to build anew. The film forms a critical comment on our global climate crisis in a politically volatile country. The younger protagonist in the film, a clone, who was born underground and whose recollections are inherited by those who experienced the disaster, argues that the only imagined future in its aftermath is one without memory.

In Ben Mauk's 2016 text *Distant Hammers: Notes on Art and the Apocalypse*, the author points out that, in the past, artists and writers were tasked with bearing witness to apocalypse, but that apocalypse is no longer an event that can be perceived. 'The apocalypse is no longer a visual object,' he writes. 'The apocalyptic narrative was reinvented as a spectacle of our own disastrous velocity. Our speed outstripped our self-knowledge ... From there it didn't take long to arrive at the notion that we might destroy ourselves without even realising it.' Mauk observes, echoing Kanwar, that as the world becomes increasingly uninhabitable, an apocalyptic moment is something we seek to measure rather than see. I would argue otherwise. Whether in archival or speculative forms of art, it is artists who are taking on the responsibility of apprehending the apocalyptic by tackling the impossibility of 'seeing' in itself.

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Amar Kanwar, *Such a Morning*, 2017