



VASTNESS IN ECLIPSE
Ground Floor
3 channel, 31m14s, HD Video, 2.35:1,
Colour, Stereo, 2014.

TORSIONS I, II
1st Floor (front space)
1 channel, 106m24s, 2.5K ProRes, 1.78:1,
Colour, Stereo, 2014.

LOCUS I
1st Floor (back space)
1 channel, 149m25s, 2.5K ProRes, 1.33:1,
Colour, Stereo, 2014. Commissioned by 4A
Centre for Contemporary Asian Art with
the assistance of the Keir Foundation and
the Edward M. Kennedy Center for Public
Service and the Arts, Dhaka.

LOCUS II
1st Floor (back space)
1 channel, 74m30s, 2.5K ProRes, 1.33:1,
Colour, Stereo, 2014. Commissioned by 4A
Centre for Contemporary Asian Art with
the assistance of the Keir Foundation and
the Edward M. Kennedy Center for Public
Service and the Arts, Dhaka.

Omar Chowdhury
Ways
30 May — 2 August 2014
4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art

An Index of the Divine

Murtaza Vali

For Omar Chowdhury filmmaking is a ritual, a spiritual means through which transcendence may be attempted and possibly attained in this world. His works are the result of extended periods of deep immersion in the communities, sites, and events that are their subjects. Like a mystic ethnographer, Chowdhury spends years doing field research, simply inhabiting and observing his subjects, eventually identifying who, what and how he wants to shoot. Taking cues from the teachings of Zen Buddhism, Chowdhury—who operates his own camera and works with a small crew of three—attempts to be wholly present whilst filming, taking cues from and intuitively reacting to the specific visual, spatial, sensorial, and phenomenological characteristics he encounters on site. The countless hours of footage shot while on location, some totally unplanned, others carefully composed and scripted, are reviewed and gradually distilled and edited into films of substantial length. Long, dense condensations of experience and memory of specific spaces, times and events, Chowdhury's films push the limits of our capacity as viewers. Experiencing them is also a ritual of sorts. Affect and meaning accrue gradually, finally rewarding our faith and continuing engagement.

Chowdhury's installations could be characterised as visual ethnographies that investigate and reflect on the changing status of the traditional—of rural life, of religion and spirituality—in the modernising East. However, his motivations are more subjective and deeply personal, driven by aesthetic and formalist concerns. His works avoid the many pitfalls of traditional ethnography specifically by introducing techniques, forms and structures borrowed from the history of avant-garde film, art cinema and experimental documentary. There is no authorial voiceover; ambient sound dominates the soundtracks. Chowdhury edits to create a particular rhythm or pace, dividing footage up into discreet spatial and temporal packets of filmic data; the continuity of orthodox cinematic reality is shattered, each resulting shard offering its own perspective—minimal, conceptual and abstract. This formal abstraction introduces a critical distance from the subject without entirely othering it. Similarly, the stationary camera and the extended duration of many of the shots subvert the easy logic of identification with the image central to conventional film. Instead, these strategies demand significant commitment and investment from the viewer resulting in a peculiar intimacy between the audience and screen image that resists exoticisation of the latter. Viewing Chowdhury's films is a phenomenological experience, akin to encountering the Minimalists or Light and Space artists; we are repeatedly reminded that perception is always an embodied act.

Rigorous, rhythmic and ritualistic, Chowdhury's three moving image installations hover between modernist autonomy and postmodernist embrace.

In the three-channel *Vastness in Eclipse* (2014), Chowdhury—who has vivid memories of a childhood in a tea plantation—attempts to present the particular rhythm and pace of rural life, its archaic slowness, without devolving into clichés. The installation, the result of two and a half years spent researching and shooting on and near one such plantation, does this by playfully blurring clear distinctions between documentary and fiction. The first channel suggests a narrative—of an elderly farmer struck by a dizzy spell while tilling his fields, an incident that causes him to reflect on his impending mortality—that could be read as an allegory of the diminishing role the rural plays in contemporary Bangladesh. In contrast, the second channel, which features the same farmer and some of the same locations,

Omar Chowdhury produces detailed audio-visual installations created in extended spiritual and empirical immersions into sites that are conceptually and experientially demanding.

His formalist yet deeply felt works hold in generative tension various polarities: narratives and the surreal, materiality and the immaterial, rhythm and chaos, humour and melancholia,

presents an account of rural life by creating a distinct sense of space, place, time, routine and rhythm through a series of discreet cinematic tableaux. It opens with a beautifully misty shot of two modest village dwellings in the crepuscular light of the dawn just as their inhabitants begin to stir. The structures have a minimalist simplicity to them, their strong horizontals and verticals framing the execution of morning rituals and chores. As the film progresses we get snippets from the farmer's day. He bathes in the makeshift bathroom. He prepares food for a young child. He tests two others on their schoolwork. While it manages to capture and convey the relaxed pace of a rural existence, the film's abstract structure resists it being easily sentimentalised. The third channel literally turns the apparatus back on the artist. Through fragments of recorded exchanges between him and one of his collaborators, Chowdhury attempts to deconstruct and interrogate his aesthetic intentions and process, revealing the logistical, philosophical, and ethical challenges faced. Together the installation demonstrates the constructed nature of any and every filmic text, be it fiction, documentary, or meta-critique.

The single channel *Torsions* (2014) is divided into two chapters, each capturing the distinct multi-sensory experience of different religious processions—one Hindu and the other Shia Muslim—that wind through the narrow crowded streets of Old Dhaka. The first chapter opens with an intense close up of the side of a young man's head as he shuffles around, tying one end of a rope to a roadside pole. *Torsions* is marked by precisely this sort of intense proximity between camera and subject, a total submersion of the recording apparatus (and through it the viewer) into the spatial, temporal and sensorial thickness of the event it is attempting to capture. *Torsions I* focuses on the Roth Yatra, a procession honouring Krishna, during which a chariot housing idols is pulled through the streets, accompanied by throngs of singing, dancing worshippers. Such processions always involve months of careful planning and both chapters of *Torsions* show the build up and the preparations undertaken before the event even begins through a series of largely stationary shots. In *Torsions I* we see a man bathing and groups of singing and dancing worshippers eager to get started. Through what follows, however, the camera is rarely stationary. Mobile and restless it is constantly turning, twisting, pivoting as it navigates the devout masses. In one of a few silent sequences Chowdhury follows the idols being carried out of their sanctum; he is jostled around like one might expect of a person in a crowd caught up in religious fervour. Sunlight breaking in from above threatens to bleach the frame and the image eventually loses its sharp focus dissolving into a shifting abstract composition of pale undefined shapes and searing white highlights. The sound starts up again, drumming and chanting punctuating the grumble of the masses, as the filmmaker, camera, image and viewer are absorbed into the blinding sensorium of the surrounding crowd. And for just a few seconds the ineffable becomes perceptible.

Chowdhury uses distinct means to achieve comparable effects at later points in *Torsions I*. A long sequence shows women gathering in front of a marble platform that fills the left edge of the shot. Some touch their foreheads to the ledge; others caress it with their hands, pressing palms together in a gesture of deference. Throughout, the divine object, the idol being worshipped, rarely enters the frame. Instead, here and through the scenes of chanting and dancing that follow, Chowdhury focuses on acts of devotion, on the body language, movements and facial expressions through which people perform religious

power and weakness, and memory and forgetting. Out of these frictions and cohesions he creates a densely woven and deeply metaphorical language of moral inquiry.

Working with small crews and cinematic infrastructure, he spends years in both isolated and crowded ecologies to detail epistemological and ontological questions that are centred on the ambiguities of our consciousness, of time

belief, on the often very material and physical encounter between human body and religious entity. Through this approach divinity is made manifest through the worshipping body. Transcendence is achieved through unrelenting focus on the immanent.

The subject of *Torsions II* is a commemoration of grief, not joy. Over ten days and nights and reaching a crescendo on the day of Ashura, Shias gather to collectively and ritualistically remember and mourn the massacre of Hussein, the Prophet's grandson, and his family and followers, at Karbala, in modern day Iraq. Like the first chapter, *Torsions II* begins with a series of shots that establish the setting and show the extensive preparations. And it also highlights the small gestures of devotion, reciting mumbled prayers into upturned hands, attempting to gain blessing by rubbing inscriptions, by sprinkling water, by holding onto and tying threads to the grills that border the shrines. Despite the different tenor of the proceedings there are many unexpected similarities: the rhythmic beat and repeated chanting that keeps the procession moving; the groups of swaying, twisting bodies, sometimes bloodied, as men collectively self-flagellate, most dramatically with blades; and the chaos of a crowd caught up in religious fervour. Finally, both chapters underline attempts to achieve spiritual transcendence through not despite the human body.

No thought, no reflection, no analysis,
No cultivation, no intention,
Let it settle itself.
— Six precepts of Tilopa¹

If *Torsions* is about sense and event, *Locus I* and *II* (both 2014) are about space, time and the everyday. Meditations on the architectures of belief, both physical and ideological, each presents a portrait of a place of worship, a distinct spiritual locus in Old Dhaka: *Locus I* was filmed at an ISKCON² temple while *Locus II* documents activities at a Sunni mosque by the side of the Buriganga River. Neither structure seems particularly ornate or monumental making them especially apt sites for Chowdhury's investigation of the quotidian practice of religion yet hinting at its innate expression of ideology, wealth and power. Shown on facing screens, they are a succession of carefully composed long shots, each captured using available light with a largely stationary camera. Barely moving, the apparatus feels heavy, weighed down, anchoring the images, sounds and actions it captures in the space and time of their unfolding. Rarely featured in mainstream cinema the stationary camera has been used extensively by avant-garde filmmakers, such as the Japanese master Yasujiro Ozu, who used its capacity for capturing presentness to visualise the Zen Buddhist ideas of transcendence. While this is also true for Chowdhury, in his case the stationary camera may also serve as an instrument of emplacement, of rooting himself to the country of his birth.

The bulk of the sequences in *Locus I* are shots of monks and worshippers completing the modest, repetitive tasks and actions that are a necessary part of the daily routine of worship at the temple. Some prepare offerings and cook and serve food while others clean and groom themselves. They all appear totally absorbed in what they are doing, no matter how humble a task it may be and the focused cinematography emphasises the simple and literal beauty of such sequences. There are expected moments of transcendence as young men, crowded into a room, work themselves into a trance through drumming and chanting. But there are unexpected ones too, like a twenty-minute long shot that places the viewer across from a monk or devotee seated on the ground behind a low tabletop. The extended duration forces us back from the unrelenting progress of filmic time

and materiality, and their representations in thought and history.

In 2014 he has upcoming solo exhibitions at ALASKA Projects in Sydney and at MOMENTUM, Berlin. He is the recent recipient of a Bengal Foundation Commission (2014), an Australia Council Skills and Development Grant (2014), an Edward M. Kennedy Grant for the Arts (2013), and an Australian Cine-

back into the present of real time as we sit with him as he asks for and waits for his food, eats his fill, periodically chanting and singing in rapturous joy. It pushes the limits of our ability as viewers to focus on, be attentive to and draw meaning from the filmic text. Like religious belief, it tests our conviction and rewards our commitment.

Locus II similarly explores the unique space and time of a Sunni mosque. This work is also punctuated by sequences showing people engaged in daily tasks. As the *adhaan* or call to prayer begins, Chowdhury cuts to a curious but beautiful shot of a one armed man, standing alone on the structure's unfinished roof, carefully trimming his facial hair despite his handicap. It is a subtle but evocative image that emphasises the simple actions that surround belief. In contrast to *Locus I*, the spoken word seems to dominate the ritual life of the mosque. We follow a small group of the devout into a nearby industrial building where they go door to door proselytising and recruiting residents for prayers at the mosque. We hear a preacher recount, in macabre detail, the differential fate of the mortal remains of believers and non-believers on the day of judgement. In yet another sequence, the mosque's *muezzin* enters and solemnly recites the Quran into a microphone. However, this recitation is not, or not only, an act of worship but also a test of the mosque's broadcast system; religious ritual can be both exceptional and incidental, an index of the divine or a simple extension of everyday life.

The juxtaposition of these two site-portraits reveal both similarities and differences between the rituals and rhythms of worship conducted there. The films show these sites not just as places of worship but as spaces for living and communing, for resting and eating. These spaces promising transcendence through religion remain undeniably physical, material, and corporeal and their everyday immanence demonstrates the importance of always being attentive to the present, to the ever fleeting now. That sort of presentness is itself transcendent.

Though Chowdhury's motivations extend beyond mere anthropology his approach could be considered the cinematic equivalent of what anthropologist Clifford Geertz famously termed "thick description," a mode of ethnography so rich in detail that it reveals knowledge not just about the specific subject of the study but also its broader social and cultural context.³ While his multi-channel moving image installations overwhelm and immerse us in a density of cultural information, both consequential and seemingly incidental, their minimal and abstract structures help guide us through the abundance without limiting our own capacity to see, feel, think and understand—to come to our own interpretations and conclusions. Together they provide intimate, fascinating and multifaceted insights into the changing fate of traditional forms of life.

¹ Watts, Alan, "Six Precepts of Tilopa," quoted in *The Way of Zen* (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 1957), pp. 152–153.

² International Society for Krishna Consciousness, more commonly known as the Hare Krishna movement.

³ Geertz, Clifford, "Thick Description: Toward and Interpretive Theory of Culture," *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 3–30.

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matographer's Society Gold Award. He has shown works in galleries, institutions, and festivals in Australia, Asia, and Europe.

He was born in 1983 and studied at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. He currently lives and works both in Sydney, Australia and Dhaka, Bangladesh.

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Biography



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Omar Chowdhury: Ways is produced by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art and supported by the Keir Foundation and the Edward M. Kennedy Center for Public Service and the Arts, Dhaka.



4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art is an initiative of the Asian Australian Artists Association Inc. We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body; the NSW Government through Arts NSW and the City of Sydney, Champions: Kerr & Judith Neilson. Patrons: Geoff Ainsworth AM, Daniel & Lyndell Droga, Richard Funston & Kiong Lee; Johnson Pilton Walker; The Keir Foundation; John Lam-Po-Tang; The Sky Foundation; VisAsia; Adrian Williams. Benefactors: Brooke & Steven Aitken; AMP Foundation; Andrew Cameron; Julia Champaloup and Andrew Rothery; Lisa Paulsen. Friends: Michael Alvisse; Edmund Capon OBE, AM; Simon Chan Art Atrium; Choi Ropha Figuera; Susan Nathan; Becky Sparks & James Roland; Victoria Taylor; Rosie Wagstaff; Anna Waldmann; and Dr John Yu AC.

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