

THE SHADOW  
TRAPPER'S  
ALMANAC

TANMOY SAMANTA,  
RECENT WORKS



curated by RANJIT HOSKOTE

Cover Image:  
THE CHRONICLE OF A LABYRINTH  
Gouache on Rice Paper  
30 x 42 inches  
2014





THE GLOBE  
Gouache on Rice Paper  
12" x 17"  
2013

# INTRODUCTION

—HENA KAPADIA

The team at TARQ is thrilled to present ‘The Shadow Trapper’s Almanac’ curated by Ranjit Hoskote. This is Tanmoy Samanta’s first solo exhibition in Bombay. It features gouache paintings on rice paper and recycled book sculptures, two integral facets of his practice. Samanta’s practice explores notions traditionally associated with sculpture, including “volume and void, relief and surface, container and content.”

In Samanta’s delicate works on paper, we find elements of cutout and collage reminiscent of Surrealist and Dada practices as well as a nuanced surety that echoes the style of the miniature. Samanta begins a painting by layering rice paper onto a thicker base, using a series of colours going from dark to light. His book works explore various types of books, including the *kitab*, the *muraqqa*, and the *laporetto*. Each book engages the viewer’s imagination in a unique way. Samanta’s use of desaturated colour and texture evokes a sense of rich nostalgia in the ordinary.

According to Hoskote “Tanmoy Samanta’s works, with their combination of exhilaration and menace, formal playfulness and philosophical depth, remind us that art is not an escape from the world, but a route that leads us back, replenished by dream and vision, to the perplexities of the everyday.”

# THE SHADOW TRAPPER'S ALMANAC:

TANMOY SAMANTA,  
RECENT WORKS

—RANJIT HOSKOTE

*“The universe has many paradoxes, one among which is that where there’s an extensive landscape, endless sky, dense clouds, a deep feeling, in other words in a place where the eternal is manifest, there its appropriate companion can be only one person. Infinity and one person are both evenly balanced in relation to one another – both deserve to sit on their individual thrones face-to-face.”*

- Rabindranath Tagore [1]

I imagine Tanmoy Samanta as a jeweller working in a cone of light, his desk secured against a darkness that spreads out in every direction and has many names: war, forgetting, genocide, fear, exile. Samanta makes images that we may set as talismans against this many-named darkness; finely tuned and delicate as they seem, observe that these images have sharp images on which unsuspecting viewers may cut their hands. The edges of rusting machines that have not lost their power to hurt or heal, serrated blades, a plough with dragon's teeth: these occupy Samanta's gouache paintings on rice paper. Alongside them, we find instruments calibrated to weigh infinitesimal volumes of air or sediments of gathered dust, just enough in the pans of the scale to shift the delicate counterpoise of forces that governs the planet.

Samanta's paintings are a laboratory for the staging of enigmatic events. Here, the artist tests the balance between object and emptiness; here, also, gravity and flight contest one another's claims. Intriguingly, given that his is primarily a painterly practice, Samanta demonstrates formal preoccupations that might seem more germane to the sculptor's domain. He addresses the binaries of volume and void, relief and surface, container and content, in his paintings as well as in his more properly sculptural engagement with altered or recycled books. Both suites of work are represented in 'The Shadow Trapper's Almanac', the artist's first solo exhibition in Bombay.

Samanta is fascinated by the cabinet and the mirror: these act, in his paintings, as repositories of secrets, asides, the ephemera and the detritus of history. They bracket clouded memories, crystal-sharp dreams and forking futures. One of Samanta's cabinets frames the ruins of factories and the trajectories of dive-bombers; one of his mirrors holds a vertebral column belonging to the lost specimen of an endangered species, the singularly insapient and ill named *Homo sapiens*. The box, another favoured image in the artist's visual dictionary, condenses the chronicles of erased centuries and the imprints of mountains into the briefest of moments. Samanta's paintings encode memoirs of war and industry, doomed heroism and auguries of invasion, the predicament of the individual self confronted and overwhelmed by systems. We come upon a robot mastiff in one of the present paintings, a guard dog run amok; another painting invites us to consider a pair of twinned weapons swimming in a glass bowl, a sinister aquarium fraught with the potential for apocalypse.



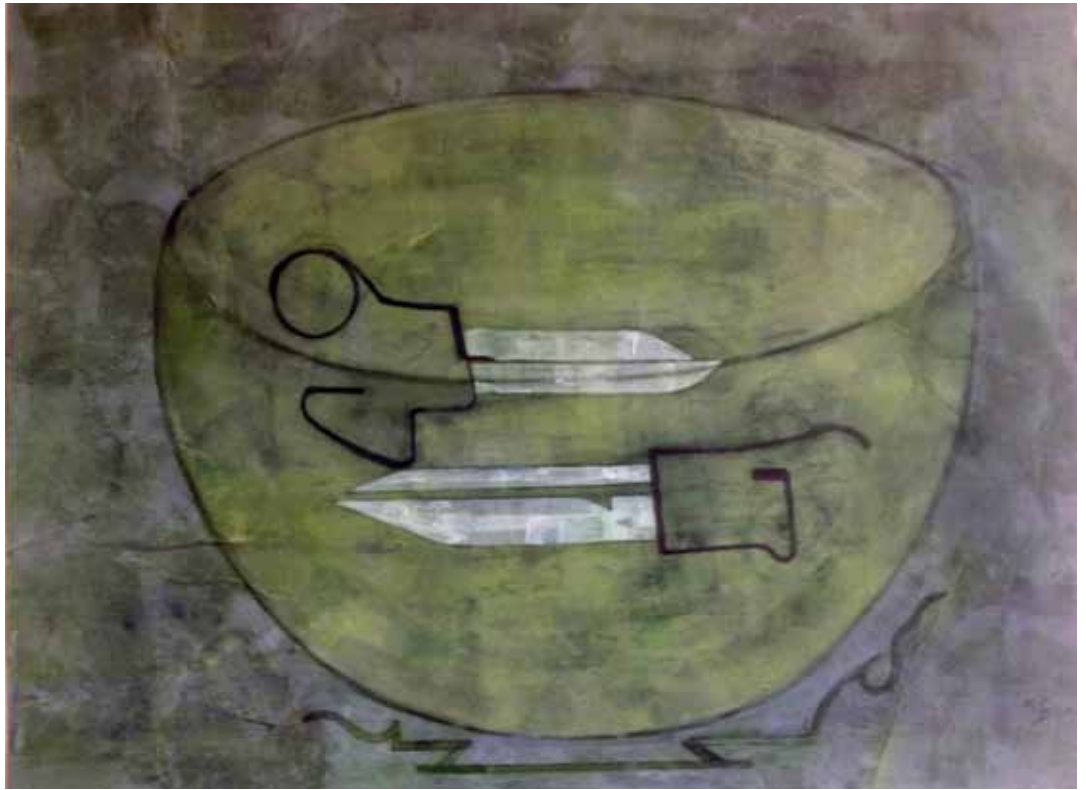


LEGACY  
Gouache on Rice Paper  
12 x 17 inches  
2014



STILL LIFE  
Gouache on Rice Paper  
30 x 42 inches  
2013

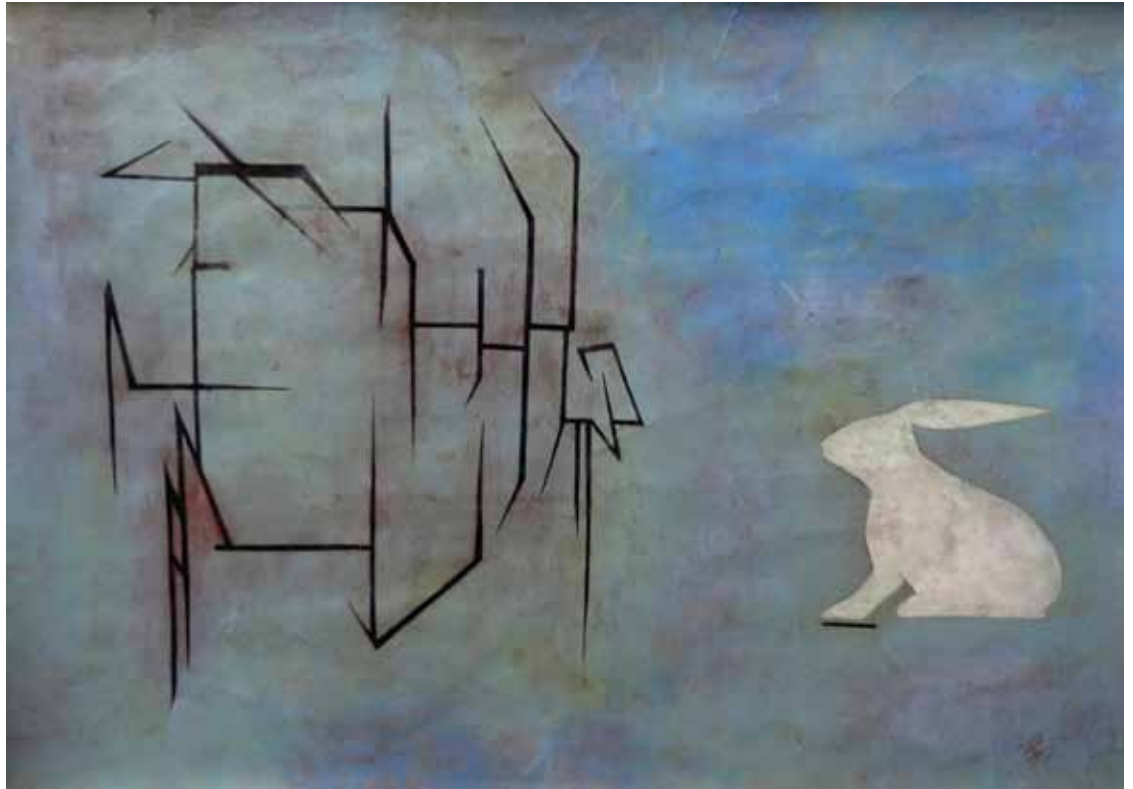
THE AQUARIUM  
Gouache on Rice Paper  
12 x 17 inches  
2014



Intimate as Samanta's paintings are, it is within them that he confronts infinity face-to-face, as Rabindranath Tagore suggests in the passage that I have chosen as the epigraph to this essay. Samanta elaborates his gouaches on rice paper as exquisite disarrangements of the everyday world and its architecture of objects, motives and consequences. He plays with latent correspondences, activates affinities among objects not otherwise closely related. Crucial to his enterprise is the need to get through the maze of subterfuges and delusions to the interiority of things. In one of the paintings in the suite, a rabbit sits outside rather than inside a loosely arranged labyrinth, as though mesmerized by the structure, hoping to enter rather than escape it. In another painting, the artist portrays himself as a cyborg or armoured diver with periscopic eyes; wryly, too, he reduces the homeland or nation to a piece of land splintered and set afloat, an island torn from its conventional moorings.

I see Samanta as a trapper of shadows, trawling elusive sensations and fugitive thoughts, mysterious signs and half-glimpsed visions in his net. Yet, having collected these, he arranges them in what I regard as an almanac: a record of seasons and tides, schedules for sowing and harvesting, an itinerary of the sun's rhythms and the moon's, the pattern of equinox, solstice and eclipse. The most likely derivation of the word 'almanac' is from the Andalusian Arabic *al manaqq*, a table of climatic conditions, a way of finding direction through life and its natural circumstances. It serves those who work with the hoe just as it does those who steer by the astrolabe; in Samanta's artistic practice, we discern both the farmer's patience and the sailor's intrepidity.

THE CHRONICLE OF  
A LABYRINTH  
Gouache on Rice Paper  
30 x 42 inches  
2014



Born in 1973, Samanta, who lives and works in New Delhi, was raised in an environment rich in literary and artistic experience. Both his parents were participants in the Bengali 'little magazine' movement; he grew up to savour the Tagorean ethos of Santiniketan, developing his practice there and later in the collegial setting of the Kanoria Arts Centre, Ahmedabad. Early in his career, he taught at Rajghat, the Krishnamurti Foundation's school in Varanasi. He found the philosopher J Krishnamurti's approach congenial to his own temperament, with its emphasis on a wide receptivity towards the world, the flowering of creativity without the oppression of canon or dogma, and a generosity of spirit when dealing with the unpredictable variety of cultural manifestations.

As an artist active in what the philosopher and art critic Arthur C. Danto memorably theorized as a 'post-historical' period, Samanta has framed his own genealogy, his own sources of inspiration and points of reference. The advent of the post-historical has emancipated artists like him from the anxiety of defining and contextualizing a practice in terms of the contention between such art-historical phases as 'modernism' and what was for a time loosely and unhelpfully spoken of as 'post-modernism', and from the teleological understanding of art history that endowed such an unstable periodization with academic value.

Elements of cutout and collage surface in Samanta's work, persistences of Surrealist and Dada practices: he is an heir to Max Ernst, Schwitters, Chirico and Magritte. Equally, with his quiet insistence on exploring the miniature and its potential for compressing epic narrative and psychic material

into idiosyncratic signals, he draws on the legacy of Gaganendranath and Rabindranath Tagore. Samanta's sleight of scale, the sophisticated visual and conceptual games that he offers his viewers, and his philosophical preoccupation with the interplay between phantasm and palpability also put us strongly in mind of the legendary Bombay painter Prabhakar Barwe (1936-1995).

Samanta's studio practice has, also, several points of affinity with that of the classical miniaturist: dexterity, patience and epiphany are combined here in equal measure. While crafting a distinctive vocabulary of stylized forms, Samanta has also evolved a specific array of techniques. When preparing a painting, his first move is to paste the thin rice paper that serves as his pictorial surface on the thicker paper that acts as its base; once this layering has been accomplished, he builds up the painting in a sequence of layers, beginning with dark and moving successively to lighter colours.

Through his adroit use of scumbling, the earlier, darker layers often show through the later, lighter ones, imparting both a chromatic and a textural richness to his paintings, transmuting them into palimpsests. Samanta experiments with a palette of sap green, mulberry, chalky pink, dusty metal blues, shadowy jade and celadon, and blood-pricked reds; his muted tonalities evoke the spectral presence of burnished heirlooms, inherited shawls, parchments bearing ancestral histories, and time-stained walls; the interiors, perhaps, of the grand feudal-mercantile palazzos of Jorasanko that have decayed in architectural reality but retain their vivid presence in the imagination.

A PORTRAIT OF  
THE ARTIST AS A  
YOUNG MAN  
Gouache on Rice Paper  
10 x 12 inches  
2014





THE HUNTER  
Gouache on Rice Paper  
12 x 17 inches  
2014



The interplay between the visual and the literary has led Samanta, in recent years, to experiment with the form of the book. He explores with various avatars of the book, including, as we shall soon see, the *kitab*, the *muraqqa*, and the *laporetto*. In another departure, he reconstructs the book through the use of altered or recycled materials, blurring the distinction between the page and other modes of recording and annotating experience, such as the map, the clock or the weather chart. These works bear an affinity with sculpture, and articulate the recurrent fascination that he demonstrates for such devices as the chronicle, the labyrinth, the atlas and the almanac.

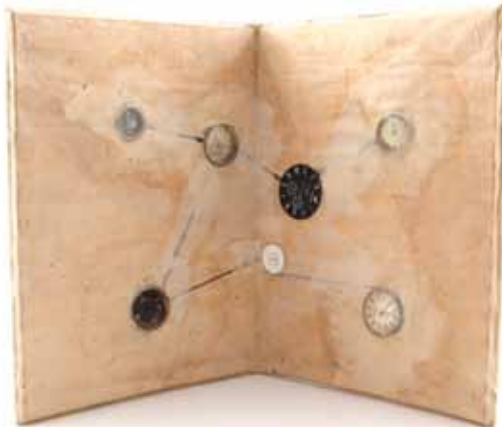
In this context, I imagine Samanta as a librarian, a dramaturge of memory: archivist sifting among the scrolls and folios; custodian of parchment, vellum and birch bark; questor of the book as talisman promising protection from the all-too-easy descent into a contemporary savagery and ignorance exacerbated by the increasingly sophisticated technologies that make these conditions possible and sustain them. The artist experiments with various scales and formats. He presents his books as acts of homage to the *kitab* of the Perso-Arabic global ecumene that once stretched from Spain to Indonesia, laid on a rihal or traditional carved bookstand, shaped as a foldable X. Or he arranges them as a sequence of discrete images reminiscent of a *muraqqa* or Mughal album of miniatures, originally convenient to the mobile Turko-Mongol cultures and eventually integral to the hybrid visual universe of the Company School. He also draws them out in the beguiling form of a laporetto or accordion book, with the pictorial narrative unfolding section by surprising section.

Samanta's altered and recycled books enshrine the complexity of the experience of reading. They invite us to read together with him; which means, also, to be baffled by what seems illegible or weathered yet demands decipherment. Through this gesture, we, as viewers, become the artist's colleagues, linked to him quite literally by the etymology of this term as fellow readers. With him, we attend to the paradox of knowledge: its expansion is proportionate to the expansion of what remains unknown. In 'The Cartographer's Paradox', the more the atlas embraces, the more the continents escape its grasp; the world remains egg-like, a generative principle rather than an object of study.

With him, again, we attend to the mutability of time, its ability to inhabit a spectrum of scales from the instant to the aeon. 'The Time Keeper's Manual', a set of four books moulded in paper that has been through a baptism and remade, we confront the dials of watches, the faces of the hours, arranged to suggest different directives of visual order or cosmic patterns: the grid; the beehive; the constellation; and a pair of eyes uncannily reminiscent of those of a great Hindu deity, perhaps the Devi. Reading with him, also, we reflect on the perennial, formative tension between the works of humankind and the cycles of nature: 'Melancholy Sky' 1 and 2 are laporetos or accordion books, one in red tonalities and the other in shades of grey, both mobilizing the forms of architecture and human endeavour against a gathering storm.



THE CARTOGRAPHER'S  
PARADOX  
Old Book, Rice Paper, Atlas  
Maps, Wooden Eggs  
10 x 12 inches  
2013



THE TIME KEEPER'S  
MANUAL  
a, b, c, d (set of four)  
Old Book, Rice Paper,  
Discarded Watch-dials  
10 x 12 inches  
2013

In 'Random Birds', we find the artist making field notes as he watches birds build nests: in this sequence of paintings, we savour stylized profiles reminiscent of the hoopoe, the kite, the duck, the stork, the macaw and other denizens of the air, rendered in parchment against textured purple surfaces. This is an extended meditation on habitation, belonging, the framing of a space to call one's own, and indeed, the gradual transformation of space into place. In terms of the mise en scene of the exhibition, it has been a stimulating challenge to devise a way of framing or hanging these works: they defy the conventional viewing arrangements of the white cube, organically connected as they are to an earlier relationship between viewer and image, where the folio was held in the hands and admired, not located at a distance on a wall.

To my eye, 'Random Birds' not only invokes the *muraqqa*, but also constitutes an elegant homage to a specific example of the form: the memorable and historically important compilation known as Lady Impey's album, comprising more than two hundred gouache paintings on paper by Shaikh Zayn al-Din, Bhawani Das and Ram Das, the stellar artists of the so-called Company School. These exquisite and meticulously detailed studies in natural history – most of them representing birds but also including some animals, fish and reptiles – were commissioned by Mary, Lady Impey, wife of Chief Justice Sir Elijah Impey, and created between 1777 and 1782 in Calcutta.

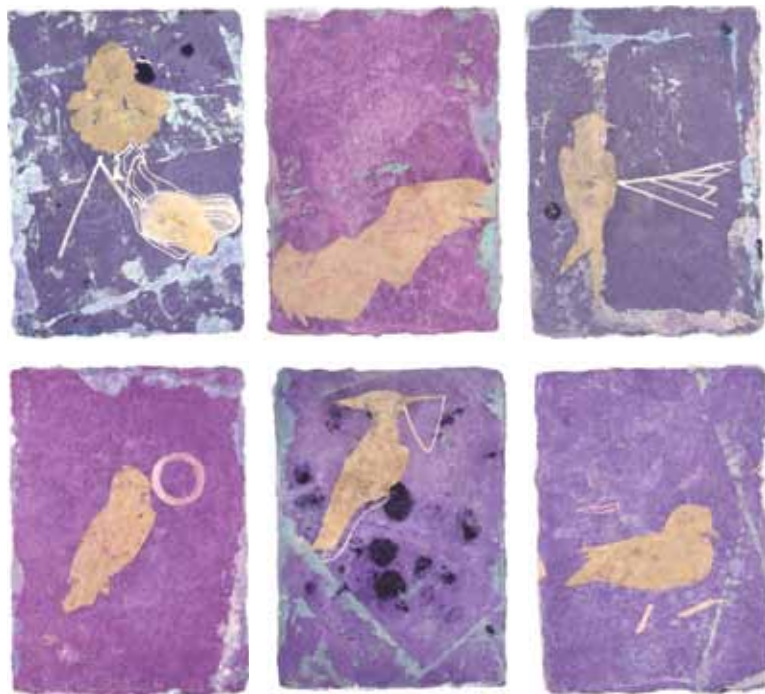
Perhaps it is our fate, in the post-historical moment, to be connoisseurs of the fragment, to retrieve the epic through the lyric and the encyclopaedia through the episode. Even so, this is an invigorating and

productive fate to embrace; in identifying and gathering fragments, we recreate the world through a kaleidoscopic, ever-changing set of relationships among parts that exceed the whole. In this sense, Tanmoy Samanta's works, with their combination of exhilaration and menace, formal playfulness and philosophical depth, remind us that art is not an escape from the world, but a route that leads us back, replenished by dream and vision, to the perplexities of the everyday.

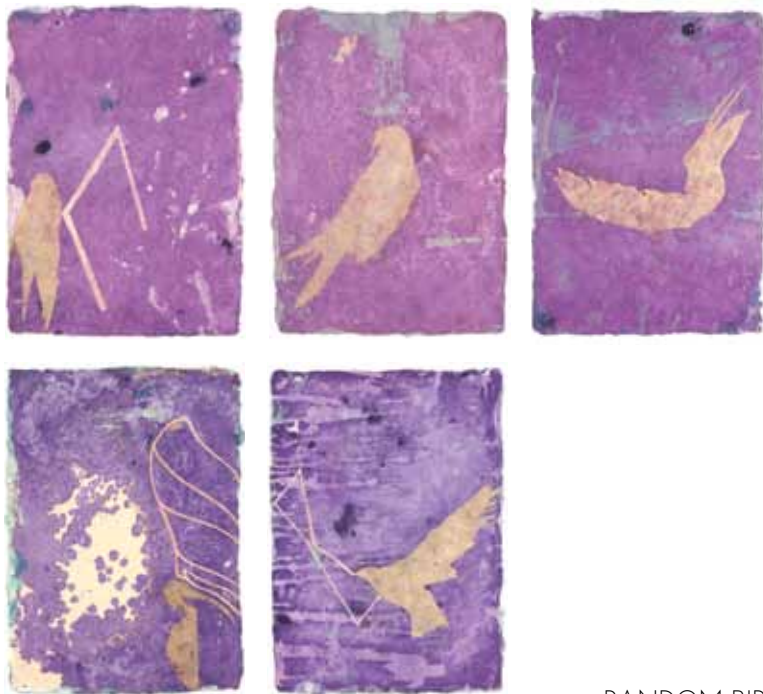
*(Bombay: October 2014)*

## NOTES

1. Rabindranath Tagore, *Letters from a Young Poet, 1887-1895* (trans. Rosinka Chaudhuri; New Delhi: Penguin, 2014), p. 113.







RANDOM BIRDS  
Watercolour on Handmade Paper  
6 x 10 inches each  
Set of 11  
2013





MELANCHOLY SKY 2  
Old Book, Handmade Paper,  
Watercolour  
14 x 18 x 36 inches  
2013



MELANCHOLY SKY I  
Old Book, Handmade Paper,  
Watercolour  
14 x 18 x 36 inches  
2013



THE CUTTING MACHINE

Gouache on Rice Paper

10 x 12 inches

2013



THE DOLL  
Gouache on Rice Paper  
43 x 29.5 inches  
2013



THE TIME HIVE  
Gouache on Rice Paper  
9 x 10 inches  
2013



THE EYE  
Gouache on Rice Paper  
30 x 42 inches  
2013



THE VOID LAND  
Gouache on Rice Paper  
30 x 42 inches  
2013



BOX FULL OF NOTHING  
Gouache on Rice Paper  
12 x 17 inches  
2014





MOUTH OF A CHAIR  
Gouache on Rice Paper  
14. 5 x 18 inches  
2013



CHIMERA  
Gouache on Rice Paper  
10 x 12 inches  
2014



GHOSTS  
Gouache on Rice Paper  
30 x 42 inches  
2013



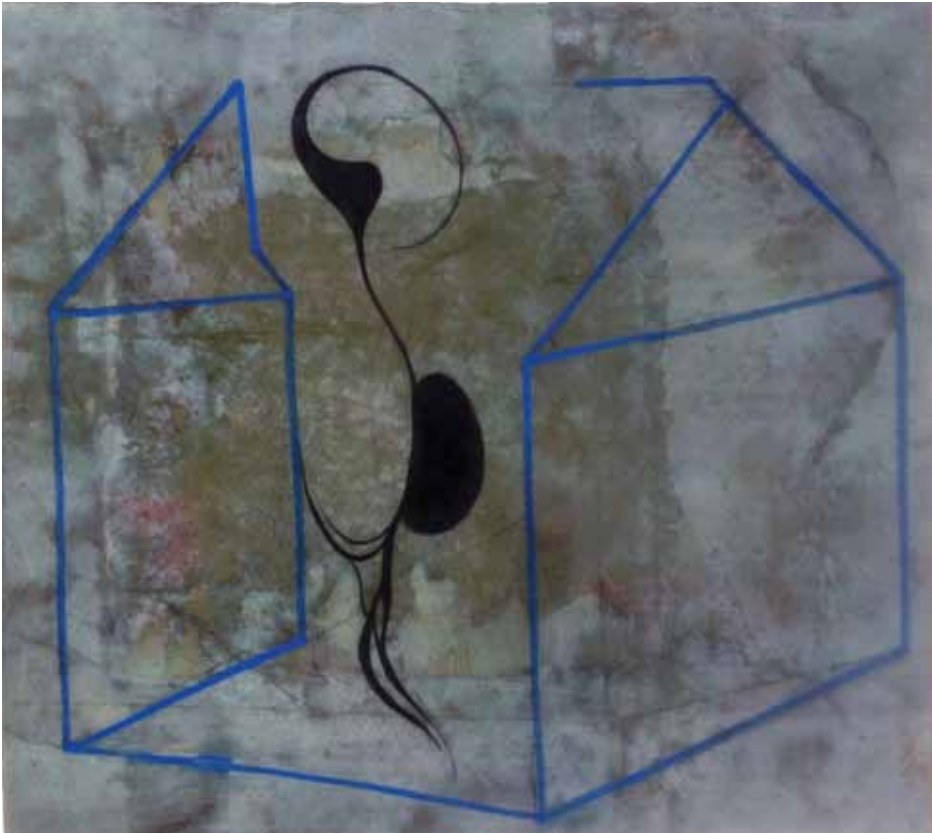
THE HELMET  
Gouache on Rice Paper  
10 x 13.5 inches  
2012



THE PERSIMMON  
AND THE KNIFE  
Gouache on Rice Paper  
30 x 42 inches  
2014

EMPTY PROMISES  
Gouache on Rice Paper  
30 x 42 inches  
2013





HOUSE ON FIRE  
Gouache on Rice Paper  
10 x 12 inches  
2014



# TANMOY SAMANTA



Born 1973, West Bengal. Obtained BFA and MFA in painting from Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan with a first class first. Lives and works between New Delhi and Santiniketan, India

## **Solo Exhibitions:**

- 2014 TARQ, Mumbai, curated by Ranjit Hoskote
- 2013 Gallery Espace, New Delhi, India
- 2009 Gallery Espace, New Delhi, India
- 2008 Anant Art Gallery, Kolkata, India
- 2006 Gallery Espace, New Delhi, India

## **Select Group Exhibitions:**

- 2014 Drawing 2014 Celebrating 25 Years of Gallery Espace at IGNCA, New Delhi
- 2014 “In the city” curated by Trevor Burgess at Lion x Lamb Gallery, London
- 2014 “Reading Room” a show of Book Art curated by Amit Jain at TARQ Gallery, Mumbai
- 2013 “Conversation in colour” curated by Jogen Chowdhury at Ganges Art Gallery, Kolkata
- 2013 Indo-Korean Art show as part of IIC Festival, New Delhi

- 2011 “Fabular Bodies” curated by Gayatri Sinha at Prince of Wales museum, Mumbai
- 2010 “Marvelous Reality” Curated by Sunil Mehra at Gallery Espace, New Delhi
- 2009 “Paper Flute” curated by Johny ML at Gallery Espace, New Delhi
- 2009 “Keep Drawing” conceptualized by Chintan Upadhaya at Gallery Espace, New Delhi
- 2008 “Telling it like it is” at Cork St. Gallery, London by Gallery Espace
- 2008 “Contemporary art of Bengal” curated by Pranb Ranjan Roy at AAKriti Art gallery, Kolkata
- 2008 “Configuration” at Anant Art Gallery, Kolkata
- 2007 “Dialogue” at Anant Art Galley, New Delhi
- 2008 “10x10” at Gallery Threashold, New Delhi
- 2008 “Still Life” at Art Motif, New Delhi
- 1996 “Contemporary art of Santiniketan” at Guild Art Gallery, Mumbai

**Art Fairs**

- 2007, 2008 Art Dubai
- 2010, 2014 India Art Fair
- 2011 Art Chennai

## **Public Art Projects**

- 2013 T-2 Liminus, Mumbai Intl. airport, curated by Rajeev Sethi
- 2012 Reliance ADA Airport Metro Express, New Delhi IGI station
- 2011 Bee-hive, Hyatt Regency, Chennai, curated by Rajeev Sethi.

## **Residency**

- 2014 Fellowship residency at the Vermont Studio Center, USA
- 1999 Artist in residence, Kanoria Centre for Arts, Ahmedabad, India

## **Awards**

- 2002 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, New York, USA



# RANJIT HOSKOTE

Ranjit Hoskote is a cultural theorist, curator and poet. He is the author of more than 25 books, including *Vanishing Acts: New & Selected Poems 1985-2005* (Penguin, 2006) and *Central Time* (Penguin/Viking, 2014), and the monographs *Žinny & Maidagan: Compartment/ Das Abteil* (Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt/ Walther König, 2010) and *Atul Dodiya* (Prestel, 2014). Hoskote has translated the poetry of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Kashmiri mystic Lal Ded as *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded* (Penguin Classics, 2011). With Ilija Trojanow, he has co-authored *Kampfabgabe* (Blessing, 2007; in English as *Confluences: Forgotten Histories from East and West*, Yoda, 2012). With Nancy Adajania, he is co-author of *The Dialogues Series* (Popular, 2011), an unfolding programme of conversations with artists. With Maria Hlavajova, he is editor of *Future Publics: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art* (BAK, forthcoming).

Since 1993, Hoskote has curated 30 exhibitions of contemporary art, including two monographic surveys of Atul Dodiya (*Bombay: Labyrinth/ Laboratory*, Japan Foundation, Tokyo, 2001; and *Experiments with Truth: Atul Dodiya, Works 1981-2013*, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, 2013), a lifetime retrospective of Jehangir Sabavala (National Gallery of Modern Art, Bombay and New Delhi, 2005-2006), a historical survey of Indian abstraction, *Nothing is Absolute* (with Mehli Gobhai; CSMVS/ The Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay, 2013), and a survey of 150 years of art by Parsi artists contextualised within the narrative of an emergent Indian modernism, *No Parsi is an Island*

(with Nancy Adajania; National Gallery of Modern Art, Bombay, 2013-2014). Over 2000-2002, he co-curated the trans-Asian collaborative project, 'Under Construction' (Japan Foundation: Tokyo and other Asian centres).

Hoskote co-curated the 7<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennale with Okwui Enwezor and Hyunjin Kim (2008) and was the curator of India's first-ever national pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2011). He was co-convenor, with Maria Hlavajova, Boris Groys and Kathrin Rhomberg, of the exhibition-conference platform *Former West Congress: Documents, Constellations, Prospects* (Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2013).

Hoskote has been a Fellow of the International Writing Program, University of Iowa (1995), an Associate Fellow at Sarai/CSDS, New Delhi (2006-2007), and writer-in-residence at Villa Waldberta, Munich (2003), Theater der Welt, Essen/ Mülheim (2010) and the Polish Institute, Berlin (2010). Jointly with Nancy Adajania, he has held a research residency at BAK/ basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht (2010 and 2013). Hoskote sits on the academic advisory board of the Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong; the international advisory board of the Bergen Triennial, Norway; the advisory board of the Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation, Bombay; and the programme advisory board of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin.



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