

Sundari Carmody: Turns, Protracted, and Slow

Essay written by Belinda Howden in accompaniment for the exhibition at GAGPROJECTS, November 2023

Sundari looks to the sky. It is high noon. She stands between the warming sun and a meagre slip of watercolour paper clipped to a board – a primed photographic surface. Awash with a light-sensitive emulsion that the artist knowingly, and unironically, tinted Lamp Black, she methodically exposes the sheet to sunlight—our star—moving it in and out of shadow, including her own. The artist as aperture.

It can't be understated how much of Sundari's practice might be pinned to photographic thinking. For an artist working primarily in sculpture, from ethereal gallery-scaled installations to heavy cast concrete architectural models to monumental public art (*One: all that we can see* is iterated here again at a more intimate, human scale), it seems counterintuitive. But the photographic—that is, the image as a surface to be understood in its own right, both an object created and a trace of the world around us—is present in many of the works of *Turns, Protracted, and Slow*. The where and when we are in the cosmos is embodied by these unfolding translations between positive and negative, light and dark, chaos and control.

Photographic thinking also captures scientific thinking. The artist is a close and careful observer. *Milky Way (Grid I)* and *Milky Way (Layered Study I)*, both 2023, are the result of long phases of material testing and the latest iterations in a years-long artistic study on the cycles and seasons of opium poppy seeds. Restrained measures of *Papaver somniferum*—the sleep-bringing poppy—are eked out across a grid like days of the week (...or perhaps, nights). For Sundari, the strictures of the grid, alongside the circle and the line, are generative. They serve an Agnes Martin-esque minimalist philosophy; the tighter the aesthetic parameters, the freer the artistic enquiry.

An exception to the rule may be the *Candela* (2023) series. Quick sculptural gestures drawn in light (an unwitting nod to the etymology of photography), they break free from the grid. Scrawled across the gallery wall, transcribed from loose pencil sketches, they bring us closer to the artist's hand. But, this too constitutes some kind of phenomenological study. Seemingly minor shifts in variables, like form or three-dimensionality, opens up whole worlds of hypotheses.

Beyond Sundari's enduring interest in historic scientific figures, such as astrophysicists Vera Rubin (1928-2016) and William Herschel (1738-1822), the deep contradiction of her empirical approach is the mystery it attempts to know. The 'glitches' of her work—a small illuminated hillock in a line of black or subtle colour variations from warm to cool white—signify realms of observed yet unknown phenomena. Why might heaving celestial bodies turn, create seasons, form day and night, influence our sleep? Sundari looks to the sky.

At high noon she exposes *Crossing The Sky I* (2023). Then again at dusk, catching the last light of the day. In Sundari's universe, the gum bichromate technique is equal parts photography and print-making. It is both the transmission of an image (a cast of the world around us) and a still amidst perpetual cosmic motion.

Dr. Belinda Howden is a writer, educator and occasional curator specialising in contemporary Australian art, and is currently Assistant Editor at Artlink Magazine.