

I pointed the lens at myself, I focused it nearby

reflections on identity through the camera lens

fileona endoxa dkhar

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Thesis Advisor:
Natasha Soobramanien

Second Reader:
David Haines

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Abstract

Illustrated by projects undertaken during my master's study at the Piet Zwart Institute, this thesis is a discussion around my current lens-based art practice and its motivations. Proposing a conceptual move, it starts with looking relations, considering the lens as metaphor for looking and being looked at. Focusing on my experience of feeling othered, I extend my analysis beyond 'the gaze' into artist Trinh T. Minh-ha's philosophy of using the lens to "speak not about identity but to speak nearby."

As I speak 'near' my identity with the lens, I articulate my identity as linked to notions of place, ethnicity and personal history. By considering place as a subjective sense of belonging, I subvert the descriptive notion that place is an administered geographic location. Then, I discuss my ethnicity as a Khasi person by focusing on an untranslatable concept within and specific to Khasi knowledge: Rngiew¹. By highlighting a 30-day video-exchange practice around the rngiew, I articulate how being Khasi for me is encapsulated in sharing something untranslatable and spiritual. Then, I focus on the Khasi hills, backdrop of Khasi spirituality and folklore. These hills and its forests bear marks of colonial and neocolonial plunder. I too have been christened, converted and educated out of this landscape. I conclude my "speaking near" identity by pointing the lens at the forests and hills, indirectly pointing it at myself.

¹Pronounced "ring-ee-yew"

1.

Addressing a Conceptual Concern: The Figurative Lens

In claiming my visual arts practice as a lens-based practice, I consider the lens as a technical and conceptual apparatus. The lens—an optical device in the literal sense—is a tool I use to produce visual images. At a conceptual level, I also think of the lens as a metaphor. This figurative lens facilitates looking relations. Looking relations are the “processes of looking” determined by “history, tradition, power hierarchies, and economies” (Kaplan, 1997, p.4). This lens creates relations between the one gazing through the lens, and the one being gazed at. This chapter contemplates this figurative lens and how it frames my lens-based artistic practice.

An Odd Game of Looking

¹ St. John “Don” Bosco was an Italian Catholic priest, who in 1845 founded the priesthood of the Salesians. (Marsh, 1912)

² The Northeast Indian hill tribes were semi-autonomous under British Rule until 1948 when they entered India with the Instrument of Accession (IoA). The IoA was signed by clan elders despite popular resistance, resulting in armed conflict. The 1950s-1990s became a dark, violent period under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), peaking in 1966 when the Indian army carried out a 5-hour airstrike targeting Aizawl, the only instance of an Indian airstrike on civilian territory. By 1970s, the Republic of India began reforming the hill tribes into federated states with the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act 1971. Christian churches offered neutral forums for peace talks till mid-2000s. The museum omits this political history. AFSPA remains in parts of Northeast India and extended to India’s Jammu and Kashmir region in 1990.

³ For the unfamiliar reader, “Northeastern region” is a directional marker. Within India, it is a post-colonial security risk. As political scientist Sanjib Baruah argues, “Northeast India is a postcolonial coinage that took root in the 1970s” during peacekeeping (Baruah, 2020, pg. 18). The Northeast is landlocked, connected to India by a small 22 km land corridor. 98% of the region’s border is international. It also has the largest and most diverse population of indigenous tribes in India.

The Don Bosco Center for Indigenous Cultures, also called Don Bosco Museum, is named for its Catholic founders¹. It is located in Shillong, capital of Meghalaya, a state of India since 1971². The museum’s purpose is to showcase the diverse cultures of the hill tribes in the Northeastern region of India³. One such exhibit is the Missions and Cultures gallery which features a plaque indicating the presence of Italian Catholic missionaries in the region since 1890. The gallery presents the museum’s catalogue, artefacts and documents as bound by “a mission of bringing harmony to a diverse region” (Baruah, 2020, pg. 8).

To illustrate my concept of the figurative lens, I focus on the museum’s Land and Peoples Gallery (Fig 1) and its sculptural representations of the indigenous hill tribes of Northeast India.



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Two hexagonal platforms center the hallway of the Land and Peoples Gallery. Atop each platform are 6 life-sized plaster sculptures forming a circle with their backs to each other and facing out to the visitor (Fig. 2). The walls surrounding these models are lined with glass showcases and framed photographs. The glass showcases are at eye-level. Above and below these showcases are large-scale color photographs of landscapes. Behind the glass are a series of plaster busts (Fig.3). The labels read Khasi, Garo, Karbi, Bodo, Hmar, Lushai, Ao Naga, Tangkhul, and so on—every hill tribe of Northeast India represented as a standard: a man then a woman. All their faces bear wrinkles (Fig.4).

One end of the exhibit is a wall covered in black and white photographs (Fig. 5). Each tribe is captured as close-ups on photographic print. The sculptures and photographs are not representations of the same individuals. Some faces smile while some stare. If you spent enough time darting from one end of the exhibit to another, you could try matching the features on a photo to the features on a sculpture. *An odd game of looking.*

I remember the first time I experienced the Land and Peoples Gallery when it opened in 2008, I was a teenager. My own image (Fig.6) has been used in documents that classify my being Khasi. Naturally, I was drawn to the Khasi busts. Head-to-shoulder representations of my ethnic category. Face to face, glass in between. Presumably, they embodied me and I them.

The inner monologue went a little like this, *“Maybe her nose looks like my grandmother’s. Maybe, he has my cheekbones, something like my fathers. He looks familiar. She does too.”*



6: My caste certificate from 2014

When I saw the black and white photographs, I was looking at people, not ethnic approximations like the sculptures. I had no access to their names, the date of the photoshoot, not their tribe or gender. Stripped from any defining caption, all I could look at was a wall of black and white close-ups. But the person in the photograph was someone real, who had lived and stood in front of the camera.

The photographs contained an impossibility of knowing, we neither know who looked through the lens (the photographer) nor who was being looked at (the photographed). Filmmaker and theorist Ariella Azoulay compares this use of photography akin to making a verdict where “an excess of information is not processed” (2019, pg. 21). She elaborates that this style of photography, using the camera shutter as a verdict, is an imperial technology. What is not known in these photographs marks what Azoulay calls “undercurrent photographic data” that is forever inaccessible to the spectator. But I was not a spectator, I had tried to embody the busts of my tribe. In its serving of a wall of uncaptioned photos, the museum immediately forced me to trace what was not present in these photographs. Because I had a stake in this engagement, I was entitled to a different looking relationship.

A Loaded Metaphor: The Figurative Lens as a Gaze

The ways of looking, described in relation to the Land and Peoples Gallery, should be linked to the concept of “the gaze.” French thinker Michel Foucault argued that the gaze is “a relationship of the subject to the object, concerned with the gathering of information, to inform and create a discourse on its subject matter.” (Fox, 1998, p. 415).

The Don Bosco Museum controls its visitor, simplifying a region of 50 million people into visual representations to differentiate, study, document and present. This Museum and its galleries commemorated Christian missionaries documenting, converting, and curating diverse tribal cultures. The gaze that presented the work was one-directional, the tribes were displayed as objects separate from the institutions (here the missionaries and then the museum itself) that came to understand them. This separation of the tribes into objects put on display is a verdict of othering, the act of specifying an “other.”

The other is “not a visible object; rather, it is rendered visible through a particular way of seeing” (Vivian, 1999, p.16). The photographs highlight the making visible of these tribes, although within one gaze. Philosopher Edward Said argued that this kind of gaze is driven by a scientific-colonial perspective. Said called this an “orientalism” that embodies the “other and all related to it as an object for study and scrutiny” (Said, 1978, p 202). Both the museum and its displays are clear-cut examples of othering as a viewing process for the spectator: the gaze it conveys is loaded with simplification and control of the other that is displayed.

Beyond the museum, however, media theorist E. Ann Kaplan considers the photographing and filming lens as a conductor of looking relations. Looking relations are the “processes of looking” determined by “history, tradition, power hierarchies, and economies” (Kaplan, 1997, p.4) It is here that I interject my entanglement with looking relations, to further add to the aforementioned literature on the topic.

Experiencing Othering

I have always found it hard to include people in my photography or videography. At present, I find myself allergic to doing any work where I point the camera at real people. Filmmaker Trinh T Minh-ha states, when “you have no desire to fix meaning, it may sometimes lead you to a place of nonsense” (2018). I like my visual work to be veiled, even to the point of nonsense. I find safety in obscurity because I struggle with the lens and how it enables looking relations. These personal choices come from the looking relations I’ve recognized within my own experience. As an Indian citizen who does not look Indian enough. As a Khasi person who is not Khasi enough. As an indigenous person who doesn’t live in her native land. I have experienced an othering limited not only to the caste certificate I carry. Experiencing othering has restructured my relationship to lens-based media because it triggers a sensitivity.

Edward Said claims the othering and rationalizing gaze of orientalism has seeped into “every form of academic learning” (Said, 1978, p. 202). My current artistic practice is also to be quantified, documented, and presented within the rules of an institution. Piet Zwart Institute within Willem de Kooning Academy within Hogeschool Rotterdam all the way to the bureaucratic dictates of the Dutch Ministry of Education. The academic need to rationalize and understand whatever is seen institutionalizes my figurative lens⁵. Surely, these are manifestations of a regime for looking relations. Given these relations beyond my control, the camera lens as figurative metaphor is a recognition of the terms of my practice.

⁵ Institutionalizes is my interpretation of what Fred Moten calls the “professionalization” of the university. He indicts the University as a capitalistic state apparatus bound on taking away the real truths of knowledge: that of questioning conquest, empire and its social by-products. In dissecting professions, the University rolls out numerous choices for its subjects, choice at the cost of recognizing struggle, institutionalizing the social individual in a prison, living life for profit. (Moten, Harney. 2013)

For me, the lens is an appendage for controlling and dictating meaning. This is how I engage with the lens and my lens-based work, with absolute care for the looking relations it produces. Because it is inescapable, I will now elaborate on what I think my figurative lens is.

My Gaze: The Figurative Lens as Multiple 'I's'

As previously discussed, the Don Bosco Museum as an institution controlled looking relations with its agenda⁶. Yet, as I looked at the objects and images of the museum, I embarked on a subjective experience. When I looked at the representations of my ethnicity, I was also indirectly looking at myself being looked at. In that room, I was a living specimen of one of the tribes. Yet I was not behind a glass wall or pinned onto a platform. My relation to Khasi identity is built on my own narrative.

Despite the racial features I shared with those busts, my identity as a Khasi person is itself opaque to me. My last name "Dkhar" translates to "foreigner" and indicates assimilation. Coming from a matrilineal tribe, this possibly means that a maternal ancestor bore a child with a male foreigner (sadly, I do not know if this was done by force). I can only trace my family as far back as my maternal great-grandmother and my paternal grandmother. I was also born outside Khasi territory into a Christian-convert family. I was schooled in Hindi and English. Most of my friends are not Khasi. Yet, I am Khasi in the Indian census, I can speak Khasi, and according to the cheekbones and nose of the busts, I "look" Khasi. If I took a black and white photograph of myself, tacked it among the other faces of the exhibit, I too would dissolve in the museum's gaze. All these multiple meanings behind my identity would disappear. These multiple meanings, multiple I's are what I argue as my gaze, my gazing back at this figurative lens.

By 'multiple-I's,' I mean a specific looking process established by artist Trinh T Minh-ha. As Trinh undertook ethnographic filmmaking in rural Senegal with her documentary, *Reassemblage* (1982), she began her practice of anti-ethnography by asserting her philosophy of "multiple I's."

⁶page 12-13

Trinh's film is a montage of rural Senegalese life. Scenes omits diegetic sound. Mid-way, Trinh's voice wonders, "What is the film about? My friends ask." She then narrates tangential statements about herself, her friends, the camera, semiotics, and so on. She asserts that this process is meant to not "speak about but to speak nearby" (Kaplan, 1997, p. 201) Her speaking nearby is a process of verbal reflections (Fig. 7 and 8). She deliberately refuses to make a movie that is about controlling what is seen. She confuses the viewer. This process asserts her philosophy of moving the figurative lens towards "the notion of multiple "I's" confronting "multiple I's' in the Other." (Trinh 1989, p 146) Trinh's work views the multiplicities of herself and the subjects of her gaze, all as multiple I's.

Trinh ultimately asserts that any work on identity should, at best, try to always speak nearby. Trinh is not concerned with giving the viewer access to a film-viewing that speaks about rural Senegal. Trinh's voice speaks nearby to reject stringent relations of looking. This brings me to my artistic practice. My figurative lens comes from the multiple I's that I am. In handling my identity as a subject for my practice, I know that this lens depicts what is nearby, near myself. And that is much closer to the truth of my practice than assertions of a looking regime that claims to "speak about" my identity.



7 and 8: Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Reassemblage*, 1982, Still, 40 min.

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2.

Speaking Nearby: Mapping a Rootless Identity

Chapter 1 points towards two motivations of my practice. First, the figurative lens that enables looking relations. Second, embracing my multiplicities as a means to dismantle regimes of looking. Now, I elaborate on what I mean by speaking near my identity.

Speaking Nearby

In her book *Woman, Native, Other*, artist Trinh T Minh-ha defines looking through the camera lens as “the notion of multiple “I’s” confronting “multiple I’s’ in the other” (1989, p.146). I find my multiple I’s in my identity. But I will not speak about my identity, I choose to speak nearby. To *speak nearby* instead of *speaking about* is my attempt to acknowledge and trace how my identity shapes my visual arts practice. To simply *speak about* identity would, to push the ideation, mean putting up my identity as an object for display. But I do not want it to be so. I speak nearby to avoid the objectification of my identity. I never capture my identity directly. I do not point the lens at my identity, I focus it nearby.

In this chapter, I *speak near* my identity by addressing my rootlessness. Place is often a descriptor of where a person comes from or where a person feels they belong. Place is often a part of someone’s identity.

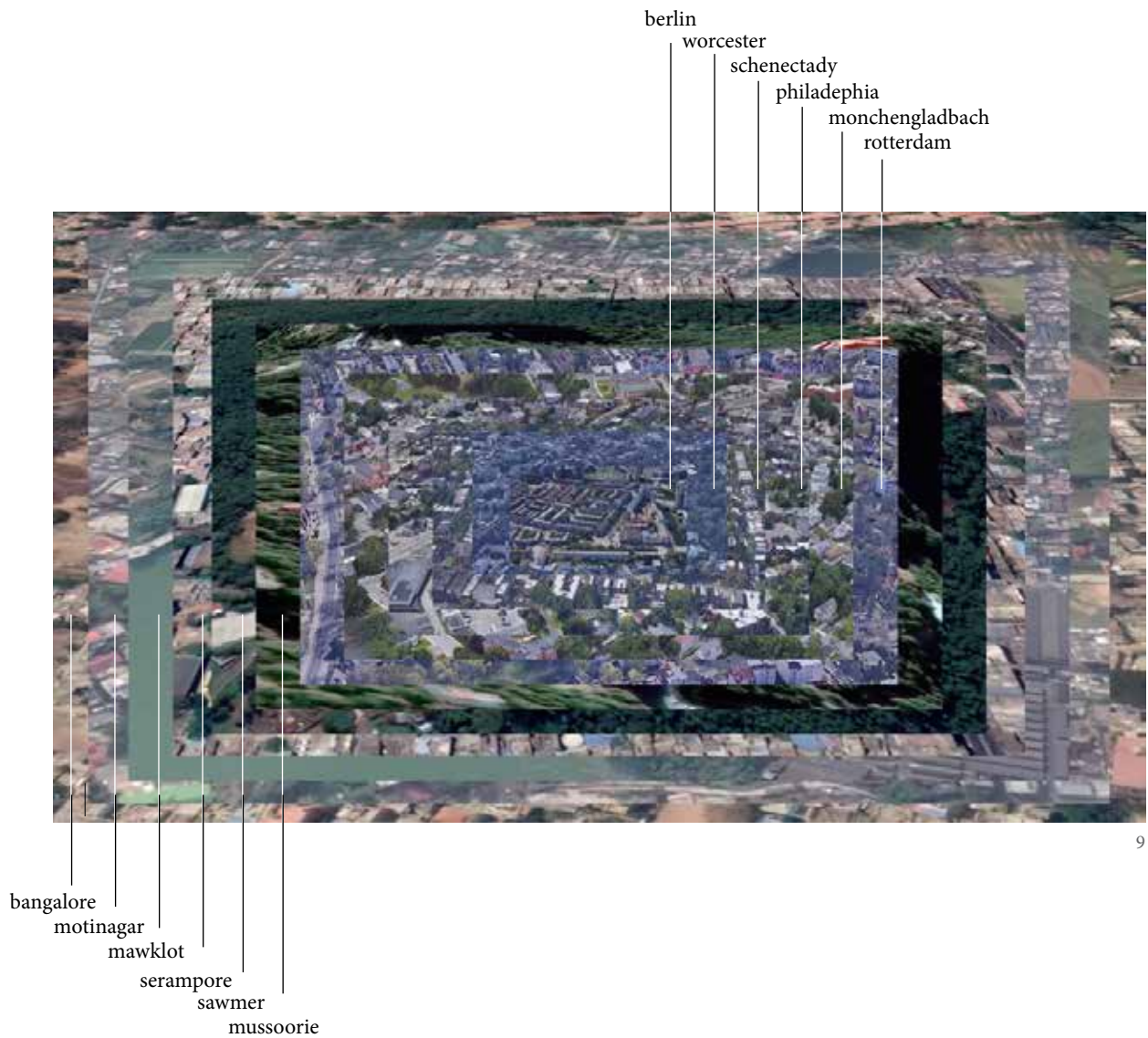
I feel I come from many places and my sense of belonging is always in flux. I feel I am rootless. That is one part of my identity, part of the multiple I’s that I am. In September 2019, I started my research-based arts practice at Piet Zwart Institute. I began by meditating on my identity as a rootless person. Below I discuss my research as well as the process and project that came from speaking near my rootless identity.

My Rootlessness

Rootlessness is “a feeling of not having a home to return to” (Cambridge, 2020). Within this definition, home makes concrete the idea of being bound to a place. For me, home has been a difficult place to define. I’ve called several places home. I’ve never lived in a single geographical coordinate for more than 5 years. In my gait, my opinions, my accent, my being, I feel these places have left an imprint on me. There are many homes I desire to return to. In this multiplicity of emotion, my rootlessness is linked to a sense of place.

To directly map my rootlessness, to make it visual, I began by making a video loop titled, “all the places i called home” (Fig 9) in December 2019¹. In this loop, a virtual camera rotates over aerial documentation of all the places I have called home. The camera pans around neighbourhoods I’ve called home. Each shot is layered on top of another. The layer in the foreground center is my current home, Rotterdam. The layer in the outermost corner is Bangalore, India, where I was born. The footage in the video come from satellite images from GoogleEarth. But for me, these places were not just about geographic coordinates, they were places where I had once belonged. As I keep moving to other places, this loop will gradually expand. This video is my attempt at visually articulating my identity, my rootlessness as an ongoing process.

¹<https://vimeo.com/377803809>



Humanist geographer Yi Fu Tuan argues for place as “a sensation of belonging” (Tuan, 1977, p.5). He states, “at one extreme a favorite armchair is a place, at the other extreme the whole earth” (p. 149). As a sense of belonging, indeed, an armchair and the earth can both generate place. For Tuan, it is this immense scalability that marks the complexity of human belonging. This video loop, this spinning map, was for a marker of where I felt I had once belonged. Next, I address my confrontation with the desire to belong to a new neighborhood in Kralingen, Rotterdam.

Building a Lens Apparatus in Mathijs van Oosterhoudt's Thematic Workshop

Given my rootlessness, relocating to a new geographical location often means addressing how to belong to this new place. This begins by orienting myself to the surrounding neighborhood on GoogleMaps. I locate the post-office, train station, supermarket, second-hand store, furniture store, café, bike lane, park, etc. In this context, a satellite lens hovers above the earth, surveilling my location. I also think of my phone-scanning eye as a lens apparatus. At a microscopic pixel level, the phone screen scales down a macro-level neighborhood and my eyes simulate a satellite lens. Meditating on this scaling of place, I built two camera apparatuses for Mathijs van Oosterhoudt's Thematic Workshop: A Focal Camera. A macro-camera and a micro-camera (Fig. 10, 11, respectively) to replicate my technological experience of orienting to a new place, beginning a sense of belonging.



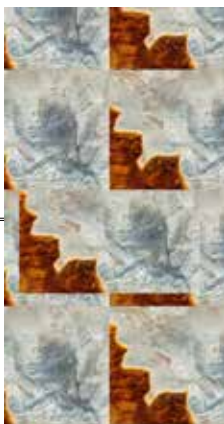
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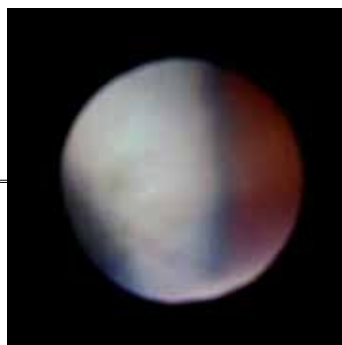
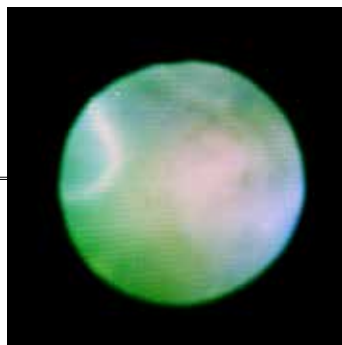
11

The cameras documented these screenshots from my phone screen.

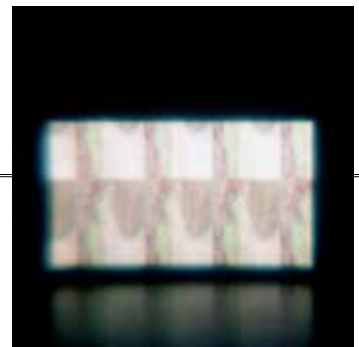
The two cameras captured
composited screenshots of
random locations from Google
Map's Earth feature.

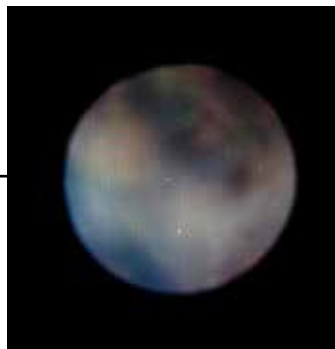
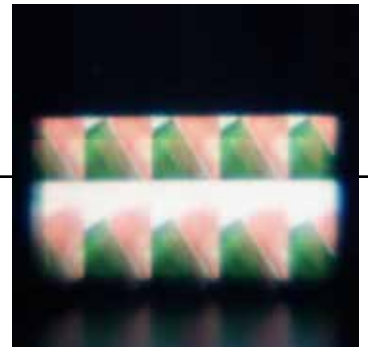
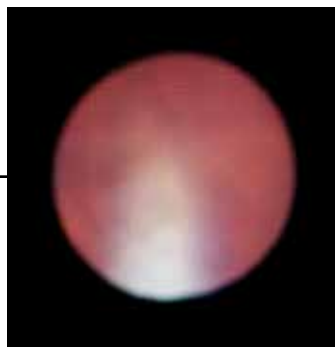
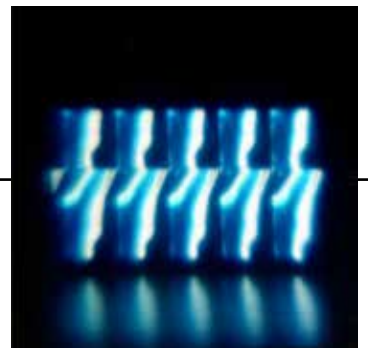
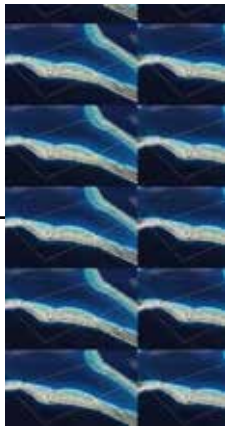


The micro camera captured
pixels.



The macro camera captured
the screen at a focus distance
of 1 foot, the recommended
safe distance for viewing one's
smartphone.



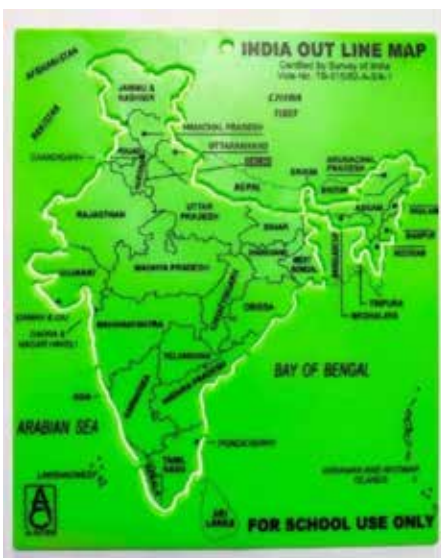


The measure of the lenses was in line with my inner desire to place myself in Kralingen, Rotterdam in 2019. Geographer Yi Fu Tuan states that space, place, and home are subjective measurements of “direction, location and distance” (1977, p. 44). Under this context, the two camera-macro and micro- apparatuses were simulating measurements of a subjective experience of place.

In experiencing a new geographical spot: Kralingen, Rotterdam, I synchronized a lens-based art practice. My rootlessness was not only a perspective from which I understood the concept of place, it also generated two distinct lenses. My rootlessness was more than my point of reference, it was a point of measurement (zooming in, zooming out). I will now elaborate on how the images are subjective abstractions that subvert place as a defined grid.

Maps as Abstractions

Place is not always a subjective experience. It is often a definite grid point on planet earth. Thai Historian Thongchai Winichakul defines this grid allocation of place an abstraction that “generates an administered space” (1994, p.110). Place is often an abstract idea mapped onto physical space.



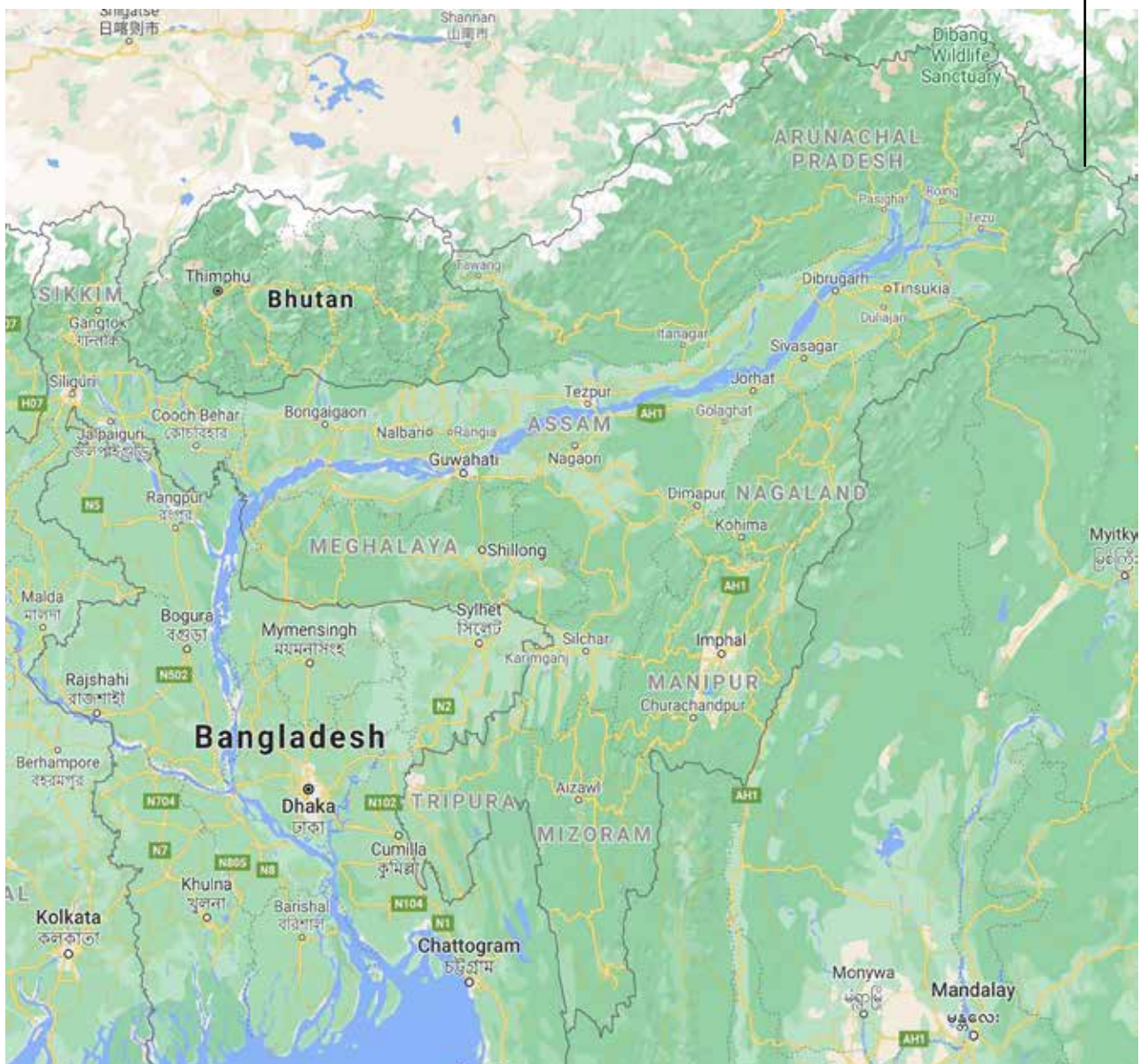
14: (First Click Plastic India Map Stencil (19 cm x 15.5 cm x 0.5 cm Green) 1 Piece: Amazon.in: Home & Kitchen)

The Nation as Map as Abstraction

Formally, using maps as an abstraction is familiar to me. The map of India was one of the first abstract drawings I ever made. Me and my classmates would trace the country's borders with a -pencil through a perforated plastic stencil (Fig. 14). We were mapping a country in a classroom, the nation as an abstracted shape.

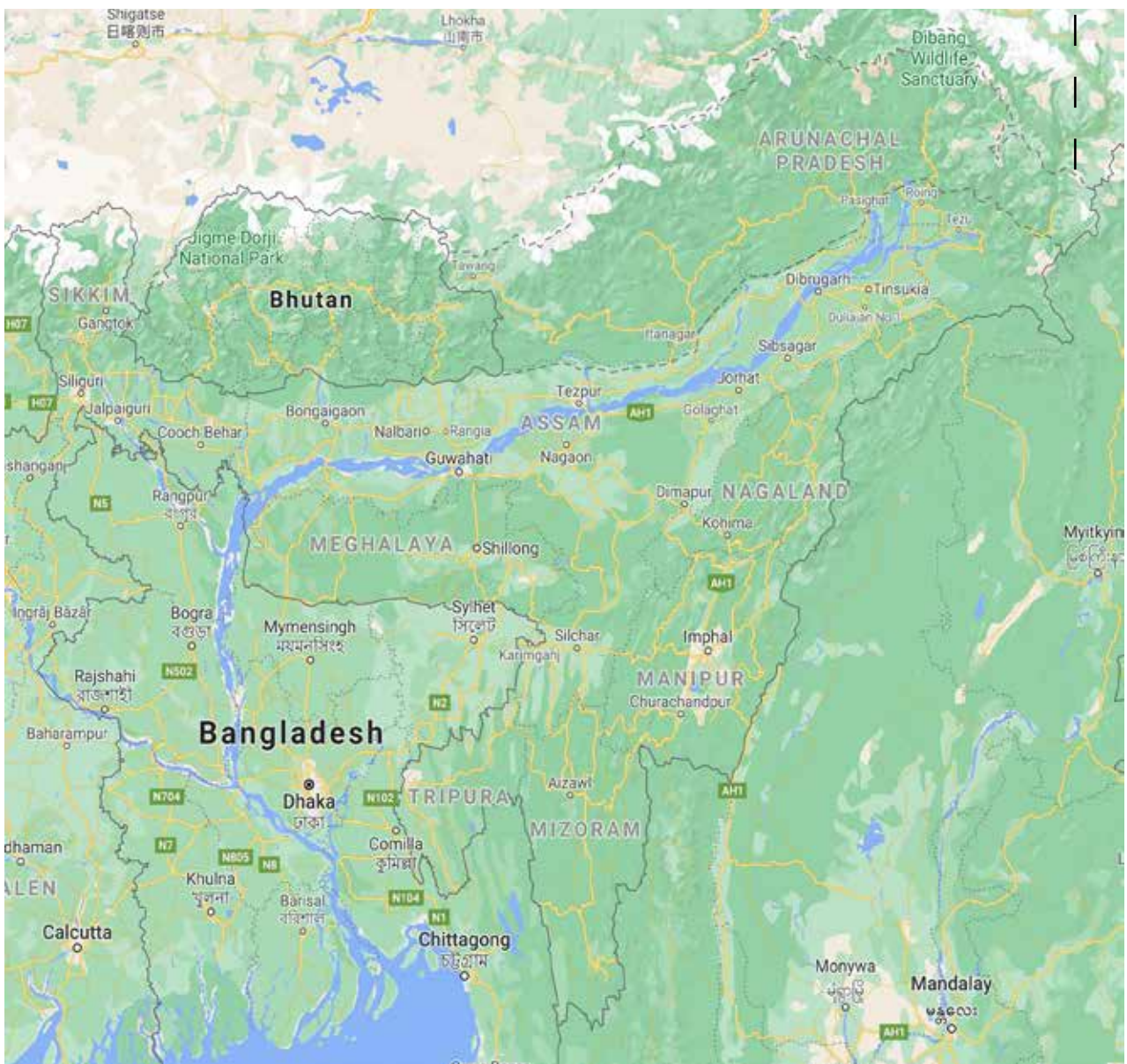
Growing up away from India, the map as nation has become a nonsensical abstraction. The northeastern region of India, my ancestral home, shares a longer land border (3488 km) with China than the 22 km strip of land connecting it to India. As of April 2021, a GoogleMaps search from anywhere but India (Fig.15, 16) shows a missing national border between the Northeastern region of India and China. It is absurd to have been a child drawing a defined line as India's border, only to grow up knowing it does not exist. A disputed border confirms the abstract idea of nationhood mapped onto a physical space.

Border between India and China
from GoogleMaps India



15: Google Maps 2021, Northeast India, 27°32'50.1"N 93°18'52.8"E, viewed 10 April 2021, <<https://goo.gl/maps/zw3gwsQQecxmW4GdA>>

Border between India and China
from GoogleMaps Netherlands



16: Google Maps 2021, Northeast India, 27°32'50.1"N 93°18'52.8"E, viewed 10 April 2021, <<https://goo.gl/maps/zw3gwsQQecxmW4GdA>>

Map as Administered Abstraction

Thongchai Winichakul considers maps residues of colonial knowledge. He indicts modern cartography's colonial origins and states, "A map was a model for, rather than a model of, what it purported to represent. It became a real instrument to concretize imperial projections on the earth's surface. (Thongchai, 1994, p.110).

An example of abstraction as an administrative map is how empires would "color their colonies in their own imperial dye," how British imperial colonies were pink-red blobs on the globe. (Anderson, 1983, p.175) (Fig.17 and 18)

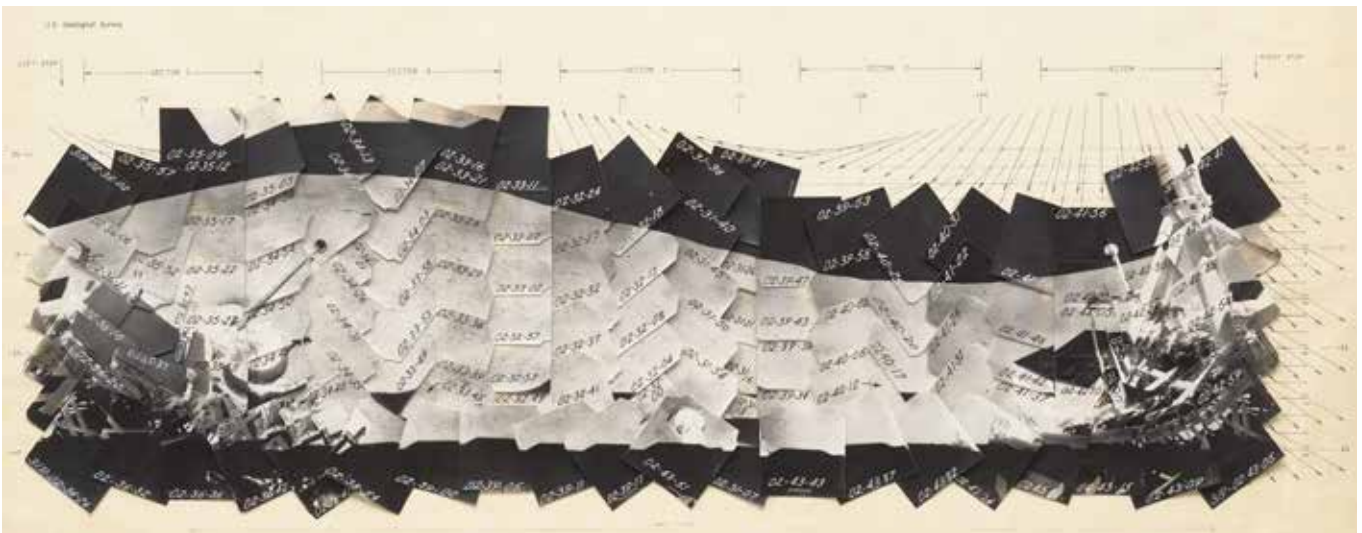


17: Walter Crane, Map of the British Empire in 1886, Giclee Print



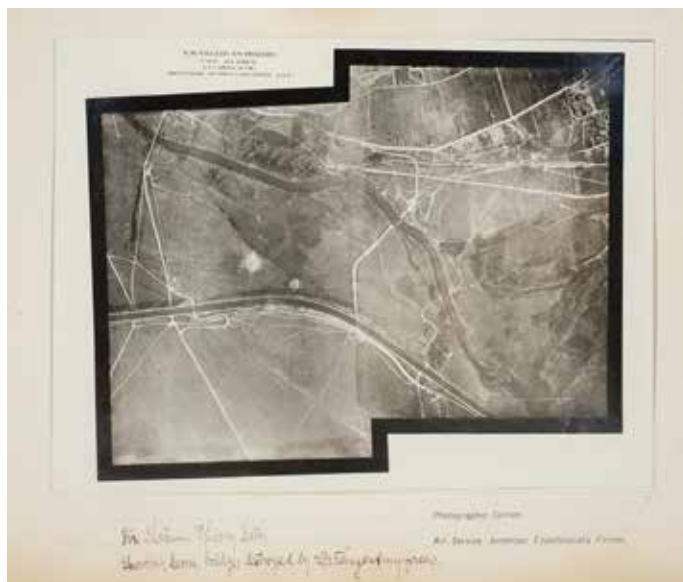
18: Countries of the British Empire drawn on a uniform scale of 1:60,000,000. Available online at : <https://www.instagram.com/p/BIVT1mPhgqA/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link>

A composite, abstract map as a model for a representation can also be found in a collage by US Geological Survey & NASA(Fig.19) It is a composite of many numbered photos placed on a chart, which render a map of the moon's surface. This was done 2 years before the moon landing.



19: US Geological Survey & NASA, Surveyor III. Surface of the Moon, Day 319, W-E, 1967

Aerial maps like this composite below (Fig.20) by photographer Edward Steichen were war-time abstractions. Steichen served in World War 1 as head of the Photographic Section of the American Expeditionary Forces from 1917 to 1919. Steichen's aerial photographs were "instrumental in adapting [aerial] photography for intelligence purposes, and implementing surveillance programs that would have a lasting impact on modern warfare." (Quoted in Padley, 2014). Presciently, Steichen considered surveillance as the potential of "what could be expected from photography." (Quoted in Padley, 2014)

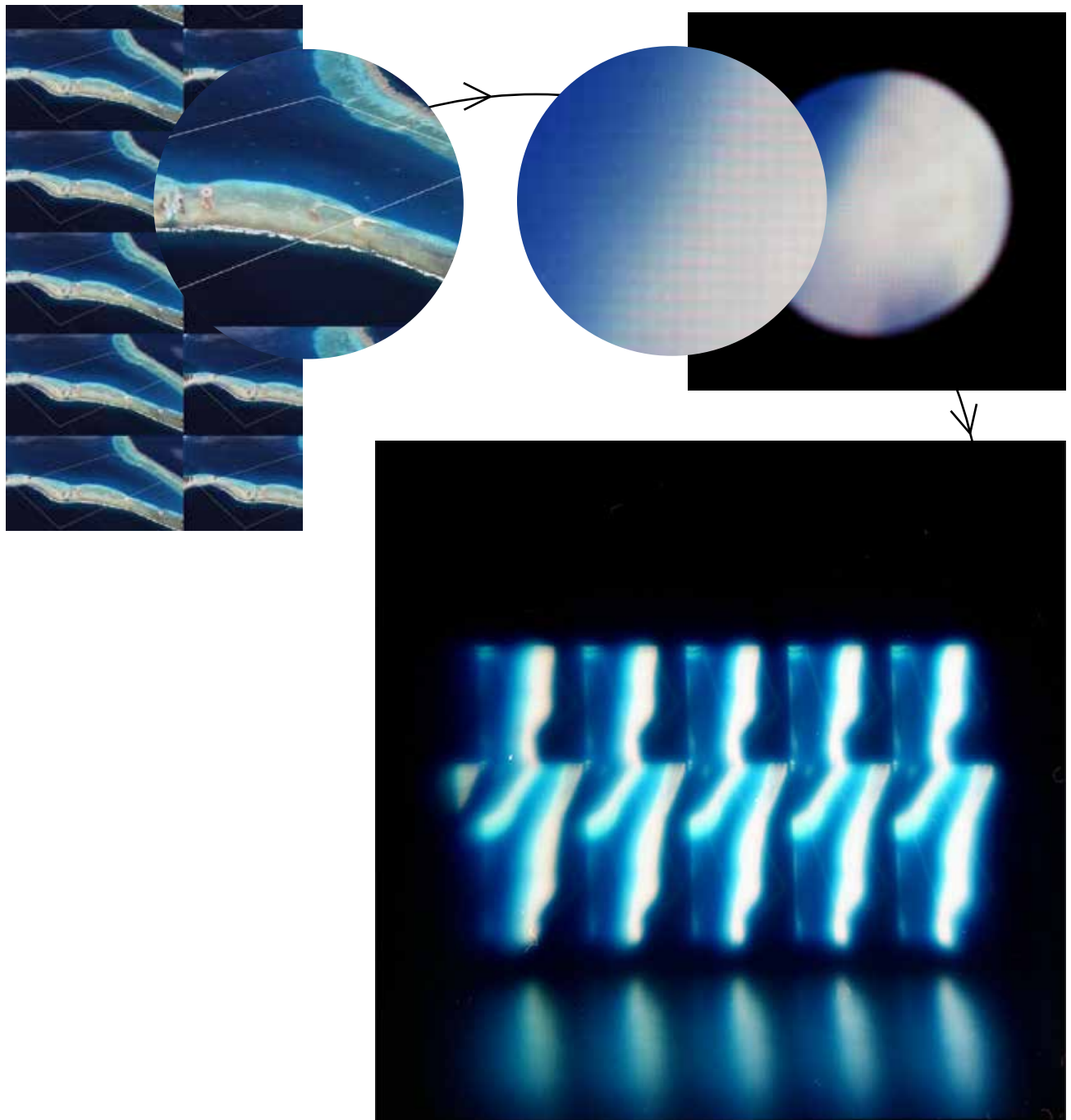


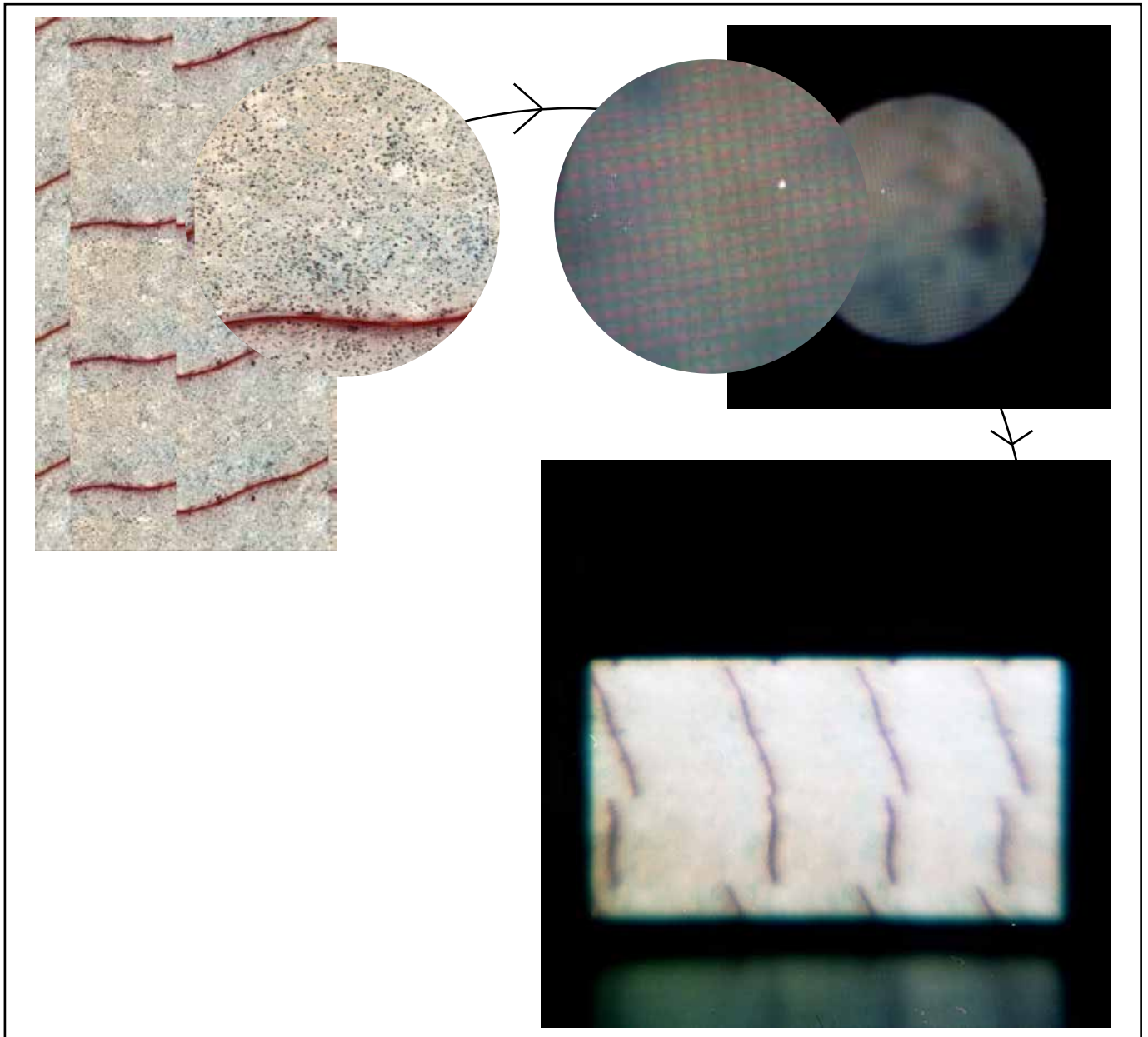
20: Edward Steichen, Plate 23 from Untitled album, February 10, 1919, Gelatin Silver Print

All the aforementioned images explicitly imply surveillance and dominion. But I used maps after realizing their significance in my attempts at reorienting myself to a new place. The camera apparatuses that captured the composites came from questions of scale and place in my own experience. I was not looking at these maps to dominate a territory, I was trying to assimilate and belong. Injecting subjectivity is my subversion of satellite and mapped images.

Un-Mapping through Abstraction

To separate maps from their surveilling logic and coordinates, I abstracted my final images. To abstract means to render imagers that are “independent from directly visually referencing” (Arnheim, 1969) the original. The abstractions themselves were remnants of a process. Put together they depict a fragmented shift from a satellite shot to a pixel to a futuristic screen-like projection (Fig.21, 22)





22

As I framed the surveilled satellite image within my two cameras, I believe I was mapping my rootlessness. The process of zooming-in and out of a mapped image was a simulation of what I often did with my own eyes on the Google Maps app. It was a process that simulated my desire to belong. My rootlessness, this inability to confine my sense of belonging to a bordered territory, became a means to recognize a sense of belonging within myself. By this I mean that belonging to a place is not just about belonging to a nation, or a geographic coordinate. Often, belonging to a place is a subjective experience. Belonging is a subjective process. By considering place as a subjective sense of belonging, I subvert the descriptive notion that place is an administered geographic location.

An example of an artist who depicts rootlessness to subvert the problem of mapped space is Mona Hatoum. She was born in Lebanon to Palestinian parents. In 1975, while she was on a trip to London, the Lebanese Civil War broke out and she chose to seek asylum in England. Since then, she has considered herself a nomadic artist. She thinks of rootlessness as a challenge against identity as “something that is fixed and easily definable.” (Quoted in Duguid, 2006)

In *Routes II* (Fig 23), Hatoum paints over photocopies of maps taken from airline brochures. She draws lines that mimic the flight routes, but as they pass the borders and crisscross each other they form geometric shapes. She fills these shapes with gouache paint, creating abstractions. She challenges the notion of maps as political boundaries by focusing on representations of movement (flight routes) to generate her abstractions. From just a travel brochure, Hatoum’s abstractions generate a new vocabulary. She considers these abstractions “routes for the rootless.” (Quoted in Duguid, 2006)



23: Mona Hatoum, *Routes II*, 2002, Colored ink and gouache on five maps, 90.2 x 106.7 x 2.5 cm

Like Hatoum's abstractions, my process of mapping my rootlessness builds on existing images. For Hatoum it is travel brochures, for me it is satellite images. Like Hatoum, I use abstractions to subvert place from its definite meaning. Like Hatoum, I consider the subjective experience of place as a marker of identity in its indefinite quality. Like Hatoum, I use abstractions to meditate on subjective concepts of place and belonging. Like Hatoum, my subjective rootlessness meditates on the multiplicity of identity.

Note: Re-acknowledging Rootlessness

Marxist geographer David Harvey wrote of "time-space compression as a capitalistic experience" and "longing for coherence of place and community is the sign of the geographical fragmentation and spatial disruption of our times." (Massey, 1994, p.147) Yes, I feel like I don't have a place to call home, but I am not an ahistorical human. As much as my ethnic identity is entangled with colonialism, my rootless subjectivity is also tied to capitalism. Right now, my Dutch student visa grants me easy entry and exit from the Netherlands, starkly different from the traumatic experience of any asylum seeker's restricted immigration route. Despite the economic precarity that comes with being an artist, I am on the educated and privileged side of rootlessness. From this position, I note that my rootlessness is a complicit position.

My rootlessness also disrupts my claim to being an indigenous Khasi person. Indigenous translates to "naturally existing in a place or country rather than arriving from another place" (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2021). As discussed, my rootlessness bars me from claiming to "naturally exist" in a place. But I still identify as Khasi. In the next chapter I delve into speaking near my Khasi identity.

3

Speaking Near My Khasi Ethnicity

Rootlessness is having an inner compass but not knowing where true inner north is. For me, there are different norths. To quote Trinh T Minh Ha, rootlessness is often a state of being “elsewhere within here.” (2010, p.12) Beyond location (the here and there), cultural geographer Doreen Massey considers ethnicity as an “obvious axis” that “deeply implicates the ways we experience space and place” (Massey, 1994, p. 164). My Khasi ethnicity has often been a bureaucratic identity. This chapter reflects upon my being Khasi.

To speak near my ethnic identity, I first need to consider what it even is. My Khasi identity is buried beneath my Christian residential education, my western university life, and the marker as foreigner in my last name-Dkhar. It is buried as much as it has been erased by assimilation, conversion, economic mobility, and globalization.

Black Studies scholar Christina Sharpe points to contemporary society as being “in the wake,” (2016, p.14) a time of grieving for a lot of violent histories. Particularly, she responds to black women academics and writers entering the academic archive trying to find aspects of their history and being unable to do so. I identify with this. My search for “Khasi” in the British Museum Collections website resulted in: “Matrilineal...hill dwelling agriculturalists of Meghalaya, Assam, Tripura, and Mizoram” (Khasi | British Museum, no date) This description ties identifying being Khasi with being from a specific place. Being indigenous often means being of the land, a paradox against my rootlessness. In the Don Bosco Museum, my encounter with the busts slipped into embodiment¹. In feeling that those busts represented something innately Khasi within me, I fell for the museum’s ideology. If not in historical archives or representations, where should I find my claim to being Khasi?

¹Ch 1 (pg 12)

Being Khasi: A Decolonial Attempt at Finding my Ethnicity

Historian Beshouy Botros asserts that decolonizing research should point to new narratives beyond historical archives. Histories of the marginalized are often written through a specific colonial gaze. As such, new decolonial narratives should consider “the case for oral histories, stories, cosmology and music as material” (Botros, 2020). Within this framework, I consider my engagement with my ethnic identity as my decolonizing practice. My first step to doing this is remembering.

Being rootless, my claim to being Khasi involves remembering subjective aspects of being Khasi. As an example, a question like “What do Khasis eat?” becomes “What did I eat as a child that was Khasi?” Another aspect that my family still maintains as part of our cultural identity is using words from Khasi cosmology. By Khasi cosmology I mean the spiritual concepts that make up traditional shamanistic belief. While me and my family have all been converted into Christianity since the mid-20th century, certain words from this cosmology are still remembered in our family. A specific example is the concept of Rngiew (pronounced ‘ring-ee-yew’) which despite its elusiveness remains in our conversations.

Rngiew is a core part of Khasi social consciousness and spirituality (Syiem, 2011, p. 7). The term is not translatable and its meaning in English has been severely debated². It can mean essence, aura, expression, soul, fate, or even consciousness. Often it is a distinguishing original mark that a person bears on her face. Rngiew can manifest as solid (eh rngiew) or soft (jem rngiew). A solid rngiew is usually a good thing. A soft rngiew is usually misfortune. Only Khasis, by virtue of speaking the language, can decipher rngiew in each other. Yet at its core, rngiew remains an elusive concept. It escapes western translation,

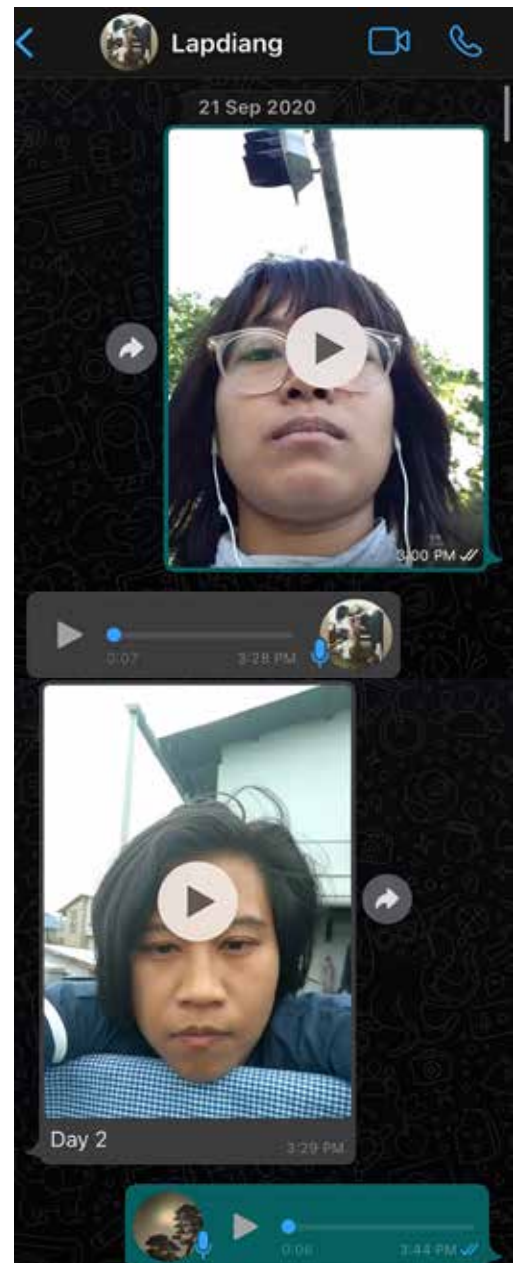
²Appendix 1 for excerpts from a discussion on the rngiew in 1988

freeing it from the dissecting gaze of scientific learning. Rngiew, for me, represents a very subjective approach to my being Khasi. I too have a personal understanding of the rngiew.

During peak COVID-19 paranoia in March 2020, my mother called me on the phone and told me to solidify my “rngiew.” I initially took her advice as an encrypted way of telling me to be resilient. My scepticism towards spirituality (my western education perhaps) didn’t consider the rngiew as a spiritual concept. I saw it as a Khasi word standing in for my mother’s expression of encouragement. As the quarantine days passed on, I began obsessing over this word, rngiew. But I was the only Khasi I knew in the Netherlands. The only Khasis I could find were on social media. So I began wondering if this rngiew could be registered online. I then started looking for someone who could figure out whether my rngiew was solid or soft. That is when I came across Lapdiang Syiem, a Khasi performance artist based in Shillong (capital city of the Khasis in Meghalaya, India). Next, I elaborate on our shared project.

30 Days of Rngiew

From September 20, 2020 to October 19, 2020, I participated in a daily video messaging exchange with Lapdiang. Every day, we sent each other 5 second videos and became barometers of each other's rngiew(Fig.24).³When taking rngiew as judgement, the person being judged can have a solid, eh, rngiew or a soft, jem, rngiew. A solid rngiew can mean you emit, manifest, or invite good fortune. The opposite, a soft rngiew, can mean you emit, manifest, or invite misfortune. Lapdiang's video clip would arrive as a phone message and I would respond in Khasi with an audio recording, "I think your rngiew is solid today." She would do the same.



Parallel to the exchange, at the end of each day, I would generate a 1000x1000 pixel image with computer code in the Processing development environment. This coding would first begin in poetry that loosely translated how I felt about that day(Fig. 25).

```
// four ellipses is a saturated very bright and light warm orange  
// orange stimulates me sometimes, maybe because it reminds me of fire and embers  
// and smoke and home  
// or maybe its just concentric wheels of Dutch cheese
```

25

```
noStroke();  
fill(#EAC942, 70);  
ellipse(width/2, height/2, width/2, height/2);  
ellipse(width/2, height/2, width/3, height/3);  
ellipse(width/2, height/2, width/4, height/4);  
ellipse(width/2, height/2, 3*width/4, 3*height/4);
```

26

Then I would think of a way in which this snippet of word could be a digital image, like painting or mark making but with a line of code (Fig. 26)

The code would generate abstract geometric shapes. The next pages (Pg 40-43) show code and generated images from Day 1 and Day 30.

Day 1: September 20, 2020

Progressions of our Rngiew: Ka
Jingbishar jong ka Rngiew
Lapdiang's rngiew is solid:
Lapdiang i eh rngiew
My rngiew is solid
Nga nga eh rngiew



```
size(1000, 1000);
background(#E3F4F5, 0.5);
strokeWeight(0.1);
fill(#FA3A50, 70);
// a square for pictorially enclosing, encasing, transmissions
// as if mapping transmissions from another world

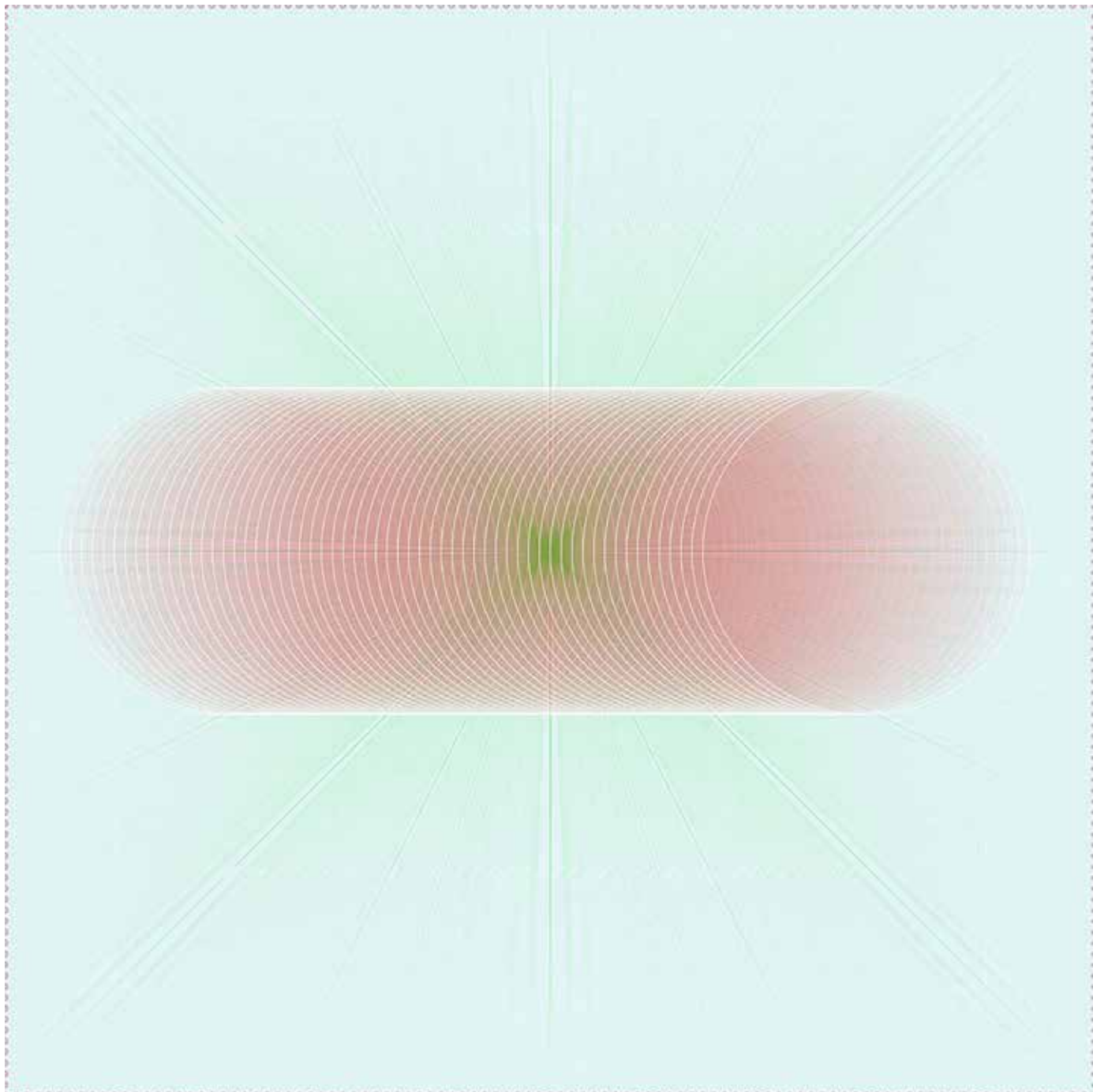
for (int x = 0; x < width; x += 10) {
  ellipse(x, 0, 5, 5);
  ellipse(x, height, 5, 5);}
for (int q = 0; q < height; q += 10) {
  ellipse(0, q, 5, 5);
  ellipse(width, q, 5, 5);}
// a border of circles from one corner to another
// I think of home on the edges of grandmother's lace tea towel
// home on the borders

strokeWeight(0.1);
stroke(#3AFA3B, 70);
fill(#CBFDFD, 3);
for (int x = 0; x < width; x += 20) {
  for (int z = 0; z < height; z += 20) {
    ellipse(x, z, 1, 1);
    line(width/2, height/2, x, z);}}
// needles darting out from the center towards the edge
// energy channels itself from the center of my soul
// at the point of contact it disperses into a gradient

stroke(255);
strokeWeight(0.5);
rectMode(CORNERS);
rect(100, 100, 900, 900);
// an invisible shield, a square with no filling
// a box to hide and withhold "ka rngiew"... to protect what is
// vulnerable, my spirit, in a material world

strokeWeight(0.7);
int c = 200;
for (int x = 200; x < 800; x += 15)
  {line(x, c, x + 10, c + 10);}
strokeWeight(0.7);
int f = 800;
for (int x = 200; x < 800; x += 15)
  {line(x, f, x + 10, f - 10);}
// diagonal lines repeat above and below within the square
// as above, so below, all in one place... the spiritual and the
// material are both pictorial in this attempt

fill(#CE2525, 5);
strokeWeight(0.7);
int y = 500;
int d = 300;
for (int x = 200; x < 800; x += 10)
  {ellipse(x, y, d, d);}
// a slinky goes boinnnnnggggg, expanding to contract
// communicating energy digitally in the visible world, reaching
// out and trying to understand my rngiew
```



Day 30: October 19, 2020

Progressions of our Rngiew: Ka
Jingbishar jong ka Rngiew
Lapdiang's rngiew is solid:
Lapdiang i eh rngiew
My rngiew is solid: *Nga nga eh*
rngiew

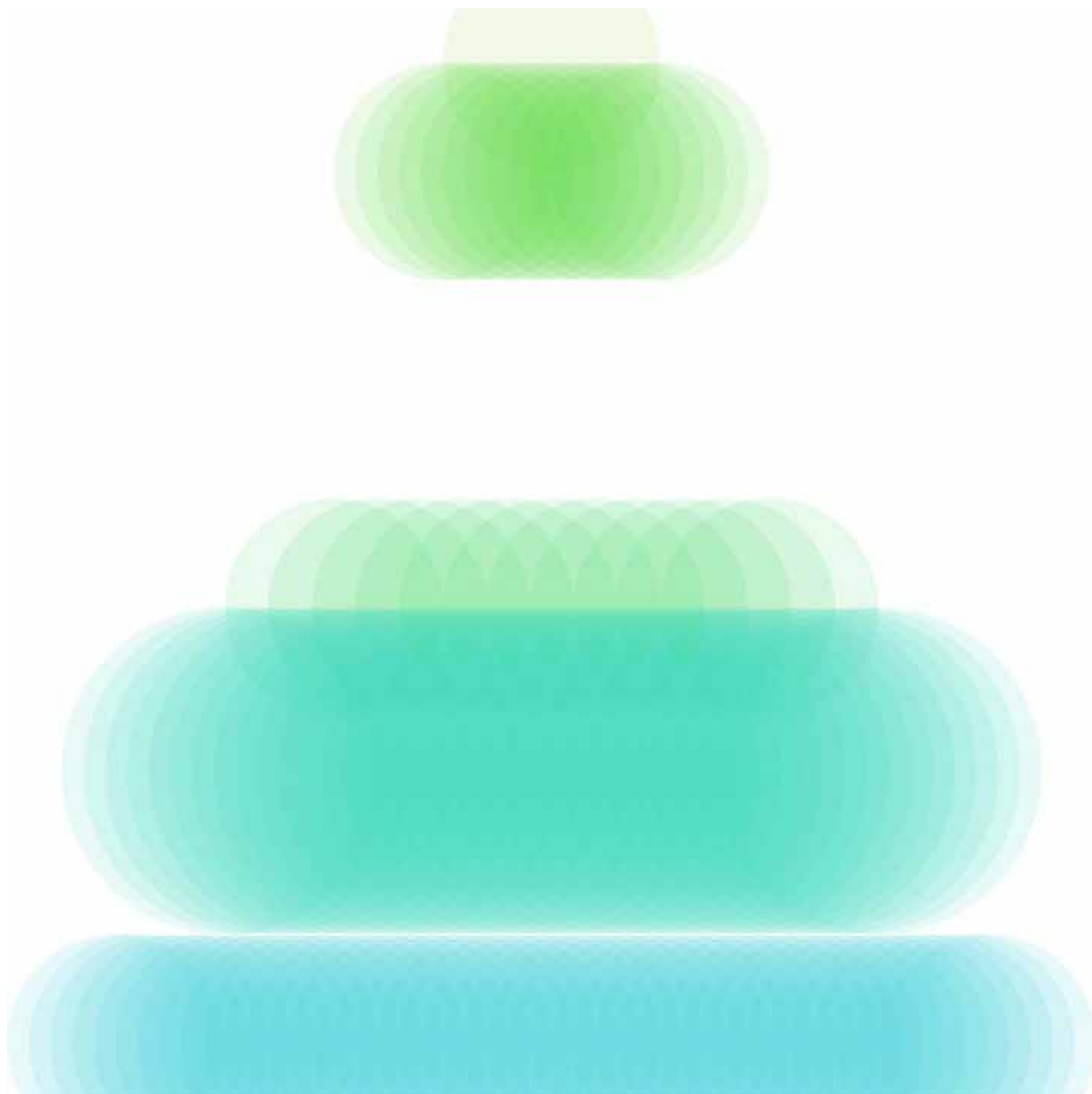


```
size(1000, 1000);
background(255);
noStroke();
fill(#8AD832, 30);
for (int x = 500; x<= width-500; x+=20) {
    circle(x, 50, 200);}
// topmost layer horizontal tube made of circles
// when you dump piles of glass bottles by the ocean
// the waves sand them into green glass pebbles

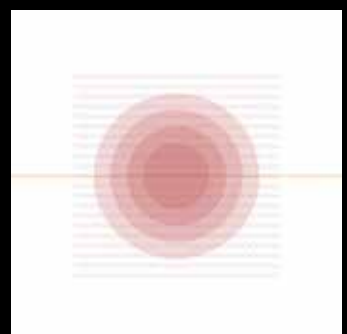
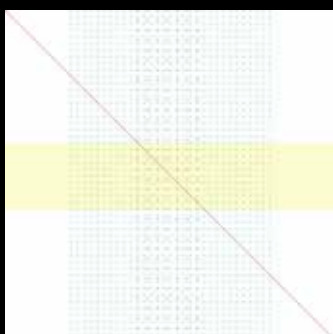
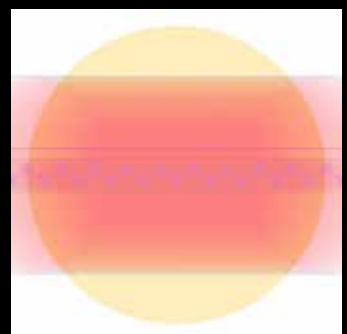
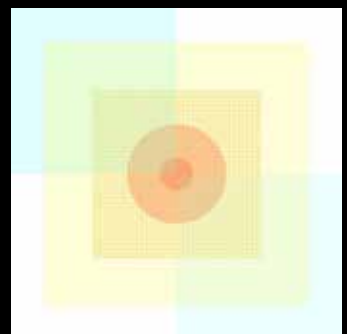
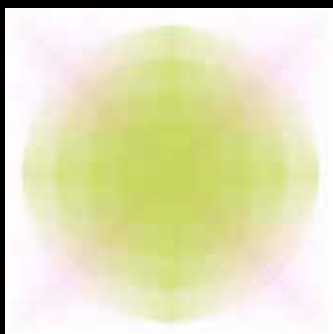
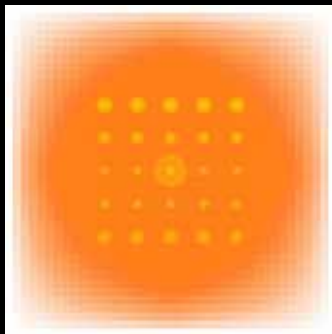
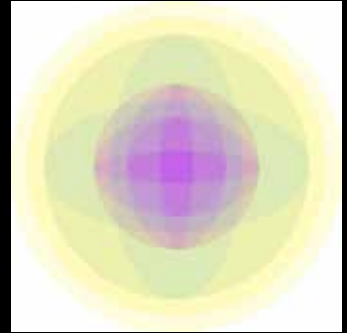
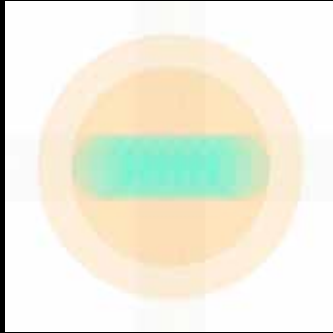
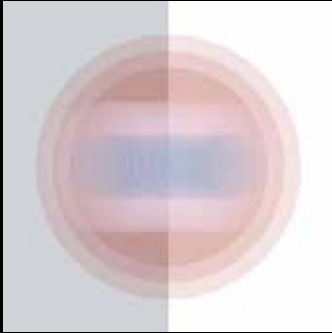
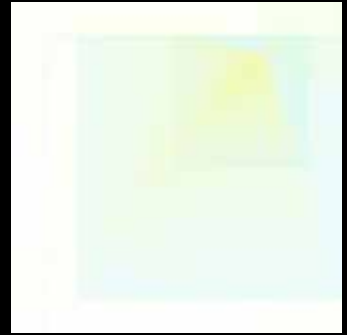
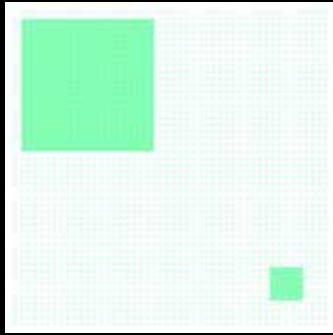
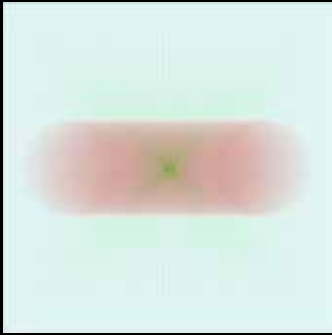
fill(#50D832, 30);
for (int x = 400; x<= width-400; x+=20) {
    circle(x, 150, 200);}
// second layer
// rockstacking, we and our ancestors did this too
// stack one rock on top of another, balancing
// non-utilitarian discipline

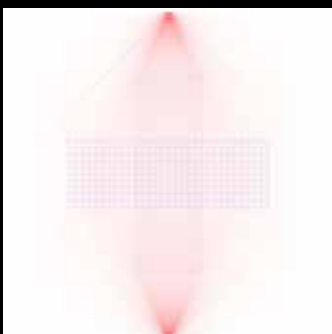
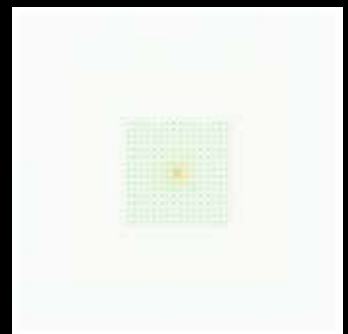
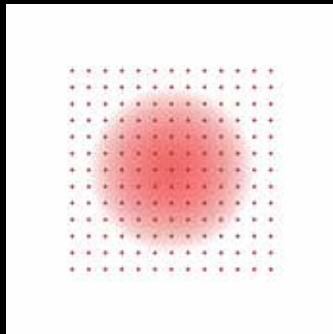
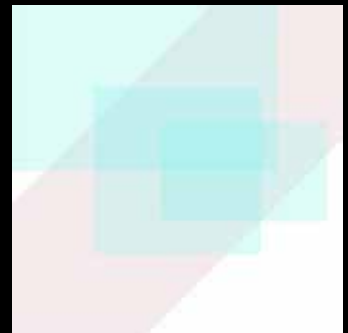
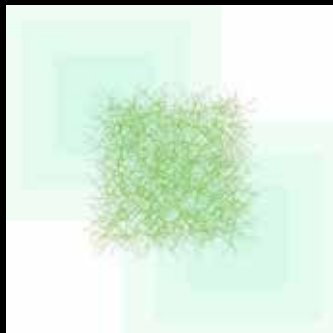
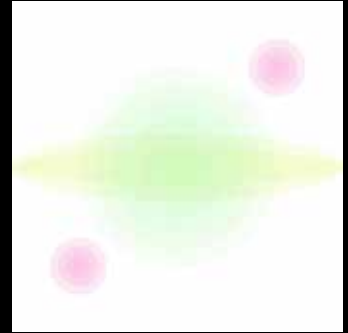
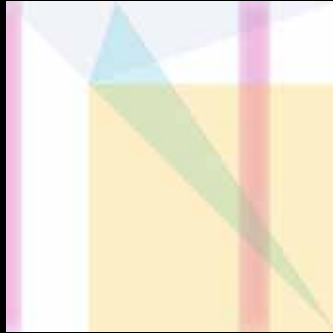
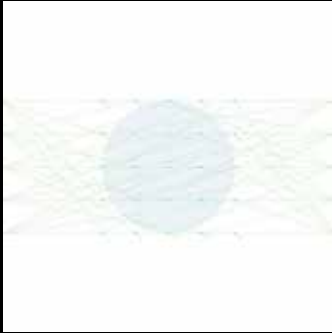
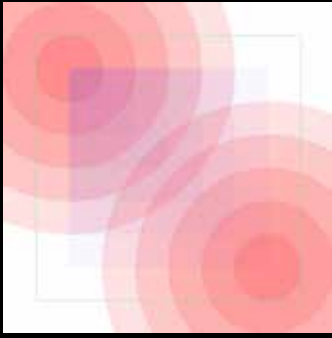
fill(#32D860, 30);
for (int x = 300; x<= width-300; x+=40) {
    circle(x, 550, 200);}
// third layer
// rockstacking
// stack one day after another
// one rock of solid rngiew on top of one rock with soft rngiew
fill(#32D8B8, 30);
for (int x = 200; x<= width-200; x+=20) {
    circle(x, 700, 300);}
// fourth layer
// the rules of the natural world allow rockstacking
// the rules of the ancestral world allow rngiew judging

fill(#32C9D8, 30);
for (int x = 100; x<= width-100; x+=20) {
    circle(x, 950, 200);}
// fifth layer
// a pile of rock, a bunch of footage
// which ocean do I go to
// to sand this media into glass pebbles, transparent and beautiful
```



Generated Images from 30 Days of Rngiew





The code and the generated images were my attempts at visually translating this 30 Days of Rngiew exchange. I didn't quite know how to present this exchange without it being a series of two women sending each other 5 second videos. Also, rngiew is not a concept I fully understand. Rngiew, initially a word that was stuck only in my memory, became a shared feeling between me, my family (my mother) and a Khasi stranger (Lapdiang). For anyone who is not Khasi, the concept of rngiew is painfully untranslatable. In making the code and abstractions, I was prying open the door of translation for my own self. I hoped that it would also open the door for someone non-Khasi to understand this rngiew. I realize now that translation is not entirely achievable, and that the exchange, code and generated images were making a different statement.

30 Days of Rngiew was my first attempt at engaging directly with Khasi knowledge. It helped me rearticulate my being Khasi, if only because I could pronounce "rngiew" correctly and use it in an artistic practice. Personally, it felt more tangible as a marker of my Khasi identity than any archived Khasi material with a colonial gaze. It was more subjective, bound to its multiplicity of meaning. This is how I feel it goes back to "speaking near" my identity.

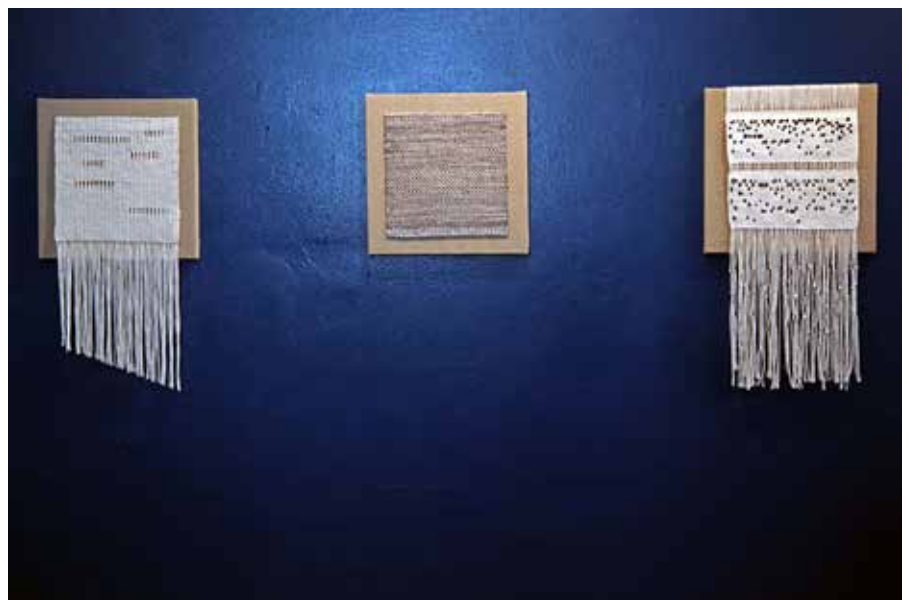
I had previously discussed how I "speak nearby" because I am sensitive to the camera lens and its gaze. I also highlighted that Trinh T Minh-ha's concept of "speaking nearby" involves an embrace of the nonsensical. Nonsensical in that simplicity of meaning is the agenda of an imposing gaze. For anyone else who is not Khasi, rngiew would seem like a nonsensical concept. But I embrace its nonsense, its resistance to translation. In its nonsense, the 30 Days of Rngiew practice was me speaking near my Khasi identity. But, I also didn't form the project out of air, my art education plays a role in my artistic choices. The video exchange and coding practice come from carefully considered formal decisions. I will elaborate on them next.

Internet Exchange as Aesthetic

Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics finds art in social relations an antithesis to "the disembodiment of the Internet" (Bishop, 2012, p. 437). Lev Manovich, considers the internet itself as enabler of relational aesthetics. As opposed to the one-way flow of a film or book, the internet allows for exchanges, between sender and receiver. Manovich ponders on "communication between users becoming the subject of an aesthetic" (2001, p. 163) He also debates if this exchange "needs to assume representation or object form in order to be recognized as art." Rngiew itself is relational. While it is untranslatable to a non-Khasi person, Lapdiang and I understood the fundamentals of what rngiew meant. Using an internet exchange as artistic practice, I built space for this Khasi knowledge (this precolonial worldview) in technology, the internet.

Code and Weaving

The choice to use code also came from the desire to blend something Khasi with something technological. In her exhibition, *Pattern:Code* (Fig 27), artist Ahree Lee uses weavings to draw a connection to code, algorithms and the implicit feminist history behind both weaving and coding.



27: Ahree Lee, *Pattern:Code*, 2019, photos by Gilda Davidia. Available at <<https://womenscenterforcreativework.com/ahree-lee/>>

Ahree Lee states that coding and weaving are both “binary systems.” Weaving textile occurs by interlocking threads, so you can only ever see a warp or a weft thread on the surface, which is essentially a zero or a one (2019). Referencing this link between coding and weaving, I tried to reactivate the relationship between Khasi weaving and storytelling.

Within Khasi mythology, weaving embodies telling a story, in both abstract sense and metaphor. With the coming of Welsh and Scottish missionaries, women began weaving gingham plaid-like patterns into their cotton and silk looms. The designs are often an abstraction of “myriad stories hidden in the colors and designs—tales about human creation, magical deities and kindred forest spirits” (Folklore, myths and handloom, 2017)

To an extent, I was also weaving. A loom weaver directs her warp and weft through loops to form geometric shapes. I was coding loops to direct my pixels, my zeros and ones. I was doing a weaving of my own, through code.



28: Patterns on woven tribal shawls found at my mother's house.

Spiritual Abstractions

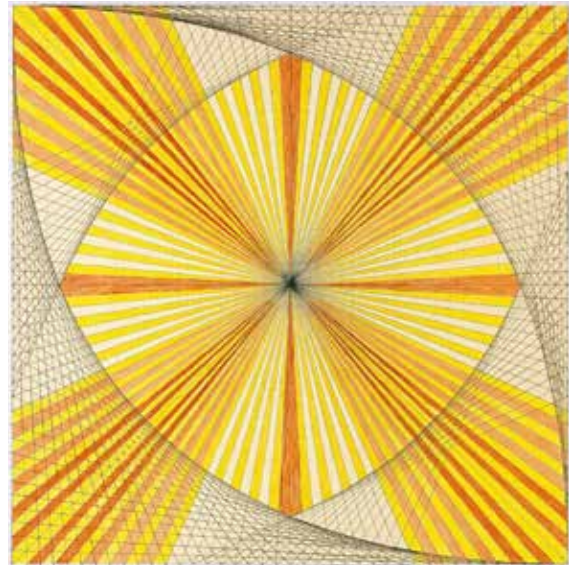
The geometric shapes generated by my code represent the ringiew in the mystical dimension. The code and its generated image were attempts to present my daily ringiew, something unseen but felt and perceived at a spiritual plane. Perhaps, it could be argued then that these images aren't abstractions but spiritual manifestations. Within the western painting canon, abstractions have been used to express spiritualism before. Abstractions succeed in communicating spiritualism because it "removes viewers from the world they think they know and allows them to focus their contemplation on symbols, the experience of a work, or its meditative character" (Rowan, 2013). During the early 20th century, some of the first spiritual abstractions were made by women. I elaborate on this below.

In 1920, artist and mystic Hilma af Klint began a series of small works with a circle that would begin as half black and half white, what she called the "starting picture-the world as balanced duality, dark and light, physical and material" (2018). These works came after a long history of Klint's connections with occultism. Born in 1862, Klint began attending seances as a teenager to communicate with her deceased younger sister. While in the Swedish academy, she joined a group of women known as The Five who would make automatic drawings during seances and trances.



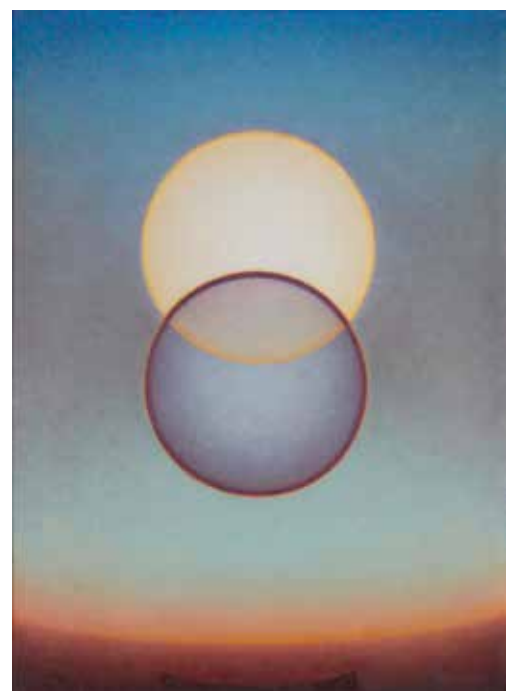
29 Hilma af Klint, No. 2a: The Current Standpoint of the Mahatmas 1920. Oil on canvas. 36.5 × 27 cm. Hilma af Klint Foundation.

Emma Kunz, a Swiss naturopath and healer was not a practicing artist. In the 1930s, well into her 40s she began using geometric abstractions to heal her patients. She would use a divine pendulum in a technique called radiesthesia. As the pendulum etched lines with pencil and crayon onto a page, she would direct it and “pose a question-personal to political- finding the answer within the lines” (Emma Kunz: art in the spiritual realm, no date). Kunz would then heal her patients after the drawing.



30: Emma Kunz, Work No 013, Pencil on Paper.
Photo by Emma Kunz Zentrum

Another woman, Agnes Pelton, member of the transcendental Painting group (1938-1941) believed in mixing mathematics and native American traditions, “to carry painting beyond the appearance of the physical world, through new concepts of space, color, light and design, to imaginative realms that are idealistic and spiritual”(Emma Kunz: art in the spiritual realm, no date).



31: Agnes Pelton, Departure, 1952. Oil on canvas, 24×18 in. Collection of Mike Stoller and Corky Hale Stoller.
Photograph by Paul Salvesson.

All three women, especially Klint, have been considered pioneers of geometric abstraction. Yet as art critic Ben Davis recognizes, their occultism is often taken for granted. He considers this a contemporary reducing of spiritualism into “conspiracy and “kitsch” spiritual aesthetics, fortune tellers and crystal healers and chart readings and all of that” (2018) Davis, however, finds it significant to recognize the history within which these women found themselves, the age of industrial modernity. He makes the case for their spirituality as an attempt not only to reconcile with science (geometry) but also meditating on the lack of spiritual meaning in modernity.

With their abstractions, these women responded to the times they found themselves in. Klint, Kunz and Pelton chose their art to convey spiritualism, something very different from the macho scientific approach to modern abstract painting (deconstructing shape, space and color). In their works, these women were articulating how they found meaning in the spiritual. I identify with these women because in the early days of Covid-19, it was difficult to suddenly experience a world of control and fear. The process of depicting *rngiew* allowed a mixing of my daily life, reflections, and practice. It also allowed me to engage with Khasi knowledge from so far away, yet inwardly, not as a science or a critique. I was abiding in something unknown and spiritual as a source of meditation. As the process went on, even if it was completely impossible to translate *rngiew*, I felt a sense of comfort as the world began to feel like a hole devoid of purpose and meaning.

An interesting coincidence: Spring 2021

During the start of spring 2021, shamans who still observe traditional Khasi spirituality climbed up the Lum Sohbetbneng, a mountain of great spiritual significance in Khasi mythology. This climb was titled “Kiew Pyneh Rngiew,” the Climb to Strengthen Rngiew. While it is a coincidence, I find it really interesting that during a pandemic I and these shamans were thinking about strengthening our rngiew, this spiritual concept, as paramount to the start of something new. For them, it was the start of harvest and a new year. For me, it was about beginning to rearticulate my identity.



32: Tarun Bhartiya, U Kiew Pyneh Rngiew, 2021. Shot on DSLR.

In the next chapter, Dispatches from ‘home’ land, I return to the Khasi Hills, my ancestral home.

Conclusion: Dispatches from ‘home’ land

In my 30 Days of Rngiew project (web installation, 2020) I began rearticulating my identity as a Khasi person as an abstracted spiritual experience. In March 2021, I returned to the Khasi Hills, homeland of the Khasi tribe, to continue my research on identity on-site. For the first time in 5 years, I was near the land and no longer far from it. In this chapter I speak nearby... dispatches from Khasi ‘home’ land.

*Being of the land
and what is nearby (March
21, 2021):*

*On the train from
the airport to the Khasi
hills, endless empty trucks
on the highway, illegal
highway truck stop. At
parents' home, dead of
night, endless squeaking
as trucks roll down the
steep hill. One after the
other, carrying coal, sand
and uranium. Mornings,
waking up to the smell of
burning forest. What is
being indigenous? Being
of the land. The land? a
source of resources and
raw materials. Indigenous
life? Living on the edge of
this land.*



33

On the drive up the Khasi Hills on March 19, 2021, the way home was shocking. I had always remembered the hills as being thicker and denser with forest. Later that day, I found out online that 22% of the forest cover had disappeared since 2010 (GlobalForestWatch, 2020). The Khasi Hills I thought I knew were quite different from the Khasi Hills I was being reintroduced to.

In an ecological sense, it is crushing to think of these barren hills in relation to increasing carbon emissions. But from a spiritual Khasi sense, these hills reflect a lost past. In traditional Khasi mythology, every hill has a spirit, *u ryngkew u basa*. It is an unseen and unheard spirit, something like air. Many of these spirits came with stories passed on and remembered as oral tradition. Most of these stories did not survive colonialism, barring those that shared some scholarship with western fairytales. Even within my own personal history, this mythology is lost.

My own Khasi identity is marred by conversion and assimilation into non-Khasi culture. I do not know much about the forest dwelling dieties. I only know of spirits that are popular; the generic, scary, dramatic spirits. Also, my rootlessness alienates me from being an indigenous person. Always far away from the land, I cannot claim to be a native. Yet in 2020, with my 30 Days of Rngiew project, I saw feeling and spirituality as a rearticulation of my being Khasi. In 2021, I returned to this ancestral land where my ethnic identity belongs. But this land was neither spiritual nor mystical. It was barren, burnt and dry. Witnessing this, I wrote a log-line to a film (March 24, 2021):

Being indigenous often means being “of the land.” On a journey back to her native land, Fileona remembers the place as a site of mythological memory and identity. Fileona is the outsider, she has been away for a long time. The land too is a stranger, it bears marks of injury through centuries of colonial and neo-colonial plunder. She recalls spiritual myths of the land, what she finds warmer and homelike. Hills, forests, quarries, polluted rivers, fog, sky, sand, rock, charred earth... scenes dissolve one after another.

As of April 2021, I am still filming and am mid-way through the production.

This film marks the conclusion of my master's study at Piet Zwart Institute. It also marks my first shift from the symbolic to the real. Real in that what is filmed is the landscape I can see. My camera stares at the Khasi Hills. My voice narrates for the first 5 minutes, not different from Trinh T Minh-ha's ventures in Senegal (Chapter 1). My narration (still in development as of April 2021) is inspired by the poetry of Soso Tham¹ which reflects on a time when oral tradition and spirituality existed in the Khasi hills. Then, I leave the moving image as is, devoid of excessive narration. As scenes dissolve from one take to another, a silence will accompany the moving image. This silence simulates the voice that tied itself to the mythology of these hills, the oral tradition. The dissolve reflects my own reintroduction to this land, experiencing one new scenery after another.

These hills, like me, have morphed with time. My ethnic history is blurry, the mythology of these hills are mostly lost. As the camera stares at these hills, I feel it indirectly also stares at me, focusing nearby.

Next pages (60-65) contain stills from the film-in-progress.

¹Refer to Appendix 2



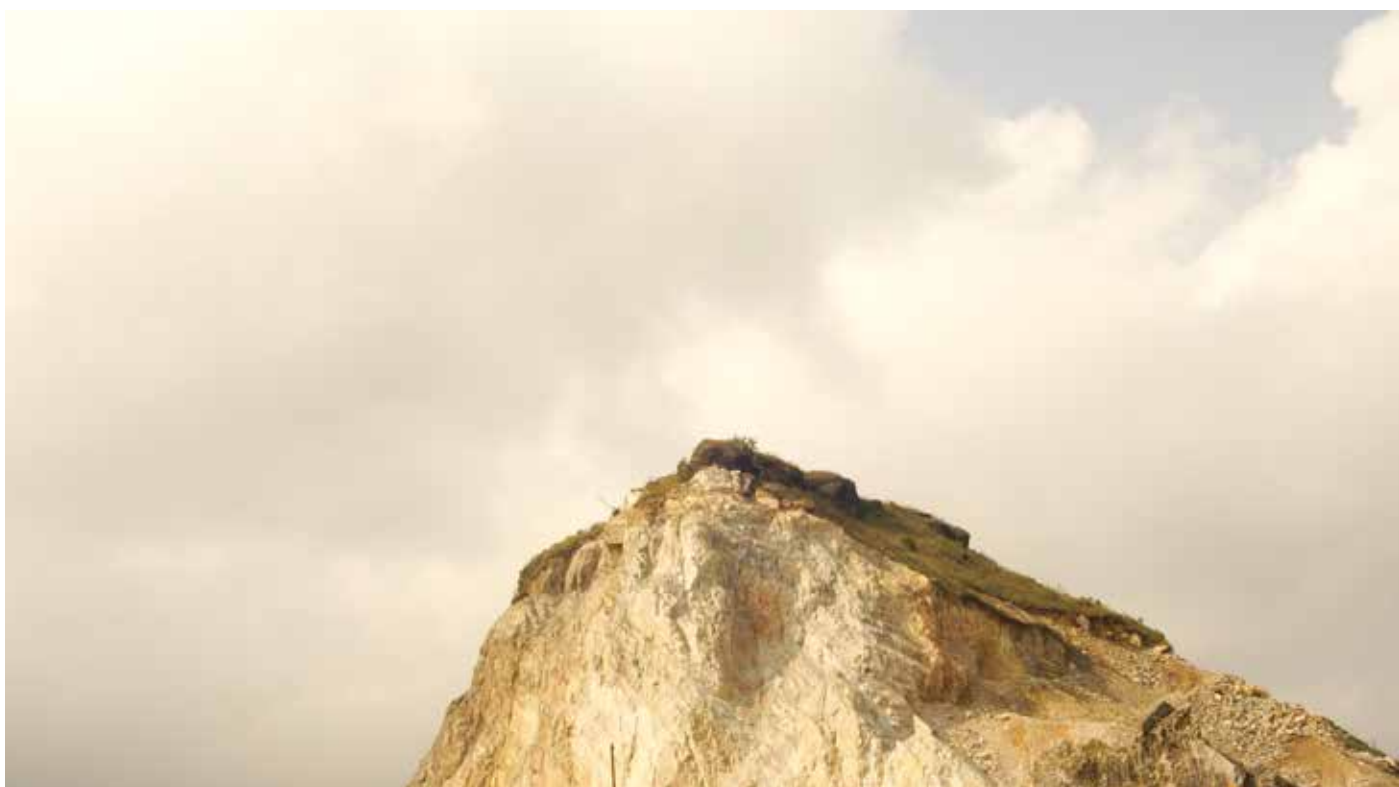
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35: A coal mine



36: A sandstone quarry



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Appendix 1

Miri, S (1988) Khasi Worldview: A Conceptual Exploration, Twenty First Century India Society, Printing Press

A discussion mediated by Sujata Miri for the Center for Research in Rural and Industrial Development in 1988.

RT Rymbai (Former President Seng Khasi, Khasi cultural organization):

Rngiew is a kind of essence in human beings, it is a kind of spirit. There is some sort of divinity which makes a man different from other beings. Ka rngiew always appears in the face of a person. When we look at a person we can be impressed by his rngiew. Ka rngiew is different from ka hok ka rwiang (luck) U nongshohnoh (murderer) cannot dare attack a man having a strong rngiew. Eh daw (Strength) does not mean eh rngiew in this context. Rngiew remains ehre after the death of a person too.

KD Ramsiej, (Former Principal, Shillong College): Rngiew is the fate of a person. If a person is jem rngiew, he always suffers from all sorts of evil things, he cannot prosper in life. If a person is eh rngiew, then he is free from pain and sufferings.

Pyndapland Khongwir (profession not stated): As the rngiew of a dead person remains on earth there is a close relation between the rngiew of the living and the rngiew of the dead

HW Sten (Professor, Khasi Department, North Eastern Hills University, Shillong): The rngiew cannot live after the death. If it lives after death the problem will arise - how does ka rngiew detach itself from the soul which goes to heaven

Sister Kharakor (Former Principal, St Mary's College, Shillong):

Ka rngiew is some sort of quality in man. It can go out of a man. When a man comes short of righteousness the rngiew gets lost and misfortunes happen to that man. When we do wrong we lose the rngiew. SO absence of rngiew will bring all misfortunes. Rngiew is a tool given

to man to achieve his goal. Rngiew is an assistance. Once we cut ourselves off from this rngiew, we are handicapped.

J. Khongwir (first name, profession not stated): Ka rngiew can exist even after the death of the body. After about two or three nights of a person's death his rngiew comes to visit the house where his dead body lies. Rngiew lives after death, i.e. it can live apart from the body. But rngiew is something within you. It is in the person itself

Fr. S Lyngdoh (Catholic Priest, Scholar of Khasi Culture):

Ka rngiew is present in history. It is a self experience of a man in history. There is no doubt about its existence. It begins here and after death remains here. It is different from man but it represents the man in all respects. It is the self expression of a person in history.

Kharkrang (first name, profession not stated): Rngiew is the finality of man. He comes here to achieve something. Man is not able to be what he actually is. How can Rngiew's presence be felt without the person?

H K Synrem (Leader, Seng Khasi women's division):

There is a time when a rngiew disappears from man. When a man loses his consciousness due to terror or fear it is said that his or her rngiew left.

Miri:

Ancient Indian thinkers too consider life and vitality (prana) as basic to man. Even when life leaves the body for sometime, we can feel the presence of the dead person, when we look at his belongings for instance.

Appendix 2

Excerpt from and translations from *Ki Sngi Ba Rim U Hynniewtrep*, The Old Days of the Khasis, by Soso Tham

Tham, S.S (1936) Ki Sngi Ba Rim U Hynniewtrep, Ri Khasi Press, Shillong.

Jingshai ngi wad sawdong pythei;
Jingshai ka Ri ngim tip eiei
Kumbo hyndai ki Kni ki Kpa
Ki sain pythei ki seng hima

We scour the world in search of light
Know not the light within our land
How long ago far back in time
Our ancients did a world create

Baroh ki Dak halor ki maw
La tap u niut ha lum ha khlaw
Hangne ki kren da kumwei pat
Nalor ki lum napoh dymmiew
Ka maw ka dieng kan dang kren briew

Signs once clear on boulder rock
Remain unread, obscured
Here we once spoke in tongues,
Upon hilltop stark and sheltered shade
Wood and Stone would speak to man

Jingshai ba rieh ba ngin dang lum
Ka don kylleng ki trep ki skym
Nangta ngin ioh jingtip ban shai
Shaphang ki Sngi ba Rim Hyndai

Hidden light waits to be found
It is still there in all of us
To help us peel, push back the dark
Restore the light from days of old

jinghsai ngi wad sawdong pyrthei
Jingshai ka Ri ngim kein eiei
Kum kiwei pat ki sngi kim mih
Jingshai ba rim baroh ngin tih
U thied u Phniang Jingshai ba im
U suh shapoh ki Dngi ba rim

Around the world we search for Light
Yet scorn the light that shines at home
The glorious past will dawn again
We will now mine this light
The seed of light within us as vibrant root
Into the Past we dig deeper

Appendix 3.1

Questions I've asked myself (2019)

How does it feel to sit in a room and remember who you are, knowing nobody else understands?

How does it feel to make sounds with your tongue and nobody can twist sounds like you do?

How does it feel to read the room knowing you are the only one who can speak for your kind?

How does it feel to have never seen a photograph of your father's father because he died before a camera reached him? How does it feel to know your father doesn't know how to watch a movie? Not even yours.

How does it feel to go through photographs of colonial natives thinking someone there is possibly your family?

How does it feel to go through photographs of colonial landscapes thinking somewhere there your grandfather grazed his cows?

How does it feel to see photos of steamboats knowing your ancestors crawled into caves boring coal for empire?

How does it feel to go through your family archives to find nothing before 1970?

How does it feel to know your people sacrificed limb and blood and womb to be free and yet there is no record of it? Just bits of a story...bits of imagination.

How does it feel to come from the wretched of the earth and to hold a camera?

How does it feel to look through a viewfinder when all your kind were looked at from a single eye gazing through a lens? Was this eye kind to them?

Who brought this camera to you? How do you hold it?
Whom do you point it at now? How heavy is it?

How does it feel to hold a camera now, first of your kind, woman as you are, whom do you point it at?

Appendix 3.2

Manifesto as Answer (written when I began this thesis in September 15, 2020)

My tribe, the Indian Subcontinent's Khasis, had no written language until Welsh missionaries came with religion and roman-alphabetical literacy. Before that, tribal myths were sustained in oral traditions and imagination.

With the written language also came documented history of the tribe's image, sealed into ethnographic documentation with different archival authors (the Salesian missionaries, the Welsh missionaries, the British East India Company, etc). This then became the mode of personal and communal expression, from oral to textual.

As global, hegemonic culture shifts further and further away from the textual world and into the pictorial world, this too has become adapted.

In this history, from oral to textual to pictorial, some sense of joining in the world picture (the world wide web of pictures) is birthed. The image, be it moving or still or graphic or dimensional or cryptic or simple meme, is constantly being generated to distill experience into pixel bits. Add to this, the filmed or photographic image no longer indexed in reality but in surveillance. Perhaps then, the image is not just about medium but about the constituents of visual culture: who views and who is viewed.

In this changing paradigm I see myself

I write and create because I'm interested in images that are more than just content. I am interested in conversations, verbal/literary/ritualistic, with traditions of visual imagination. I am interested in the visual language of those who have been viewed more than they have had the autonomy of viewing.

My artistic process initiates itself with a vein of what I consider alienation. Because culture, (DOMINANT CULTURE), chooses upon whom it bestows the "permission to cry"... sometimes, millennia of suffering, martial law, curfews, friends being arrested...just doesn't surface up because attention is permission.

But let's imagine, imagine and create and not care about swaying this machine that fetishizes suffering.

thanks to Natasha Soobramanien