

The Corporeal **Afterimage**

The colonial subject is probed and examined to uncover sinister designs in an unjust socio-political landscape. **Bishnupriya Ghosh** enters Rajkamal Kahlon's zone of conflict.



Rajkamal Kahlon

I am at the barber's and a copy of *Paris Match* is offered to me. On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the *meaning* of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors.¹

One may recall Roland Barthes' epiphany: the capacity of the iconic image to naturalize empire in the humdrum of the barber's shop. His subsequent unravelling of the visual mythologies of French colonialism is equally iconic as one of the earliest in the long interdisciplinary interrogation of the visual violence in colonial encounters.

As anthropologists, historians and cultural theorists unearthed vast image repositories,

it became clear that the visual inscription of colonial subjects was indissoluble from the exercise of colonial rule. For the images of colonial subjects not only instituted the visual difference (skin colour, clothing and headgear, posture and gesture) necessary to the racial logic of colonial rule but the recursive circulation of typical images (in photographs, sketches and paintings) also naturalized these cultural interpretations.

Barthes' point is that well past the colonial encounter, these 'afterimages' of colonial rule continue to fascinate; recast as nostalgic antiquity or kitsch, they refurbish the image of empire. The afterimage: an optical impression lingering long after the physical





(Above) **Rajkamal Kahlon.** *Turning Eickstadt's Wonder* (Detail). Graphite drawing: 7" x 60". 2 thaumatropes, gouache on paper discs, string. 2012. Exhibited at *LABOR BERLIN 12* at the House of World Cultures, Berlin (2012-13).

(Facing page bottom) **Rajkamal Kahlon.** *It All Started with Someone's Lie*. Gouache on book pages from *Cassell's Illustrated History of India*. 30" x 21". 2004. Exhibited at *Fatal Love: South Asian American Art Now* at the Queens Museum of Art, USA (2005), among other places.

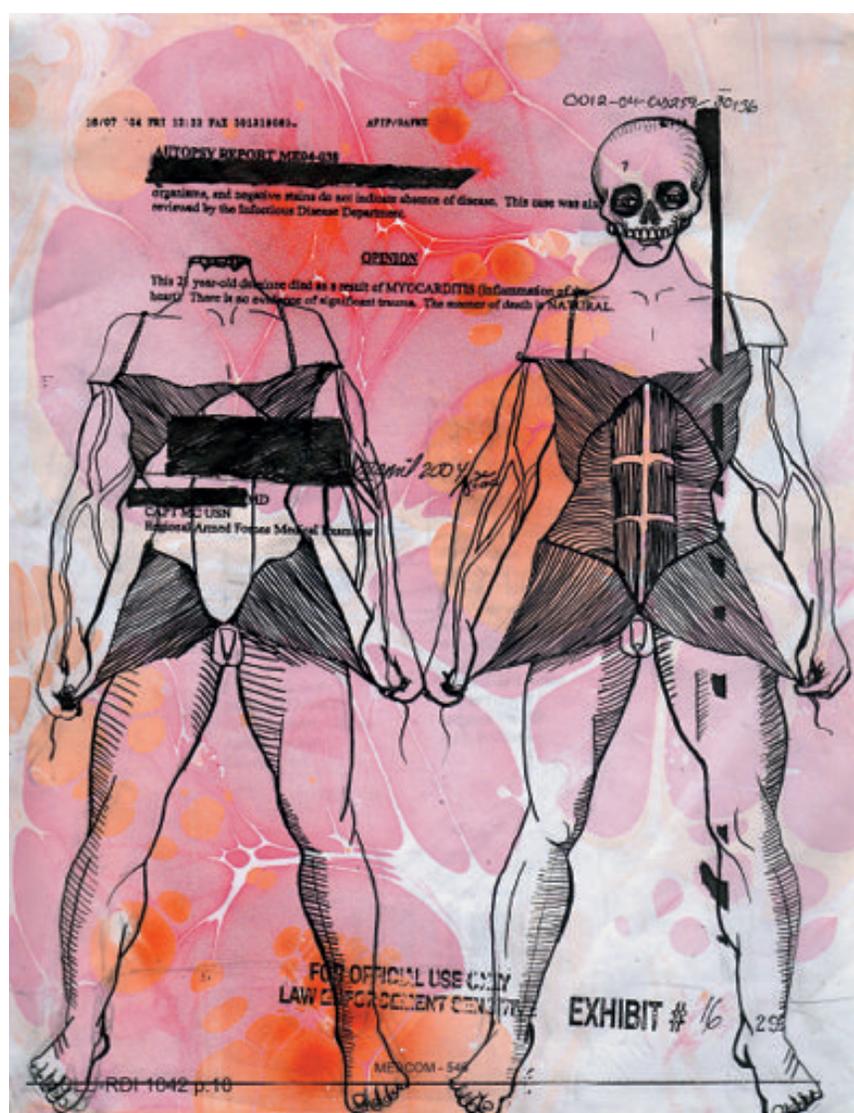
(Right) **Rajkamal Kahlon.** *Autopsy No.: ME04-38; pp. 1-11: The Teeth Appear Natural and in Good Condition* (Detail) from the series *Did You Kiss the Dead Body?* Ink on marbled U.S. Military Autopsy Report. 2012. Exhibited at the Taipei Biennial (2012).

disappearance of the object. Not simply fiction, it exerts ghostly presence in the human perceptual apparatus that regulates the transmission/translation of physiological signal into sense, into recognition.

Enter Rajkamal Kahlon: a Berlin-based American artist and theorist of the robust afterlife of colonial visuality. Her early works, using gouache on book pages, undo the poised stillness of "the people of the world" illustrated in colonial ethnographies. A naked kneeling form 'enters' the familiar figure of a woman in a sari. We see only the lower half of the figure painted onto the sketch of the woman; the canvas is a book page taken from a children's grade school book on India (published in 1894). At first glance its rawness appears to violate the docility of the ethnographic subject in the sketch. Unsettled, as we reflect on what this might mean, we realize we are complicit in its penetrating movement, the looking/entering under the sari; we participate in the proverbial colonial desire to look under the veil. At second take, then, the nakedness bleeds from the sari's rim, discomfiting, provoking. The colonial afterimage wavers.

This early piece, *Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places*, exemplifies the complex lure of Kahlon's series, *People and Places here and there: Stories of India* (2001). It gestures toward a more ambitious project to follow two years later: Kahlon's visual dialogue with *Cassell's Illustrated History of India* (1875), a 1200-page colonial ethnography with 600 illustrations that she picked up at a Sotheby's auction. At the time, Kahlon, who has roots in South Asia, was a U.S.-based artist invested in tracking the present touristic consumption of South Asia: in an early installation, *Tourist* (2001), viewers were invited to insert

themselves in front of the Taj Mahal with a cut-out of Kahlon's mother who had visited the monument in 1970.² Throughout Kahlon's oeuvre, the invitation to enter, pry and reflect on one's interactions with too-familiar images that we see in *Tourist* persists. The resplendent volumes of *Cassell's Illustrated History of India* provided historical evidence of world-making practices that relied on the fixing of people to places. Intent on disturbing the model subjects of colonial rule enshrined in that colonial ethnography, Kahlon first tore up, pasted together and scrambled the culturally consecrated pages to assemble



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her canvas. Then she scratched, sketched and painted over the colonial production of otherness in vivid bold colour, rendering the archival images newly sensuous in unsettling composites. As ever the composites are textured and densely layered so that they invite participatory touch. We are tempted to peel *back* the layers so we can access the 'insides' of these excessively corporeal bodies made palpable in vibrant colour. Bandaged and blindfolded, urinating and defecating, sodomized and sundered, they refuse the disciplinary conventions of uniform depiction known to such classificatory artifacts. The human body turned grotesque through its traumatic encounters with colonialism, military rule and torture is revived in these paintings. In its revitalized form, it disturbs the colonial afterimages.

Kahlon accentuates the *corporeal* nature of these images: corporeal not only in their sensuous texture, yoking sight and touch, but also in invoking discipline and punishment. The disciplined colonized body that is subject to visual inscription, organization and display is utterly vulnerable to coercive power – to put it crudely, the body is potentially a corpse, dead meat. The violence of visual inscription metonymically indexes physical power. If Kahlon makes us *feel* that potential power, we are in the thrall of a corporeal afterimage, a ghostly trace lingering, insistent.

Born in 1974, Kahlon grew up in California. Her family hails from the Punjab. She studied at the University of California, Davis, and attended the Whitney Independent Study Program, a post-graduate theoretical program for artists and critics. She also went to the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, New York, and has taught art and theory courses at the University of California, Berkeley, the San Francisco Art Institute and the California College of Art.

The bold opulence of visual layers continues throughout Kahlon's paintings, sometimes with a lighter touch as we see in *Double Take* (2010-11). A series in gouache, acrylic and ink on paper, Kahlon returns to iconic colonial imagery to launch her critique of late capitalism's desperate shenanigans. A woman clad in revealing gauze reads Adam Smith and swings a Prada purse, an *unheimlich* assemblage of book, bush, breasts and bag; an emperor (Aurangzeb) straight out of Mughal miniatures pores over a sinuously coiled roll of paper, a melancholic

reminder of everlasting wars; together the images embody the links between consumption and war. These paintings compact historical periods in their layers, Kahlon's vibrant but delicate colours bleeding archaic exotic pleasures into the contemporary; and yet the lighter ink strokes circling the painted images short circuit those pleasures. Weaned from old habits, we are incited to forge new relationships with images once shelved in the archive.

Two important threads follow from this discussion of the corporeal afterimages of colonialism. First, Kahlon's unflinching dedication to revivifying documentary forms whose epistemological authority lies in their putative 'objectivity' – that is, their presentation of a rational and commonly agreed upon version of the world. This links the book page paintings with Kahlon's autopsy report series, *Did You Kiss the Dead Body?* (2009 – ongoing), an incisive critique of the U.S. military occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. Kahlon was an Artist-in-Residence at the American Civil Liberties Union's National Security Project (NSP) in New York.³ With the release of almost 100,000 pages of records from U.S. detention and torture centres under the Freedom of Information Act, Kahlon was concerned about the loss of empathy toward the tortured that such a deluge of information can – and did – produce. Given her ongoing concern with colonial violence, racial authority and discipline/punishment, the awful intimacy of torture – penetrating the inner recesses of body and soul –

seemed worthy of further investigation. The gorgeous, almost delicate paintings, a pinkish marbling (representing the violated internal body) and light sketch of European bodies in classical postures (representing the ideal, and lost, outer schema) layered over autopsy reports from the ACLU website, turn the rational statistic back into flesh. The discordant feedbacks between abstract marbling, classic sketch and rational-scientific text unsettles, drawing the viewer into the act of imagining the life that was lost. As Kahlon turns bureaucratic document into sensual form, we engage in coruscant mourning.

Did You Kiss the Dead Body? is an ongoing project that Kahlon continued after her relocation to Berlin, with two drawings, 19 pages in length, showing at the 2012 Taipei Biennial. The biennial marks the emerging international circulation of Kahlon's work: not only will Nature Morte, New Delhi, host her works for two months (from September 2013), but she is also one among a select coterie of artists showing at the 2013-14 multi-city international art event, *Meeting Points 7* (curated by the WHW, What, How and for Whom?) that spans Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

The invitation to participate in the artistic process is the second continuing thread in

Rajkamal Kahlon.

Therapy for Optophobia (Detail).
Ink on 3 antique eyeglasses, texts and wall painting of Descartes' diagram of stereoscopic vision. 2012.



Kahlon's oeuvre. Besides her paintings, she has several installation pieces that depend on audience interaction – on our corporeal investment. An early *Viewing Project* (2001) comprising 19th century colonized subjects invites participants to insert their face in cut-outs, thereby calling for a dexterous perspective that includes both seeing the image from the front and becoming a part of it as one 'enters' from the back.

The breaking of the illusionistic space in order to break the spell persists in the *Dummy Boards* installations (2008 – ongoing), inspired by the Dutch trompe l'oeil practice of tricking viewers into thinking silent figures (full-length dummies made of panels) were present in the room. Since these figures were often servants, Kahlon, once again, invests in disrupting their quiet servitude in a series of 3-dimensional



(Left) **Rajkamal Kahlon.**

Alice in Wonderland from the *Double Take* series (Detail). Gouache, ink and acrylic on watercolour paper. 84" x 51". 2010. Exhibited at *When Violence Becomes Decadent* at Freies Museum, Berlin (2012), among other places. All images courtesy the artist.

pieces. These installations directly invite the breaking of old habits of viewing that her book page paintings implicitly suggest, as audiences glide softly around the uncanny dummy boards of long-silenced figures.

Kahlon continues to work in the interstices of colonialism, visibility and violence. Her recent series have featured the integration of images (from colonial archives) with optical instruments and toys. One series installs images of precarious life (a holocaust survivor, a 'native' decapitated head) within the lenses of delicate, gold-rimmed eyeglasses (*Therapy for Optophobia*, 2012), while another installs the colonizer (a German biological anthropologist, Von Eickstadt who visited India in the 1920s) and the colonized (an adivasi man) on the two sides of a revolving thaumatrope (*Turning Eickstadt's Wonder*, 2012).⁴ The *Optophobia* exhibit is accompanied by a diagrammatic representation of a viewing figure that 'sees' image-impressions projected deep within the cortex. Here, Kahlon takes a reflexive turn, pausing on the visual infrastructures (instruments, blueprints, machines) that made the colonial visual inscription possible; we participate in optical play, becoming complicit with promised phantasmagorias to come.

The afterimage takes a spectral bow. It leaves us looking, touching.

END-NOTES

1. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Translated by Annette Lavers, 1957. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972, p.166.

2. *Tourist* invited viewers to 'be seated' on a bench with the postcard image of the Taj Mahal, the most visited tourist site in South Asia, in the background. 75 polaroids were taken of those who complied at the San Francisco Art Institute.

3. Rajkamal Kahlon, *Did You Kiss the Dead Body?: Visualizing Absence in the Archive of War*, November 9, 2012. See <http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2012/11/09/did-you-kiss-dead-body-visualizing-absence-archive-war>.

4. Von Eickstadt was specifically interested in measuring and studying the adivasi, and produced as many as 12,000 photographs. Kahlon creates large-scale graphite drawings of a colonial outfitted body with the head of a man he photographed, along with the two thaumatropes made available for the audience to use. The thaumatropes have Eickstadt's head on one side and a semi-nude adivasi woman's body on the other. When the viewer spins the thaumatropes the images collapse into one, turning Eickstadt into the subject of his work.