

Surrey Art Gallery Presents

**On Distance, On
Image**

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On Distance, On Image

Part 1: The Hinterlands

I finally moved to the country full-time just a few months ago.

When I was in school, I was interested in social movement theory—a field which emerged in its contemporary form in the 80s as mode of processing, among other events, the decolonization, liberation, anti-war & civil rights movements around the world that had taken place two decades or so prior. These events occurred in the middle of the Cold War and on the precipice of an era of globalization promoted through the neoliberal policies of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. In those studies, theorists would examine social movements from around the world—what made them successful, what made them fail.

One of the predictors for a successful revolution was distance from the state—psychological, physical, logistical. In the way I understood this, it meant you just needed to be far away from it. The old structure had to be out of your sight in order to plan, to imagine, to enact alternate systems of hierarchy or governance—to not create something in the image of what already existed. Sometimes shorthanded as the “hinterlands,” the idea of space away from institutions, laws, structures, eyes became literal to me. It wasn’t a qualitative aspiration, a psychological-emotional-social desire or even a utopian vision. And for the past twenty-some odd years, I have sought out the hinterlands. I wanted them to be real.

Part 2: Qey Shibir

My grandparents were farmers in Gojjam, Ethiopia until the Derg, the murderous and ruinous Communist military regime that overthrew Haile Selassie's monarchy in 1974, took power. In the 17 years that they held control, until they, too, were overthrown in 1991, the Derg sought to remake the fabric of Ethiopian life and culture according to Marxist-Leninist principles and prioritized land reform resulting in communally and state-run farms, and resettlement and villagization. The ideals of collectivity, locality, and shared responsibility—dreamy on paper—were overshadowed by the regime's violent cling to power. The Derg murdered an unknown number of civilians and perceived opponents, ranging anywhere from 10,000 to 980,000 people—including many members of my family—during a period that they, themselves, named Qey Shibir or the Red Terror. An estimated 500,000 people fled Ethiopia during the Derg's regime. These numbers, vague, represent some abstract fraction of the true number, which balloons even from the lowest estimates if you begin to count intense periods of civil war and famine—images of which brought Ethiopia to the worlds' attention.

In 1985, Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie wrote *We Are the World* and performed it with over 45 other artists under the name "USA for Africa" as a benefit to raise awareness and millions for famine relief. A year earlier, Bob Geldof and Midge Ure wrote *Do They Know It's Christmas?*, which, like *We are the World* was performed by icons of pop music.

"And there won't be snow in Africa this Christmas time

The greatest gift they'll get this year is life

Where nothing ever grows, no rain or rivers flow

Do they know it's Christmas time at all?"¹

Harry Belafonte was the force behind USA for Africa. Belafonte and Geldof were well-respected activists and in so many ways, these songs were important in bringing a crisis to the consciousness of the world. But they are also pop songs for foreign audiences who probably knew little of Ethiopia, and so their lyrics are wrong at best or riddled with damaging ignorance at worst. Invisible in the lyrics are the global frame of the Cold War and a famine that emerged as part of the disastrous intersection of widespread and disruptive land reform, dictatorial repression, and a civil war motivated by a government to rout out any opposition.

My father kept a lot of the stories of our family, my grandparents, their farm, and the Red Terror to himself. I think it was hard for him. In many ways, he was an unintentional refugee—he just happened to be gone when the shit went down and then he couldn't get home. When he finally did, what he found was ruin. We had no pictures growing up. Our family members who were able to flee were around us—but in America, the images we saw of Ethiopia were of famine and the pictures painted by these songs—"the only water flowing is a bitter stream of tears."

I went to Ethiopia with my father for the first time in 2019. It had been twenty years since the last time he had visited and had made it clear he didn't want to go again. Maybe when he suddenly invited me to go with him he knew he wouldn't live much longer. He was killed in an accident in late 2021, during the pandemic which began just a few months after we returned. When he died, I hadn't seen him in person in almost two years.

When we were in Ethiopia, I tried to visit the Red Terror Martyrs' Museum in Addis Ababa. The electricity in the city had been out for a couple of days, so I walked around the museum in the dark, straining to see any images I could and trying to piece together a history that hadn't been visible to me halfway across the world (and still isn't). Earlier in that week my father and I had gone to the Holy Trinity Cathedral, where Haile Selassie is entombed and where my father, who was once an Ethiopian Orthodox priest, had performed a mass for the Emperor. Knowing this, our guide, a young priest himself, took us to a mausoleum which was closed

off to the public, but filled with pictures of priests and military officials who had been killed by the Derg in the earliest days of the coup. I have a video on my phone of my father looking at the pictures and relaying in Amharic to the other priest the names of the men and stories of who they were. I don't speak Amharic, but I watched him point to each picture individually as he spoke, and then move to the next and repeat the process. I haven't watched the video since I filmed it, I don't need to—it is a series of images that are etched in my brain.

Theories of generational trauma posit that it can be passed down as aspects of genetic material are rewritten in one generation and birthed into the next. As I get older, I don't think any of us really escape trauma. I imagine our individual DNA, scarred and traveling around our bodies, reknitting itself as we process or don't process our traumas—the traumas of our parents and our parents' parents. In a funny way, I think I have just accepted that generational traumas are just what I am working with—the baseline. And so the reknitting isn't even an attempt at repair as much as it is a moving forward from it. It is a simultaneous holding of histories and pain, and a generational pressure to construct a different future.

Part Four: "Thank god it's them instead of you" or Centrifugal Forces

I used to work in art—that is how I know Jagdeep Raina. In fact, I met Jagdeep on a former farm turned art space deep in central Maine. For a long time, my particular corner of the art world running residencies was where the hinterlands and my DNA met in a kind of ouroboros. We were away, and in that awayness we were together—all of our trauma-altered DNAs stuck in the hinterlands, and suspended just enough from reality to challenge what had come before and to construct something new. I leaned heavily on the natural environment and a sociality that offered a protected space to learn, or rather unlearn, so much of the

cynicism and the seemingly immovable cultural forces that shape our futures without our participation. While the hinterlands in this experience allowed for ephemerality, subverting the harmful effects of representation by not capturing or by not naming, it is also where I really started to understand image-making—image-making as visibility, image-making as worldbuilding.

I left the art world in January to run an actual farm organization. I know very little about farming, but there are a lot of reasons why this shift made sense, including my father's death, and perhaps that ancestral impulse that I needed to fill. After all, farming, along with the traumas, is in my DNA. However, the hinterlands, in this new full-time rural life, mean something different. Rather than acting as a space of holding like I had experienced in the residency realm, these hinterlands offer a spaciousness, a pushing apart rather than a pulling together. There's just a lot of space, and with that space, it becomes very easy to isolate oneself from the world. I mean this isn't new information—this is *why* people move to the country. But there are implications to this particular kind of isolation that, maybe naively, hadn't occurred to me before. Whereas I had romanticized this desire to be away from the image of the state, I have realized that distance can render other necessary things alien or simply invisible. Centripetal force can create a kind of emotional relationality, but centrifugal force can also deprive us of knowing the concrete realities of what happens behind the trees, in distant fields, in the privacy of individual homes fenced off from view or set back from the road.

Part Five: No Farms No Food

Understanding that photography isn't the only mode of image-making, Susan Sontag argued that "[t]o collect photographs is to collect the world."² When we think about visibility and representation, we know that this "collecting" of the world can be harmful or helpful. Harmful in the "bitter stream of

tears" flattening way and helpful in the way that Jagdeep Raina works: taking previously obfuscated or abstracted images of migrant farm workers and placing them at the center of our consciousness. The narratives and images so delicately and reverently treated by Jagdeep share a timeline with the Derg's calamitous reign, Band Aid's questioning of arguably the world's oldest Christian society's awareness of Christmas, and the stories that all of these social movement theorists tried to draw through study. *Ghosts in the Fields* is an exhibition about visibility—a kind of retroactive visibility that asks, "What else have we gotten wrong? What stories have been overlooked? Miscalculated through the distance of time, geography, and an invisibility rendered because of the who, the why and the when?"

If you live in the rural northeast of the United States, you've probably seen "No Farms, No Food" on the bumper of a car. It is a logical statement. Blunt, even. And yet... the modes of production, and the labor (*the people*) behind our farms and our food, is an abstraction for most of us. It is almost impossible to connect human hands to a box of Cheerios (which from oats to o's are produced mechanically) to an entire aisle of cereal in a grocery store in a sea of grocery stores, let alone to imagine the wages, the dangerous conditions, and the instability that farm workers face. It is also hard to connect those same thousands and thousands of boxes to the idea of food deserts, or that in the US, 27% of the population is food insecure, a number which has been on a steady rise since the pandemic. It is almost impossible to understand the vulnerability of our food system and farm workers as the climate changes—the effects of floods, droughts, heat, fires.

The relational distance is enormous, and so we do have to rely on images. Jagdeep's impulse to make these particular images—the visual, the archival, the hand work, the textured, the audio—aren't simply an historic marking of what happened or what was. He is building a world, through history, of what is happening; what is now. These images of labor are their own centripetal force which brings us into direct confrontation with the myriad ways in which our food systems are broken and our humanity, whether laborer

or consumer, is visible within that brokenness. The images of protest propose a different kind of force—the kind which propels us into demanding something different. *These* are the structures we need to see in order to replicate—lean in as close as we can. Jagdeep’s inherited DNA might look like mine: reknit through the holding of histories and traumas and generational pressure to construct a different future.

On this new farm where I now find myself, the farmers talk a lot about observation being key to the practice of regenerative farming. You watch the animals, you watch the pastures, you observe the soil, the bugs, the birds and you follow nature to guide you on how to do what nature wants to do—produce. A few years ago, another artist friend spent a lot of time trying to convince me that farming was like image-making. It took me a while to understand that what he actually meant was that if image-making is worldbuilding, farming has the capacity to be worldbuilding as well. You grow in the image of the world you want to inhabit. In many ways, with *Ghosts In The Fields*, Jagdeep has created a new ouroboros for me where the cycle of life, death, rebirth, and consumption is ever nutritious, ever lifegiving, ever worldbuilding—image-making into farming into image-making and round and round.

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¹ "Band Aid – Do They Know it's Christmas?," genius.com, <https://genius.com/Band-aid-do-they-know-its-christmas-lyrics>

² Sontag, Susan. *On Photography* (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 174.

Bio

Sarah Workneh is Co-Executive Director of Sky High Farm, a non-profit regenerative farm which grows produce and proteins exclusively for donation into the urgent food system and is committed to community-centered research and action to contribute solutions toward issues at the intersection of climate, agriculture, food access and education. Previously, Sarah spent 23 years running alternative art educational spaces—first at Ox-Bow School of Art & Artists' Residency and more recently at the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture. She has published numerous essays and speeches, lectured widely at schools and programs around the US, and served as an advisor to academic, residency, and other non-profit programs, particularly around issues of community building, equity, and strategic planning. Workneh has a BA in Linguistics and Russian, and pursued graduate work with a focus on Social Movement Theory, Political Economy, and Liberation Theology.

Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Jagdeep Raina:
Ghosts In The Fields* at Surrey Art Gallery

September 21 - December 15, 2024

Co-curated by Associate Curator, Suvi Bains and Assistant
Curator, Jas Lally

ISBN: 978-1-926573-82-3

Editing and design by Rhys Edwards
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Funding generously provided by:



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