The past in the present

VISUAL ARTS

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What did Zahir Raihan, Ritwik Ghatak and Andrei Tarkovsky have in common other than being film-makers? It was perhaps their faith in cinema's ability to document the marks left on bodies and homes by political upheavals and to capture the way the past persists in the present. Cinema's power as a medium of visual art lies in the way a face on screen can bring the past close and an empty frame can make someone's absence felt. A shot lingers; a cut interrupts; someone long dead looks back. These encounters give Naeem Mohaiemen's exhibition, *Raihan – Ghatak – Tarkovsky* at Experimenter, Hindustan Road, its unsettled pulse.

At its centre is *A Missing Can of Film* (2025), a search through the surviving works of Raihan, the film-maker who disappeared in 1972 while looking for his brother. Mohaiemen sends Raihan's melodramas and political documentaries tumbling across split screens. Scenes of song and dance collide with images of wartime suffering. Faces from different films appear side by side, drawing Raihan's melodramas into conversation with his political documentaries. When one panel goes black, the images beside it carry on: a disturbing reminder of how the world continues after someone vanishes. Soviet montage theory proposed that adjoining shots produce meanings through their collision. Mohaiemen makes that principle felt. His cuts loosen Raihan's film-making from a tidy category, revealing a career that travelled between Urdu and Bengali, popular entertainment and revolutionary commitment.

On his works on paper, Mohaiemen



turns from cinema's crowded frames to the private world of readers. *Jamahiriya Means People: Okba Ibn Naafa* draws on his father's voracious reading during his years as a Bangladeshi surgeon in Libya in the 1970s. The imagined library gives a personal dimension to an era of exchanges among countries seeking independence from the world's dominant powers. Reading becomes a thread connecting a migrant's intellectual life to the wider history through which he was living.

Karen's Last Books: Ibsen to Nguyen brings that attention to reading into the presence of death. Drawings of book covers, excerpts and fragments of conversation preserve Karen Wentworth's final reading list before her voluntary euthanasia in 2023. The books record where her attention rested as her life approached its end. Their familiar forms give the work its poignancy: a reading list becomes a portrait assembled from another person's words. Placed alongside the search for Raihan, these works reveal how differently lives can enter an archive. Wentworth had the opportunity to choose the traces she left. Raihan's disappearance left others searching through what survived. Mohaiemen makes that unequal control over remembrance the exhibition's most affecting concern.

In the hands of Anwar Chitrakar, the Kalighat *bibi* has discovered the iPhone. In his solo exhibition, *In the language of the pata*, at Emami Art, Chitrakar's *Mobile Madona* bends towards the screen, her *sari* falling in the generous curves familiar from 19th-century *pats*. The posture belongs to an older pictorial world; the absorbed attention is unmistakably ours. This encounter between inherited form and contemporary habit — the archetypal drunk *babu* with a bottle of alcohol makes way for one holding a bottle of sanitiser — gives the exhibition its liveliest moments.

Kalighat painters were acute observers of a changing Calcutta. Chitrakar retains that eye for everyday behaviour. In *Reel Life*, a couple performs before a recording device held by another figure. Courtship becomes a production. His sweeping outlines and rounded bodies lend these scenes an immediate familiarity. Curtains, patterned floors and furniture turn the settings into little theatres of domestic life. The use of natural colours helps sustain the material connection with his *patua* inheritance.

A comparison with Lalu Prasad Shaw arises naturally. Shaw's poised *babus* and *bibis* often inhabit a world of polished surfaces, measured gestures and lingering leisure. His engagement with Kalighat produced a distinctive modern language of portraiture. Chitrakar places greater emphasis on incidents: someone records, someone attends to a partner, someone becomes absorbed in a screen. The figures invite us to read their relationships through what they do. This difference is where Chitrakar is the strongest. His modern subjects alter the distribution of attention within an established composition. The phone competes with the surrounding world; the camera introduces a spectator into intimacy.