

Frieze Artist Award

ARCTIC IMAGINATION

A diary of 'we are opposite like that', a moving image commission by the winner of this year's Frieze Artist Award, Delhi- and London-based Himali Singh Soin



Dead reckoning.

In the crucible of the Enlightenment a Humanism was born. As the human mind was celebrated as a liberating force, wonder seeped from the world. Nature was stripped of enchantment, rendered possessable. Ways of knowing calcified as space was deemed measurable, time countable, hierarchies material. Order for Freedom: a seductive fallacy. Casting all nonhuman life — especially black and brown and non-male bodies — as a resource, Enlightenment Humanism produced elite anthropocentric networks. Few were free. Extraction, exploitation, oppression: these were the secret terms of progress, painted as the inevitable cost of exceptionalism. Now, in the late Anthropocene, the violence of this ideology can be seen: grinding up land and bodies alike, Humanism has brought the planet to the edge of extinction. *For historians, the present had lost itself over time.*

How can we reposition nature as a distant other, a view so embodied by this Humanist hubris? *we are opposite like that* (2019) posits a metaphysics in which freedom is reconfigured, the human is humbled and other, alien voices are able to speak. The work imagines a familiarly strange landscape — the polar regions — as settings for a post-Humanist tale, with ice as protagonist. Pairing poetry with archival material, the video probes a moment of crisis of Humanist faith, when the Victorians (standard-bearers of exceptionalism) came to fear ice, seeing in it the destabilising possibility of deep geologic time. *The ice moved through her for a few hours. A mineral messenger.*

Ice is not warning, or lament. It does not ask you to mourn. Instead it swells, yawning, stretching across time and scouring away the epistemology that has shaped and devastated recent history. Ice is free to grow, breathe, delight. It becomes a state of being rather than matter. It offers the possibility of reimagining the map by challenging what counts as the edge and the centre: from the vantage point of ice, human life is peripheral. Ice, which has grown and shrunk over million-year cycles to carve oceans and shape mountains, articulates the growling time of the planet. *What had survived was ancient.*

In the film, the boundary between natural and human history is breached. The outlines of a melting fossil — ice — trace the illogic of Humanist values. Thinking it an act of freedom, we chose to burn ancient matter — fossil fuels — binding ourselves inextricably to the ground. Just as we seemed to free ourselves of natural cycles through industrial 'advances', we unwittingly slipped into the more ominous rhythm of a geologic force. *She found fossils of ferns stamped in stones from way back when. Her own landscape had once been opposite like that.*

Interrogating this collapse, *we are opposite like that* proposes ice and an alien female life form as augurs of a new geo-ontology. These two are linked to each other, as if on a Möbius strip. Post-Humanism rejects exceptionalism, proposing instead an equal but messy ontological plane. Ice and alien, self and other, alloy into one and many.

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A figure wanders in the present-day Arctic landscape. She is not alone: the ice, too, is animate. It has held bones, rusted chains, the smell of blubber. The whalers' graves have risen for air. *She'd take the third person over you.*

The figure seems alien, a carrier of some remote collective trauma. Despite its contamination, she huddles in a coal mine, believing it to be a source of heat, a place where her pigmented body finds friendship in the charred brittle. She caresses the carcasses of failed settlements, melts meteorites in a ritual for safe passage. She names islands that do not exist and wakes up to a thousand suns, sends messages: is there anyone out there? The ice fortified her. Traversing the whiteness, she feels fronds of frost sting, spikes spreading like cables, pushing signals. She is transforming into ice. Thresholds fray, membranes slip and fuse into one other. Materials osmose, exchanging energy. An exhilarating annihilation. From her vantage, the world is spectral. From the mountains, she is a diffractive blip, a fold. *Her broken chronometer preserved in ice, still recording two types of error.*

Any site of loss is a home to ghosts. The frozen love letters of a broken-hearted explorer are hidden somewhere on Spitsbergen. A clairvoyant, seated in Calcutta, psychically roams a place she can hardly imagine, in search of 'Franklin', captain of the icebound ship that never returned. Permafrost evaporates, releasing primordial viruses into an improbable future. As time, Chronos, rapidly melts ice, the spirits of Kairos emerge. Like mirages, they derail their observers. Conjuring false images, imagined pathways, new ways of knowing. *She'd take kidneys over the north star and water over watches. She'd take time.*

The poles, North and South, protest the reliability of our narratives: they proceed according to their own magic realist logic. They inspire strange and quantum communications, manifesting non-linear time and aporic space. *we are opposite like that* seeks to beckon the ghosts hidden in these landscapes and turn them into echoes. *Not rest like stillness, but the kind of rest in music. A string held taut, an interval with the pedal down.*

This imagery floats above an endangered, soon-to-be-mythical, soundscape: sheets of pancake ice smashing into each other, the long drone of a boat, the hard timbre of the wind. The tempo is controlled by her shifting latitudes, the dynamics by the temperature variances between the late nineteenth century and her recent expedition. Melodic fragments of Victorian composer Edward Elgar's *The Snow* (1895) encroach upon the images. The string quartet becomes a chamber of resonances, sounding a topological alarm. *Quartz, astral, petrified.*

Himali Singh Soin is an artist and writer based in London, UK and Delhi, India. In 2020, she will participate in the Dhaka Art Summit. Her book of fictional mythologies *From the poles, we are opposite like that* (2020), is supported by the India Foundation for the Arts.

Himali Singh Soin's 2019 Frieze Artist Award commission, *we are opposite like that*, screens daily at 1pm in the Standard Library/Auditorium at Frieze London, Thursday 3rd - Sunday 6th October. The award is curated by Diana Campbell-Betancourt and supported by Forma and Channel 4 Random Acts.

Above
Stills from Himali Singh Soin, *we are opposite like that*, 2019. Courtesy: the artist