

Manora Field Notes 2019

Manora Field Notes is a project in three parts, an iteration of the artist's long-standing and evolving engagement with Manora Island, a peninsula located off the harbour of Karachi, Pakistan's largest city. Khan's sustained contemplation of the island's landscape, history and present reality has yielded a complex alternative geography, which conveys larger concerns of post-colonial histories, climate change and displacement.

Khan's visual practice is built on a process of critical research, documentation and mapping-based exploration, focusing on urban public space and its entanglement with history. The artist has concentrated on the transformations of sites such as the expanding Karachi harbour and Manora Island. Her archive of images, objects and recorded observations, which document the evolution of the island, engages with multiple bodies of knowledge – historic myths and local communities – to foreground the dimensions of embodiment, ecology and habitation.

From the eighteenth century onwards, Manora served as a defence outpost facing the Arabian Sea. Its many sites of worship – the Shri Varun Dev Mandir, Saint Paul's Church and the Shrine of Yousuf Shah Ghazi, amongst others – point to the diverse religious history of pre-Partition South Asia. Over the past decade, Khan has witnessed the slow erasure of the island's architectural history and natural ecology. These transformations reflect in microcosm some of the larger issues of environmental change, social and economic justice, and mass displacement. Like the island that stands as a sentry-post, this exhibition is an observation point that produces insights which bear relevance to other sites in the Global South and across the world that are undergoing similar transformations.

Exhibition History:

2019:

Manora Field Notes was first shown at the Pavilion of Pakistan, 58th Venice Biennale, curated by Zahra Khan and commissioned by the Pakistan National Council of the Arts and Foundation Art Divvy

2020:

Lahore Biennale02, *Between the Sun and the Moon*, curated by Hoor Al Qasimi

[images](#)

Hundreds of Birds Killed

Hundreds of Birds Killed is a multi-part installation comprised of cast-brass objects and maps and a recorded reading of lives and properties lost to seasonal monsoons from the year 1939. A copy of India Weather Review from that year--an annual report made by the British to monitor the loss of lives and properties due to natural causes--serves as the starting point for this work. Obsessive in its detailing of these losses along with barometric readings and wind force, the report reveals the link between natural and fiscal storms.

While human casualties are elided, “hundreds of birds killed” stand out as a repeated term that bodes not only ecological crisis but its entanglement with capital. Traditionally, farmers predicted monsoons by observing the blue streaked *perti wha* bird and how high nests are built. The colonizers, however, preferred to record the wind and waves on top of Manora Island’s observatory. The death of the birds, then, warns of a rift with the land and its rhythm which *precedes* disasters.

If the report frames disaster in terms of liability and devaluation, the brass objects perform a different action on value. Here, the monsoon was never a great randomizer to be tamed or preempted. Rather, the clusters of boots, spoons, cattle ensnared in twigs, like wreckages after a storm, point to death and debt as being always already uneven. Made mostly from toys found in the second-hand markets in Karachi, they fuse and layer up in ways that suggest fossilization (turning into stone) and alchemy (turning into gold). Pop imageries of sofas, electric fans, and airplanes, their *démodé* and kitschy way of life now coated in brass, lend themselves to a subterranean economy of recycling debris and refuse of not just the storm but the market.

The other cast-brass component is the seventy-six tiles that make up maps of cities impacted by the storms. These are produced through lengthy processes of transfer: roads, railways, and waterways are graphed using imaging software, laser-cut into plexiglass, and cast in brass by a local foundry of third-generation casters in Golimar, North Karachi.

The labor-intensive process of brass-casting not so much reverses the devaluation caused by the storm as re-routes value through the act of making. Instead of trying to tabulate and preempt erratic weather patterns, Khan interprets unscalable disasters and loss through material intimacy. As such, the installation tries to bridge two pillars of memory—the archival report and the physical site.

Text: Tung Chau

[images](#)

Sticky Rice and Other Stories

Part I & II

2019

Four-channel video installation

13.10 min Follow link to view videos: [part I](#) & [part II](#)

Sticky Rice and Other Stories is a filmic installation in two parts. It traces a mental map of the region around Karachi, from colonial textile trade to containerized cargo shipping. The disorienting effect of this geography mirrors the effect of globalisation on Karachi's own locality, which is obscured by the movement of goods from one place to another at ever less cost, less friction.

The first part follows the artist as she journeys to artisanal communities in Karachi to produce with them miniaturised models of historic and contemporary boats. Displayed on the seafront where actual cargo ships operate, the boat models play with scales of production—the singular, hand-made object versus the vast military-industrial projects in the area, where countries like India, China and the United States vie for rail and sea access.

They recall, on the one hand, Manora Island's past as a colonial outpost for Britain and, on the other, the role of the global south port in a new geopolitical order, marked by the New Silk Road and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

The second part of the film shows an artisan cleaning and reassembling a telescope while conversing with the artist. He informs us that the telescope, made with vintage binoculars, is constructed from parts smuggled across the border from Iran at Chaman, through a route that began at the time of the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-89). The formal economies of oil and war meet the informal economies of second-hand markets and bootleggers, which are then set up for local tourists on Manora's beach. A piece of the past, the telescope makes its way into the present first as relic, then as technology of vision.

Sticky Rice turns a critical eye on archival work itself and tests the limit of such work against globalisation: what does it mean to negotiate locality when the artwork itself is implicated in, and made possible by, the economy of biennials. What does it mean for an artist to mediate a production-consumption chain. How does craft, far from becoming obsolete, mediate between the nostalgia of tourism and the anachronic potential of souvenir objects, between slow and fast technologies.

Text: Tung Chau

[images](#)