

# CUE

EXHIBITIONS

EVENTS

PROGRAMS + OPPORTUNITIES

PARTNERSHIPS

CATALOGUES + MEDIA

ABOUT CUE

PROGRAM ALUMNI

SUPPORT

SHOP

SEARCH

## "Latent Energies" by Swagato Chakravorty

Share

October 18, 2024

**Writer:** Swagato Chakravorty

**Essay Mentor:** Alpesh Kantilal Patel

This essay was produced in conjunction with the exhibition [\*\*\*This Fire That Warms You\*\*\*](#) by Tsohil Bhatia, mentored by Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo), and on view at CUE Art from September 5 – December 14, 2024. The text was commissioned as part of CUE's [\*\*Art Critic Mentorship Program\*\*](#) and is included in the free exhibition catalogue available at CUE and online.



Installation view of *This Fire That Warms You*, 2024. Photo by Leo Ng.

*This Fire That Warms You* highlights new directions in Tsohil Bhatia's conceptual, multidisciplinary practice, articulated through sculptural installations. The works in this exhibition, some of which are variations upon works shown previously at Blueprint.12 Gallery in New Delhi, comprise an extended investigation into process and transformation. Inside CUE's theatrically spotlit gallery, one finds decay and desiccation [*21 September 2022 – Ongoing*, 2022; *Fruits of passing (Remains from home)*, 2022–24], the cumulative force of small gestures [*Three Simple Fountains*, 2024; *Untitled (Latent tension)*, 2024; *Untitled (Cacerolazo ii)*, 2024], simmering energies and the occasional volatile release (*Notes on Resistance*, 2024), and—permeating it all—the promise (or threat) of an event, a happening—something yet to be, or maybe already bygone. Bhatia self-identifies as a homemaker as well as a working artist, conceiving of care-work and domestic labor—particularly relating to cooking and the kitchen—as forms of creative practice, and vice-versa. Here, however, labors of care and domesticity seem withdrawn. The artist-caregiver-homemaker is not present; only their traces endure. This absent presence haunts the works, making ordinariness newly strange by revealing the materiality of time's passing. Bhatia extends and occasionally disrupts the address of these works through activations, interventions, and a related public sculpture-performance presented at NADA House on Governors Island.

*This Fire that Warms You* reimagines the art gallery as a kitchen; a creative reworlding that undoes hierarchies of artistic and domestic spaces. Notably, the installation features no wall labels. Stepping into CUE's spaces, you encounter Bhatia's kitchen shelves, laden with condiments, jars of grains, lentils, and spices. During installation, the

# CUE

EXHIBITIONS

EVENTS

PROGRAMS + OPPORTUNITIES

PARTNERSHIPS

CATALOGUES + MEDIA

ABOUT CUE

PROGRAM ALUMNI

SUPPORT

SHOP

SEARCH

artist had shown me these shelves in their own kitchen. Here, transposed to another context, they appear as a wall-mounted installation of found objects titled *Untitled (Concrete Codex)* (2017–24), implicitly quoting—in its serial regularity—Minimalism with a difference. These everyday items, reassembled as an artwork completed over a specific duration, also document Bhatia's culinary practice; the differing quantities of ingredients index a chronicle of cooking. Some ingredients are unlabeled, but those with a working knowledge of South Asian cooking will identify many staples of the *desi* (and diasporic) kitchen. If the seriality of *Untitled (Concrete Codex)* evokes histories of Euro-American modernism, its presentation of ordinary cooking ingredients (some more culturally-specific than others) suggests what the artist calls an “abstracted biography”—a way of contesting (raced, gendered) visibility through the strategic withholding of information.<sup>1</sup> Bhatia's use of abstraction, in this sense, doubles as an assertion of what Édouard Glissant calls the “right to opacity.”<sup>2</sup>



*Untitled (Concrete Codex)*, 2017–24. Photo by Leo Ng.

Bhatia's work is formally rigorous. *Untitled (Cacerolazo ii)* organizes the artist's pots, pans, and utensils into a hanging chandelier. *Three Simple Fountains* presents three steel sinks set in a row, each with carefully piled up metal plates, ceramicware, and glassware, onto which tap continuous streams of pumped water. *Notes on Resistance* comprises four pressure cookers simmering on an electric cooking range, with a Palestinian keffiyeh draped over the oven door handle, doubling as an ordinary kitchen towel. In *Untitled (Latent tension)*, some fifty pieces of glassware neatly arrayed on five shelves rest precariously atop each other, balancing on just the bottom shelf, with the rest set apart from the wall. *Fruits of passing (Remains from home)* is a large square of packed soil on the floor. Upon its surface is strewn—in an orderly chaos—a large number of dried, decayed, and rotted fruits, vegetables, and plant matter seemingly drawn from around the world (the banana flower, common across South and Southeast Asia, is rare in the US; mangoes and okra evoke expansive diasporic histories).



# CUE

EXHIBITIONS

EVENTS

PROGRAMS + OPPORTUNITIES

PARTNERSHIPS

CATALOGUES + MEDIA

ABOUT CUE

PROGRAM ALUMNI

SUPPORT

SHOP

SEARCH



*Three Simple Fountains*, 2024. Photo by Leo Ng.

Five repetitions of a singular form along the wall, “one thing after another.”<sup>3</sup> A square sculptural form placed on the floor. Three “fountains” lined up in a series. I see Bhatia queering episodes from a (mostly straight, white, and male) history of modern and contemporary art: Judd, Andre, Duchamp, Nauman....Across their seriality, with iterations upon the line and the grid, one senses the ghosts or afterlives of Minimalism. We never quite grasp the fullness of these installations; they are in flux, at temporal scales that sometimes escape human perception. It’s difficult to adequately describe what the *work* of some of Bhatia’s artworks is—that is, at what point in time (if ever) it is completed.

*Untitled (Cacerolazo ii)*, true to the history of noisy protest it names, erupts into clamor whenever the artist vigorously shakes the chandelier of pots and pans, setting the whole thing swinging and swaying, and casting fantastical shadows onto the wall. Thus activated, the work suddenly reaches across historical and geographical contexts, tracing unexpected affinities—from the intimacies and labors of Bhatia’s South Asian diasporic kitchen to popular protests worldwide: France in the nineteenth century, French-colonized Algeria in 1961, Chile in the 1970s and 80s, Argentina in 2001, Lebanon in 2019, and rallies for Palestinian liberation since late 2023. *Three Simple Fountains* seems poised on the edge of catastrophe, as the cascading streams of water—with their subtly distinct acoustic pitches that disrupt the installation’s seriality—threaten to unbalance the delicate heaps of plates and glassware. This precarity, a latent potential for structural failure that would instantly transform order into chaos, recurs in the title and the just-so balancing act of *Untitled (Latent tension)*.



*Untitled (Cacerolazo ii)*, 2024. Photo by Leo Ng.

*Notes on Resistance* and *Fruits of passing (Remains from home)* most clearly evince the tensions contesting aesthetic formalism in Bhatia’s practice. Take the Palestinian keffiyeh in *Notes on Resistance* that, through its strategic placement within the installation, doubles as an ordinary kitchen towel. In the present context, it risks overdetermining the work, even as it highlights Bhatia’s commitments to forging community and solidarities with the minoritized and the dispossessed everywhere. One must work through these initial recognitions to *also* apprehend this object as the artist offers it—as a kitchen towel—and to more closely read the installation’s titular notes on resistance. The four pressure cookers, of an older design familiar to generations of South Asians (and indeed much of the global majority), are of various sizes and contain differing levels of water. They are continually heated upon their respective stoves, inexorably building pressure that results in explosive releases of steam.



# CUE

EXHIBITIONS

EVENTS

PROGRAMS + OPPORTUNITIES

PARTNERSHIPS

CATALOGUES + MEDIA

ABOUT CUE

PROGRAM ALUMNI

SUPPORT

SHOP

SEARCH



Detail of *Notes on Resistance*, 2024. Photo by Leo Ng.

This is not a quiet or gentle work. Walk around the installation and you hear the simmering of its water as a sustained grumble. Get too close during a steam release and you could get hurt. Pressure cookers of this design have sometimes been modified into explosive devices, weaponized toward various ends. They have even exploded in ordinary use. Here, in the exhibition, the release of steam by each pressure cooker—a furious hiss—sometimes occurs together as a chance synchronization, a cacophony of pent-up energies rushing forth. At other times, one of them may produce a lone sound. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang tell us that decolonization is not a metaphor.<sup>4</sup> See the keffiyeh. See it as a kitchen towel. Repeat until time doubles your perception. It recalls nineteenth-century optical illusions, in which two images each signify something on their own, yet also combine to signify a third thing. Third meanings, third spaces,<sup>5</sup> Third World solidarities. Often in Bhatia's practice, formal rigor gives shape to materially-grounded concerns. *Notes on Resistance* brings them together with precision, asking us to hold space for a multiplicity of meanings as well as for the global multitude.



*Fruits of passing (Remains from home)*, 2022-24. Photo by Leo Ng.

# CUE

EXHIBITIONS

EVENTS

PROGRAMS + OPPORTUNITIES

PARTNERSHIPS

CATALOGUES + MEDIA

ABOUT CUE

PROGRAM ALUMNI

SUPPORT

SHOP

SEARCH

*Fruits of passing (Remains from home)* is a work of somber tenderness. Eschewing the sterility of Minimalist histories of sculpture such as that in the work of Carl Andre, it offers soil as a material support for organic matter. The work's double gesture of citation and (historical) transformation becomes a refusal of violent white masculinity, especially considering Bhatia's use of earth—a material central to, for example, Ana Mendieta's "earth-body" performances and her *Siluetas* series. The varied organic material, meanwhile, recalls seventeenth-century Dutch *vanitas* still life paintings. These richly detailed paintings, their emergence entangled with the global reach of Dutch colonial enterprises, offered viewers sumptuous visions of global biodiversity as well as sobering moral lessons on the impermanence of life through depictions of rotting fruit and flowers, complete with those lifeforms—flies and other insects—that continue cycles of life after human beings cease to be.

The presence of dried and decaying fruit also evokes the queer histories and fleshly ephemerality of Zoe Leonard's *Strange Fruit* (1992–97), itself born out of the 1980s–90s HIV/AIDS crisis. Leonard created *Strange Fruit* to mourn the passing of a friend, the artist David Wojnarowicz (1954–92). Over five years, she sewed back together the peels from approximately 300 bananas, oranges, lemons, and other fruits. These mended skins, emptied of the flesh they once contained, continue to decompose at the artist's own insistence. The inevitability of their transformation over time poses an enduring challenge to institutional tendencies toward preserving objects in a fixed state.



Detail of *Fruits of passing (Remains from home)*, 2022–24. Photo by Leo Ng.

Among the organic matter in *Fruits of passing (Remains from home)*, there is a solitary rose—dark red, complete with its stem. It reminds me of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince* (1943), a picaresque tale of a young prince who wanders through space and travels to various planets, touching on existential themes of friendship, love, loneliness, and loss. But it is the little prince's (ultimately frustrated) relationship with a rose that returns us to care-work, its withdrawal, and the concerns with time that animate Bhatia's practice. Seeking closure, the little prince realizes that what makes his rose distinctive is not necessarily its unique beauty but rather the labor and time that have shaped his care: "it is she that I have watered...it is she that I have listened to, when she grumbled, or boasted, or ever sometimes when she said nothing. Because she is *my* rose." And he is reminded (by a wise fox that has become his companion): "It is the time you have wasted for your rose that makes your rose so important."<sup>6</sup>

*Fruits of passing (Remains from home)* is rich in complexity; it offers art historical transformations and refusals, earthly sculpture, an archive of ephemerality, and as the title suggests, a grave marker of sorts. The questions it, like other works in the exhibition, poses are deceptively simple: how might we apprehend time in the act of its passing? How do we relate to it from the tenuousness of our bodily existence? *This Fire That Warms You* offers propositions constructed around abstraction, opacity, precarity, and community—imagined and otherwise. In the process, Tsohil Bhatia goes a long way toward unburdening representation.<sup>7</sup>



# CUE

EXHIBITIONS

EVENTS

PROGRAMS + OPPORTUNITIES

PARTNERSHIPS

CATALOGUES + MEDIA

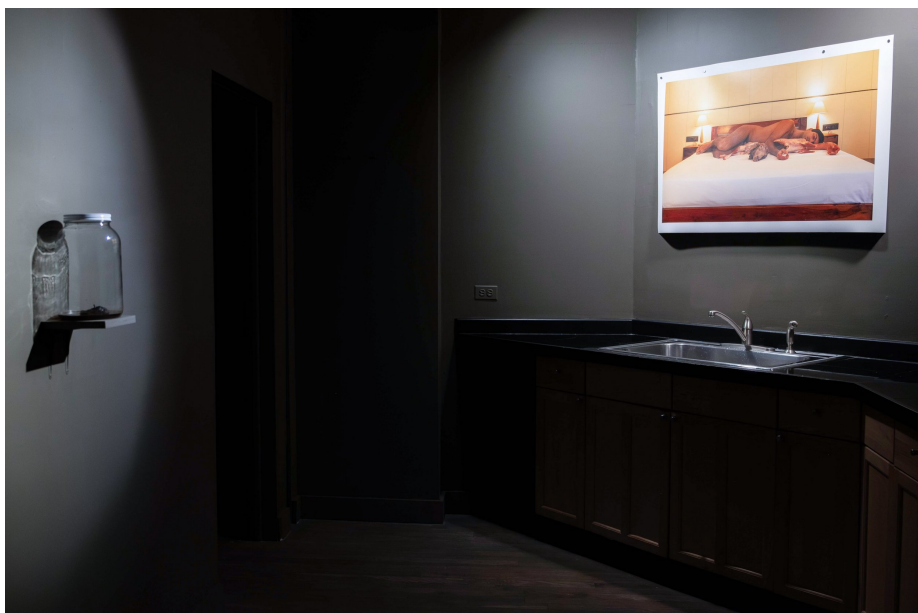
ABOUT CUE

PROGRAM ALUMNI

SUPPORT

SHOP

SEARCH



Installation view of *This Fire That Warms You*, 2024. Photo by Leo Ng.

## Endnotes

[1] “Thinking Through Flower Box 3D,” a conversation between Alpesh Kantilal Patel and Tsohil Bhatia, in *the thing that happens when the thing that is supposed to happen does not happen*, eds. Elizabeth Chodos, Jon Rubin, Charlie White (Pittsburgh: Miller ICA at Carnegie Mellon University, 2022), 72.

[2] Édouard Glissant, “For Opacity,” *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1997), 189-194.

[3] Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” *Complete Writings 1959–1975* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975).

[4] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1:1, 1-40 (2012).

[5] Homi Bhabha defines a “third space” as that “which gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” in contexts of anti-colonial cultural resistance. See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

[6] Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince*, trans. Katherine Woods (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 48.

[7] Kobena Mercer, “Black Art and the Burden of Representation,” *Third Text*, 4:10 (1990).

## About the Writer

**Swagato Chakravorty** (he/him) is an Indian American curator and critic whose work ranges across modern and contemporary art and visual culture, focusing on cross-cultural and diasporic contexts, especially in relation to the Global South. He is currently completing his PhD at Yale University. Most recently, he was the Daniel W. Dietrich II Curatorial Fellow in Contemporary Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA), where he co-curated *Isaac Julien: Lina Bo Bardi — A Marvellous Entanglement* (with a newly-commissioned performance) and organized *Day With(out) Art 2022: Being and Belonging* (with Visual AIDS), as well as several time-based media installations. Previously at MoMA, the Jewish Museum, and the New Museum, he assisted with numerous exhibitions, including *Judson Dance Theater: The Work is Never Done*; *Jonas Mekas: The Camera was Always Running*; and *Sarah Lucas: Au Naturel*. He has published work on the reception of Ritwik Ghatak’s cinematic radicalism in Western contexts, high-speed photography and the history of performance art at MoMA, Anthony McCall’s light installations, and the lens-based practice of Alfredo Jaar.

## About the Writing Mentor

**Alpesh Kantilal Patel** served as a mentor for the CUE program. Patel is an associate professor of global contemporary art and LGBT\*Q theory at the Tyler School of Art and Architecture, Temple University. Their art historical

# CUE

EXHIBITIONS

EVENTS

PROGRAMS + OPPORTUNITIES

PARTNERSHIPS

CATALOGUES + MEDIA

ABOUT CUE

PROGRAM ALUMNI

SUPPORT

SHOP

SEARCH



scholarship, curating, and criticism reflect their queer, anti-racist, and transcultural approach to contemporary art. They organized a series of exhibitions under the theme "Forever Becoming: Decolonization, Materiality, and Trans\* Subjectivity" at UrbanGlass, Brooklyn, where they were curator-at-large in 2023. They are the author of *Productive Failure: Writing queer transnational South Asian art histories* (2017) and co-editor of a special issue of *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* (2021) commemorating Okwui Enwezor, as well as the anthology *Storytellers of Art Histories* (2022). They recently contributed to the volumes *Routledge Companion to Decolonizing Art History* (2023) and *A Companion to Contemporary Art in a Global Framework* (2023). Their research has been supported by grants and fellowships from the Fulbright Foundation, Arts Council England, NEH, Cranbrook Academy of Art, and New York University. Their book *Multiple and One: global queer art histories* is forthcoming in 2026.

## About the Art Critic Mentorship Program

This text was written as part of the Art Critic Mentorship Program, a partnership between CUE and the AICA-USA (the US section of International Association of Art Critics). The program pairs emerging writers with art critic mentors to produce original essays about the work of artists exhibiting at CUE. Learn more about the program [here](#). No part of this essay may be reproduced without prior written consent from the author.

In Essays Tags Swagato Chakravorty

← Newer: "Rewriting the Vow: Queer Visions of Marriage Rituals from the Caucasus" by Tsovinar Kuiumchian

Older: "Luma, Between Memory and Contemplation" by Alexandra Trujillo Tamayo → 0 Likes

### Address

137 W. 25th Street, Ground Floor  
Between 6th and 7th Avenues  
New York, NY 10001

### Gallery Hours

Wednesday – Saturday, 12 pm –  
6 pm  
Holiday hours and visitor  
information, including access  
notes, can be found [here](#)

### Contact Info

212.206.3583  
[info@cueartfoundation.org](mailto:info@cueartfoundation.org)



## Subscribe

Sign up with your email address to receive news and updates.

SIGN UP

We respect your privacy.