

# **Sutapa Biswas: *Lumen***

## **Exhibition Audio Description**

### **Introduction**

Welcome to BALTIC's Level 3 gallery, and this audio descriptive tour of Sutapa Biswas' exhibition *Lumen*.

In the tour, we will begin with an introduction to the exhibition and a description of the space. I will then guide you through the room and describe the artworks on show.

If you would like any assistance to help locate individual pieces or for anything else, there is a BALTIC crew member in the gallery at all times who will be more than happy to assist you and make your visit more accessible.

### **Interpretation**

Sutapa Biswas works across a wide range of media including drawing, painting, photography, moving image, installation and performance. This exhibition at BALTIC spans Biswas's extensive career, from her early photographic series *Synapse I* made between 1987 and 1992, to the major new film commission, *Lumen* made in 2021. Since the early 1980s, Biswas's works have explored themes of time, space and the human condition through a decolonial and feminist lens, engaging with oral histories, literature, poetry and art history.

The works in the exhibition investigate deeply personal and historical narratives shaped by Biswas's lived experience as a British-Indian woman. They are connected by recurring themes of motherhood, migration, memory and loss, and ideas of belonging and desire. The works share a poetic sensibility, inviting us to reflect on our own personal histories and family relationships. They also tell unsettling truths, tracing the diasporic experience and confronting the colonial histories of the British Empire

### **Exhibition Space**

The exhibition occupies the whole of the third floor of the BALTIC and is portioned into three gallery spaces. The galleries are dimly lit and the walls are painted dark blue. The art works are illuminated by spotlights.

Moving through the entrance into the first gallery a central wall is hung with four large photographic prints. The wall is open on both sides and beyond, exhibits on the long sides of gallery two can be glimpsed.

There are two films at either end of the room in gallery one, to the far right and the far left as you enter, these are playing on a continuous loop. On the side wall on the left *Remembrance of Things Past* is projected on two screens, each the size of a large television. A separate audio described version of this film is available. Please ask BALTIC crew for details. On the right,

projected on a single screen, is *Magnesium Bird*. In each area a simple wooden bench is set before the screens for viewing. Above the benches hang pendant speakers.

The next two gallery spaces contain three separate film works played on large screens. These are timed to play in sequence. When the films are playing, they throw out light, colour and sound. First, in gallery two, *Light rain*, then *Birdsong*, followed by *Lumen* in the alcove in gallery three.

Entrance (with navigation)

From the entrance you may walk 10 steps forward into gallery one.

The gallery is dimly lit. Straight ahead is the first central wall on which four large, framed monochrome photographs are hung. The works are lit by spotlights.

### **Synapse 1**

These photographs are known collectively as 'Synapse 1'.

They are large hand-printed black and white photographs with a white border and matt black frame. Each frame is 112 x 132 cm and they stretch in a straight row across the wall.

The group of four photographs feature projected images of Indian landscapes. The bright pictures contrast with the dark

shadows that surround them. The lines on the edges of the images are oddly curved.

Observing the photographs from left to right.

**Picture 1** - The first image is of a tall crumbling temple surrounded by *bamboo* scaffolding. Rickety platforms are built into the grid of scaffold.

On closer inspection, below the image, light catches the tops of two thumbs and the forefingers of a pair of clasped hands.

It gradually becomes apparent that the illuminated picture is projected onto naked skin. A small swirl of shadow reveals a belly button. Above the illuminated temple there is a glimpse of the lower curve of a breast, caught in reflected light.

**Picture 2** - A river scene. Thin waves lap at a bare shoreline. On the far riverbank, bushes and trees, perhaps the edge of a jungle, follow the sweep of the river.

Three Indian children wade knee-deep in the river. A boy and a girl aged about seven years and further right an older, taller, girl. Their faces are blurred. They have paused to stand and look at the camera. The two girls have hitched up their long tunics into bunches of material gripped in one hand above their knees. The boy wears shorts and a t-shirt.

The edges of the illuminated picture swell upwards following the rise and fall of the torso. A belly button appears like a shallow whirlpool in the lapping waves.

**Picture 3** - An arid sandy landscape. The top of an ancient building in the foreground. A bird flies freely above the parapets.

In the shadows underneath the picture, it is possible to make out the artist's hands. Her fingers point down as she rests her hands on her inner thighs.

A metal, patterned bangle, shines on her left arm with sharp points of light.

In **Picture 4** - the darkness intensifies. The image of a stone relief Buddha-like figure sits cross-legged.

There is a stark contrast between the bright, projected image and the blackness that surrounds it.

The top half of the picture is completely dark, and the *buddha* image occupies only a small patch of the middle section below. The stone-relief figure is projected so that it fits perfectly onto the artist's belly. Her hands are cupped beneath her belly, posed like a meditating buddha, or as if cradling something precious.

## **Time Flies**

*Time Flies* is a collection of studies of birds on watercolour paper using graphite and acrylic and gouache paints. They are all roughly A4 size in their frames, 26 x 35 cm.

The paintings are a mixture of birds from different regions of the world, and many of which are British and Indian birds. They reference taxidermy birds and colonial paintings, and birds from ornithological magazines.

There are fifty-seven bird pictures in all, presented in white frames. The frames have been scatter hung, so that they take on a more organic form rather than a formal arrangement.

The frames make a shape like a ripple that spreads across the wall. The white frames seem to hover on the dark blue wall like a murmuration of birds.

The shape begins with a single white frame next to a line of three more frames. The frames swell in number then flow back to a narrow point, ending with a single bird in the last frame.

The birds are arranged in a balance of colour and species.

Many of the birds are painted perched on a twig or branch against a white background. A brown wren, the pink bull-finch, a buff and brown sparrow.

Other birds are busy. A blackbird feeds its young. A blue tit, with his yellow chest, hangs upside down on a bell-shaped feeder.

The more exotically coloured birds and flowers are scattered amongst plainer neighbours. The bright-yellow Golden Oriole. Different types of Indian sunbirds. A red-chested Sunbird is perched on the stalk of a red flower. His long-thin curved beak, set to probe the red funnel flowers. A green parakeet pecks at orange flowers.

A Red-tailed Lyre bird clings to a tree stump against a black background. His strong beak juts from a black face. He has a yellow back and brown rump. His long red tail curves outwards at the ends.

Each bird represents a moment of time when Biswas painted a bird a day, after the death of her father.

### **Light rain**

Light rain is projected onto two separate screens, both roughly 3 and a ½ meters wide by 2 meters high.

White words on a black background. A line of Japanese script. Underneath a translation - 'From the bowels of this earth rises up'.

A night-time scene in part of the city of Beppu, Japan. A view looking down on the city from above. In the middle distance the city is lit up. All around billows of smoke belch from the ground and stream up into the sky, drifting and briefly concealing parts of the busy city from our view.

The same night-time city landscape is projected on each screen, filmed from slightly different vantage points. The variations in the shifting formation of rising smoke, caught differently by the breeze in each image highlights the idiosyncrasy of each scene. A white block of flats about seven stories high is straight ahead. Lights shine from every balcony and from the windows in the stairwell tower. All around other flats and houses light up the night. Headlights blink as cars pass through the city, red brake lights flash and reflect in the windows of a building turned dark for the night.

The foreground is dark. Silhouettes of unlit buildings appear and disappear in the rolling smoke. A thick, pall of steam from the volcanic subterane rises from a dark area beside a building at the front and streams across the city. The rivulets of smoke mingle with others that seep through the city's foundations.

A line of lights runs up the hillside on what might be a road out of town. Although the hills are black, lights from buildings pierce through the darkness and give away their shape and height. Wooded areas are outlined black against the dark grey night sky. At the top in the middle of the scene, a beacon light flashes. High above, to the left, on a nearby hill, floodlights illuminate a wide area where a towering mesh fence winds around the hill.

The colours are striking. The city lights cut through the seething smoke in rust brown, pinks, greys and whites. Geothermal activity constantly bubbles under the city, as ordinary life goes on.

### **Birdsong**

*Birdsong* is projected onto two screens side by side. Both screens are roughly 4 metres wide by 2 and a half metres high. The scene is the same across the two screens with a soft delay between them, the image on the left echoing the image on the right just afterwards.

Hanging by a slender thread a silver origami horse spins. In the double image the horse on the left twists a half second behind the horse on the right.

The horse has wings, like Pegasus. It has been carefully and precisely folded out of silver paper and catches the light with a dull shine as it turns. Its triangular head is set on a broad neck and shoulders. Its two ears are laid back. The thread is tied at the crest of its neck making its two front legs rear up slightly. This creates an energy that flows down the two back legs and long tail and up through the wings that sprout from behind its shoulders.

Behind the horse is a blurred window with trees and a glimpse of blue sky beyond. The image fades to black.

The light brightens on a neat living room. Sun streams through a window onto a small boy, about four years old. It's a close up shot of his head down to his waist. The boy sits on a sofa looking about him. His dark hair is cut neatly around his ears. He has brown eyes and thick black eyelashes. His face is serious, his mouth downturned. He wears a red polo neck jersey and thick white wool jumper with the collar turned up. Behind him, across a window, there's an elegant antique side-table with a vase of arranged red flowers.

As the child glances around, a shadow falls across his face. He stares up at something in front of him. Part of a brown leg, rump and a long black tail swing into the picture. The boy peers upwards.

A pair of looped reins dangle into view. A small smile breaks across the boy's face.

The child raises his eyebrows and settles back on the sofa.

The image fades to black.

A wide-angle shot of the living room. Sunlight spills through a pair of French windows onto a cream carpet and red rug. There is a round mirror over a small fireplace. At the far side of the room, a tall thoroughbred-type horse stands quietly beside the sofa. The horse is tacked up in a western saddle and bridle. The boy looks very little, ensconced in the large sofa beside the horse.

On a wooden seat in the foreground, is a cushion with a George Stubbs portrait of a racehorse on the front. The fine bay racehorse in the painting is very like the bay horse that stands in the living room, with his shiny black mane and tail and rich reddish-brown coat.

The image fades to black.

The film returns to the spinning winged horse.

### **Synapse IV**

*Synapse IV* relates to the images in *Synapse I*.

Here the projected black and white image is of sculptural reliefs from a Hindu temple. Five columns, side by side, filled with sensuous carved figures.

The image is projected over the artist's naked body, which is partially obscured. She lies with her head back and pointing downwards. Her dark hair is loose and brushes near to the lower edge of the picture frame. A kaleidoscope of grey, black and white shapes is created where the Hindu temple figures distort as they meet the shape of her body. The artist's legs point upwards towards the right-hand corner, but her torso and legs are obscured and indefinite where shadows meet the glowing images.

The artist's arms are raised as she looks at her hands, catching the projected image in her palms almost like an offering. Between her arms her round bare breasts merge with the images of the temple figures. Her arms and hands create black shadows behind her.

### **Lumen**

The film *Lumen* was co-commissioned in 2021 by Film and Video Umbrella, Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge and BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art with Art Fund support through the Moving Image Fund for Museums and Autograph.

The title of Biswas's most recent film *Lumen* is taken from the name for a unit of light. Inspired by the artist's journey by sea with her family from Bombay to Dover, the semi-fictional narrative tells the stories of her mother and grandmother through a poetic and powerful monologue. Personal memories and stories of migration and displacement unfold and overlap with colonial histories during the British Raj. A key scene in the film references Vermeer's *Woman Reading a Letter* (c. 1663), which resonates with Biswas's experience of her own mother reading letters from home. Filmed in India and at The Red Lodge Museum, Bristol, the film evokes maritime histories of trade, colonial extraction and of slavery, such as those associated with the River Tyne.

An audio-described version of the film is available for use in the space. Please talk to a BALTIC Crew member for details.

A selection of five production stills accompany the film.

### **Lumen Production Stills**

Each of these five production stills feature the narrator from the film *Lumen*. She is a South Asian woman in her early thirties with large dark eyes, clothed in a black sari. Her black hair is parted in the middle and pulled into a sleek low short ponytail. She wears a delicate silver nose ring on the right side of her nose and plain silver studded earrings. The images are dark interior shots where the subject is illuminated by what appears to be a single source of light, diffused and casting no harsh shadows.

The walls are covered in heavy wood panelling enclosing the room and adding a sense of claustrophobia. The polished dark wood floorboards are well worn. The palette of dark earthy colours is sometimes added to with rich, seductive reds and oranges.

Observing the photographs from left to right:

#### **One**

A woman in a black sari sits cross-legged on a long wooden table. Her dark hair is pulled back into a short ponytail. The shot is angled from above. Her bare arms are draped along her

legs, her hands rest on her knees. Her feet are bare. Long stemmed red chrysanthemums are spilled in front and behind her.

The light shines down onto the woman, as if falling through a skylight. As the viewer peers down at her, the woman's head is lifted and she stares back with an unblinking gaze.

## **Two**

The woman stands with her back to us gazing into a large circular mirror. The mirror is set on the left of the picture and fills about a third of the frame. The woman's back between her shoulders is bare. Her hair is tied up. She has lifted her arms to brush back the strands of hair above her ears.

Although the woman stands staring into the mirror, her reflection cannot be seen. Instead, the empty interior of the room behind her reflects blankly the dark wooden panelling that surrounds her.

## **Three**

The woman lies flat on her back on bare floorboards, diagonal across the centre of the rectangular composition. Apples are strewn across the floor all around her, a mix of yellow-green and red. Two rosy skinned pomegranates mix in with the apples.

The woman stares upwards, her arms lie by her sides and her bare feet poke out beneath her black flowing sari.

The dark-brown floorboards are uneven widths and run straight up in the picture to end by the wooden fender of a huge period stone fireplace of which only the hearth is visible. Metal tongues are propped on stands on the fireplace. Some apples have spilled onto the stone, their soft plump skins contrast with the cold stone hearth.

#### **Four**

This photograph is a side-on view of the woman from the waist up as she stares into the large round mirror. She stands facing to the left, just off the centre of the picture, with her back towards us. The mirror occupies the right half of the photograph. The woman has moved slightly past the mirror and turns her face to look sideways into it.

The mirror stands in front of a huge, white marble fireplace.

Reflected in the mirror there is a longer view of the woman. Her face with an intense gaze is visible here, her bare arm by her side with a curved, elegant hand. Her dark hair is pulled up in a neat bun at the nape of her neck.

In the reflection a second mirror can be seen. It is set on a stand in front of a window beside a highly carved wooden armchair.

A second reflection of the woman can be seen in the second mirror and then, within that, another mirror and reflection. The reflections visually echo.

## **Five**

The final photograph is a head and shoulders portrait. The woman gazes directly towards the viewer. Light illuminates her left side and shadows fall across her face on the right. The background is in dark shadow with a little light shining off the edges of the dark panelling behind her. The woman's brown skin glows in the light contrasting with the surrounding darkness.

The woman's dark eyes are unfocused. Her eyebrows are slightly raised in a frown. Her mouth is firmly shut, but a ribbon of white cotton protrudes from between her lips with rough and fraying edges. Her left hand holds the bottom of the ribbon and she pulls at the ribbon with her right hand just below her chin.

## **Magnesium Bird**

*Magnesium Bird* is a moving image work that is set within the Victorian walled gardens of Harewood House, Yorkshire, UK, an estate with historic links to India and the Caribbean whose wealth was built on slavery and extraction colonialism. Dotted amongst the long green grass of an apple orchard, small

intense fires smoke as sculpted birds constructed out of magnesium ribbon burn in random design. A blustery wind catches the flames and blows them blazing to the right, flattening the smoke. The orchard trees are bare; their black branches reach into a grey sky. The light is fading to dusk.

The camera pans from left to right, level with the grass tops and moving smoothly at a fast-walking pace.

At the far side of the garden there's a long line of greenhouses in front of an enclosing wall. The dull sky reflects grey in the many panes of glass. A group of children - the artist's own son, nieces and nephews - play outside the greenhouses, chasing backwards and forwards. The left of the pictorial composition is marked by an empty bench painted white.

The camera stops. The picture fades to black. We return to the start. The same footage unwinds. About every thirty seconds the film halts and then repeats; back and forth like a typewriter carriage whilst the sounds of the children at play and the stormy winds move the work forwards.

The camera pans past the trunk of a tree, the grass is blown flat by the wind in erratic bursts. Smoke whips upwards and then blows sideways. The bright fires burn with tinges of colour from the magnesium. Reds and oranges above the bright white of the newly lit fires.

A magnesium bird sits, ghost-like, in the grass in the middle distance, not yet alight. It is made from magnesium tape and is large, about the size of a swan. It's body and elegant neck suddenly ignite and blaze up with white heat into ferocious flames. The camera moves on.

The intense fires that burnt up first, start to die down quickly, still bright but smaller. Tinges of purple and green flare from the sides of the fires as they burn down. Eventually, racing smoke is all that is left.

The picture fades to black for the last time and the soundtrack is silenced.

This is the end of *Magnesium Bird*.