

LUMEN
SUTAPA BISWAS
26 JUNE 2021 – 20 MARCH 2022

Level 3 BxNU Gallery
BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art

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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* (1987–92) to the major new film commission *Lumen* (2021). Since the early 1980s, her works have explored themes of time and space and the human condition through a decolonial and feminist lens, engaging with oral histories, literature, poetry and art history.

Born in Santiniketan, Bengal, India, Biswas emigrated to England with her family in the mid-1960s to join her father in London when he moved there under difficult circumstances. Her memories of India and the sense of displacement and loss she experienced as a young girl when her family relocated, as well as her remembrances of the journey from Mumbai to Dover by sea, have had a lasting impact, informing the content and narratives of her work.

Biswas studied Fine Art and Art History at the University of Leeds, where she developed an interest in exploring the complex relationships between colonial histories and gender, race, class and capital in art. She sought to disrupt, deconstruct and reimagine the canon of Western art history taught at Leeds at that time, challenging the dominant art historical narratives. The staging and compositions of her works often reference well-known paintings by artists such as Johannes Vermeer, George Stubbs and Edward Hopper, inviting us look at these works from a decolonial perspective, and to reflect on their gendered spaces and representations of wealth and privilege.

In the 1980s, Biswas was a vital contributor to the Black Arts Movement in Britain, a radical movement of artists and filmmakers who addressed issues of race and gender. Her work first came to prominence in the landmark exhibition *The Thin Black Line* curated by the artist Lubaina Himid at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London in 1985, where she exhibited the painting *Housewives with Steak-knives* (1984–85). The work reimagines a South Asian housewife as the Hindu deity Kali, giving power and presence to an otherwise marginalised voice.

Biswas's works have continued to investigate the politics of representation through the exploration of deeply personal and historical narratives, drawing on feminist theory, anthropology and critical cultural theories, and how these intersect with the discipline of art history. Her works are shaped by her lived experience as a woman of colour, exploring identity, belonging and Otherness.

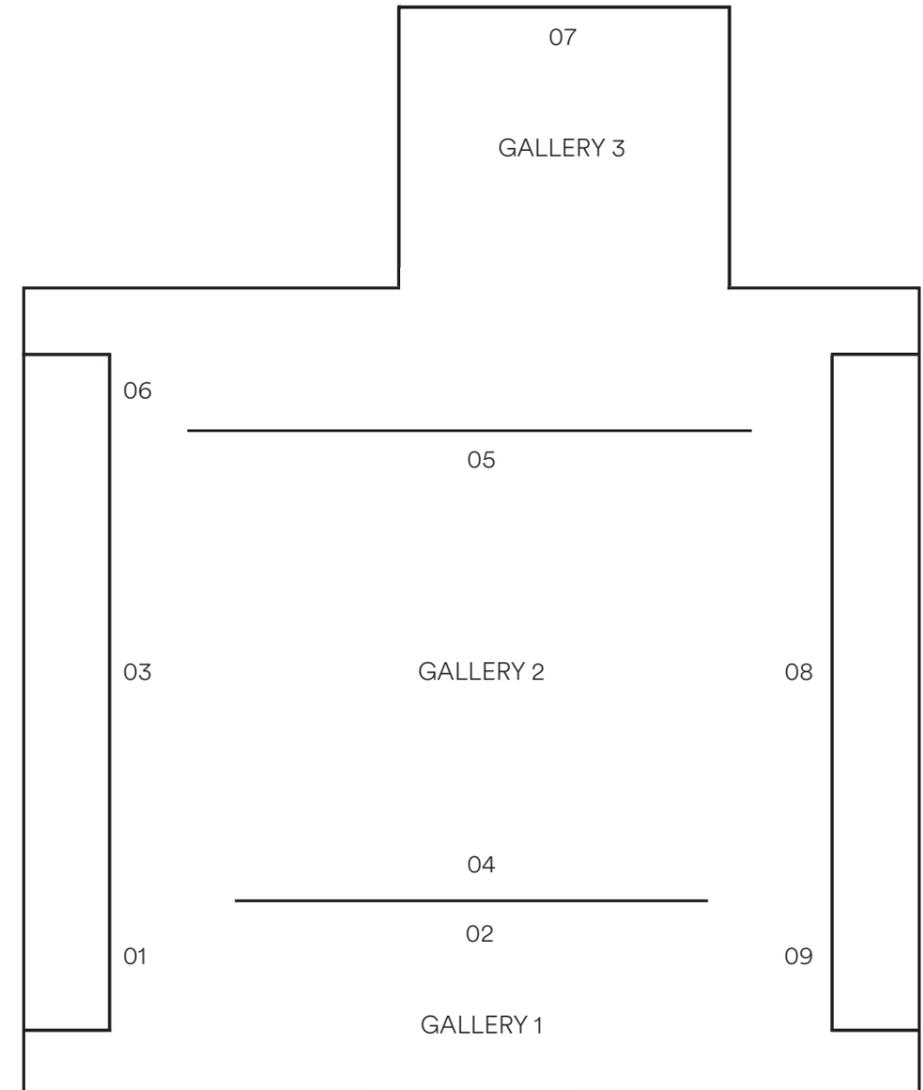
The selection of drawings, photographs and compelling moving image works in this exhibition are connected by recurring themes that Biswas continually revisits such as motherhood, migration, memory, loss and temporality. The works share a poetic sensibility, inviting us to consider time and space in relation to 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 which continue to exert power and influence to this day.

Remembrance of Things Past, 2006 (#1)

This film takes its title from the English translation of the novel *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–27) by the French author Marcel Proust. Biswas interviews a group of young people waiting for a school bus at the harbour front in Toronto, Canada and asks the question 'What do you think the world expects of you?' The answers offer a glimpse into their lives, revealing their personalities and expectations for the future. There is a sense of temporality as we momentarily connect with these individuals at a delicate point of transition from childhood to adulthood.

Synapse I, 1987–92 (#2)

In this series of hand-printed black and white photographs, the artist's naked body becomes a screen for projected images taken during her first return trip to India after moving to England in 1966. The title *Synapse* references the synaptic structures of our nervous system that carry information around our bodies. Each image contains a snapshot of a place the artist visited, ranging from the landscape around her grandmother's house to other sites she yearned to recover. In the related work *Synapse IV* (1987–92) (#6), sensuous sculptural reliefs from a Hindu temple are projected onto her body. The works



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| 01 | <i>Remembrance of Things Past, 2006</i>
Two-channel video, 35 mm transferred to digital format, colour, sound. Duration: 9:58 min | 06 | <i>Synapse IV, 1987–92</i>
Hand-printed black and white photograph |
| 02 | <i>Synapse I, 1987–92</i>
Hand-printed black and white photographs
Collection of Gallery Oldham | 07 | <i>Lumen, 2021</i>
Single-channel HD digital video, colour, sound. Duration: 30 min |
| 03 | <i>Time Flies, 2004–ongoing</i>
Acrylic, gouache and graphite on watercolour paper | 08 | <i>Lumen, 2021</i>
C-prints |
| 04 | <i>Light rain, 2015–21</i>
Two-channel digital video, colour, sound. Duration: 10:10 min | 09 | <i>Magnesium Bird, 2004</i>
Single-channel digital video, colour, sound. Duration: 9:27 min |
| 05 | <i>Birdsong, 2004 (re-mastered in 2021)</i>
Two-channel video, 16 mm film transferred to digital format, colour, no sound. Duration: 7:12 min | | |
- All works courtesy the artist unless otherwise stated

consider family histories, memory, ideas of belonging and desire.

Time Flies, 2004–ongoing (#3)

These delicate bird drawings reflect on a written passage in the book *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust describing the call of a woodpigeon cutting through a forest. This was the subject of the artist's last conversation with her father before he passed away, and birdsong was the first sound she heard immediately following her father's last breath. Referencing taxidermy birds and colonial paintings in which birds were a familiar motif, the works consider loss, grief, and are a moving tribute to her late father, who Biswas describes as 'birdlike'.

Light rain, 2014–21 (#4)

Shot in the Japanese city of Beppu, famous for its hot springs, the two-screen installation of *Light rain* captures billowing clouds of steam rising out from between the buildings, creating a strange, almost otherworldly vista, permeated by the ambient sounds of traffic. The slightly staggered timings between the two projections draws our attention to the passing of time and the slow disconcerting filtering of volcanic activity.

Birdsong, 2004 (#5)

Shaped by Biswas's own experience of motherhood, this two-screen installation is inspired by the first sentence spoken by the artist's then eighteen-month-old son when he asked his mother if a horse could live with them in their family home. Biswas conjures a magical imaginary world full of dream-like images and

The film *Lumen* (2021) has been co-commissioned 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. This programme is made possible thanks to Thomas Dane Gallery and a group of private galleries and individuals. The commission has been additionally supported by Autograph. Supported by Arts Council England.

This exhibition has been curated by Alessandro Vincentelli and Emma Dean, BALTIC Curator. It has been developed in

captures a precious moment as her son Enzo (now four years old) appears alongside the horse. The colour palette of the room references George Stubbs's painting *Shooting at Goodwood* (1759), which depicts an aristocratic hunting scene attended by a Black male servant wearing yellow and scarlet livery.

Lumen, 2021 (#7)

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 Mumbai 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 and transportation, such as those associated with the River Tyne. A selection of five production stills accompany the film (#8).

Magnesium Bird, 2004 (#9)

In this haunting film, the camera pans left and right to reveal the brilliant white flames of birds sculpted out of magnesium ribbon, which have been ignited at dusk. Filmed in the Victorian walled gardens at Harewood House in Yorkshire, an estate built by wealth garnered through West Indian sugar plantations, the work is a meditation on the fleeting nature of our existence and the passage of time.

partnership with Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge and is accompanied by a new publication designed by Kajsa Ståhl of Åbåke, co-published with Kettle's Yard and Ridinghouse. The publication is supported by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University.

A companion exhibition *Sutapa Biswas: Lumen* will take place at Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge from 16 October 2021 – 30 January 2022. Together, the exhibitions will provide the most substantial survey presentation of the artist's work in over seventeen years.



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