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2022

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TEN SOUNDS I CANNOT HEAR

**APPROVED BY
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Ten sounds I cannot hear

by

Aishwarya Arumbakkam

Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Austin
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

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Dedication

To my parents

Acknowledgements

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Amma and Appa.

Thank you.

Abstract

Ten sounds I cannot hear

Aishwarya Arumbakkam, MFA
The University of Texas at Austin, 2022

Co-Supervisors: Ann Reynolds and Teresa Hubbard

My report will look at the making of my most recent body of work entitled *Ten sounds I cannot hear*. I will discuss each individual work through the process of their making, elaborating on my motivations, doubts, and decisions. The report will interweave written text with images of the works on view, and in the studio.

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TEN SOUNDS I CANNOT HEAR

How it started

I started making the works that constitute *Ten sounds I cannot hear*¹ in 2020, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of this global pandemic, and sudden closures of international borders, I was abruptly separated from my ageing parents for an undetermined period. I was pained by our separation and overwhelmed with anxiety about them. I was also starting a life halfway across the world as a new immigrant and one half of a married couple. I felt guilty for leaving my parents to start a new, and possibly better life in a country far away, and for doing this at a time when they needed me. I was consumed by a need to stay connected to a home I had left.

We were always in touch over facetime and whatsapp, and through photographs and voice notes. I tried to compensate for what I feared I was missing by having long phone conversations with my mother, tracking the number of steps my father took, combing through the messages we exchanged, and watching their home surveillance cameras. I conjured reasons to shoot with my parents every day, over facetime, so I could spend an extended amount of time with them. We began to build a new kind of intimacy shaped by distance. We experienced the burdens of time, distance, love, and loss. Our relationship was indelibly mediated through different kinds of communication and technologies, which both conflated and heightened time differences and distances. The through line of our interactions was a constant attempt to connect, and an inability to fully do so. The moments that embodied this gap in our interactions started to leave traces, and when I looked at these traces closely, they began to take shape as the body of work *Ten sounds I cannot hear*.

Writing on works

AMMA BREATHING

In Amma breathing, my mother looks into the camera as the pixels adjust and readjust to create an image of her face. She sits, her body facing away from the camera, but her head is turned towards it. The video is in grayscale.² In the video, her smile fades, her face gets distorted to a point where she almost disappears, and then she appears again. As a result of the faulty internet connection over which the video was recorded, her image is never fixed. Unlike a still photograph, this image feels almost alive. It constantly changes and thus appears to take on a life of its own. Like my mother, it seems to breathe; it lives. The unstable pixels in the video materialise a third entity who is now part of my relationship with my mother, the distance between us.

Of everything, I find the reappearance of her smile to be most unnerving. The video is so slow, I don't notice when she stops smiling. But when the video starts to replay from the beginning, her smile reappears suddenly, like it would with a jump cut. With every replay, the video loops back in time, playing the same moment over and over again. The abrupt restart and unending replay is almost violent. The jump cut also indicates a temporal distance that has been leaped over. It is time I do not get to see, but can sense is missing.

This video is projected on long, translucent, white fabric that is suspended from the ceiling and hangs a few inches above the ground. It moves and breathes with the image. The fabric looks like a curtain, and a shroud. I can walk around the image of my mother. I can look at her image from two sides. But when I go around, what I see is not another side of my mother, but the image of my mother from another side. In my studio, I often caress my mother's face as it appears on the fabric. I hold her image between my palms. I rest my cheek against hers. The sensation is slippery, it's almost a memory and I am filled with longing. I remember a story a professor told me about a cinema viewer in the thirties who threw ink on a screen because a particular image in a film upset him. But the film

progressed, taking the image with it, leaving the ink behind.³ *Amma breathing* is both tactile and ephemeral.

The video projection casts a third image on a wall behind the fabric. I arrive at this shadow image when I enter the space between the fabric and the wall. The shadow image is mediated by the screen of the fabric it passes through, which breaks down the pixelating image even further. The shadow image is bigger, more abstract, and less tangible. It is not an image of a person, but an impression of an interaction. The space between the fabric and the shadow image creates an interior space. It is an inside akin to a camera obscura⁴ where the projected image and I share both space and time. Here, what is further is brought closer to you, but it doesn't stay. Its referent, my mother, is no longer present and the impression gathered from our interaction is impermanent and transient.

When I photograph my mother, I call her on facetime from my laptop. She answers the call on her phone and positions it. Once positioned, I see her image on the screen of my laptop. I photograph the screen of my laptop with my digital SLR camera. The physical object I am looking at, focusing on and photographing with the camera is not my mother, or her image, but the screen that receives her image, and conveys it to me. Similarly, the object in the space, the curtain on which I see my mother's image is also a screen that both receives and mediates the image.

AMMA'S CHEST

Gampi translates to goose skin.⁵

I had been sitting with the photograph that became *Amma's chest* for about two years. I did not quite know what to do with it, but I knew I wanted to work with that image. During this period, it was always up in a corner of my studio as a small inkjet print on copier paper. The questions I asked myself while working on *Amma's chest* was when does

something become more than an image? Why am I working with a photograph and not a video? What is it about this image that keeps me coming back to it?

I realised that the image itself is not as interesting to me as the breath it is suggestive of, or, on longer looking, the absence of breath. That scared me. I wanted the final form to hold the tension between the presence of breath and its absence, the tension between life and death. I decided to print the image using photopolymer intaglio on Gampi silk tissue paper. The following words guided my printing process.

presence , absence
lifesize
death mask
reanimating
keeping alive
container
breath as time
physical two dimensional
still image, moving paper
tension

I think about what it means to be making *Amma's chest* at this time. When I photographed and printed *Amma's chest*, my mother was still alive. Today when I write this, my mother is still alive. A writer, who is also a friend, says I am preparing to remember.⁶

AMMA IN BETWEEN, BREATHING

I slept on the floor of my mother's room for more than four months. I would wake up in the middle of the night in panic. Immediately, I'd hold my breath and strain my ears. I had to make sure my mother was breathing. She was alive.

TRIPTYCH 1 APPA

The work *Triptych 1 Appa* is a series of three four inch by four-inch images, each intaglio printed in grayscale on separate white sheets of translucent gampi silk tissue paper. The images are a close up of my father's face. I keep the camera close to his skin, so I can touch with my eyes what I cannot with my hand. In the first image my father has his eyes closed, in the second he looks off camera, and in the third he looks into camera. Each of the images is surrounded by a large amount of white space.

When placed immediately next to each other, with no negative space, I read the three images together. In this form, the triptych creates the impression of a single, quick moment. However, when separated by the white of the paper, each individual image can be considered its own gesture. Kept sequential, the images are still connected by time but the visual space between them moves the images further apart in time. By splitting a single action into three images, and separating them through space, I tried to extend time in *Triptych 1 Appa*.

After I made the photographs on which these images are based, I spent two years making inkjet prints that I found to be lacking. While I was searching for a form for this work, I was also trying to learn different analogue printmaking processes. I happened to hear a printmaker describe intaglio printing. She said something like "Weighed by water, the fibres of the paper open. Under pressure, the ink gets pressed into the paper. As the paper dries, the surface of the paper closes back over it. In the resulting print, the paper holds the image in it."⁷ I realised what I was searching for was not a way to print the image, but for a way to hold the image.

The first step of printing via photopolymer on intaglio is exposing the plate to the image. I print the digital image on a pictorico film and place it face down, emulsion to emulsion, on the photopolymer plate. I turn on the vacuum which presses the plate and emulsion tightly to one another. I then flip the bed upside down. Away from my eyesight,

the plate is exposed to UV light, hardening parts of it to create a bed to hold the ink. For a perfect exposure that retains all the details, the pictorico film and the emulsion on the plate need to be touching each other completely. No matter what I try, I never achieve that. There are always small but noticeable gaps of air that remain between my pictorico film and the emulsion on the plate. In my work, I am always trying to touch my parents by closing the distance between us. However, the space between us inevitably leaves its mark. In *Triptych I Appa*, it is in the form of the unexpected artefacts that arise in the process of printing.

When my photographs are printed digitally, they are instantaneous, immobile and immediately fixed. In analogue printing processes, especially intaglio, the image builds itself slowly, through a series of traces that I coax out of the plate and imprint into the paper. There is something elusive and time-based about this process of printing. While the final printed image is stable and archival, the process of arriving at it is loaded with instability.⁸ The final print holds these tensions in it.

The paper used for *Triptych I Appa* is a 10 gsm gampi silk tissue that is both fragile and strong. Gampi is thin, light, and sensitive. However, it passes through manipulations under water, and pressure with surprising strength because of its long fibres. The quality of being both sensitive and strong is an attribute I aspire to in my work. Another thing that struck me about the gampi is how skin-like it feels. To print from the plate to the paper, I had to spray the gampi with water, lift, and place it on the press bed. Lifting a sheet of wet gampi is like peeling the tender skin off a wound. The texture is uncanny. When I spread the wet sheet onto the plate, it feels like I am giving skin to the image. As the printed gampi dries, it develops wrinkles that look like ageing skin. One set of my prints was installed unframed for a month under tungsten light. When I got them back after this period, I noticed the heat of the lamps had scarred the surface of the print, wrinkling it further. I see this burning of skin, loss of elasticity, weighing of folds, and appearance of wrinkles on my father every day. While the printed image is stable, the paper that holds it ages with time and is vulnerable to the surroundings.⁹

TRIPTYCH 2 AMMA

The work *Triptych 2 Amma* is also a series of three four inch by four inch images, each intaglio printed in grayscale on separate white sheets of translucent gampi silk tissue paper. In each of the images there is a chair in the foreground. In the first image, my mother walks into the frame. In the second image, she crosses behind the chair. In the third image, the edge of her kurta is seen leaving the frame. She has exited the frame. In all the images, the chair is solid and in focus. The black ink on it is heavy. My mother on the other hand appears soft, light, blurred, out of focus, and, in part, translucent. She appears to be more of a passing emanation than a physical presence. The solidity of the chair emphasises her transience.

Viewing *Triptych 1 Amma* makes me experience a sensation of reverse charge. Simultaneous visual movement occurs in two opposite directions, causing a moment of tension and tightness. My mother moves from right to left of the frame, while the images are arranged to be read from left to right. The opposing movement makes me think about how my mother is slipping away as I am holding on.

In my practice, I tend to start with material that is documentary.¹⁰ I experiment with form to tease out the emotional content of the material. My hand, and the physical process of different mediums lead me towards discovery at this stage. With the passage of time, and through different kinds of mediations I gain some distance from the initial photographic image. This distance allows me to see the image for what it is. My real motivations and concerns in relation to the subject matter are revealed.¹¹ In this critical period, it is important that the work stays in the studio. Hence, working slowly without a preset agenda, and working long term are important to my process.

APPA WALKING

Appa walking consists of a series of three works: a set of graphite drawings, a hand-drawn animation film, and a lithographically printed artist book. All three works originate

from the same source material, a video of my father walking that I recorded through facetime. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, with lockdowns in place, my father couldn't leave his house. For six months, my father would walk in a cyclical figure eight everyday, clocking up to ten thousand steps a day. Between 2020 and 2022, I kept going back to this material, reworking it in different forms.

The hand drawn animation film *Appa walking* is shown as a life size projection. In this grayscale film, my father walks in an endless loop, accompanied by the rhythmic sound of a metronome that syncs to his footsteps. He walks alone within a white frame, enclosed by the dark grey of the gallery walls. We see him from the back, his shoulders slightly hunched with age, his legs a little bowed. He sinks into every step he takes. Washes of graphite move within and out of the pencil marks outlining his body. Within the film, there is no horizon, no surroundings, and there is no narrative. His figure casts a small shadow by his feet, feet that constantly move to take steps. Even as he tirelessly walks, his hands swaying like a pendulum, the figure seemingly remains in place. The illusion of movement is continuous and sequential but not progressive. It makes time feel extended and cyclical while creating a space that is almost non existent. The film plays as a perfect loop, with no beginning or end.

Appa walking was made through the process of rotoscoping. I selected key frames from the video of my father walking and printed them on a home inkjet printer. I traced over the printed figure of my father with graphite and water to create a set of eleven drawings. I placed scans of these drawings on an editing timeline, and subtly manipulated their scale to create a looped animation film. I am interested in rotoscoping because of the tensions between the photographic source and its hand-drawn translation. The rotoscoped image is tied to a Camera-reality¹² while also holding mediations and irregularities related to hand tracing. The deconstruction and subsequent rearranging of material into a time-based form is in line with editing, memory and recollection.

Through close looking I came to know what it meant for my father to physically take a step, and what it meant for me to see him take step after step. I could see his age weighing on his body. His shoulders had started to slump, he did not lift his left leg very high, and he sank into every step he took. A step is a measure of time, and at his age, my father doesn't have much time left. Every step he takes is a step forward in time, and one away from me. In this work, I always stay behind him, and always at the same distance from him. I am chasing and never catching up. While I see every minute shift his body makes to take a step, I don't see his face, I only see the back of his head. In *Appa Walking* I think about how the edges of what I can see or know function in my practice as reframing devices rather than limitations.

The book *Appa walking* is a thin, light object you can hold in your hand. As in the film, we see my father from the back, walking in an undifferentiated white space. The image is printed in grayscale using black lithographic ink on white paper. My father's figure is the size of my palm. The background is composed of sparse, non uniform grains. The grains create a subtle tone and visual texture on the paper. The book begins with an image of my father from the back, standing with his feet together, his arms at his side. As I read the book, my father takes two steps and stops. He finishes at the same position he started, with his feet together, and his arms at his side. In the last page, his figure is missing. What remains is the background grain that highlights his absence. There is a physical ending when I close the book. I don't allow my father to leave in the film *Appa Walking*. But in the book, I let go.

In the book, the action of walking is broken down into a series of sequential, bodily movements. The frame-by-frame movement of my father in the book hints at its cinematic origin. However, the possibility of seeing two frames adjacent at the same time, and being able to move forward and back changes the narrative experience. It makes for a slower, more detailed experience.

The book was printed through the process of photolithography and is accordion bound. The entire structure appears as a continuous form. The paper I used to make this book is Masa, a relatively light rice paper with a distinct front and back side. When I photograph my father through the screen, I instinctively move my camera to a different position, hoping to see him from another angle. What I see instead is the same image with a slightly different distortion. Similarly, what I see on the other side of the paper in the book is not another image, but the same image with some textural obfuscation.

The drawings *Appa Walking* consists of eleven graphite drawings I made on tracing paper while rotoscoping. They are stacked on top of each other prompting a collapse of time. Here time is neither linear nor cyclical. The impressions are overlapped and visible all at once. The most striking thing about the drawings is the way my father's figure pulls on the surface of the paper, drawing the entire image inward and into him. His figure is composed of a fine graphite outline and washes of graphite in a range of tones. The weight of these materials causes the thin paper to crease around the figure, pulling on all sides, pulling the surface towards it. His figure anchors this work.

Collectively, all three works in *Appa Walking* reflect my interest in temporal and gestural nuances. Through repetition and variation I explore ways in which these nuances can be heightened by subtle, formal decisions.

LINES

I got my father a fitness tracker just before the pandemic started. He had been having some medical issues and I was using the fitness tracker to monitor his health. I would get a notification every day of the number of steps he took that day. Across the world, trying to catch up, I would trace the number of steps he took that day using black india ink on bristol paper. For every step my father took, I made a mark. *Lines* is a collection of hundreds of black ink drawings on white paper, each unique and particular to

a specific day. On some days there are more steps, on others fewer, and on some none at all. Over time, with repetition, a cadence and rhythm appear.

The drawings are displayed with a sense of seriality to them. They are unframed and taped to the wall by hand. My biggest concern with *Lines* is that the work will become too much about the drawing and its formal visual aspect. When I exhibit *Lines*, I consider the logic of the work, the emotion behind it, and the simplicity and rigour involved in it. I think about the act of counting, continuity, and time. I think about the relationship involved in tracking and tracing.

When I see, talk, stay in touch, and even know so much, like every step my father takes, what is it I cannot see? We have so many ways to connect, but what is it that we cannot get? Because there is something, and that sense of something missing is important in *Ten sounds I cannot hear*. There is tension between intimacy and the impossibility of it.¹³ In choosing the works to exhibit for *Ten sounds I cannot hear*, I think about what I show, what I withhold, and the dialogue between what is seen and what is not.

APPA IN BETWEEN, SLEEPING

“Sleep is the stage before death”¹⁴

CALL

I started going to graduate school for an MFA in studio art in the middle of the pandemic. I made a throwaway remark to a new acquaintance, a citizen of this country, that I speak to my parents twice a day. She was shocked. She asked me what we were talking about. I responded with platitudes, but this question made me want to know, what is it we speak about? I printed all the messages my father and I exchanged over a five-month period and combed through it closely. I began to see some patterns in the transcribed words. The work *Call* emerged from this exercise.

Call is a set of six, A5 size, paper-based works. Selective areas of the printed messages are redacted using white gesso to leave behind the words that repeat in our exchange. The act of leaving behind only parts of the text was similar to the act of lowering the depth of field while photographing an image.¹⁵ With this action I may see less, but what I choose to see holds meaning. Isolating parts of an image also allows me to create intentional sets of relationships within the image.

My friend, who is an artist, introduced me to Gesso. She said it is a neutral medium. Its special character was that it was nothing, and the function it served was to be painted over. An initial coat of Gesso appears flat, almost translucent on paper. However, when it is layered, with an unsteady hand, over multiple sessions, it becomes textured and heavy. It appears as a dense mass that is also strangely shadowless and white. It feels heavy but looks like nothing. In *Call*, the words where my father and I attempt to connect but fail to do so float around in a mass of gesso. Gesso functions in this work as distance does in my relationship with my parents. Like gesso, there is a weight to this distance, I can feel it, but it is hard to perceive.

LETTER

I wrote a letter to my parents, but I have not found the courage to send it yet. I show this unsent letter in exhibition spaces. There is no translation.



Figure 1: Screenshots from *Amma breathing*, 2020-22. Black and white. 2:11 min.



Figure 2: Installing *Amma breathing*, at the Visual Arts Center, Austin, November 2022.



Figure 3: Detail from *Amma breathing*, as installed in the studio.



Figure 4: Installation view of *Amma's chest*, 2020-22, Intaglio on Gampi silk tissue. 25 x 18 inches, Edition 8 + 2 A/P at the Visual Arts Center, Austin, November 2022. Photograph by Alex Boeschenstein.



Figure 5: Cleaning the photopolymer intaglio plate used to print *Amma's chest*.



Figure 6: Early iterations of *Triptych 1 Appa* and *Triptych 2 Amma* as inkjet prints, as installed in the studio



Figure 7: Intaglio test print of *Triptych 1 Appa*.



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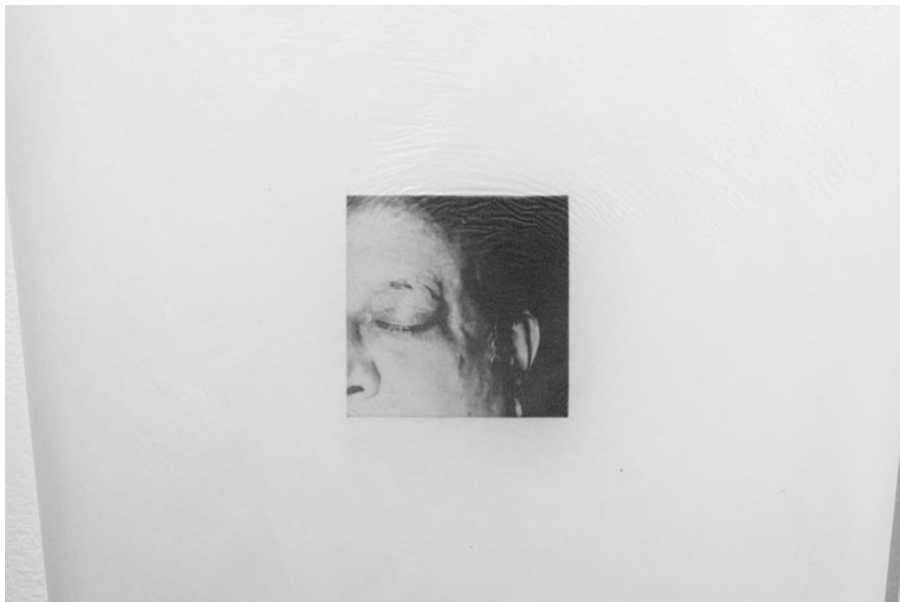


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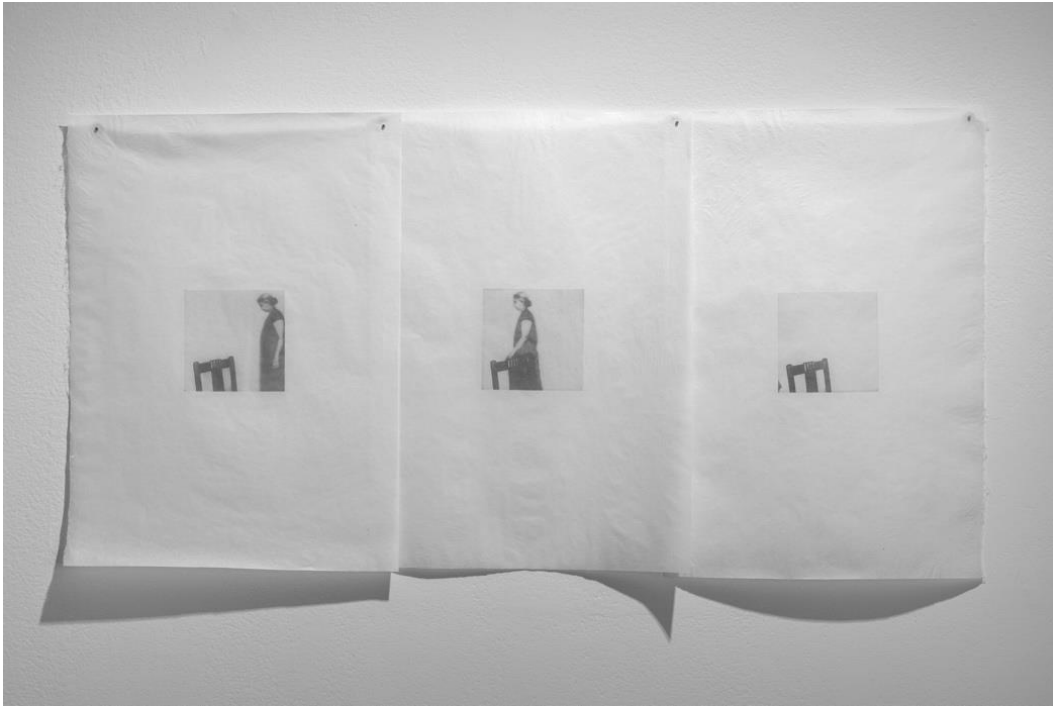


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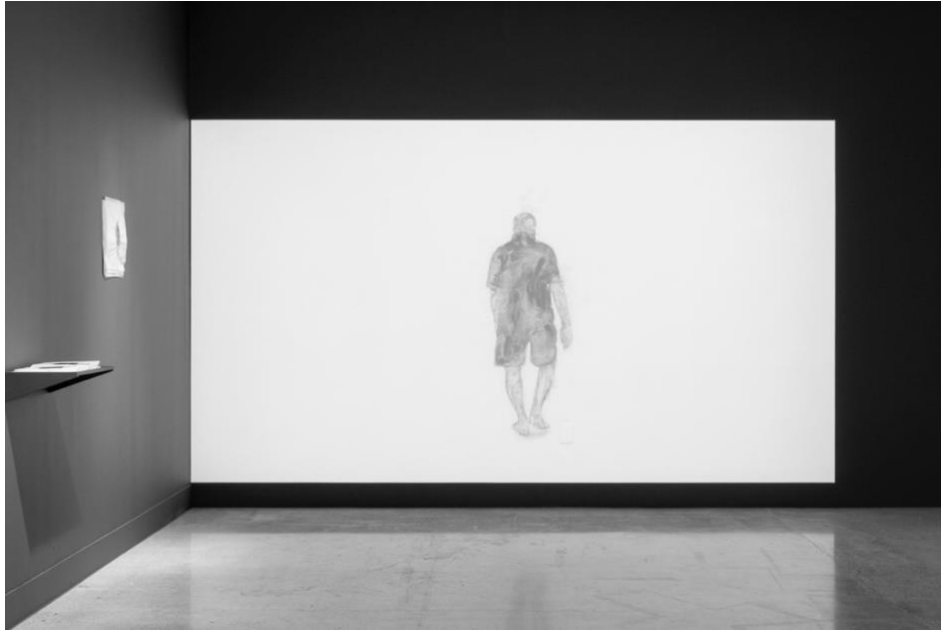


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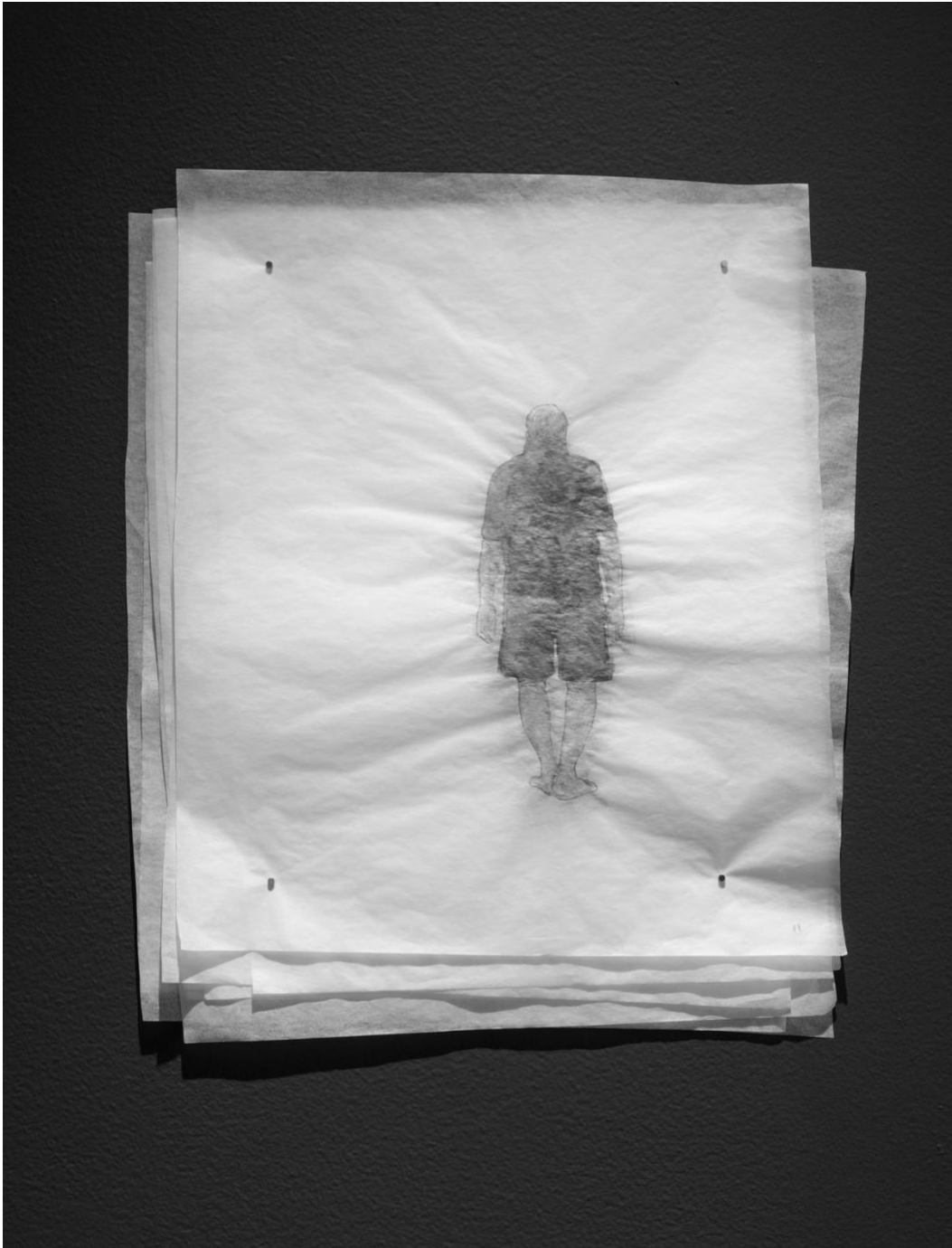


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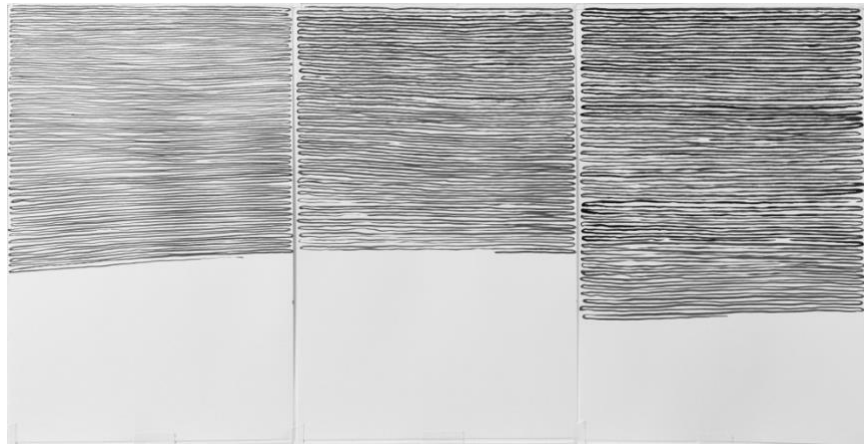


Figure 15: Detail of *Lines*, 2020-22. India Ink on Bristol paper, 17 x 11 inches each

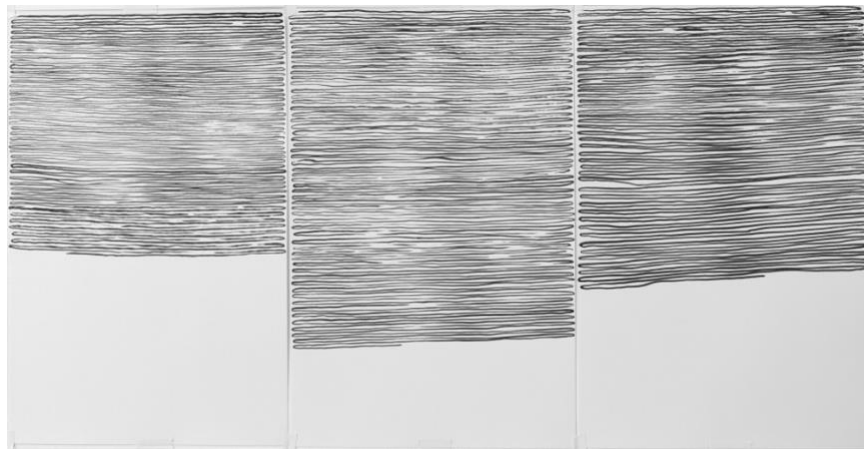


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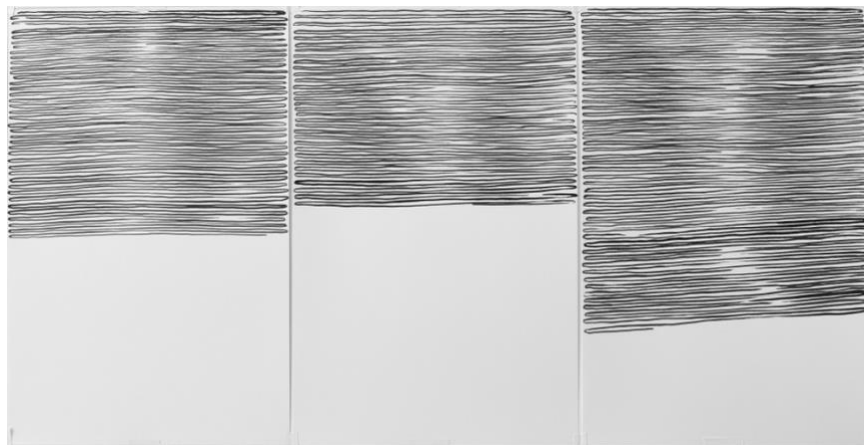


Figure 17: Detail of *Lines*, 2020-22. India Ink on Bristol paper, 17 x 11 inches each



Figure 18: Measuring the size of *Appa in between, Sleeping*, 2020-22. Black and white. 11:12 min (loop), in the studio.

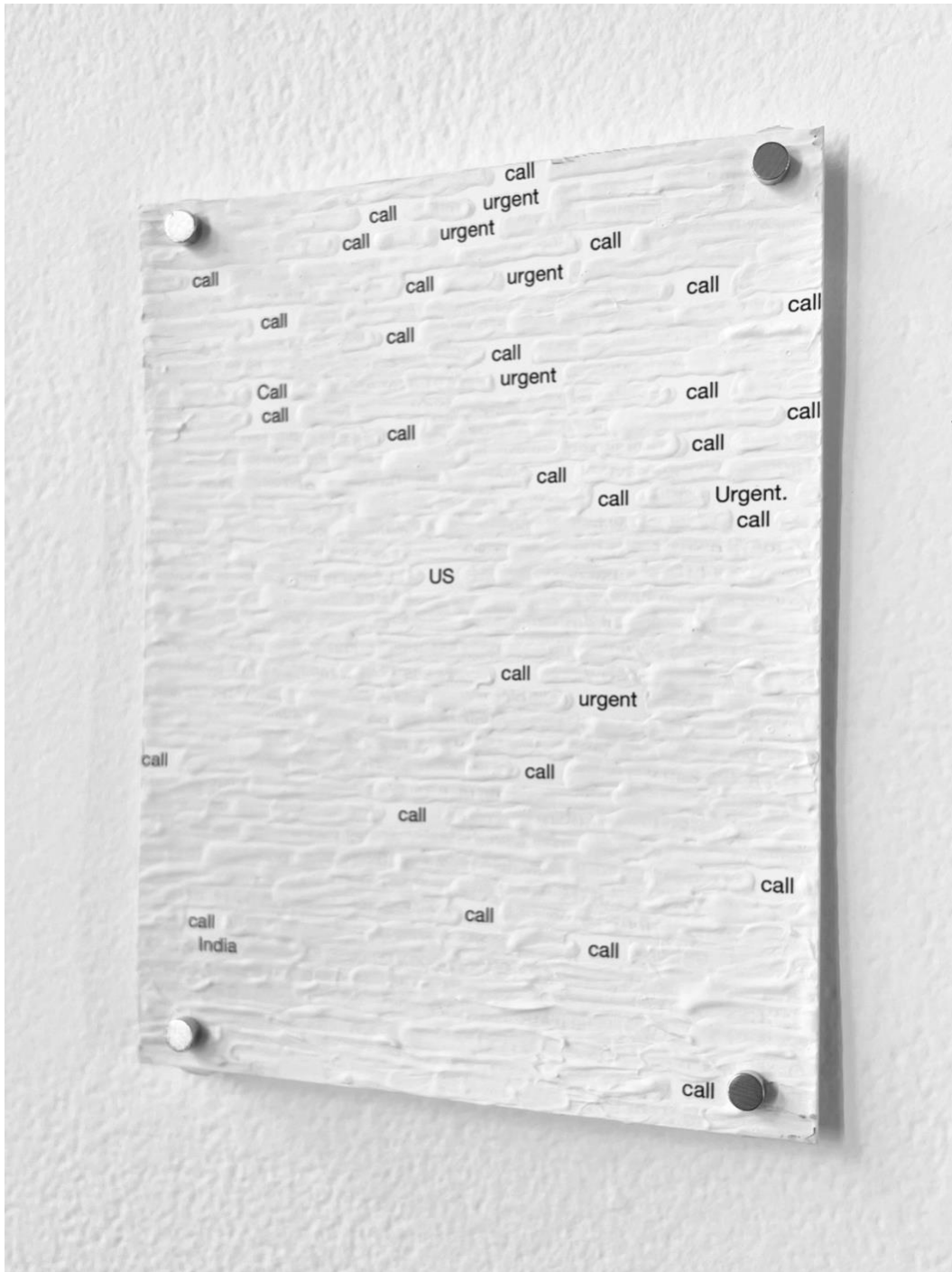


Figure 19: Detail of *Call*, 2022. Gesso, Inkjet print on Copier paper, six panels, 5.4 x 4.2 inches each (five in number), 4.5 x 4.2 inches each (one in number), as installed in the studio.

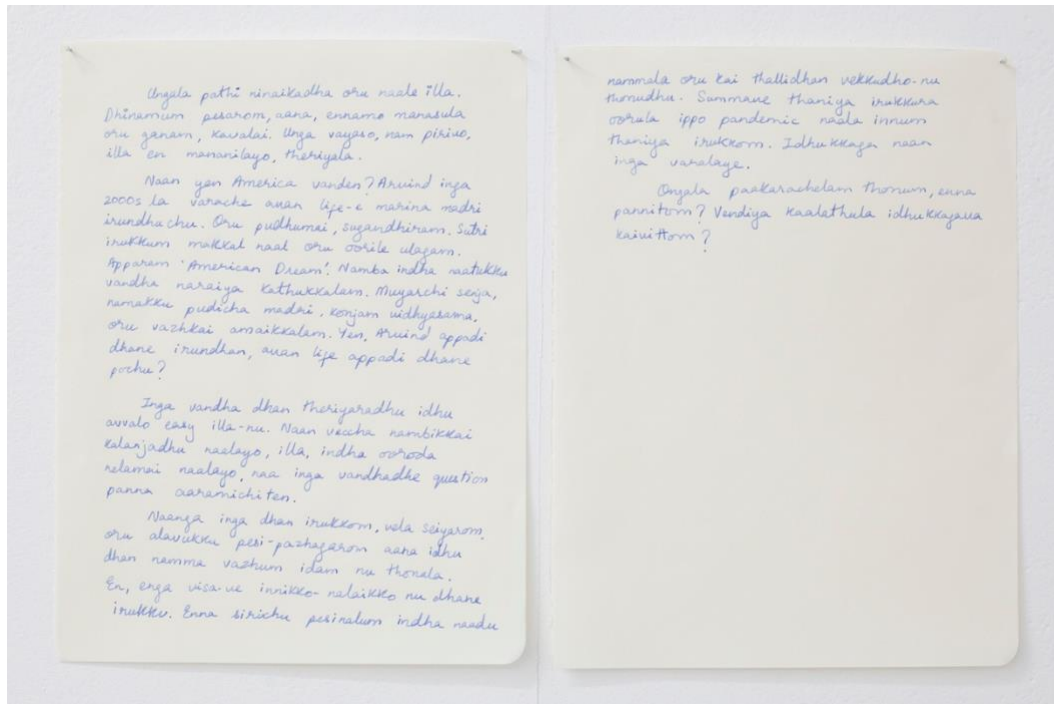


Figure 20: *Letter*, 2020. Water based ink on acid free paper, 9.75 x 7.5 inches each, two pages.

Notes while working

TENSION

What does it mean to have work that is tactile express/represent things that are untouchable. What does it mean to bring closer things that are so far away? Am I making the intangible, tangible? But the tangible is fragile. It is always changing. It is not solid or holdable.

What about urgency?
What about vulnerability?¹⁶
fear,
concern,
tenderness, love.
Uncertainty & unease.

The work has to hold tension in some form or way. The distance vibrates with tension. Don't make the work too comfortable.

Subtlety and tension. Identify and sharpen points of tension in the work. Make it precise. Resist the urge to make it neat, let it be a little uncomfortable. Resist preconceived notions of what is good and go with what is precious and meaningful.

Nothingness or lack of change also produces tension. There is tension in things remaining the same while things are moving. An inability to resist.

If it is riskier, it is good.

Struggle.

BREVITY

I had dinner with a scholar, who was also my teacher. I cooked a meal for her at home. She told me that the beauty of Tamil is its brevity.¹⁷ Tamil can refer to my language, culture, and its people.¹⁸ I have since thought about how my language shapes my art practice.

SURFACE, TOUCH

“The haptic image is suffused with sadness and desperation, the inadequacy of one kind of touch substituting for another.”¹⁹

I make a photographic mask of my mother’s chest. I give skin to her image. The paper is light, it breathes. I project my mother’s image onto a sheet of fabric. I caress, kiss, and hold her image. I gently push ink into the skin of my father. I rub it out of his eyes. I press this ink into paper. My mother disappears into the surface of the paper. She breathes into my ear. An image of my father is the size of my palm. I make things so I can touch my parents. But I know what I am touching is not them.

I choose surfaces based on visual appearance, weight, the way they hold an image, the mediations they cause to the image, and the mediations the image causes to them. I consider the process of transferring an image onto a surface and try to choose processes that resonate with my emotions and concerns related to the image. I think back to my experience of making the image. I remind myself of the meaning I see in the image with the passage of time. I assess overlaps and differences between different surfaces I use. I try to evoke a sense of touch. I think about touching the sound, about sound as touch. I hold onto fragility, vulnerability, sensitivity, and strength. I think about contradictions.

My parent’s age, our separation, and my perception of the time we have left, all of it evokes a strong, emotional response in me. I push that into the surface of a work. In its making, I edit, remove, pare down and distil to reach its core.

These considerations do not always translate. In those cases, I consider the works to be unfinished, and continue to experiment with them till I reach a form that feels right.

SPACE

Space in my works is ambiguous and amorphous. There is no indication of where either my parents or I are, but there is indication of those spaces being separated by duration and distance. The space we are in is a no space where no narrative action seems possible. It feels compressed and flattened but at the same time endless. It is the psychological space of distance and ageing.²⁰

SILENCE

Silence in the space

Mention of sound in the title

Silence while watching

Silence and stillness

Missing sound, photographing absence²¹

Absence is related to pain

Touching with camera, listening with eyes

Images that hold sound

Opacity of language, absence of translation, intentional obliqueness

Attentive, active viewing, awareness

Subtleties, details

Heightening, Tension, Vibration, Anticipation

Negative space

Emotional weight

Sustain

Time feels longer and slower

LOSS

My practice is related to loss. It is a word that reoccurs in different works, and in different bodies of work. I have been thinking about that. I am not interested in or attracted to loss. I may be sensitive and anticipate it. But I don't seek it out as a topic to explore. Rather, when faced with loss, my response is my practice. I react to loss by photographing. I deal with loss through making.

TIME

A strange time that feels endless but is also scarce. Experiencing this time, even while anticipating its loss. Stillness, where nothing seems to happen. Slowing down the action, slowing down the viewer. Asking for active engagement. Experiencing the work in time.²² Duration as commitment. When nothing changes, every little thing that changes matters. When I look for a long time, what I see starts to change. Time based narrative experience. Transformation. Something more complex is revealed in experiencing it over time. Endurance of our relationship over a distance. Time as distance. Arranging works in a space to build a rhythm. All my works have a sense of time and pace. They unfold over time, slowly.

The act of remembering.

Stillness. Sustaining a note. Stretching it, allowing it to vibrate.

Breaking down and building up.

Images transforming itself through time.

Looking deep. Revealing. Changing.

Time between the images.

Fragments and continuity.

Counting days, one after another, marking time. Seriality.

Repetition.

Tension. Urgency.

Degeneration. Time as an agent of change and decay. On the body and on memory.

Loop. Endless time. Only the present.
Inevitable forward movement. Progression.
Reverse tension.
Gestural and temporal nuances that hold a sense of time.
Breathing. Walking. Blinking. Sitting. Sleeping.
Drawing. Photographing. Printing. Projecting. Writing.
Age.
Rhythm.
Fading with time.
Dissolve. Transformation. Change.
Instability, elusiveness.
In between. Transition.
Slowing. Prolonging.
Resisting.
What stays, how does it change.

HOME²³

In an interview I recorded with my mother, I ask her how she can be ok with me leaving her after all those years she spent caring for me, after she changed her life to revolve around me. She said that's what giving life is about. She was responsible for bringing me into the world, but the rest, it was my life to live. I did not understand her then.

The process of making this work has brought someone I love closer. My practice is based on this connection. The work itself, I can part with it. But I hope a part of it will always stay connected to me.

Epilogue

In *Triptych I Appa*, reflected in the image of my father's eye, you can see the ring of the light we use to shoot. My father is my camera and lighting assistant when we shoot. He scouts for walls we could use as a backdrop, sets up the light, the cell phone camera, and the frame. At times, both my parents help relay directions to each other as we shoot. During the time I was shooting with them, I would spend almost sixty to ninety minutes on facetime with them every day. When there was fear and uncertainty about everything around us, we derived comfort in being with each other. Shooting was an excuse to be together. We were separated by geography and time, but we were intimate, and we were together in a way that we created. Eventually, time passed, lockdowns were released, vaccines were distributed, and international borders reopened. Now I split my time between our two countries. We don't stay on the phone that long anymore. Just last week, my father sent me this message: "Why r u not giving any Project ?"

We spent days, months, years without being able to meet in person. Through all this, time always passed, and the distance always stayed, but we spent days filling the distance between us with the works we made together. Through my work, I tried to slow down time that was slipping through our fingers. My parents are older, maybe time passes differently for them. I don't know. I know how it passes for me. It makes me panic. Whether fact or not, I feel anxious about my parents not having much time left.

Now my life has changed again. I am soon moving back. My mother got diagnosed a year ago with a stage 4 brain tumour. I remember the phone call I got from her doctor. I started making this work with one kind of distance, a bridgeable one, in my mind. Now I am chasing her as she approaches another kind of distance, one that can perhaps never be crossed. This changes the work and what it means to me. The fragility of age and time are more urgent. The images I now hold are different from the ones I made. I am grateful for having them.

My portfolio report is a way to document myself at a moment in my life when my parents were still very much alive. This was a time when my fear and anxiety were real, but intangible and distant. While making this work, I was unwilling to accept that my parents were ageing, and that I was going to lose them. By looking, listening, visualising, filling, flattening, impressing, and slowing, I repeatedly tried to prolong time or close the distance. Even though I failed, at some point I really did believe, we had all the time in the world.

References

“In order for a person to advise, even to help another, a great deal must happen. Many different elements must coincide harmoniously; a whole constellation of things must come about for that to happen even once.”²⁴

- ¹ The title *Ten sounds I cannot hear* comes from a personal archive I revisit periodically. I organize all my material as a digital archive on my harddrive. The archive is sorted by date and location. While looking through this archive few months ago, I came across two sub folders titled “four distances” and “ten sounds.” On 31/05/2020 I tried to record a sound from four distances, and tried to record ten different sounds. The phrase “I cannot hear” comes from the work *Letter*. When I read *Letter* now, what comes back to me is the feeling of inability that drove me to start photographing my parents.
- ² This prompts response to a question Teresa Hubbard has consistently asked since my first studio visit with her in 2020, “*Why grayscale?*” The reason I started working in grayscale in 2013 is identified by Marks, Laura U. “The Memory of Touch,” *The Skin of the Film Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2000, 133. “*A significant number of interculutural film- and videomakers embed a critique of visuality in their work. Often they draw from critiques of ethnography. This well-known critique asserts that ethnographic photography and film have objectified non-Western cultures and made a spectacle of them; they have reduced cultures to their visual appearance; and they have used vision as part of a general will to knowledge of the other as a means to power. Many films and videos critique the will to visually master another culture. Some put up real or metaphoric smokescreens that obscure the view of a culture. Others suggest that the most important aspects of the culture or the story are invisible. In all cases, these works trouble the relationship between vision and knowledge. Pointing to the limits of visual knowledge, they frustrate the passive absorption of information, instead encouraging the viewer to engage more actively and self-critically with the image.*”
- ³ I am paraphrasing a discussion we had in January 2021 in Dr. Ann Reynold’s class *Film Cultures of the 1960s: Surrealism* regarding a screening of the film *L’Age d’or*, 1930 by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali.
- ⁴ I draw here on Kaja Silverman’s description of the camera obscura in Silverman, Kaja. “The second coming,” *The Miracle of Analogy or The History of Photography, Part I*, Stanford California, Stanford University Press, 2015, 14. She says “*The classical camera obscura- the one that was the norm from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries-was a darkened chamber with a small aperture through which light entered, bearing a reversed and inverted stream of images that both originated in the external world and analogized it. This continuous flow of mobile and evanescent*

images existed only in the “now” in which it appeared, and since the viewer had to enter the camera obscura in order to see it, the two were spatially as well as temporally co-present.”

⁵ I am paraphrasing an introduction by thepaperwoman, in the blogpost “Gampi 101,” in *Paper connection international*, 2014.

⁶ I am paraphrasing a comment made by Maggie Mitts during a studio visit in October 2022.

⁷ I am paraphrasing a conversation I had with Audrey Blood in May 2022 about intaglio printing.

⁸ I came across strikingly similar description of instability in analogue photography in Silverman, Kaja. “Unstoppable Development,” *The Miracle of Analogy or The History of Photography, Part 1*, Stanford California, Stanford University Press, 2015, 39. *“This might seem a puzzling claim, since unlike the images that appear inside the camera obscura, which are mobile and ephemeral, the defining attributes of analogue photography are immobility and permanence. The photographic image was, however, neither immobile nor permanent in the first decades of its history. It emerged slowly, through the gradual accretion of the traces inscribed on a “recipient-plate” by the light emitted by the external world, and it often disappeared shortly after it arrived. And even when this image did not blacken or fade, there was an instability at its core.”*

⁹ When *Triptych I Appa* is installed in the gallery, the print warps in reaction to the surrounding environment. In viewing this affected print, I am reminded of Marks, Laura U. “The Memory of Touch,” *The Skin of the Film Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2000, 156. *“At the same time, the decaying image makes the viewer reflect on how much of perception is generated by memory and longing, rather than engagement with a crisply available visual object.”*

¹⁰ I often ask myself why I start with documentary material. I found part of the answer in Kracauer, Siegfried. “Epilogue,” *Theory of Film: the redemption of physical reality* with an introduction by Miriam Bratu Hansen, Princeton New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1997, 300. *“We literally redeem this world from its dormant state, its state of virtual nonexistence, by endeavoring to experience it through the camera. And we are free to experience it because we are fragmentized. The cinema can be defined as a medium particularly equipped to promote the redemption of physical reality. Its images permits us, for the first time, to take away with us the objects and occurrences that comprise the flow of material life.”*

¹¹ This moment in my studio resonates with Marks, Laura U. “Introduction,” *The Skin of the Film Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2000, 5. *“The story suspends in order to contemplate this emptiness, which is narratively thin but emotionally full: It is the product of a*

process of mourning, a search for loved ones who have vanished, and cannot be recalled with any means at the artist's disposal."

¹² I use the term "Camera-reality" as defined by Kracauer, Siegfried. *Theory of Film: the redemption of physical reality* with an introduction by Miriam Bratu Hansen, Princeton New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1997. Paraphrasing Kracauer, Camera-reality is a unique reality that is dependent on physical or material reality, but as perceived and revealed by the camera.

¹³ Paraphrasing a comment made by Howie Chen during a studio visit in April 2022.

¹⁴ I am quoting a comment made by Alexander Birchler during a studio visit in October 2022.

¹⁵ The camera's unique capacity to isolate elements of physical reality, and cinema's ability to recontextualize these elements to reveal their meaning is explained by Kracauer, Siegfried. "The establishment of physical existence," *Theory of Film: the redemption of physical reality* with an introduction by Miriam Bratu Hansen, Princeton New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1997, 41-59.

¹⁶ This and many questions in the chapter "Tension" were first asked by Sohrab Hura to me in relation to my practice. A lot of my methodology builds off conversations and critiques I have had with Sohrab Hura over the years, starting in 2016.

¹⁷ As said by Professor Martha Ann Selby with whom I took a class on *Wives, Lovers, Mothers, Queens: Goddesses in world religions and cultures* from August to December 2020.

¹⁸ Shulman, David explores comprehensive definitions of the term "Tamil" in "Beginnings", *Tamil a biography*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016, 2-4.

¹⁹ I am quoting Marks, Laura U. "The Memory of Touch," *The Skin of the Film Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2000, 155

²⁰ I am paraphrasing a comment made by Dr Ann Reynolds in a studio visit in March 2021.

²¹ In a conversation I had with Tanzim Wahab in 2015, he described the work of Dayanita Singh as "photographing absence." I see it as a phrase filled with contradictions and possibilities, and I have held on to it.

²² Along the same lines as Copp, Corina "A Translator's Note," Akerman, Chantal. Translated by Copp, Corina. *My Mother Laughs*, The Song Cave, First Edition, 2019, 170. "Time and again, Akerman expressed that she wanted people to feel the experience of time passing, rather than escape their lives at the movies, "to lose themselves in the frame... to be moving between information and abstraction."

²³ In a conversation with Sohrab Hura over the phone in June 2021, he told me he sells his work because he wants his works to have a home, and he doesn't think he can be

the one to give it to them. I am at a stage where my work is starting to leave my studio. I like the idea of finding homes for my work. It implies a level of care, intimacy and a personal relationship. But the other day, in August 2022, Maggie Mitts asked me how I could part with work I am making to bring someone closer. The chapter “Home” was written in response to their thoughts and questions.

²⁴ I am quoting Rilke, Rainer Maria translated by Burnham, Joan M. “Chapter 2,” *Letters to a young poet*, Novato, California, New World Library, 18. This book was given to me by Dayanita Singh in Goa in 2019.

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