

Artist biographies

SHUMON AHMED is a visual artist who lives and works in Dhaka, Bangladesh. In addition to teaching photography at Pathshala South Asian Media Institute, he works freelance, exploring the fusion between video and photography to vividly tell stories that are profoundly private and communal at the same time. His has exhibited his work in various galleries, festivals and screenings internationally including Asia's biggest biennial photo festival, Chobi Mela V; Whitechapel Gallery, London; Fotomuseum Winterthur; Dhaka Art Summit; and at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale with the support of the Samdani Art Foundation.

MATTHEW CONNORS is an artist and Chair of the Department of Photography at Massachusetts College of Art. For his recent project, *DDPPRRKK*, featured in the exhibition, Connors made photographs in North Korea. He received his BA in English Literature from the University of Chicago in 1998 and his MFA in Photography from Yale University in 2004. He has exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; DOX Centre for Contemporary Art, Prague; and the Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York.

GAURI GILL is a photographer who lives and works in Delhi, India. Gill's body of work includes a decade-long study of people living in marginalized communities in Rajasthan, India. Her work has been shown widely in India and across the world, including Green Cardamom Gallery, London; Nature Morte Gallery, New Delhi; Matthieu Foss Gallery, Mumbai; Stanford University; Chicago Cultural Center; Bose Pacia Gallery, Kolkata and New York; and Mississauga Central Library.

PAUL GRAHAM is an artist who lives and works in New York City. Graham is known for his pioneering use of color photography in the 1980's, during a time when British photography was dominated by a traditional black-and-white aesthetic. Graham has exhibited extensively, with over 80 solos shows around the world, including selected exhibitions at Anthony Reynolds Gallery, New York; Gallerie Les Filles du Calvaires, Paris; and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

AN-MY LÉ is a contemporary artist who lives and works in New York. She holds a BAS and MS from Stanford University and an MFA from Yale University School of Art. Recent solo exhibitions of her work include *29 Palms* at Murray Guy, New York; *Small Wars* at PS1/MOMA Contemporary Art Center, New York; and *Vietnam* at Scott Nichols Gallery, San Francisco. She is the recipient of a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation fellowship, and her work is held in numerous national and international collections.

YAMINI NAYAR is a contemporary artist who lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. Nayar's practice focuses on "how architecture translates history and memory in the present—suppressed narratives—and ideas of the uncanny, legibility and difference." Nayar has exhibited her work in numerous institutions, including the Guggenheim Museum, New York; Saatchi Gallery, London; Queensland Art Gallery; deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum; Cincinnati Art Museum; the Queens Museum, New York; and United States Arts in Embassies.

THASNAI SETHASEREE is a professor in the Department of Media Arts and Design at Chiang Mai University, Thailand. Sethaseree holds an MFA from the University of Chicago. Recently Sethaseree presented his work at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts as part of an exhibition curated by Rirkrit Tiravanija, featuring his project *make it like home . . . anywhere?*, which draws on memories of home within Thai immigrant communities in Chicago. He has also shown at *Utopia Station* at the 50th Venice Biennale; Si-Am Art Space, Bangkok; the Queens Museum, New York; and the Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery.

TEJAL SHAH is a contemporary artist based in Goa, India, who incorporates video, photography, performance, and installation into their work. Shah has had solo exhibitions internationally in India, Germany, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and the United States. Shah's work has also been exhibited at the Tate Modern, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; and Documenta 13, Kassel. Shah has a Bachelor of Arts in Photography from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and spent a year as an exchange student at the Art Institute of Chicago.

MICKALENE THOMAS is an acclaimed contemporary artist currently living and working in Brooklyn, New York. Thomas is well-known for her use of mixed media and photography, while drawing on aesthetics from her upbringing in 1970s America. Thomas has exhibited her work at the Brooklyn Museum; Santa Monica Museum of Art; The Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; the Corcoran Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery, Washington D.C.; and La Conservera Contemporary Art Centre, Ceuti.

LIDWIEN VAN DE VEN is an artist based in Rotterdam who works in the realm of political and religious subjects. Lidwien has won several awards for her photographic work and installations, recently receiving the 2014 Dolf Henkes prize. Her work was shown at the Museum Reina Sofia, Madrid; the Busan Biennale; BloombergSPACE, London; Documenta 12, Kassel; the Sydney Biennial; and in the exhibition *Be(com)ing Dutch* at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, where she produced the installation *Freedom of Expression*.



(Above) Gauri Gill, *Ruined Rainbow*, 2010

UNSUSPENDING DISBELIEF

Introduction

It's always seemed to me that photography tends to deal with facts whereas film tends to deal with fiction. – Diane Arbus

Mrs. Clinton told General Petraeus that his progress report on Iraq required "a willing suspension of disbelief." – Eli Lake, "Clinton Spars With Petraeus on Credibility," *New York Sun*, 12 September 2007

... so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadowy of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith ... – Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1817, Chapter XIV

While Coleridge wrote of the usefulness of suspending one's disbelief for poetic purposes, and Clinton followed suit in saying that this is also applicable to matters of foreign policy, Arbus sees it as germane to movies, which work through fiction, as opposed to photographs, which barter in facts. But what of facts? Roland Barthes notes in his text "The Great Family of Man": "Birth, Death? Yes, these are facts of nature, universal facts. But if one removes History from them, there is nothing more to be said about them ... to reproduce death or birth tells us, literally nothing." The 1955 photography exhibition *The Family of Man* presented Man as a universal, eternal family to which we all belong, the pictures' lyrical aesthetics blithe in their tautology.

The ten contemporary, international artists in *Unsuspending Disbelief*—Shumon Ahmed, Matthew Connors, Gauri Gill, Paul Graham, An-My Lê, Yamini Nayar, Thasnai Sethaseree, Tejal Shah, Mickalene Thomas, and Lidwien van de Ven—use the conventions and rhetoric of photography to question the span, and the collapse, between what the photograph pictures and what it means. Familiar people, places, and things are detached from immediate comprehensibility. What is shown in the picture is nameable, but the subjects of the photographs are rendered oblique. Instead of facts, the photographs are propositions for a different kind of looking that considers what is shown as nested in how, who, where,

Artists

Shumon Ahmed
Matthew Connors
Gauri Gill
Paul Graham
An-My Lê
Yamini Nayar
Thasnai Sethaseree
Tejal Shah
Mickalene Thomas
Lidwien van de Ven

Exhibition

January 22 –
March 13, 2016

Reception

January 22, 2016,
6–9 pm



1 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957).

Exhibition checklist

1–4 **TEJAL SHAH**
Between the Waves, 2012
4-channel video installation with sound, 85 min.
Courtesy of the artist and Project 88, Mumbai

5 **PAUL GRAHAM**
Double Rainbow, Donegal, Ireland, 2013
Pigment print, Plexiglas

6 *Senami, Wellington, New Zealand*, 2011
Chromogenic print, Plexiglas

7 **SHUMON AHMED**
Metal Graves 5, 2009
Photographic print on Archival Hahnemühle Fine Art paper

8 **YAMINI NAYAR**
Head Over Heels, 2013
C-print
Courtesy of Dr. Richard Marcus and Heekyong Kong

9 **SHUMON AHMED**
Metal Graves 13, 2009
Photographic print on Archival Hahnemühle Fine Art paper

10 *Metal Graves 10*, 2009
Photographic print on Archival Hahnemühle Fine Art paper

11 **AN-MY LÉ**
Works from the series *29 Palms*, 2003–4
1. *Mechanized Assault*
2. *Night Operations III*
3. *Combat operations center, guard*
4. *Security and stability operations: Iraqi police*
5. *Combat Support Service Operations I*
6. *LCAC (Landing Craft Air-Cushioned)*
Courtesy of the artist and Murray Guy, New York

12 **PAUL GRAHAM**
Golden Pawn Shop, Bronx, New York, 2013
Pigment print, Plexiglas

13 **MATTHEW CONNORS**
From the series *DDPPRRKK*, 2013
Pigment inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist

14 **LIDWIEN VAN DE VEN**
Oslo, 20/08/2011 (portrait), 2015
Digital print on paper
Courtesy of the artist

15 **MICKALENE THOMAS**
Black and White Polaroid Series #2, 2012
Digital Polaroid prints

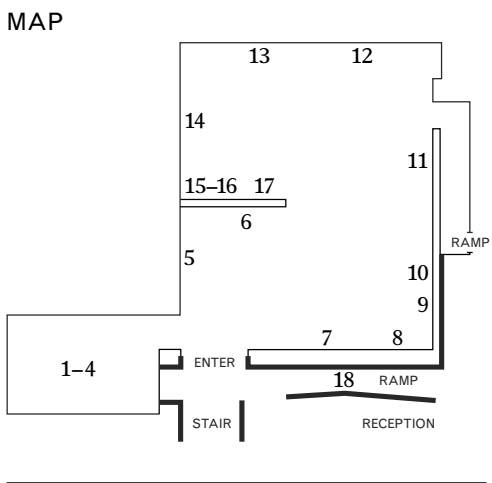
16 *Black and White Polaroid Series #3*, 2012
Digital Polaroid prints

17 *Polaroid Series #3*, 2012
Digital Polaroid prints

18 **GAURI GILL**
Ruined Rainbow, 2010
C-prints
Courtesy of the artist

In the Gidwitz Lobby

THASNAI SETHSAREE
October: The Spectacular, 2015
Fabric, paper, latex glue, glitter, urethane, paint
Courtesy of the artist



All works by Graham courtesy of the artist and Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York

All works by Ahmed courtesy of the artist and Project 88, Mumbai

All works by Thomas courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago

INTERIOR

(Left to right, top to bottom)
Paul Graham, *Senami, Wellington, New Zealand*, 2011
Shumon Ahmed, *Metal Graves 5*, 2009
An-My, *29 Palms: Mechanized Assault*, 2003–4
Lidwien van de Ven, *Oslo, 20/08/2011 (portrait)*, 2015
Matthew Connors, *Pyeongyang* from the series *DDPPRRKK*, 2013
Yamini Nayar, *Head Over Heels*, 2013
Mickalene Thomas, *Black and White Polaroid Series #3*, 2012
Tejal Shah, *Between the Waves, Channel II - Landfill Dance*, 2012
Thasnai Sethsaree, *October: The Spectacular*, 2015

CREDITS

This brochure is produced on the occasion of the exhibition *Unsuspending Disbelief*, held between January 22nd and March 13th, 2016 at the Logan Center Gallery, Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts, University of Chicago.

Curator: Laura Letinsky
Curatorial research assistant: Autumn Elizabeth Clark
Design: David Giordano
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(CONTINUED)

when, and why. The works switch up expectations, troubling categories, ms/mastery of technologies, processes, and appearances. The who, what, where, and when grapple with a distance that is unmeasurable.

The headiness of rainbows, touch, and heat in Ahmed's and Gill's work is a phenomenon of mistreated and out-of-date film. Yet, despite such lowly materiality, these images pose as the very stuff in which we believe. The evidence of photographic materiality is apparent and magical. Rainbows and unicorns appear in Connors's, Gill's, Graham's, and Shah's work, blatant in their artifice that is nonetheless, for lack of a better word, beautiful. Connors's individual images of everyday street scenes in not-commonly depicted North Korea are, in combination, narratively askew. Rather than offering a single, conclusive story told by one author, the precise and delicate pacing of Connors's and Graham's picture sequences act like tidal pools in which individual elements exist in mini-ecosystems.

Lé's large-format, more-detail-than-you-can-absorb, formally epic pictures of military exercises rub against van de Ven's enormously scaled family portrait. As one approaches the work, the information becomes less clear the closer one is to the image. The picture of women and girls, who all seem to look past their patriarch and picture-maker to meet and be dissolved by the viewer's gaze, simultaneously registers another kind of intensity in its placement on a blood-red ground.

Mug shots, IDs, and screen tests are photographic typologies typically used

for information gathering. The contact-sheet-like portraits, of person and scene, of Thomas's gridded polaroids are lead-ins to her larger-scale narrative works. This work reveals and revels in storytelling through what can and cannot be seen. A conundrum of near and far, here and sometimes there, is figured in Nayer's pictorially confusing architectural constructions. The monocular lens is confounded here, as it is in the repetition that structures Ahmed's, Thomas's, and Gill's presentations, as well as the pacing and rituals of Shah's video. This latter multi-channel piece wafts futurism, spirituality, and mythology, suggesting a subjectivity that evades prescriptive depiction.

Decoration in all its resplendence and labor is the facade of Sethaseree's huge, ambitious pieces. Colorful cut paper sheets—typical Thai decorations—overlay government/military-censored images of Thai news reportage. The repressed images are deemed, by the powers-that-be, a crime. Here, instead of ornamentation as crime, the crime is, as shown in these pictures, their censorship, a "making pretty" that is the mainstream's "normal."

Photography's power suggests a singularity, an authority that is only possible through ubiquity and repetition that, like words, when seen or said often enough, becomes believable, despite experience to the contrary. Words are thought to be substitutes for what is not present, making language the marking of a rupture, the gap between the thing and the pointing to the thing. Always pointing elsewhere in time and experience, words, like pictures, are reminders of what is

not there or here. They are what remains, the "this-has-been," as Barthes wrote. Present, so near yet so far, an all-at-once trace of what was, both a disturbance and a salve that so perfectly serves the circuitry of want never-sated. For pictures as for things.

Suspending disbelief, as opposed to suspending belief, is an act of will in which one puts aside one's disbelief, or skepticism, so as to experience a catharsis. This *Katharsis* for Aristotle or *Verfremdungseffekt* for Brecht depends on that suspension in order to bridge the distance necessary to traverse others' narratives. It is related, perhaps, to use another German term, to *Schadenfreude*, that special enjoyment one gets in viewing—from a distance—another's suffering. So too Laura Mulvey's "visual pleasure" speaks to looking's pleasing distance as well as its power, with its politics extending to the body and identity.

If suspending one's disbelief is an act of will, a choice, what kind of choice is it? "Have It Your Way," recently replaced by Burger King with "Be Your Way," is an imperative along the lines of Coca-Cola's "It's the Real Thing," the progeny of Milton Friedman's realm with its "freedom to choose." Is having it "my way," "be-ing" my way, being "real" limited to one of the 300 million photographs uploaded every day on Facebook? "Real" in photographs, as in life, is bound to history, politics, and socio-economics as well as author and viewer. Is being "real" really a menu option for all of us? For any of us? At all? A suspension of disbelief indeed.

What is available or appealing, sustaining or sustainable? Is it possible to entirely undo photography's imbrica-

tion in seemingly inescapable capitalism? And if so, what of its pleasures? Can there be pleasures in other structures, other systems? Making use of the impolite and irrepressible through photography, the artists in this exhibition deal in pre-tense that is, through various strategies, unsuspected. Unsuspending disbelief is to reckon with one's disbelief, to un-bracket the "real" of the picture as inalienable, as inalienable as our rights. By whom and for whom is this story enacted? These artists fully acknowledge the distance, separations, lacks, scars, and other stretchings that exist in our lives, and maybe thereby create the possibility of pleasures not predicated on closing one eye to and holding one's breath at inequalities and falsehoods. Rainbows, real in all their material glory, but with no pots of gold at their origin or end.

Special thanks to all the artists and workshop panelists as well as The University of Chicago's Gray Center, The Logan Center Gallery, The Arts Council, The Open Practice Committee, COSAS, The Center for the Study of Race and Politics, and Northwestern University, whose support helped realize this exhibition and related events. Extra-special acknowledgements to Autumn Clark and Ellie Hogeman, whose professionalism, enthusiasm, and smarts make them real partners in the curation of the show, and also to Karen Reimer for her empathetic and brilliant editing.

Laura Letinsky
Curator, *Unsuspending Disbelief*

