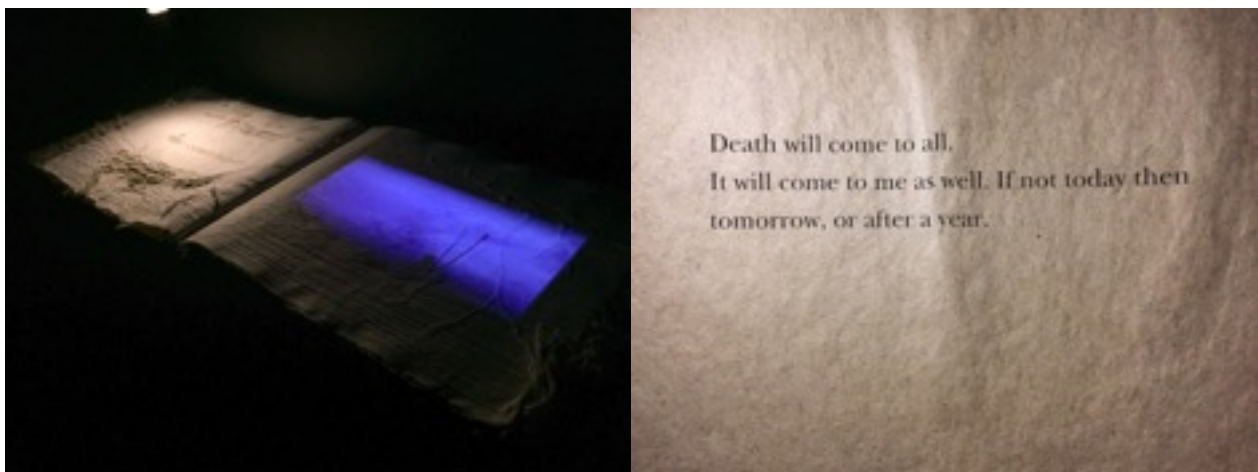


Gallery Exhibit Review - 'The Sovereign Forest' by Amar Kanwar
Natasha Lim G04

My first impression upon walking into the gallery was a striking one: it was as if I had walked face-first into a wall of darkness. Even after blinking a few times, my eyes struggled to make things out in the dimness of the gallery space. On my left, there was a video installation; in the distance, I heard noises that resembled chanting and murmuring. The gallery had been greatly transformed since my last visit - I recalled the airy spaciousness from the high ceilings and widely spaced-out walls, but in this context, the dim lighting created a sense of oppressiveness that was difficult to ignore. I felt as if it blocked out all my senses, suffocating me - it was a sensation that put me on the edge.



The first two works I approached was the video installation (immediately to one's left upon entering the gallery space) and a large book with text on the left and a video projection on the right.

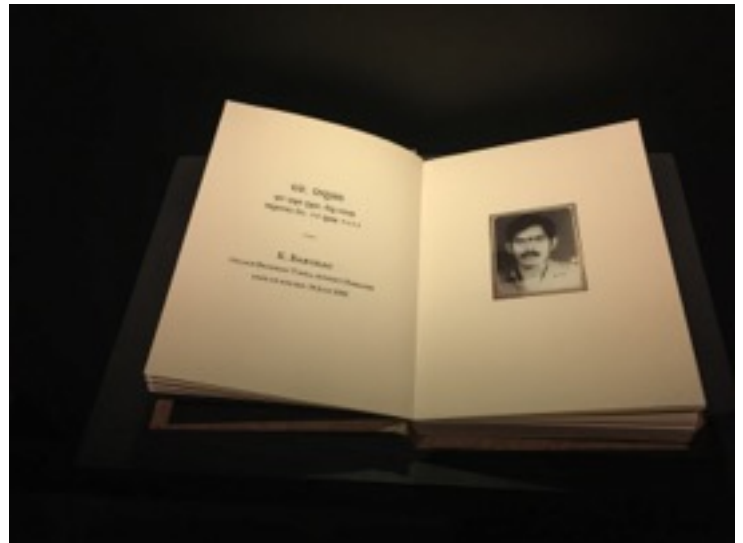
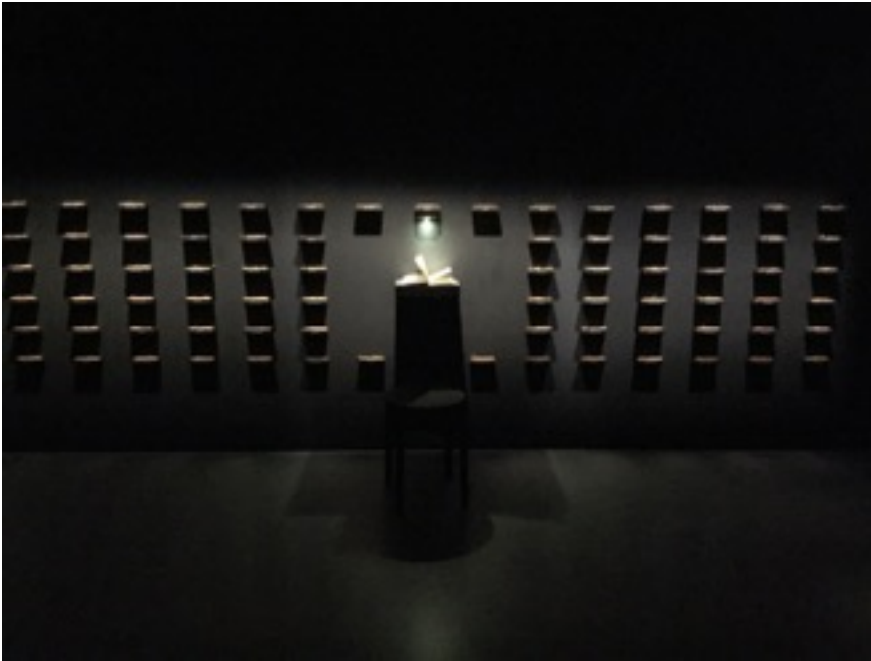


Fascinating. The fond exasperation that I often feel when visiting fine arts galleries was back, but I set aside the familiar feeling of being shoved out of my comfort zone and began to explore the gallery in hopes of understanding more about 'The Sovereign Forest'. It was then that I encountered the long wall of documents - clipboards with legal documents, newspaper articles, photographs, fingerprints, journals, maps. It was altogether rather overwhelming, and frustrating, especially given the lack of artist statements on the wall (which was a rare occurrence); however, I appreciated how Kanwar did not outrightly assert his stand, but rather allowed the audience to come slowly to their own conclusions, giving space for interpretation.





Out of the entire exhibit, the part of the work that I found most intriguing was the section exhibited in the centre of the gallery. When I first walked in, I saw rows and columns of rice grains, categorised neatly and obsessively; I also observed my classmates perusing small booklets set carefully upon ledges in the midst of the grid-like categories of grains.



It was the little booklet on the right wall which caught and held my attention, and eventually became the most memorable part of the work for me. It was also the work that helped me better understand Kanwar's intention. The contents of the book was summarised simply in uppercase font on the first page: in memory of farmers who have committed suicide in Odisha. The left pages contained the names and personal information of the farmer and the right pages held the portraits of the corresponding farmer mentioned in the left page. There were many names in that book, and many faces; it had been in that moment that I thought I understood what Kanwar's intention was. 'The Sovereign Forest' echoed the voices of each individual whose lives had been impacted by the corrupt government and the ongoing unrest, and I saw that in the lives lost in each and every individual whose names and faces have been recorded in that book.

Although I was not able to pay close attention to every single part of the work - and probably would not have been able to, given the sheer volume of documentation present and the fact that a lot of the words were in a language I did not understand - I felt a connection with Kanwar's work. While I may not have fully understood the political situation or historical context mentioned in the work, there was a heaviness in my heart. Kanwar had worked to uncover difficult narratives, focusing on the different little voices and stories of the people.

All in all, 'The Sovereign Forest' left quite a deep impression on me. Truly, art is about the stories. Often, the constant bombardment of imagery in our daily lives has caused us to become desensitised from what we see. As creative people, we were never meant to inform like a journalist or communicate like the media. Kanwar's 'The Sovereign Forest' is slow and meditative, requiring effort on the part of the audience to gain deeper understanding; it is different from conventional media (non-fine arts) as it is concerned with aesthetic and documentation rather than its function as an informative piece.