

aaj kal Exhibition Response

text by M. Doughty



The phrase *aaj kal* acts as a collective summoning of the present moment as informed by its past while also being full with potential futures. The artists Rhea Maheshwari, Tarika Sabherwal, brunelle dias, Tiffany Singh and Gitanjali Bhatt contribute conversations about movement and time through their recollections of presents past. They act as records, showing where their daily lives take place or even their psychospiritual state of being while producing a work. The categories past, present and future have been a hallmark of conceptualising time as linear, which is not a universal idea. Theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli reminds us that the word time itself is from an Indo-European root word that means 'to divide', implying there is a whole.¹ *aaj kal* reiterates the subjectivity of temporal experience by collapsing time to reunify it as an immersive body, rather than a straight line.

Maheshwari's paintings have often been described as tapestries for the way they unify multiple perspectives and use decorative and framing elements that reflect her embodied state while making the work. In recontextualising narratives from Hindu texts like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, Sabherwal gives voice to the value of the ritualism she was raised with and its significance for the similarly constant recontextualising people manage throughout their lives. There is a grappling with an embodied spirituality that makes time move differently in Maheshwari and Sabherwal's paintings. Rovelli notes that every mystical experience 'throws the faithful outside of time, putting them in touch with eternity.'² The questioning of place Maheshwari offers is rooted in deep traditions and in her lived present and is manifested in the layers of the landscape which become layers of experiences, places, and times. There is no distinction between a here/now or a there/then. Similarly, dias' paintings of friends sharing food focusing on the action of the meal table where the details of passing plates is almost certainly happening somewhere, begs the question, is this moment frozen at all? In a gallery, is anything stagnant?

The experience of time passing in a gallery unusually quickly, of being absorbed into the art you witness or participate in, is a recorded phenomenon. Galleries increase appreciation and understanding, but a similar level of ambiguity as

in a lab setting. In a 2014 study, on a screen in the lab, ambiguity was a cause for dismissal, whereas in the gallery it was cause for further exploration.³ The gallery setting heightening people's perceived understanding of an artwork is a testament to the importance of in-person aesthetic experiences. Bhatt's video work challenges ways of observing by interrogating visual traditions, Singh invites a widening of social awareness by including creative ones. Each are served by the stretching of time in the gallery, which helps in understanding how the works collapse the past onto the present.

The artworks in *aaj kal* feel as though they are occurring continuously rather than existing in a fixed state. In his exploration of how science considers time, Rovelli summarises that its best 'grammar for thinking about the world is that of change, not permanence. Not of being, but of becoming.'⁴ The practice of this awareness is something commonly discussed by artists who describe their work as a process, where the act of making determines some, or all, of an artwork. Rovelli explains that 'time' is actually 'spacetime', and just like gravity, it is a force composed of change and reciprocal influence. This implication may seem chaotic at first, until we recall that clock-regulated time has only existed since Europe's fourteenth century. Time zones were only invented in 1883.⁵ The religious texts Sabherwal's works build from are over two thousand years old; around the same age as the oldest archaeologically uncovered quilt. *aaj kal* accesses the long lived memories of creative traditions that predate modern conceptions of time. Folding layers of memory into their making and present moments, the collapsing of time feels old and familiar — as if it was never divided to begin with.

¹ Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time*, 2019, 53.

² Rovelli, 52.

³ David Brieber, et al., 'Art in Time and Space: Context Modulates the Relation between Art Experience and Viewing Time', <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0099019>, 2014.

⁴ Rovelli, 86.

⁵ Rovelli, 55, 67, 69.