

## Praneet Soi: Anamorphosis

Created and published during the Covid-19-induced global lockdown, Praneet Soi's book *Anamorphosis* serves as an afterword to his eponymous 2019 exhibition at the Mosaic Rooms, London, making it available for 'home viewing'. For more than a decade, the Amsterdam-based Indian artist has engaged with questions of political conflict, processes of labour, bodily and territorial trauma, and the homology between cultural and cartographic violence. These preoccupations inform the works that constitute *Anamorphosis*, 'the medieval technique of distorting an image such that it can be seen in its entirety only from one particular angle'. In the formats of both exhibition and book, *Anamorphosis*'s conceit lies in drawing attention to visibility as a physical and political condition in the colonised lands of Palestine and Kashmir, as well as drawing attention to their people's shared suffering.

A result of Soi's travels in 2017 through the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel, a region that he has been visiting since 2009, *Anamorphosis* was developed through an ethnographic mode: film stills, silverpoint drawings on linen, handwritten diaristic notes, pencil sketches and paintings, most abundantly of olive trees. These elements are interspersed with images of vivid, patterned tiles from Kashmir, the traditional motifs repeated throughout the book in various shapes and sizes. Soi has been collaborating with Kashmiri craftsmen for many years, including nationally acclaimed papier-mache master Fayaz Ahmad Jan. While the original London exhibition featured a single-channel video, *Yalla Yasmeen!*, with its constituent materials displayed separately in sections dedicated to both Palestine and Kashmir, the book is composed as a collage-like concatenation of those visual and textual records: strips of journal entries strewn across blown-up images, footage from Palestine, and Soi's illustrations framed by geometries abstracted from Kashmiri tiles, and the tiles in turn overlaid on the pictorial and notational documents from Palestine.

As its title suggests, going through *Anamorphosis* is governed by scopic play, with the optical functioning as a form of knowledge and truth-telling. On two pages, the map of Kashmir is subtly embossed onto the surface of the paper, the viewer expected to find the right angle to be able to view it. One instance of the map's appearance falls immediately after the excerpt from the Indian Constitution that accorded Kashmir special status, which was revoked in August 2019 by India's current Hindu nationalist government; here, the relevant section is obscured by a tile. The use of two paper stock types underscores the dialectic between the visible and invisible; in pages dedicated to the Canaan olive oil factory in Jenin, the glossy image of the factory's exterior silhouette was soon followed by a demystifying extreme close-up of its machines on matte paper.



Praneet Soi, spread from *Anamorphosis*, 2020

Over the past few years, Soi has segued from the more traditional studies of scale and form, exemplified by his miniatures and sculptures, to the use of time-based media, including moving images. For example, *Srinagar*, 2016, and *Notes on Labour*, 2017, based in artisan workshops in Kashmir and Kolkata, were digital works assembled through slide-show installations. *Third Factory*, 2018, deployed video projection as a substratum for Soi's drawings and stills from his visits to a storied 15th-century Srinagar mausoleum, a tile from which was replicated and manufactured in a Portuguese ceramic factory for the exhibition. *Anamorphosis* achieves similar effects through the revision and overlap of the exhibited film's stills and its processual matter. High-resolution tiles are juxtaposed with low-resolution film stills of the everyday, historical endurance intercut with the banality of life under occupation (shots of people spending a day by the sea, a glimpse of a residential neighbourhood or the long shot of a village waiting for a train to pass). Cinematic grammar, like close-ups of faces and objects and superimpositions of different archival moments, holds the reader's gaze while multiple iterations of the same scene on a page render duration in print form.

At the same time, the lack of narrative seriality within the structure of the book mimics a slide show. Soi, a student of the pioneering essay filmmaker Jean-Pierre Gorin, brings some of the genre's sensibilities to the artists' book form by way of gesture and montage. A logic of imbrication emphasises the coexistence of numerous perspectives, possibilities and linkages with seemingly faraway geographies. Outlines of one image hosting the details of another make apparent the connections between the struggles of the Kashmiri and Palestinian peoples. The 'freeze frame' aesthetic that converts the cinematographic into the photographic imparts a degree of certainty often missing in the story of conflict zones. Seeing has in many cultures been conflated with knowing, vision a method of substantiating belief. In *Anamorphosis*, iconicity becomes proof of presence in embattled regions, the visit itself a political act, as curator Reem Fadda has pointed out. The book provides an elegant coda to an artwork seeking to understand fundamentally unknowable pain by looking closely.

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**Kamayani Sharma** is a writer based in New Delhi.