

# DEEP TIME

In *we are opposite like that*, a commission for the 2019 Frieze Artist Award curated by Diana Campbell Betancourt, **Himali Singh Soin** portrays an alienating world set in remote areas within the Arctic and Antarctic circles. Brought to **Quoz Arts Fest** by London's **Block Universe** as part of a six-year cycle of research into archival practices of embodiment, it incorporated fieldwork from a 2017 Svalbard residency and live narration, playing on 19th-century Victorian fears in a poetics of paranoia.

Words by Nadine Khalil



Himali Singh Soin. *we are opposite like that*. 2019. (Still + print on aluminium). HD video, stereo sound, colour. Image courtesy of the artist

There's an added dimensionality to viewership when a film is performed in real time – it expands the frame. That's what happened when *we are opposite like that* was staged at Alserkal Avenue's Concrete to live music. Himali Singh Soin was present in person as in moving image, shrouded in a metallic silver suit that looked like aluminium foil of the sci-fi kind. "In the film, I'm wearing an emergency blanket, the kind first used by NASA to cover space robots because it contains heat," she explained. "The body and the landscape – both of which are containers of histories that are being lost – mirror each other." But it was more than just a prop providing a reflective surface. "The body is losing heat and the landscape is melting. The silver wrapping articulated this relationship."

Lending a sculptural effect, the suit became a textural feature, crackling like ice – like an instrument. It added to the ominous sounds of an

encroaching collapse. "I collaborated with musicians and an animator to make ice – seemingly so still and inanimate – move," she continued. The impulse was both atmospheric and archival as Soin dug deep into a Victorian anxiety about an impending Ice Age that would take over Britain. "Thrust into deep time, Victorians are cast as 'interglacial beings', existing fortuitously in a brief and unreliable moment of melt," the film reveals. Soin also drew from *The Arctic Home in the Vedas*, Bal Gangadhar Tilak's 1903 book on the North Pole being the origin of the Aryans in 8000 B.C., which responded to her prompt, "the state of the nation", with obvious political connotations. The underlying narrative here is a fear of annihilation of Empire, and an equating of historic glacial catastrophe with our climate catastrophe.



Himali Singh Soin. *we are opposite like that*. Performance at Concrete as part of Quoz Arts Fest 2020. Image courtesy of the artist, Block Universe and Alserkal Avenue. Photography by Jandri Angelo Aguilor



In layered images, ice is portrayed as all-subsuming, seductive, annihilating and crystalline. Reimagining the polar landscape as a post-human place of postcolonial ruins, destitute whaling stations, frozen fossils and rusted debris, the film opens with an inverted mountain rippling, and this mirage of a pixelated glacier regularly returns. "The Arctic, for me, is a space of non-knowing, despite recorded observations of the Aurora Borealis. There's a lack of certainty there because of the mirages. There are explorers who reported two suns and a red sky in their diaries, yet no one is really able to put a finger on reality," Soin explained.

In her recent article in *Momus*, "There's a Tongue for This": *Aurora as Art Writing*, she references a 1882 Swedish expedition that illustrated an aurora sighting in terms of a language of signs or 'scrawlings': "Could the aurora be a form of art writing? A new criticism, a different way of listening to the world?" By incorporating her own writing practice into the film, she is asking: what would ice say, if it were to speak? As an age-old witness of dramatic ecological destruction, ice is envisaged as a melting archive. The ice becomes her; a cyborg, a creature, a sound.

Soin further considers how an environment so hostile to human life is key to the survival of the planet as a whole – "*we are opposite like that* is about the tension between these intertwined opposites" – a tug of war that manifests in the eeriness of looming boulders of ice, immovable and yet moving in thick sheets. The sense of calamity, of "futures foreseen", is carried through the music, a mix of an original score for a string quartet and fragments of the Victorian composition *The Snow* by Edward Elgar. "I found many of the Arctic explorers describe the landscape in the tonality of muted strings," Soin added, explaining that her collaborator and partner David Tappeser coded the music's tempo with a graph of the latitudes, longitudes and temperature variances of her journey to the North Pole.

The visual layers are similarly coded, like a palimpsest, or an otherworldly time warp, part of the past and the future. As she orates in the film, "The last frayed edges of what she knew wilted... What had survived was ancient. She found fossils of ferns stacked in stone from way back when. Her own landscape was once opposite like that... She was thawing, dripping afterlife, still a thin haze persisted."