

## Flash: Archana Vikram

March 25–June 24, 2017

A woven cloth is draped over a vibrant red flower; the petals lightly press against the surface of the fabric. Near the bottom of the frame, the delicate folds of the cloth and subtle shadows appear to have been sculpted in place by the commanding black background on which it rests. Archana Vikram's *Smothered* (2016) is part of the larger series "The Unwelcome" (2014-16), which calls attention to the lingering, though illegal, practice of female infanticide in India. To create the series, Vikram constructs tableaux of objects and materials that allude to the ways in which an infant could be killed. Flowers, standing in for the infant, are crushed, submerged in water, or burned. The severity of their display is enriched by the stark black background as it does not permit the eye to stray from the scene.

India's most recent national census found that the sex ratio of the state of Maharashtra declined to 833 girls per 1,000 boys—significantly lower than the nation's average of 914.<sup>1</sup> While the exact number of cases of female infanticide each year is unknown, what remains clear is a strong preference for the economic and social value of male children, which, as Vikram writes, "is embedded in the cultural fabric of India."<sup>2</sup> The photographs that comprise "The Unwelcome" pointedly address the urgency of this continuing crisis that devalues the lives of girls and women. Vikram's work explores themes of loss and secrecy, suggesting through each tableau that these practices are neither overtly visible nor easily reconcilable.



*Smothered*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

Photography has long been used to document trauma, tragedy, and violence. The camera can act as witness to suffering, recording events with a seemingly transparent and truthful authority. However, Susan Sontag once famously critiqued the power of the photograph, calling the act of taking a picture a "non-intervention."<sup>3</sup> For the critic, the photograph obscures the event captured and therefore distances the viewer from it. Theorist Ariella Azoulay further expands upon the ethics of photography in our present age, arguing that the photograph should not merely elicit empathy, but also a sense of civic duty between the viewer and the subject photographed. The photograph, for Azoulay, is a means to mobilize.<sup>4</sup>

The difference between these writers' viewpoints is a matter of proximity. For Sontag, the photograph implies physical and emotional distance; the viewer is too far from the subject depicted. On the other hand, Azoulay's insistence on the relationships established through the act of taking a picture and being photographed would appear to bring the viewer physically closer. Through the camera's lens, the viewer is brought *into* the world in which the subject resides. Despite their differences, the photographs that Sontag and Azoulay discuss are always derived from actual events. They are photojournalistic images used to provoke, call to action, or illustrate a tragic event. So how might the viewer relate to a photograph that is outside the realm of

photojournalism? How might Vikram's tableaux impact the viewer?

Vikram's photographs are, of course, not documentary. They are not direct glimpses into the illegal practices of infanticide, and furthermore they do not contain any human figures at all. Rather, the images are metaphoric and poetic in nature: they depict traces of a fictive act that is left unseen. Charred edges of petals, powdery residue of drying flowers and dirt, and freshly broken stems demonstrate Vikram's sensitivity to tactility and the affective impact of each simple gesture. In *Smothered*, Vikram plays with proximity in yet another way. The flower is tightly framed in the composition, appearing prominently in the middle of the frame. The details unfold slowly and deliberately. One sees variations in the cloth's weave, the stray threads on the edges of the fabric, and finally, that the cloth is in fact damp, lending even more transparency to its surface. While the fabric directly points to suffocation, it also poignantly alludes to the very act of concealment that allows these practices to persist. How does one then try to make visible an act that is, by its nature, kept hidden? The photograph is a nuanced consideration of this question, bringing into focus the relationship between absence and presence, between life and death.

—Kelly Filreis

### Notes

1. "Foeticide is still rampant in state," *The Times of India*, June 9, 2016 (<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/Foeticide-is-still-rampant-in-state/articleshow/52679082.cms>, accessed June 30, 2016).
2. Archana Vikram, "The Unwelcome," artist's website, n.d. ([www.arcanaimages.com/Fine-Art/The-Unwelcome/i-HrkKHLV](http://www.arcanaimages.com/Fine-Art/The-Unwelcome/i-HrkKHLV), accessed June 30, 2016).
3. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin Classics, New York, 2002: 11.
4. See Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Zone Books, New York, 2012.

**Archana Vikram** (born in 1971 in Mumbai, India) is a photographer based in Bangalore, India. Her work was featured in a solo exhibition entitled *Sounds of Silence* at Alliance française de Bangalore in 2012, and has been included in exhibitions at the Soulcatcher Studio, Santa Fe; Fotoloft Gallery, Moscow; and as part of the 2016 International Biennial of Fine Art and Documentary Photography, Berlin, among elsewhere. She won a Moscow Foto Award in the Abstract category, 2015; received honorable mention from the International Photography Awards, 2015; and was a finalist for Photolucida's Critical Mass award, 2014, among other professional distinctions. Vikram studied at the Spéos Paris École de Photographie in 2013, earned her Master of Management Studies degree in Marketing at the

K.J. Somaiya Institute of Management Studies and Research, Mumbai in 1994, and earned her Bachelor of Science degree in Microbiology at Ruia College, Mumbai in 1992. *Flash: Archana Vikram* is the first solo museum presentation of her work.

**Kelly Filreis** is a scholar of modern and contemporary art, specializing in the manifold histories and theories of sculpture since 1960. She was the Spring 2016 Curatorial Intern at the CMP, and currently holds the position of 2016-17 McDermott Graduate Intern for Contemporary Art at the Dallas Museum of Art. During the summers of 2011 and 2012, she co-organized the "Art of This: One Nighter Series," two-month long programs of exhibitions, film screenings, and performances held in vacant storefronts in Minneapolis. She earned her MA in the History of Art at UCR in 2016, writing on the role of photography and site in Lynda Benglis's 1971 poured polyurethane installations, and her BFA at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design in 2011.

**Flash! contemporary art series** features single works made within the last year. The series is organized by Joanna Szupinska-Myers, CMP Curator of Exhibitions, at the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock. *Flash: Archana Vikram* is the fifteenth exhibition in the series.