



THE HIDDEN TRUTH

Enclosure/Erasure

Imran Channa
Koel Gallery, Karachi
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BY ZARMEENÉ SHAH

In *Enclosure/Erasure*, artist Imran Channa presents three series of works based on photographs derived from personal and historical archives, the latter specifically pertaining to Partition, questioning ideas of recorded histories and lived truths. Through a painstaking process of drawing, erasing and redrawing, he creates what seem to be abstracted landscapes and expressionist renderings through erasing what was once a realistic image. Working from a photographic series published in *Time* magazine that documented the Partition, Channa's process is critical to the understanding of the conceptual thrust of his works. The photograph is first copied precisely, drawn beautifully and rendered with an accuracy that remains faithful to the original image. It is then just as meticulously erased, leaving behind a series of marks that stand as indicators to the presence of the original, speaking of the veracity of historical documents and 'truths', written and rewritten according to those who disseminate them.

Since the early 19th century, photography has been linked to the idea of truth; the camera captures an indiscriminating image of what is present before it. However, just as the photographic image is loyal to what is in front of the lens, it is also limited in its scope, only able to capture a small piece of a much greater whole — and that, too, subjectively framed by the eye and hand of the photographer. Writers such as Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer have vigorously questioned, since the 1930s, the photographic image's relationship with the truth. In *Photography*, Kracauer proclaims, "The photograph annihilates the person by portraying him or her." For him, a photographic portrait is unable to "portray the knowledge of the original" and instead delivers just a fractured and abstracted slice of time, which can never contain the whole truth. Benjamin speaks of a similar eradication, terming this as the lost "aura".

In the context of Partition, the relationship between photographs and the idea of truth becomes critically important. Where lived histories and memories are at odds with recorded histories and 'facts', it is perhaps only through the consideration of the former that the whole truth, or perhaps Benjamin's lost aura, can be reclaimed. Where the repertoire of memory is able to construct the *sense* of a whole image, a photograph is merely a solitary fragment, removed from its context and unable to deliver both the whole and the truth, thereof.



Error | COURTESY KOEL GALLERY

Channa's three series displayed in the show manifest three different processes, each woven with history, memory and truth. In the *Eraser on Paper* series, intricately rendered drawings from the archival photos are made and then completely erased, leaving behind a trace image — a ghost — which, when closely viewed, reveals some part of the original image but as if through a veil. The veil of memory is invoked — distant and yet deeply felt.

The *Error* series enacts a similar erasure but the erasure lines in these works form marks across the surface, effacing the drawing; yet creating a surface on top of them. The intricate drawing underneath is not rendered completely invisible, but its clarity is lost. The expressionist marks formed by the erasing create layers of meaning which speak of felt and lived experience, of a truth far deeper and more powerful than that depicted by the photographic image.

The third series, *Memories*, repeats the process of erasure. This time, however, the image is juxtaposed alongside personal images from the artist's life. Personal and historical narratives, both drawn, erased, redrawn and re-erased, create a series of dense monochromatic works which evoke abstract landscapes where the personal and the historical are no longer distinguishable. Truth is at the heart of these works, truth that is lived and truth that is recorded.

Just as French philosopher Michel Foucault's entire philosophical project is concerned with uncovering that which has been rendered invisible to us through mechanisms of power and domination, Channa's works ask us to question the visible, to see with new eyes. By removing the crisp reality of the photographic image (and thereby its manipulative lens), he allows us to experience the whole embedded within it — the 'aura' of the thing, layered and complex, as the truth necessarily is. □