

El Dorado VIKRAM DIVECHA

Preview: 8 March
9 March – 1 May, 2022

Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde is pleased to present *El Dorado*, Vikram Divecha's third solo show at the gallery.

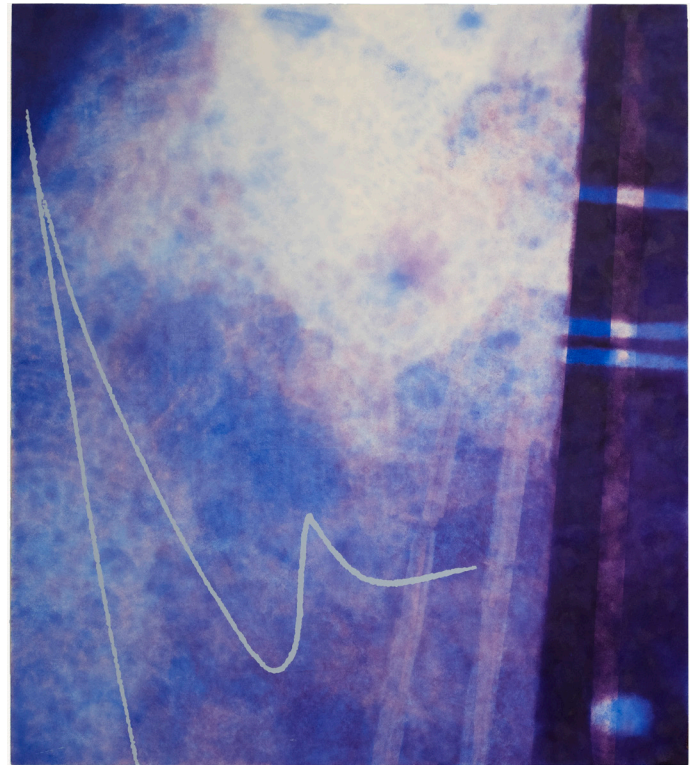
In December 2017, Divecha chanced upon a projectionist's block calendar diary among the refuse of the recently decommissioned El Dorado Cinema in Abu Dhabi. First opened in the 1990s on the capital's Electra Street, the El Dorado initially screened English language films before shifting to largely Bollywood and Tollywood films for South Asian audiences.

The events captured in the pages of the diary, unassuming and banal, became a springboard from which Divecha not only imagined a persona, but conjured a profound reflection on alienation, exclusion, and remembrance. The resigned poignancy of the diary entries—'as usual,' 'bulb changed today,' 'picture stuck, error come'—constituted a departure point for the genesis of a character blurring fact and fiction, an invisible projectionist, named simply 'K'. Borrowing from cinematic conventions of fictionalisation, Divecha renders, through K, an exhibition-as-portrait: even the obviously abstract paintings conspire to sketch out a character who was, by profession, on the margins. K's years of isolation in a dark booth echo not only the alienation that riddled our lives during lockdown, but also one that is hinged to current political events, and that eventually numbs our own political self-determination.

K's diaristic documentation of 'reality,' scrawled in the calendar pages, is scanned and printed on yellowed sandwich paper and mounted on wood panels evoking the thickness of the desktop block calendar. The entries allude to screenings in the El Dorado's two halls, the texts peppered with film titles and references to regional languages—Tamil, Telugu, or Malayalam (K's native tongue, since he hails from Kerala). Each print maintains the original calendar's dual Islamic/Western date system, which itself intensifies the temporal tension undergirding this body of work. Page (January 10) reads simply 'as usual,' acknowledging in writing the boredom that gripped K's spirit.

El Dorado includes a series of excerpts from a fictionalized screenplay, locating K specifically within the very idiom of cinema. These outtakes, screen printed white on inky black paper point at once to the sombre dwellings in which the projectionist passed his days. Assembled from informal conversation with El Dorado employees, an invisible personage is evoked, emerging from fragments of memory and invented figments. Considered together, the diary pages and screenplay excerpts function as a portraiture of absence.

This absence is further confounded by *The League Times Daily* 1982 January 12 (2022), a work stemming from Divecha's research with archivists to study activism in the 1980s in the north of Kerala, K's original home. Recalling the 1982 anti-government strike in India, the work—a scanned and printed article with the headline *The Youth Prepare for the General Strike*—suggests a politically active strand to the projectionist. Dated January 12, a week prior to the first general strike that rocked independent India, the article alludes not only to current farmers' uprisings in India, but offers an eerie foreshadowing of the violent authoritarian reaction that followed in 1982. We are led to believe that K would very likely have imbued a Keralite activism, albeit one that withered by 2017 in Abu Dhabi as he became absorbed not only by the obscurity of the booth, but also by the estrangement caused by capitalism-inflected labour. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, K's diary is punctuated by scribbles—marks, marginalia, and doodles, rendered unconsciously, at those moments of suspended time, when one relinquishes



Untitled Scene (Aimless Calligraphy, March 2), 2022
Oil paint and screenprint on wood panel

thought and action to an undirected automatism. Overtime, for Divecha, these "aimless gestures from the B-roll of life," began to echo the writings of Marx on the alienation of labour - where he states that worker's being subsumed in a cycle are rendered directionless, impotent. The scribbles then became an unexpected voice, an unintentional hand in the creation of the final work. Scanned and enlarged, the vector forms amplify the imperfections and details of these meandering lines. Silkscreened on the painted surface, they pivot between being exalted symbols and visual disturbances.

In the Aimless Calligraphy paintings, the directionless scribbles are juxtaposed with very purposeful beams of cinematographic light penetrating the space. This juxtaposition intensifies when we consider the typical scenes of hyper-masculinity which pepper South Asian cinema—determined protagonists enacting their wills to triumph, masters of their fate (for a few hours life is at odds with fatalism {often ascribed to Hinduism}, where higher powers steer the outcomes of believers' existences). Abstracted and intense, the paintings channel the vivid colours of South Asian cinema, swirling in light beams, lens flares, and other optical flourishes. Yet the paintings also suggest a movie-goer's state of mind, one of suspension, fantasy, escape.

Colours are modulated by 'glazing,' another layering process enabling a masterful range of hues; the scribbles are silkscreened atop these strata. Light filters through the translucent paint, reflecting off the white gesso to create an effect of soft glow. Like the cinema, the luminous paintings entangle light and colour in a work of seduction, of slippages that enable viewers to identify with conquering protagonists, of a moment of a suspended unreality in which we control our own fate. The paintings take on an explicit dual dimensionality: the depth of the seductive colour vs the flatness of the marks, which could be read as disturbances to the projected image, like 'floaters' in one's eye, indicative, perhaps, of the projectionist's own distraction. Demolished cinemas like the El Dorado have seen a surge of nostalgia, as residents bemoan the disappearance of architectural and cultural heritage. In *El Dorado*, Divecha attempts to archive not a place, but a life.



Untitled Scene (Aimless Calligraphy, March 25), 2022
Oil paint and screenprint on wood panel

About Vikram Divecha

Beirut-born, Mumbai-bred, Vikram Divecha is an artist based in Dubai. He holds an MFA in Visual Art from Columbia University and was a participant of the Whitney Museum's Independent Study program. Divecha's practice shifts between public art, site-specific interventions, installation, film, painting, drawing, photography, and text. His practice raises questions about time, value and authorship by engaging people across urban and social spheres and working with available material and space. Divecha terms this approach as 'found processes', which often sees him intervene within public and social systems. From wholesale exporters to municipal gardeners, architectural consultants to railway traffic managers, Divecha's participants inform and shape his projects in various ways, at times for sustained durations. His ambitious new 34-minute film *Dohrana* (2021) commissioned by Warehouse 421 continues his collaboration with Sharjah's municipal gardeners, exploring Urdu poetry, choreographic postures, movements and music within the ever-green aesthetics of urban landscaping and traffic islands. Divecha teaches as an Adjunct Professor at AUS (American University of Sharjah) in the College of Architecture, Art and Design.

Exhibitions include: *Portrait of a Nation II*, Manarat Al Saadiyat, Abu Dhabi (2022); *Sharbaka: Entanglement/Attunement*, 19 WSN, New York (2021); *On Foraging*, Expo 2020, Dubai (2021); *Conjuncture*, The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, New York (2020); *Towards Opacity*, Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai (2020); *Second Hand*, Jameel Arts Center, Dubai (2019); *Living Room: UIT (Use it together)*, ISCP, New York (2019); *Rock, Paper, Scissors: Positions in Play*, National Pavilion UAE, 57th Venice Biennale (2017); *Tamawuj*, Sharjah.

For any further information or press related requests please contact Christen Faver at info@ivde.net
Images courtesy of the the artist and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

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