Bernice Donszelmann

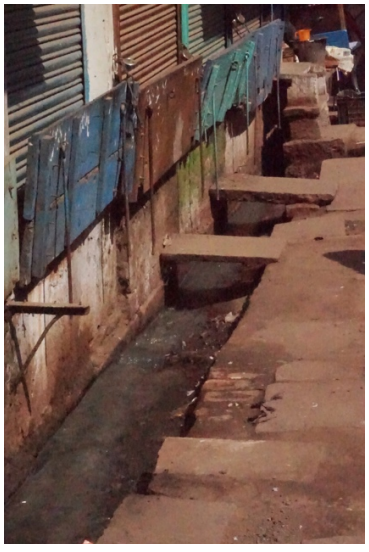
Shelagh Cluett Trust Residency 2020

Varanasi was to me a rich and strange place, sometimes very disturbing. In the time spent at the Alice Boner Institute in Varanasi it was, ultimately, daily life there that most captured my attention: the makeshift organisation of the city at a local level, the chaos of traffic (which I found exhilarating) and the management (or mismanagement) of dirt. While I had done some research prior to my arrival in Varanasi in February, I did not have a clear plan regarding what I would be looking into and potentially making there. I had emerged from a very busy year of exhibiting and, while the work was progressing well through this, I was looking forward to the opportunity to stop and rethink my studio work in response to the new context. My main daily activity centred on walking and making photographs. The works I had been making prior to coming to Varanasi had predominantly been floor pieces and the idea of the ground and forms of horizontal depth had been occupying me for some time. While it seems slightly disrespectful in the face of such a sacred ancient city, what fascinated me most as an artist was the way that life, housing and work in Varanasi relate to the problem of keeping separate the clean and the dirty, waste and processes of deterioration. (And it also illuminated the extent of energy and money dedicated in the wealthy west to keeping the ground from erupting through the surface and into our lives).

In my photography of the city, I was engaged with three main subjects:
Firstly, the character of the small shops and other commercial working spaces of Varanasi. I was interested in the thresholds between interior and exterior in and how that boundary is maintained. While I wasn't in Varanasi in the monsoon season, the impact of the regular flooding of the Ganges is also clear in the organisation of these spaces and their relationship to the street. Thresholds often appeared like bridges over moats and these spaces appeared to float above ground like pods or boats.





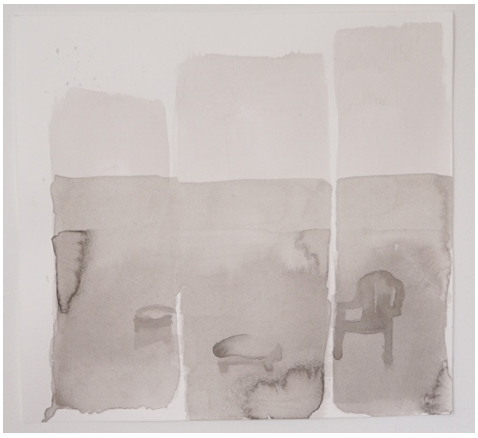


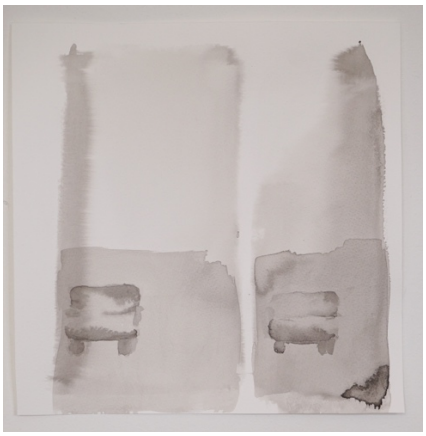


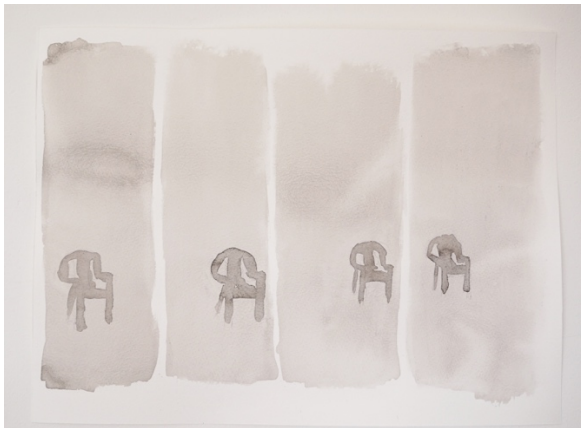




That idea occupied me imaginatively and, later in my stay in Varanasi, I began working on ink and paper works using my photography as a starting point. I began this only very shortly before the COVID crisis hit India and the situation began to change very rapidly. As such I only made a start with them at the ABI. However, it proved a very fortuitous starting point as the work from this has sustained me through lockdown in London and still is. (And, interestingly, the imagery of these isolated floating spaces resonates now with our current situation of social isolation).





Secondly, the museum at Ramnagar Fort, the former residence of Vibhuti Narayan Singh, the last king of Varanasi during British rule. The current museum at Ramnaghar which houses objects from Singh's period is an extremely ramshackle and badly maintained museum – to the point of being comical. It is a very male domain and heavily staffed with guards who are ferocious in enforcing rules regarding visitor's movement through the museum. However, the objects themselves were left in a very neglected state. The contradictions of the situation absorbed and intrigued me. Photography in the museum was not allowed. I managed to do some clandestine photography and was pleased with some results of the small number of photographs that I did succeed to make there. I had intended to work with Harsha and Anoop to obtain permission to photograph the site in a more serious and sustained way but the COVID crisis interrupted that. I very much hope to get back to Varanasi to pursue this project further at some point. I envisage it as a potential book project.









And, finally, the parallel world of the feral dogs of Varanasi. I was especially interested in how utterly indifferent these animals are to human society. I made a large number of photographs of sleeping dogs but would have liked to have been able to develop a combination of moving and still image. The sleeping dog photographs were the subject of a daily drawing practice.









My experience of Varanasi was much different than expected insofar as the COVID crisis interrupted it so dramatically. As my last week there was largely caught up in the panic of arranging flights back to the UK, my stay did feel short. However, the time that I did have there was thoroughly memorable. The Alice Boner Institute was delightful in scale and in character. The hospitality of the staff, Harsha and Anoop, in particular, was exceptional. I felt very well looked after and consistently supported through all the different phases of my stay. It was an extremely congenial (and often humorous) company. The company of the two other artists there – Dieter Kuhn and Filip Haag – was a further boon to my experience at the ABI. They had been at the ABI for two and a half months already by the time I arrived and they were very welcoming and generous. We formed a strong bond, especially in the face of the shared experience of the looming COVID crisis. Mealtimes were very sociable and Harsha and Anoop joined us regularly for lunch. The German academics on site – Uta Huesken and Jörg Gengnagel – and their Sanskrit class students added a further rich dimension to the experience. They were extremely generous both with the depth of their knowledge of Varanasi and its history and their regular invitations to us to join them on various cultural visits and excursions with the Sanskrit class: an initiation ceremony as well as a guided tour of the ancient Kashi pilgrimage route. Harsha facilitated a meeting with Suresh Nair from the Department of Fine Art at the BHU and a visit of the site. It was planned that I would give a talk there on my work but this was unfortunately disrupted by the COVID situation. Harsha also kept us very well informed of a range of cultural events and I enjoyed some wonderful concerts of Indian classical music of which I have become a fan.

I would like to thank the Shelagh Cluett Trust for giving me this wonderful opportunity. The experience has been invaluable.