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TRAVELLING ART





On the cover: Yamini Nayar.
Study 7 (Detail). C-print.
28 cms x 35.5 cms. 2009-2012.
Image courtesy the artist and
Jhaveri Contemporary.

A Heap of Broken Images

Yamini Nayar is an inspired explorer of liminal spaces, observes **Abhay Sardesai**.



Yamini Nayar. Photograph by Kate Cunningham.

Summoning the ardour of a collector and a collagist, Yamini Nayar assembles irregular worlds out of the random debris of everyday life on table-tops in her Brooklyn studio: paper strips, glass shards, wooden panels, segments of thread and lengths of wire lying around in alleyways and street corners are carefully gathered and intuitively arranged to create chaotic sculptural forms. The haphazard constructions look incomplete but strategic – memory and

desire mix in unexpected ways to create spaces that have been pulled together to create worlds that have fallen apart. These painted, glued and ripped constructions, often carrying fragments of found images, are captured by the eye of a large format camera and then, discarded; their process of *being*, which is, in fact, a progressive *staging* of built environments, approximates a performance that Nayar frames in her photographs.

Born to a Bengali mother and a Malayali father in New York in 1975, Nayar grew up in Detroit before studying photography and related media at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), Providence, and the School of Visual Arts, New York. The family moved to Detroit from the East Coast in the late '70s, where her father began work as a manufacturing consultant in the auto industry and her mother began studying towards becoming a psychoanalyst. Nayar remembers wanting to be a poet – she even studied literature and writing at Eugene Lang College in New York.

An archive of fragments, most of Nayar's photographs index an anarchitectural trove of traces, preserving a record of a diorama that has been demolished, a model that has vanished, a display that has been abandoned. The act of documentation here becomes an inquiry into the multi-angular enthusiasms of the act of representation. What stands between detritus and its afterlife *as* detritus is the photograph. Not only does it arrest the ephemeral moment of status transformation as far as the abject material is concerned but it also memorializes the anti-monumental in a non-ironic manner. Nayar's images are evidential – they authenticate the obvious, yes, but at the more metaphorical level, they draw you into a Barthesian landscape of loss although without the attendant lament.

How does a flat, two-dimensional image, in this case, a photograph, accommodate the assortment of aspects that an object,

assemblage or installation possesses? What are its sins of omission? This line of interrogation, initiated by Cubism a 100 years back, is extended by Nayar to record difficult environments that she fabricates – as the scales clash, the dimensions collapse and the shapes speak to each other in asymmetric accents, entering her photographs becomes a challenging task. The best of them come across as unnavigable. A sense of damage

hangs heavy in the spaces. There is mystery as well but it is neatly bereft of any ardency – you won't find the ruin being romanced here.

If one looks at the better works from her second solo at Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai, *Harpoon*, in 2012, one detects a commitment to exploring the brutal visuality of disharmonious zones¹. *Ethos*, for instance, is an image of what looks like a

whitewashed Styrofoam box with windows framing crusty black beehive-like masses that loom large over a vacant parking lot. Not only does this devastated complex, supported by a scabrous concrete block, bring to mind sites that have been bombed out of their equanimity and buildings with corporate offices that have collapsed but also

Yamini Nayar. *Ethos*. C-print.
101.6 cms x 127 cms. 2012.



public religious festivals, especially in South Asian cities, and their after-effects – the disrespectfully dismantled pandals and their ill-fated Plaster-of-Paris friezes. *In Waiting* shows a maquette for an ill-fated stadium or suburban aerodrome against a cratered road with a sharply defined kerb. The image looks like it is solarizing slowly from the left. Bursts of orange light seem to brighten up Escherian stairways in *Happen*. Some strips of wood try to contain the black galactic landscape in incomplete frames even as some others fan out of one of the suns – from where, incidentally, proliferates an array of horse-head stickers.

As you stand before Nayar's more challenging images, it is not the complex orchestra-

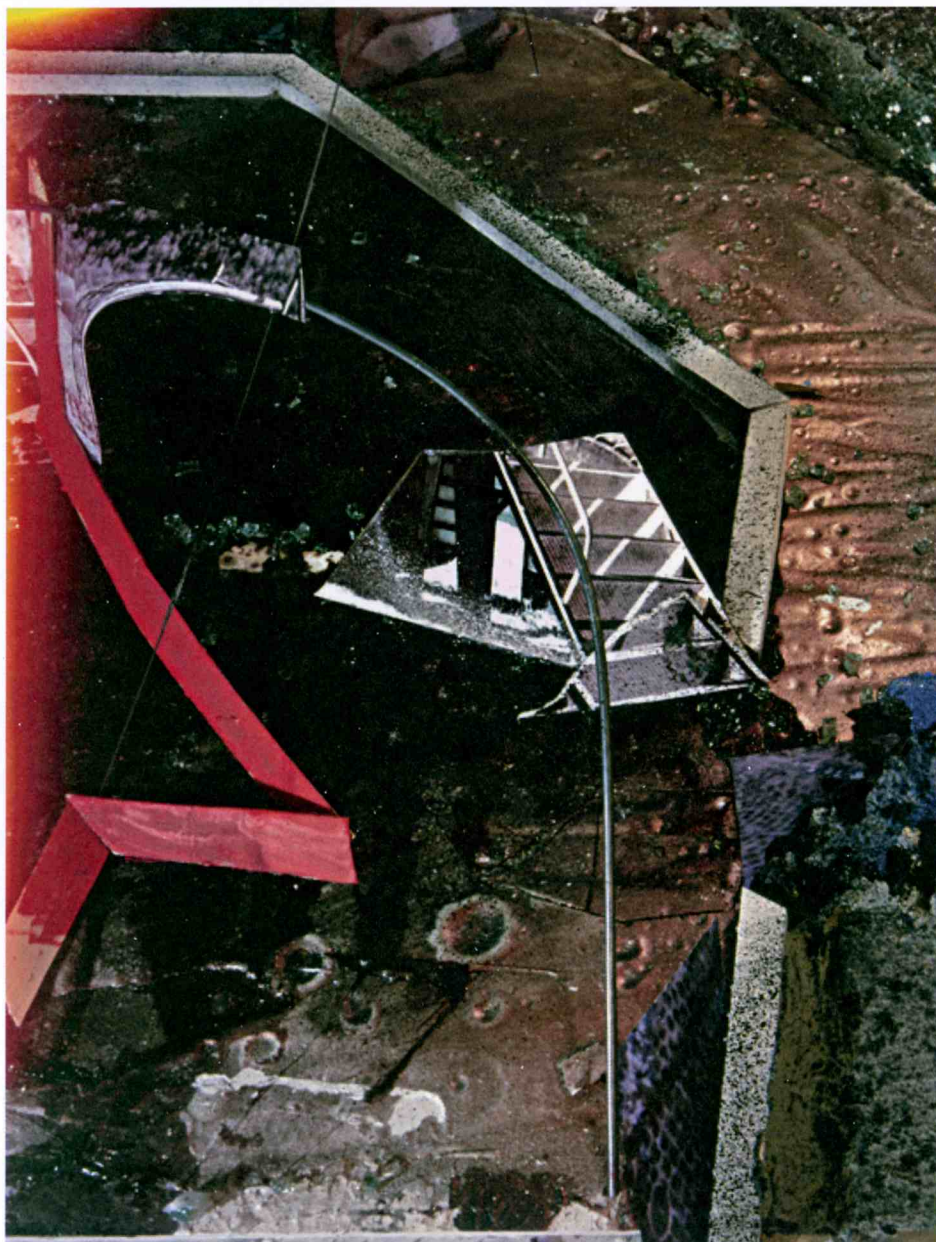
tion of the rubble that casts a spell; it is the absence of obvious points of entry into the photographs that makes them enigmatic. They often test the critic's skills of description and his talent for making the descriptions comprehensible. Often, there are no narrational toe-holds; the edifices have an ambiguous status and the violence they have suffered seems unaccountable and startlingly generic.

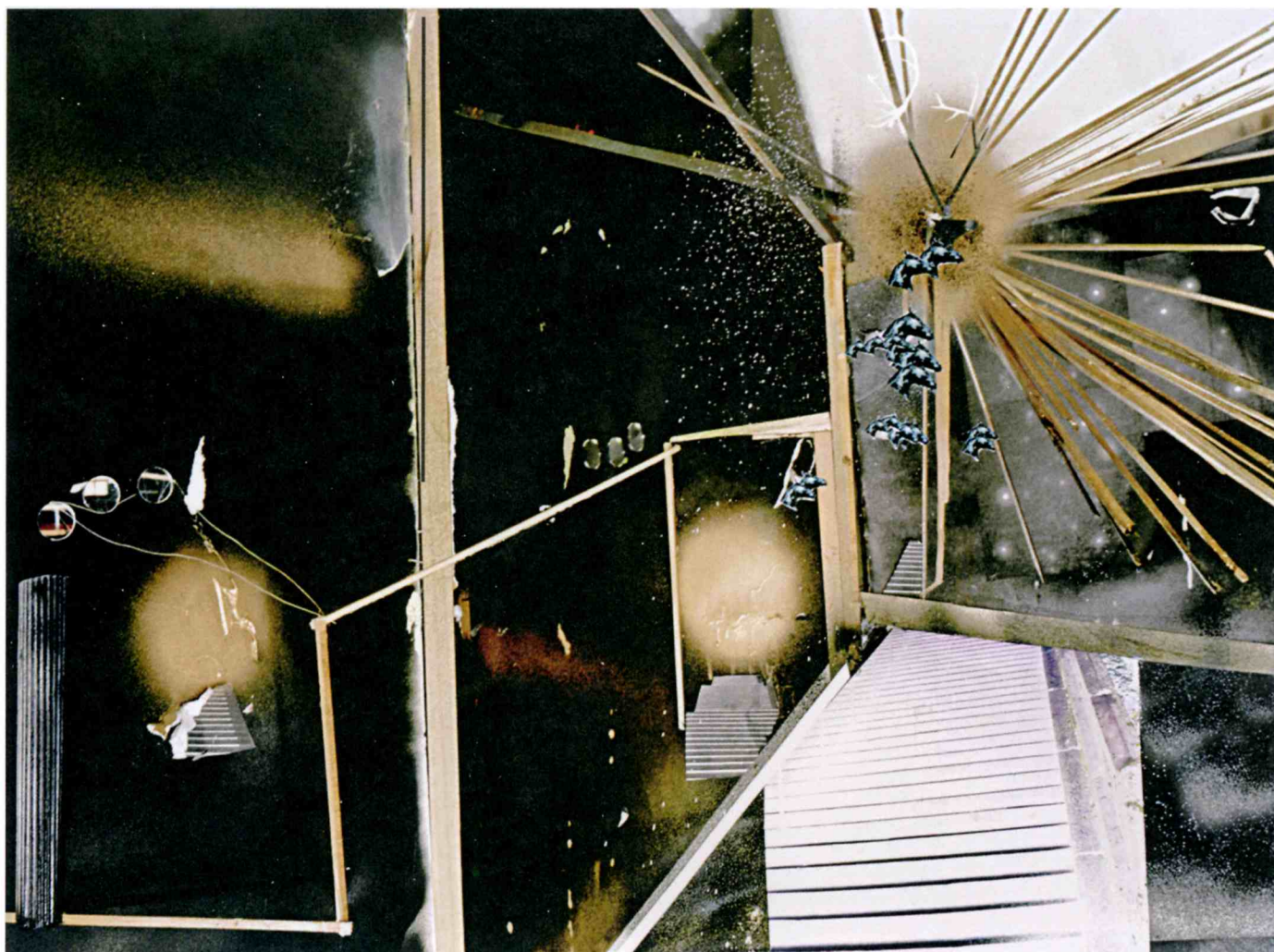
Interestingly, Nayar begins her work with a meditation on "utopian visions". Moments from the grand narrative of Modernism often offer her the initial inspiration. A few of her photographs are strewn with art historical clues – the eye on the wall staring at you across a torn floor in *Cleo* is

a wink at Surrealism, the muscular legs in the cheerfully composed *Pursuit* is a nod in Richard Hamilton's direction. However, it is modernist architecture with its contents and discontents that Nayar has obsessively mined and drawn from. In fact, Nayar remembers taking a class at RISD in the Department of Architecture where she studied opera houses exhaustively.

How does a building occupy space and what is the to-and-fro of the conversation that its interiors have with the exteriors? How is history housed and how is its evacuation a function of time? Though most of

Yamini Nayar. *In Waiting*.
C-print.
101.6 cms x 76.2 cms. 2012.





Yamini Nayar. *Happen*. C-print. 76.2 cms x 101.6 cms. 2009. Images courtesy the artist and Jhaveri Contemporary.

the structures in Nayar's better works look anonymous, a work like *Cascading Attica*, for instance, with its frozen sheet of water against a makeshift building with square windows and a dome comes across as a quirky tribute to Frank Lloyd Wright's Falling Water House in Pennsylvania. "I've been influenced by the architectural photographs of Julius Shulman and Ezra Stoller", says Nayar. "What drew me to their images originally was an awareness of their reach in creating a language of architecture and modernism that conflicts or exists separately from its realities", she adds. Neat and ruled, white spectral lines are traced out of a pier on the verge of complete disintegration in *Study 7*, for instance. Here as well as in other such works like *Untitled Study 1*, the diagrammatic grid, often part of the planner's drawing board, affords Nayar the opportunity to launch into a critique of industrial modernity. Having fallen from grace as a thriving automobile town

in recession-hit USA, Detroit is a ghostly presence in Nayar's work; spaces like riverside quays and warehouses anchor her memories and their contaminations.

Even those of Nayar's works that do not show crumbling spaces have a disquieting quality to them. In photographs like *What's Essential* or *Salute* featuring domestic objects, there is a stillness that comes across as clinical and ominous.

There is something liminal about most of the spaces that Nayar presents before us in her new works – they are abrupt, transitional and apocalyptic. The debris in these spaces strikes uncertain poses – one imagines it mounted somewhere on the threshold between the global slum and the global mall. One is quite convinced about where Nayar stands though: in the middle of tedious chromatic equations and the dated play of half-forms and quarter-forms of other practitioners, she is among the few who are developing new approaches to abstraction as an art genre.

END-NOTE

1. In her first show at Thomas Erben in New York (2009), Nayar shared space with the brilliant Sheela Gowda. Her second show was at Thomas Erben in New York (2011).