

**Neeta Madahar**

*Nature Studies*

Preview of work at Purdy Hicks Gallery, London

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Photographers are so frequently assumed to be the kind of people that scurry around the world documenting this and that, dipping in and out of different societies and cultures, collecting mementos of life. However, there are those photographers who find their subject and make it part of their daily ritual. Neeta Madahar, whose exhibition *Nature Studies* is currently showing at Purdy Hicks Gallery, is one of those artists. Her advice to students is simple: "Making work over the long-term is what counts...Figure out what you need, and where you need to live in order to make work." The series *Sustenance* — one of three projects that makes-up *Nature Studies* — has been published in several journals, exhibited internationally and was made over the course of eighteen months, within the confines of her garden.

*Sustenance* was made as part of Madahar's MA that she earned from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Massachusetts. The series of saturated colour images documents the birds that visited the bird feeders in her Framingham garden. The use of a large-format camera with flash on a long shutter-release enabled Madahar to create very intimate studies with exceptionally high visual clarity. The images have frequently been compared to dioramas, due to their almost impossible perfection, and the static, almost portrait-like depiction of the birds. Indeed, the diorama was a medium that Madahar showed an interest in working with, but like many artists she turned to photography in order to add a mechanical element to the work. In this series, the physical distance between Madahar, camera and subjects is quite unique, and posed some problems for her, primarily that she could not be aware of precisely how the birds would be composed in each photograph. The *Sustenance* images are therefore a result of the photographer using senses other than sight: She was required to study the bird

songs to tell which species were feeding, and observe their behavior for when would be the best moments to make exposures.

As a British citizen of Indian decent working in the US, themes of migration and transition are also integral to Madahar's work. This is articulated with the constant camera angle and position of the bird feeders within the garden, around which the seasons change; different species of birds visit her garden as the leaves change colour before dropping from the trees. This cyclic element of the project, and the mundane of the everyday, is perhaps what Madahar is referring to in the title of the project, as well as the symbiotic relationship between her and the birds.

*Falling*, a new project, is again a piece of work concentrating on a very specific, repeated motif, this time of falling sycamore seeds. Accompanying five still images (of *real* falling seeds) is a video piece that features digitally generated sycamore seeds which appear from nowhere, or as if from the heavens, and spiral and dance their way hypnotically towards the camera / viewer. The presence of still images to accompany the video work (or vice-versa) is quite interesting, considering how *Sustenance* was received by some viewers, who found that the saturated colours and composure of the birds must have been the result of some digital jiggery-pokery. Not only does *Falling* have traces of the age-old discourse on the dichotomy of the still image and the animated image, but Madahar's embrace of the technology pokes a tongue at the tiresome populist debate upon the digital *verses* the chemically produced image.

The video is set to original music by Miguel d'Oliveira which adds an even deeper sense of child-like wonder to the images, particularly the use of the xylophone. Like the birds to Madahar's garden, the seeds are also visitors passing through, bringing with them a nostalgic memory. Indeed, like many other artists, the garden seems to be an important place for Madahar. Perhaps as it is the place where a child first embarks upon an encounter with nature, albeit domesticated — close enough from their parents to feel safe, yet with enough distance to provide a space for imagination and site of adventure.

The garden — a space where Man attempts to piece together his own ordered version of Nature's chaos — may help to illustrate the fundamental characteristic of Madahar's practice, which is a relentless tension between the random and the structured: The constant camera angle, yet without knowing

precisely what is in shot in *Sustenance*; the computer-generated, precise rotations of the sycamore seeds yet darting erratically around the screen; and finally, executed precisely in the series *Cosmoses*.

These large abstract photograms, consisting of origami Cosmos flowers (cosmos meaning a harmonious whole and named due to their perfect symmetry) were composed at random, as necessitated by the photogram process. Madahar scatters the origami flowers on the photographic paper a little like a gardener sows seeds in a flowerbed. Again we see a convergence of the chaotic (the photogram) and the scrupulous (the meticulously designed and built origami flower). The title also refers to space; the infinite cosmos consisting, to the naked eye, of an apparently abstract arrangement of heavenly bodies, yet capable of being structured within ancient and complex astronomical and astrological systems.