

As long as

The American artist Ajit Chauhan takes a subtly semiotically subversive approach in his work. The places and scenes in his erased postcards seem latently enigmatic, they lead to distant places that seem to have fallen out of time, and yet at the same time they seem intimate and bring the viewer close to them. In terms of content, the old postcards, which have been processed by carefully removing and scratching off the upper layers, always remain in limbo, even if at first glance they show images such as flowers or waterfalls. However, Chauhan is not concerned with shifting signs, breaking context or semiotic deconstruction; rather, a dimension of the invisible plays a decisive role in his understanding of the image. Chauhan's work is fundamentally characterized by an attention, even attentiveness, to the small, often inconspicuous things. The found, the accidental, but also the abstract and energetic qualities of places, things and materials form the inherent vocabulary of his visual poetry.

Ajit Chauhan was a guest at AIR – ARTIST IN RESIDENCE Lower Austria in November and December 2023. During an earlier, first stay in spring 2022, an intensive exchange developed with the artist, not only about art, images and visual poetry, but also about questions of the construction of reality, nature and being. The second invitation at the end of 2023 was now entirely dedicated to the realization of a solo exhibition. *As long as* is less intended to show a specific selection of works than to reflect Chauhan's thinking in and with images in the sense of a spatial-poetic staging. The exhibition space functions as a kind of multidimensional "image carrier" that not only accommodates Chauhan's small picture poems, but also lends space to their inter pictorial interplay as an independent mental and staging agent. Voids and interstices, i.e. aesthetic emptiness and semantic voids, form the essential vocabulary of Chauhan's poetry, which is extended into the spatial. The viewer enters a specific, but also highly immaterial and absent space of inter pictoriality, which takes account of Chauhan's deeply relational holistic view that permeates the superficial appearance of things and relates the visible to the invisible.

Chauhan's pictures seem to draw on an almost magical way of thinking, similar to that early phase of childhood in which the real, the imaginary, the real and the fictional do not yet appear (or cannot be separated) from one another and thus flow into one another. The artist works, also influenced by the cinematic, with the associative, the enigmatic, with reciprocally charged content, with layers of memory, but also with ideas of emptiness and rhythm, which is ultimately also essentially reflected in the hanging of the pictures, in the spacing in and between the pictures.

For Chauhan, the visible, the manifest, proves to be transitory. He is less interested in the given, the observable per se, than in the relationship to it, which is variable, reciprocal and limited according to the respective point of view. Chauhan thus also inherently asks about the standpoint, the perspective of observation. What do I see, from where, what is visible, what eludes the gaze? He searches for the point at which perception and thinking begin to reflect on themselves, on their own conditions and limitations. The question of seeing flows seamlessly into one of recognizing and understanding, which are consequently also subject to the premises of point of view and limitation.

The source and carrier material for the pictures shown in *As long as* are almost entirely old postcards. Two series of works form the main repertoire of the exhibition *As long as*. In the first series of pictures, Chauhan confronts the viewer with almost "portrait-like" depictions of various flower heads. However, Chauhan understands the flower in these old colored postcards less merely as a special object of perception and aesthetic contemplation. Rather, in the sense of a temporal metaphor, it stands for a special, beautiful, yet per se transient moment. According to the artist, it functions as a kind of crystallization point, it symbolizes a special moment (of being) and is able to arrest and stop the usual, conventional, everyday, functional perception for a moment.

Chauhan counteracts the sometimes latently exaggerated depiction of floral beauty with a “negatively” produced pictorial layer: the artist carefully exposes a kind of web by scratching and scraping, so that the viewer can recognize an almost deceptively real spider’s web covered with water drops, which seems to be stretched over the respective pictorial space, ergo the respective flower. Only on very close inspection does the web become recognizable as something made. The production time, the contemplative and at the same time highly concentrated process of uncovering, itself becomes a kind of temporal signature, an indexical trace of the action.

Through this subtractive “drawing” process, the barely recognizable removal and peeling of the upper layer of the picture, the artist creates an additional level of representation that semantically changes and expands the respective pictorial narrative. Chauhan covers all the colored depictions of flowers, but also the pictures in the second series, which show old black-and-white depictions of waterfalls, with a wet spider’s web. The web, or more precisely: the idea or topos of the web, not only forms a recurring pictorial cipher for Chauhan, it also has a symbolic and metaphorical dimension. In the sense of a metaphor of being, Chauhan refers back to the Hindu creation myth of Indra, which sees the world per se as a highly relational structure in which the visible is also related to the invisible. The net thus reflects a holistic model that thinks of the world as a structural relationship of its own entity and not just as a mere sum of details. Each drop of water is able – in this understanding, far more than just visually – to depict all other drops, which can stand for things, circumstances, but also moments and events, and to react to them in inherent interdependence.

On closer inspection, each of Chauhan’s nets proves to be individual, a composition made for a single ephemera. In some cases, the artist seems to frame the respective motif, to ensnare it; in others, the net unfolds a complementary level that lends space to an independent pictorial-spatial dynamic. Thus each card proves to be a discrete scene of an inner compositional but also semantic dialog between flower and net or waterfall and net. It is no coincidence that the artist gives each card a title that also semanticizes the imagery, such as *Suggestion*, *Afterthought*, *Nostalgia*, and *Water, Harmonices*, so that the card is able to form its own little world, a coherent field of semantic transfer and charge.

The pictures in the second series of postcards, which show different waterfalls, are also each covered with a “wet web”. Here, the motif of water can be found on two levels, although the metaphors point in different directions. The primary “pictorial object”, the waterfall, enters into a symbolic dialog, but perhaps also into a dialogue with the metaphor of the “wet web”. In both cases, water is not only something fundamental, essential to life, but also always the same in the sense of an element, and yet always different. As a waterfall, it functions as an analogy for being and becoming, indeed for life itself, through the idea of flowing, of the stream. On the net, on the other hand, in the form of the manifold drops, it forms a kind of mirror medium. Each drop is capable of “seeing” all the others, reflecting them and thus reacting to them. Each of the crystallization points thus inevitably proves to be connected and interdependent with all the others.

By showing the viewer old postcards, Chauhan opens up the view towards different times, towards the past. From the pictures, the viewer sees the past and “radiates” into the present. Conversely, and in terms of the aesthetics of reception, i.e. entirely for the individual viewer, the present is also able to be reflected in the past and connect with it. Through the gentle initiation of these interactions of mutual contemplation, Chauhan transcends the familiar scheme of actual perception and its here and now.

With Chauhan, the viewer may ask himself what these pictures “want” from him. Do they show at all, do they address a specific reader or viewer, or are they largely self-sufficient? With Chauhan, however, it is not a question of merely showing or presenting the edited cards, but of staging a specifically articulated interaction between the images. The artist works subtly but just as purposefully with the positioning of the pictures, but also with the emptiness between the pictures, in order to unpretentiously help those inner and inter-pictorial correspondences and charges to take effect. It almost seems as if the images in the matrix of Chauhan’s spatial staging enter into a mysterious relationship with each other and “speak” to each other. Emptiness, the erased and the omitted are not only recognizable as inherent aesthetic vocabulary of Chauhan’s pictorial-spatial poetics. The empty spaces between the pictures and the

interruptions in the “meter” of the hanging form a constitutive part of a grammar with which Chauhan helps his pictures to speak, even to “think” in their own way.

Chauhan succeeds in undermining superficial forms of image reading and perception with a few subtle pictorial and spatial choreographic interventions. The viewer is challenged to synthesize the alienated, desemanticized “material” in his own way. Thus, 16 of the 30 erased postcards can be found on double-sided support frames mounted on 8 thin, free-standing vertical iron rods, which together form an imaginary wall. The empty space, whether in the form of rhythmic spaces between the pictures or in the form of those absences synthesized into a wall, is thus ascribed a per se evocative agent that not only significantly shapes the exhibition dispositif, or more precisely in the viewer’s experience of it, but also penetrates and transcends it.

Ajit Chauhan’s focus is directed beyond the merely superficially visible, the empirically given, ultimately towards the non-visible and non-material. He is essentially interested in “nouema” (Kant), which, in contrast to the sensually perceptible “phenomena”, can only be grasped in thought. Chauhan works subtly on the transitions between these categories and quantities, i.e. between the observable, the visible and the imagined, the conceptual and ultimately the spiritual.

Ajit Chauhan’s visual language can neither be reduced to the enigmatic and pictorial, nor to working with empty spaces and absences. Rather, its peculiarity lies in their interdependence and semantic interaction. Chauhan’s artistic practice, his subtle as well as intimate pictorial-spatial language with images and absences reflects a way of thinking that seeks to transcend the visible, indeed understands it as transcended per se, and in doing so pursues a concept of reality that cannot be separated from questions about the relationship between oneself and the world, that which is changeable in the constant.