

*Where should the plants sleep after the last breath of air?*

Solo Project by

**R a s h m i m a l a**

Presented by

**The Guild**  
*Art Gallery*

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*Where should the plants sleep after the last breath of air?\**

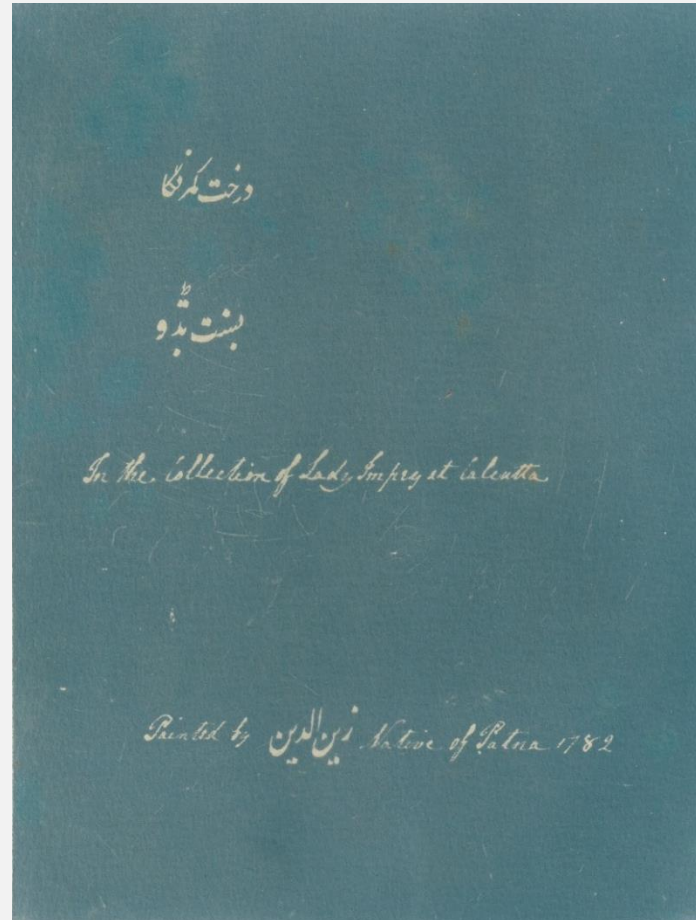
In this body of works I seek to re-present plants. It appears as if these plants are suspended in time almost without a context or even without a shadow. A plant found growing in the pavement shares the same space as another from the pages of an illuminated manuscript, a colonial herbal compendium or a medieval visual atlas. However, all these plants are keenly drawn from political contexts. In some of the series here, they represent shifts in agricultural practice because of colonisation. In others, they represent a newly emerging ecology of urban botany. Sometimes, they represent those weeds on which we do not cast an eye, or do not even sometimes recognise them as plants. Taken together, these works represent a botanical ecology which is so interdependent with a zoonotic universe and human intervention. In effect, this body of work that seems to be hanging in air, almost without context actually carries the burden of both the politics of our time and a history of representation.

And, although it appears that the hyper-real idiom which I use seems to be erasing all notions of context, in fact, a history and politics are embedded in the rendering of the very body of the plant. These paintings are an exploration into the act of representing a plant. I draw, therefore on multiple sources from the history of botanical illustration, placing myself within the genre but equally in my own time.

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\*Quote from Palestinian poet and author Mahmoud Darwish's poem *The Earth Is Closing on Us*.

I would like to remember and acknowledge all the numerous artists who contributed to the various genres of representing plants whose names remain unrecorded.



Cyanotype reproduction of inscription on a painting showing signature of the artist in Persian (lower bottom) in the line that reads: *Painted by [shaikh zayn-al-din] Native of Patna 1782*; form *Impey Album* (1777 – 1782).

## Common Weeds



*Common Weed*



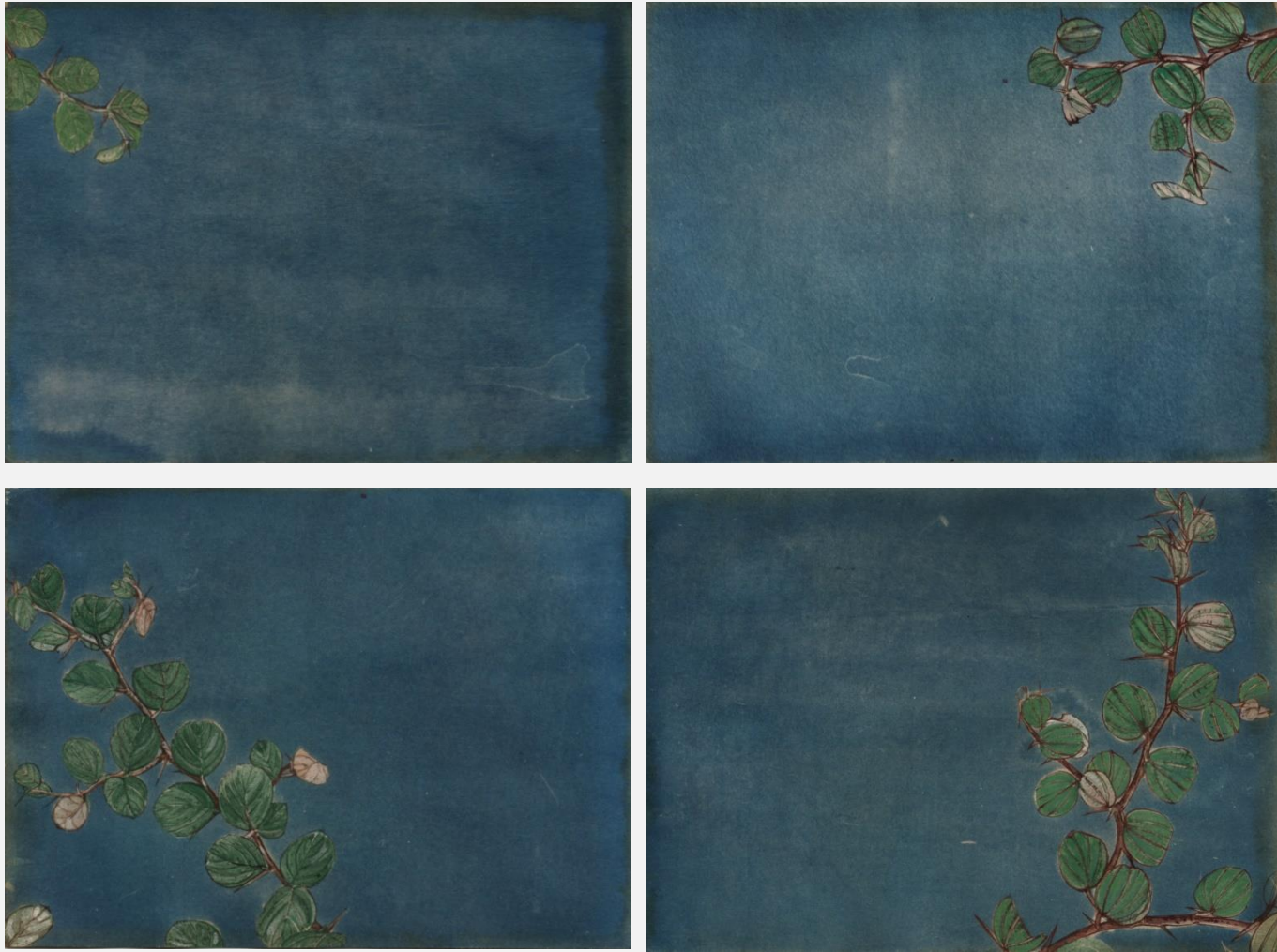
*Common Weed* (set of 2), 2020, natural pigments with casein on paper, 37 cm x 35.5 cm (each).





*Lilac Tassel Flower* (set of 6), 2020, natural pigments with casein, cyanotype on paper, 15 cm x 11cm (each).

## Indian Jujube



*Indian Jujube 1* (set of 4), 2020, natural pigments with casein, cyanotype on paper, 11cm x 15 cm (each).



*Indian Jujube 2* (set of 4), 2020, natural pigments with casein, cyanotype on paper, 27 cm x 16.5 cm (each).



*Ziziphus mauritiana*, also known as Indian Jujube (*Ber*) is a tropical fruit tree species belonging to the family *Rhamnaceae*. A common sight during the morning walks around my neighbourhood. Indian Jujube fruit set depends on cross-pollination by insects attracted by the fragrance and nectar. Pollen of the Jujube is thick, so not airborne but is transferred from flower to flower by honeybees, ants and other insects. The seeds are spread by birds, native animal stock, feral pigs and humans who eat the fruit and expel the seeds. Hence, they represent a whole ecosystem.

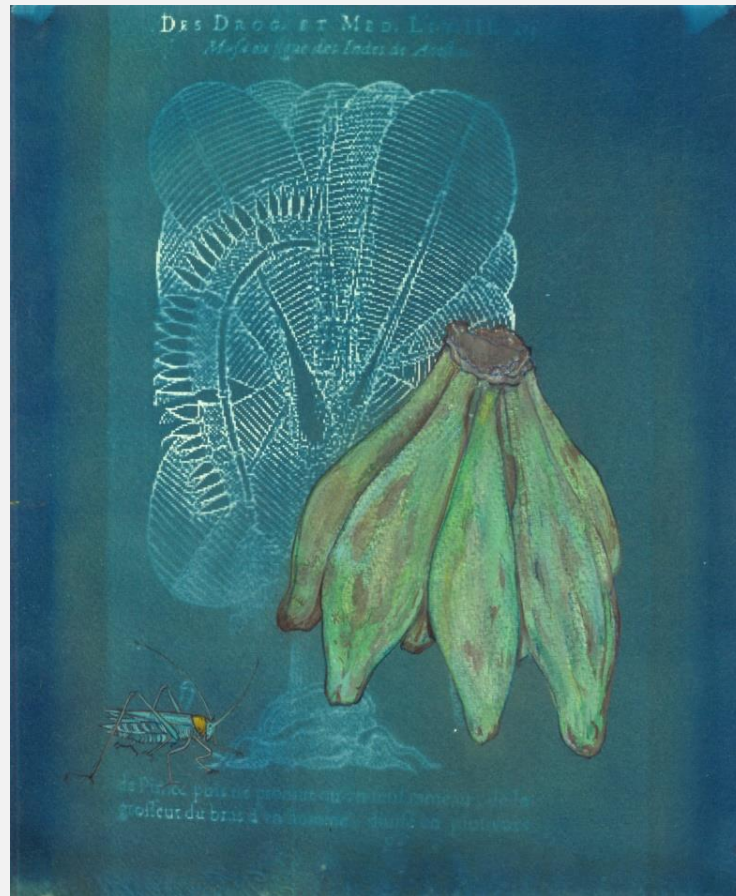
These native plants and trees are substituted by the authorities in urban set ups with non-native plants like conocarpus. The easy and fast growing conocarpus are a threat to the environment if planted in mass and harmful to water pipelines underground. The pollen of the plant also triggers respiratory problems.

## Plants and their Visitors



*Bird on Indian Olive*, 2021, natural pigments with casein, cyanotype on paper, 23 cm x 31 cm.

A bird from a Japanese painting visiting the Indian Olive tree (*Elaeocarpus serratus*, *Jalphai* in Assamese) in a home garden.



*Bheem Kol*, 2020, natural pigments with casein, cyanotype on paper, 28.4 cm x 23.4 cm.

*Musa balbisiana* Colla or *Bheem Kol* is a wild variety of banana with plenty of seeds that grows in abundance in the North Eastern India. Nutritionally better than many other varieties, this banana can cure diseases like polio if fed regularly to infants. Traditionally it is used for preparing a kind of alkaline base, almost as a substitute to salt. Commonly, *Bheem Kol* peels are sundried and burned to obtain the distilled alkaline base, known as *Khar*, a quintessential element of the region's cuisine.



*Indigo*, 2020, natural pigments with casein, cyanotype on paper, 23 cm x 30.8 cm.

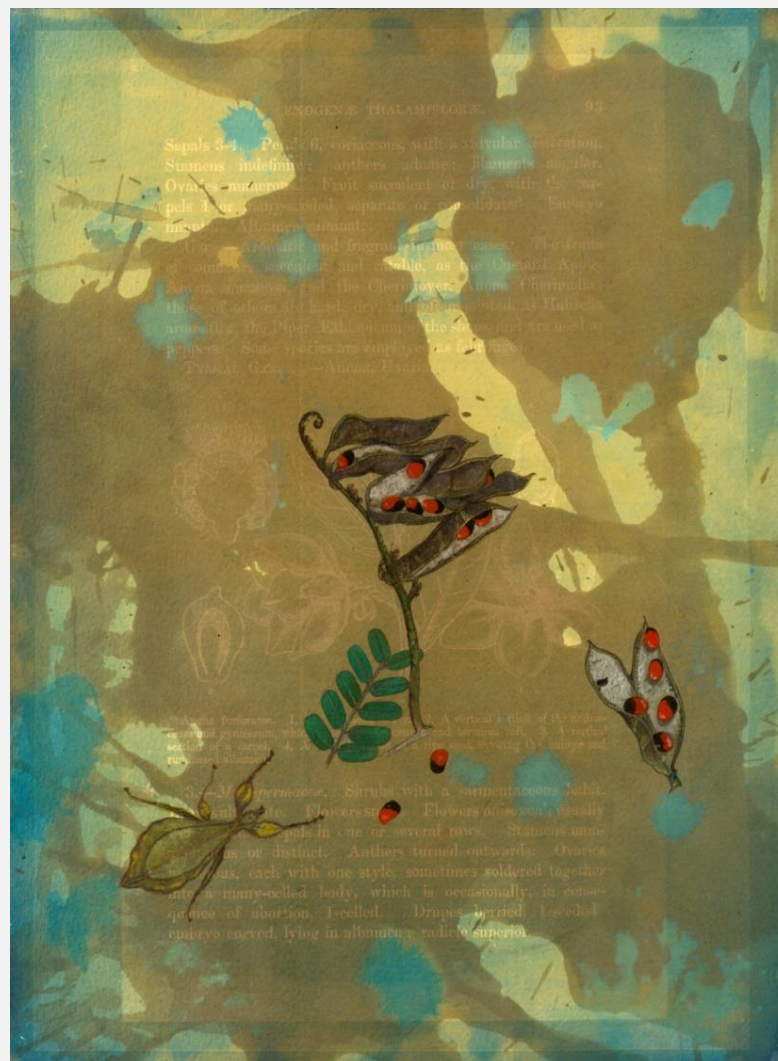




*Melon*, 2020, natural pigments with casein, cyanotype on paper, 31 cm x 23 cm.



*Red Fruit*, 2020, natural pigments with casein on *wasli* paper, 31.8 cm x 21.5 cm.



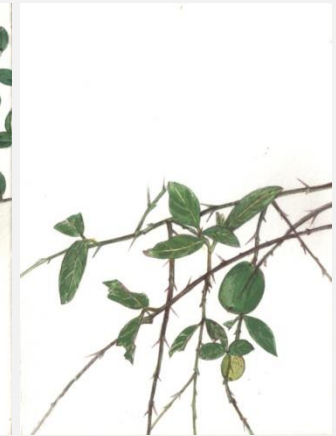
Kunnikuru, 2020, natural pigments with casein, cyanotype on paper, 31 cm x 22.8 cm.

## Plant Studies



*Study 1*





*Study 1 (set of 20), 2020, natural pigments with casein on paper, 14.8 cm x 10.8 cm (each).*



*Study 2 (set of 3), 2020, natural pigments with casein on paper, 23 cm x 36 cm (each).*

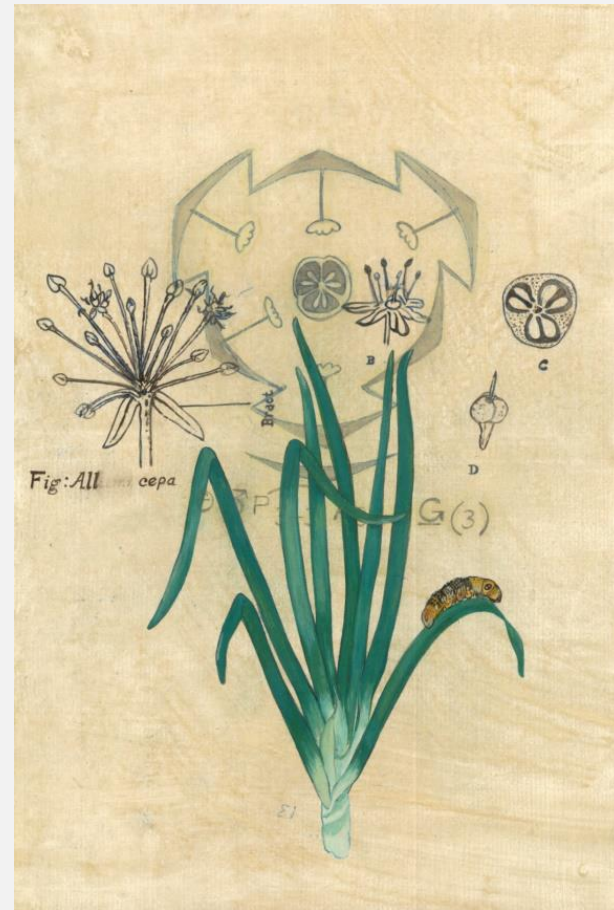


*Anatomy of a Flower*, 2021, natural pigments with casein on paper, 27.5 cm x 19.5 cm.

## Cash Crops



Cash Crops







*Cash Crops*





*Cash Crops: Garlic, Onion, Sugarcane, Legume, Saffron and Jute (set of 6), 2020-2021, natural pigments with casein on wasli paper, 32 cm x 21.5 cm (each).*

The image Garlic, *Allium sativum*, and wild garlic, *Allium vineale* reference coloured woodblock engraving of a botanical illustration from Adam Lonicer's *Krauterbuch*, or Herbal, Frankfurt, 1557, with captions in Latin, Greek, French, Italian, German, and English.

This is an attempt to bring botanical drawings and paintings in the same ground of textbook diagrams, which are at times visually appealing but an abstract expression to a common eye.



## Exploring Surfaces



*Datura*, 2020, natural pigments with casein on *muga* silk, 16.5 cm x 29 cm.





*Muga* silk is a variety of wild silk geographically tagged to the state of Assam. This silk is known for its extreme durability and has a natural yellowish-golden tint with a shimmering, glossy texture. In the Brahmaputra Valley, the larvae of the Assam silk moth feed on aromatic *Som* (*Machilus bombycina*) and *Sualu* (*Litsea polyantha*) leaves. After every wash, its lustre increases. I prepared a surface using the old used *Muga* silk, a piece of my mother's discarded garment to paint plants.

*Marigold-1*, 2020, natural pigments with casein on *muga* silk, 21.5 cm x 11 cm.



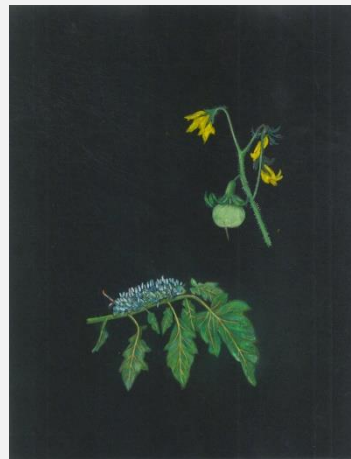
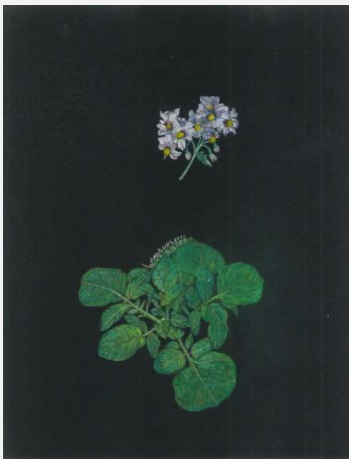
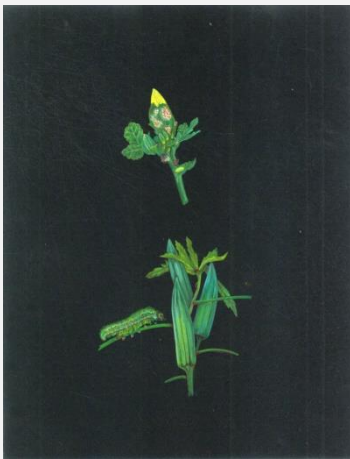
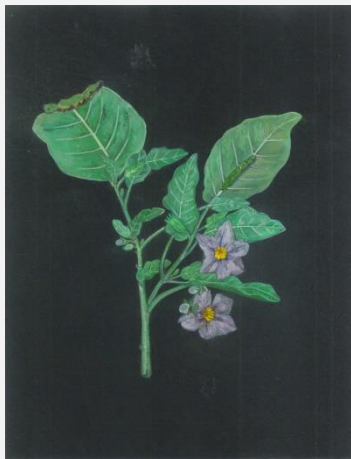
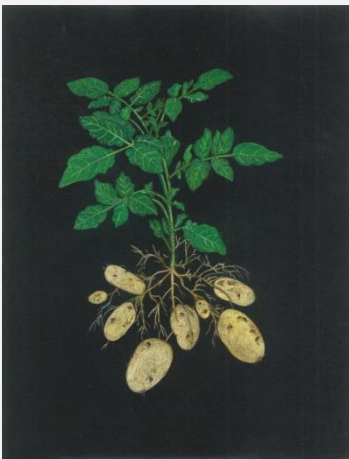
*Marigold-2*, 2021, natural pigments with casein on vellum, 30.5 cm x 22.5 cm.



*Weed*, 2021, natural pigments with casein on vellum, 30.5 cm x 22.5 cm.

Vellum is a prepared animal skin or 'membrane', traditionally used as a material for writing and painting. I came across many botanical artists' declaration of vellum as very good material for exploring the surface topography of plants. They claim that its warmth and modulation of colour combines perfectly with the rendering of a plant. To explore the truth of these claims, I prepared the vellum surface by priming with gesso mixed with casein on the goatskin vellum acquired from the shadow puppet makers of Andhra Pradesh.

## Double Portraits



*Double Portrait* (set of 8), 2020-2021, casein based gouache on acid free black paper, 27.9 cm x 21.6 cm (each).

Mary Delany (née Granville 1700–1788), an artist and botanical illustrator, lived in England and Ireland. Accustomed to oil paint and most of the other mediums of her time, Delany in her 70s, invented a form of paper-cutting or decoupage, which she termed as "paper mosaiks". There are 985 of these intricate illustrations of botanical specimens, which are now housed in the British Museum. Around 1771, after visiting Sir Joseph Bank's (an English naturalist, botanist, and patron of the natural sciences) extensive collection of botanical specimens, Delany began work on her celebrated *Flora Delanica* – not an herbarium of dried plants but a florilegium of images of flowers made of tiny pieces of coloured cut paper.

Exquisitely beautiful, and with its scientific accuracy, every collage includes a label with the plant's Linnaean and common names. And on the back of each work, Delany noted the date and place the collage was created, the name of the specimen's donor, and a collection number. Each of Mary Delany's collages are an irresistible visual delight. The overwhelming experiences of seeing, led me to paint the double portraits.

These portraits I have created are of familiar vegetables which bear their own history of migration of how they travelled miles away, centuries back, and became essential to our palate.



## Mangifera Indica

*Mangifera Indica* is part of an enquiry to trace history of a place following the words in a sixteenth century printed text. Garcia da Orta's *Colloquies on Simples and Drugs of India* was first published from Goa in 1563. Chaptered in the form of a set of colloquies, the *Thirty Fourth Colloquy* mentions the of arrival of a cart full of mangoes, from the author's garden in the island of Bombay (Mumbai) which was leased out to him. I explored to establish a relationship between the textual documents and other visual references in context.



*Thirty fourth colloquy, 2019, natural pigments with casein, cyanotype on paper, 36 cm x 27.5 cm.*



*Pages from Past 1, Flora Sinensis, 2019, natural pigments with casein, cyanotype on paper, 24 cm x 29 cm.*





*Infected A & B* (pests and diseases in Mango), 2019, natural pigments with casein, cyanotype on paper, 22 cm x 16.5 cm.



*A Sapling for Orta's Garden*, 2019, natural pigments with casein, cyanotype on paper, 29 cm x 21 cm.



## Fire in the Backyard



*Fire in the Backyard 1*





*Fire in the Backyard 1*



*Fire in the Backyard 1* (set of 6), 2020, natural pigments with casein, cyanotype on paper, 25 cm x 25 cm (each).



On May 27, 2020, an explosion occurred in the hydrocarbon producing well of the Oil India Limited in the village of Baghojan, near the Dibru Saikhua National Park, Tinsukia, Assam. This led to spilling of oil out of the well, which continued to leak uncontrollably for over 12 days. On 9th June 2020, this oil well caught fire. The massive inferno at the well, with thick black smoke moving up quite a few meters high, was seen from a distance of more than 30 kilometres from the site. The fire spread rapidly, affecting the nearby residents along with destroying a lot of flora and fauna. Nearly 2000 families were shifted from the well's vicinity to relief camps. An eye-catching image was circulated in print and web media, the carcass of an endangered Gangetic dolphin that was found in Maguri-Motapung wetland, which is less than a kilometre away from the fire site. The fire was doused after around five and a half months. A lady in the relief camp expressed her concerns about the weeds and insects from the affected area on camera, which compelled me to seek for a larger perspective to the destruction caused.

*Where should we go after the last frontiers?*

*Where should the birds fly after the last sky?*

*Where should the plants sleep after the last breath of air?*

- *The Earth Is Closing on Us*, Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008).

**Rashmimala**



# The Guild

*Art Gallery*

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1028, Ranjanpada, Next to Sai Temple, Mandwa Alibaug Road, Alibaug – 402 201.  
Ph: +91 2141 247847

1/A Pipewala Building, 4<sup>th</sup> Pasta Lane, Colaba, Mumbai – 400 005. Ph: + 91 22 22875839 / 22876211  
theguildart@yahoo.com / theguildart@gmail.com

**[www.guildindia.com](http://www.guildindia.com)**