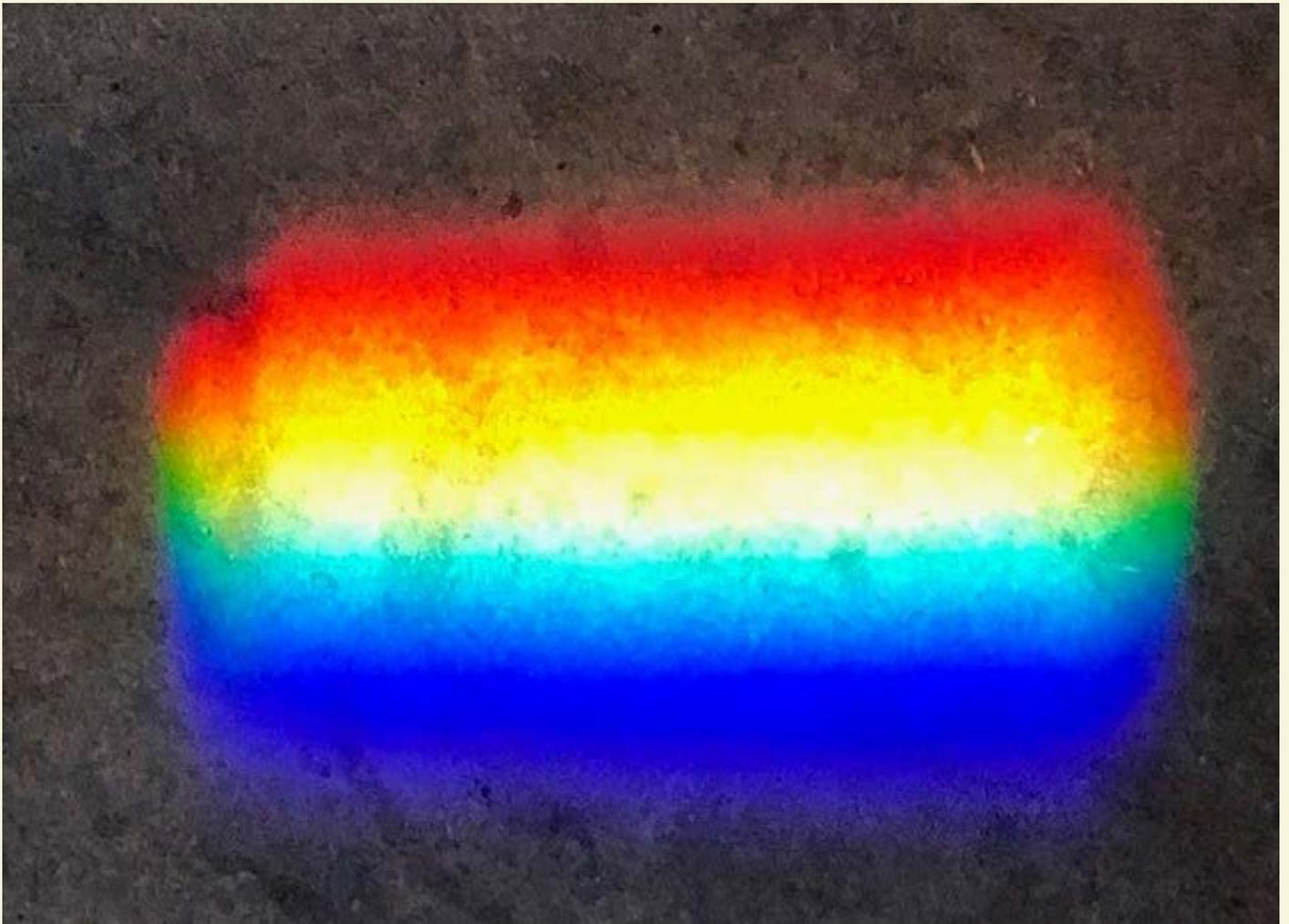


# *O Sole Mio*

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ISSUE 06

20 May 2020



Koushna Navabi  
Richard Wentworth  
Ruth Whaley  
Lekha Poddar

**Parasol unit**  
foundation for contemporary art

## Learning to Look with all Our Senses

Among the profusion of information, guidance and comments we continue to receive during the Covid-19 pandemic some are helpful, some are really good and others are just great. Whether or not within the next few months we can revert to where we stood in our life prior to the pandemic, one thing is certain, the current change and pace of life that we have submitted to will have a lasting effect on our senses, bodies and minds.

To protect their citizens, some countries closed their borders, others restricted movement altogether by excluding travel both within their own or to a foreign country. As a result, frequent travelling has for now become

an activity of yesteryear. Fortunately, we human beings are flexible enough to adapt to new circumstances and, thanks to technology, have been able to communicate on many levels with the outside world. 'Social distancing' implies that touching people in public is to be avoided and that, after all, can perhaps be seen as a welcome restriction. Prior

to the lockdown, being bumped into, by other people's backpacks, shopping bags or even their limbs, was an everyday part of life. I recall the frustration of being hit right and left in aeroplanes or simply on the street and looking back with nostalgia to those days when it was considered disrespectful to come into physical contact with other people in public places.



Another welcome life experience is having relearned to be in touch with one's surroundings. I am not altogether sure what has contributed to this change of attitude. Is it the necessity of being on the lookout for potential danger and being cautious before acting or is it simply due to having more time

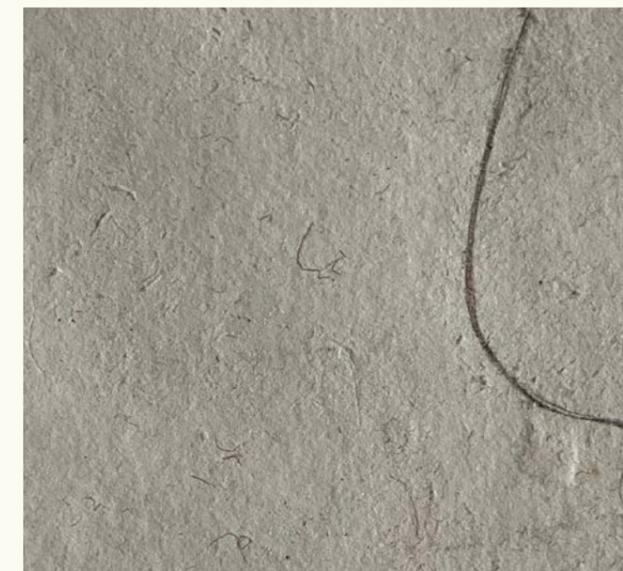
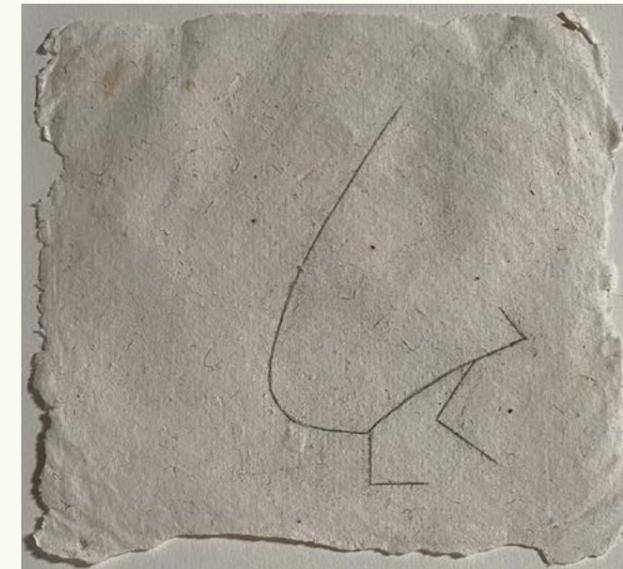
to consider options as opposed to acting on necessarily hasty decisions? For myself, I am glad to have this time.

Let's keep in mind this renewed enjoyment of looking carefully at things but go back to our artistic discussion and examine some examples of how artists have looked or are still looking

at their surroundings. Sometime in the early 1980s during one of my usual gallery visits, I came face to face with a cast bronze sculpture that looked like the outline of a cat. It was an intriguing object, something like a drawing in the space. My interest grew considerably when the artist Joel Fisher explained his work to me and the process through which this *Untitled* sculpture had come about.

Fisher used to handmade paper, a process which in itself requires patience and a love of creating. He would place the paper to dry on some rough felt he had in his studio and, not surprisingly, some felt fibres would inevitably adhere to it. On close examination of the paper's surface, Fisher discovered that some of the felt fibres had interesting shapes, which was enough to incite him to further his exploration of a new body of works. Fisher first identified which of the felt fibres interested him, then with a pencil

he would draw their shape at a larger scale and in close proximity to the fibre. This intriguing practice allowed Fisher to create a sizeable series of works on paper which would never have come into existence were it not for his keen



interest in looking intently at those paper surfaces. Later, he ventured to make sculpture by turning some of the two-dimensional drawings into three-dimensional works and this is how his *Untitled* work had been realised. Naturally, I was amazed by this elaborate process and exercise in perseverance and patience. In the 1980s, such a practice seemed special but could have happened, but in subsequent decades such artistic mindsets have become increasingly rare among artists. However,

with the current lockdown we are all experiencing, it has once more become a welcome practice to take time to gaze with our eyes and to think more consciously with our minds.

Among the numerous contributions I have had the good fortune to receive from artists in response to the *O Sole Mio* project, I realise that many of them put considerable importance on the act of gazing, on scanning their surroundings, and on the careful observation of minute details. Not surprisingly, they found that the process had markedly heightened their sense of perception. The four contributions I took pleasure in selecting for this sixth issue of *O Sole Mio*, which considers the theme of learning to look with all our senses, include works by three artists, Richard Wentworth, Koushna Navabi and Ruth Whaley, and a reflection by Lekha Poddar, an art collector and founder of the Devi Art Foundation in New Delhi. During this time of required isolation, she sees in an artwork parallels with the inspiration to be found in the iconic song 'O Sole Mio'. Each of these contributions focuses differently on the act and the art of gazing intently and it is certainly enlivening not only to discover their thoughts and their art but also my pleasure to thank them profusely for having created such thought-provoking works for the project.

A leading figure in British Sculpture and a proponent of the New British Sculpture movement of the 1980s, Richard Wentworth is a conceptual artist whose work and ideas have had considerable influence on younger generations of artists, often encouraging them to explore chance and coincidence in their work.

A special characteristic of Wentworth's

work is its seemingly practical nature, whereas the work itself is the result of considerable thought and deliberation. It is therefore not surprising that for his contribution to *O Sole Mio* he has presented a work which incorporates, as he says, 'fleeting stuff' in a 'chipped glass prism'. How marvellous indeed to encapsulate in one minuscule object, endless hours of reflection.

'I Shall Salute the Sun Once More' is the title of a translation by the artist Koushna Navabi of a well-known poem by one of Iran's foremost modern poets, Forugh Farrokhzad. The poem is commonly translated into English as 'I Will Greet the Sun Again'. In this special work, Navabi connects with the deceased poet on a personal level, which could be seen as a homage to Farrokhzad, but could also signal Navabi's interest in engaging intellectually with this singularly daring and innovative female poet whose untimely death at the age of 32, in 1967, left the Tehran intelligentsia short of many insights and inspirations.

Here, the impulsive freedom of modern poetry is juxtaposed pictorially with various sections of a very tall tree which now exists only in an uprooted state on the ground. In its current condition, the fallen tree is photographed by Navabi from an angle that accentuates its length. By definition, an uprooted tree lies somewhere between life and death, or without having any defined attribute or vertical territory. The two works here, one by Farrokhzad in written language and the other in pictorial language by Navabi, express complementary

concerns. Together, they speak vividly of the intense inner feelings of both these women. Farrokhzad's daring yet poetic exploration finds a kindred spirit in Navabi's highly loaded imagery.

Ruth Whaley's intimate painting *The Gaze* has two distinct parts, an angel and a freshly blooming rose, both hugely symbolic. The figure of the angel was inspired and copied after a large wall painting at Santa Felicita, entitled *Annunciation (The Virgin Mary)*, 1528, by Pontormo. With *The Gaze*, Whaley plays conceptually on several layers of thought. The wall painting at Santa Felicita not only takes us to another era, but the Archangel Gabriel's intense gaze at the Virgin Mary bears good news and heralds hope for a bright future. By

taking us this far back in time, Whaley also gently reminds us that hope has always been alive in the human mind.

From another part of the world, in India, Lekha Poddar offers her reflection on the confinement we are all currently experiencing, no matter where we live on planet Earth, and our potential faith and hope in a future recovery. Harnessing the power of creativity and art, Poddar presents a work by Iqra Tanveer entitled *Paradise of Paradox*, which like all other works in this issue is about seeing and discovering hope.

Ziba Ardalan  
Founder, Artistic and Executive Director

Images: Joel Fisher, *Untitled*, 1988. Painted bronze, 163.5 x 126 x 31 cm (64¼ x 49½ x 12¼ in). Pencil drawing on handmade paper, 16 x 17 cm (6¼ x 6¾ in)

# Koushna Navabi

*Fallen Tree / I Shall Salute the Sun, 2020*

Koushna Navabi, *Fallen Tree / I Shall Salute the Sun*, 2020. Poem by Forugh Farrokhzad, translated from the Farsi by Koushna Navabi. Photography courtesy the artist

[Click](#) to view the full work in the online issue 06.



*When Ziba Ardalan asked if I would contribute to O Sole Mio it was at the beginning of the lockdown with all those strange and unsettling feelings that none of us had experienced before. Being accustomed but now unable to work in my studio made it even more eerie. I wanted to contribute a work that responded to the concept and title of the exhibition but looking through my archive I didn't find anything that fitted. On my daily walk one day I came upon a fallen tree, which I found very moving. When I got back home I opened an old book of Forugh Farrokhzad's poems, which by chance fell open at 'I Shall Salute the Sun Once More'.*

Coronavirus, home, iPhone, laptop.

Koushna Navabi's practice encompasses sculpture and painting and frequently makes use of traditional handicrafts and materials in ways that weave specific realities into the memories she revisits in her works. Her exploration of diverse aspects of identity, estrangement and artifice result in disturbing manifestations of both inner and collective feelings, along with a strongly symbolic sense of 'home'.

In 2019, Koushna Navabi exhibited works in two related group shows, *The Spark Is You: Parasol unit in Venice* at the Conservatorio di Musica Benedetto Marcello, Venice, and *Nine Iranian Artists in London: The Spark Is You*, at Parasol unit, London.

## *I Shall Salute the Sun Once More*

I shall salute:

The sun once more  
The rivulet that once ran through me  
The clouds that were my expansive thoughts

The poplar garden's painful growth  
That passed through dry seasons with me

The flock of crows who gifted me the night-farm's fragrance

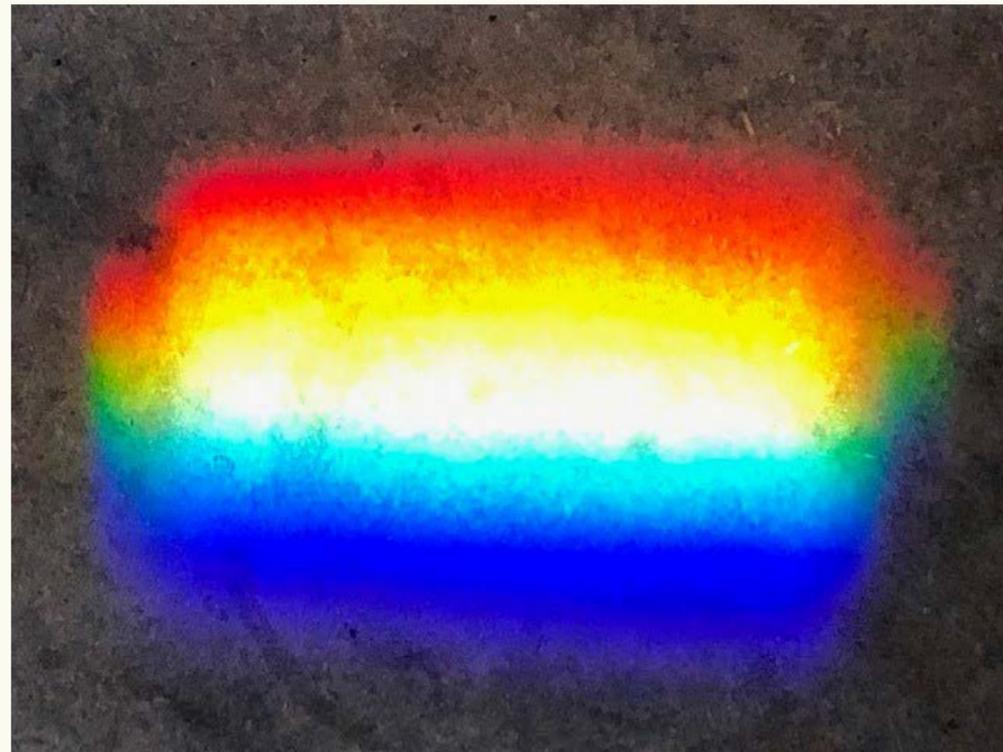
My mother, who lived in the mirror like my aged self

My lust, repetitive and turbulent  
like the earth's craving to fill its core with green seeds.

Forugh Farrokhzad, translated from the Farsi by Koushna Navabi

# Richard Wentworth

*Marking Time (Spring 2020), 2020*



I don't like curtains or blinds, I like waking to light and its mood ... I usually know the hour.

In the most spectacular of English springs that I can recall, the plasticity of time and the tautness of territory, has alerted me to much that I had never fully considered in seven decades of watchfulness. Maybe it's just that every perception is heightened?

Language changed. Familiar words and expressions suddenly caught in amber, colliding with the new unfamiliar technical *sprache*.

Templates contemplated.

Fall of light has been the engine of travel. Light describes the length of my days, the intensity of shadows, the new cultural conduct.

I envy worlds before they were professionalised. Worlds where the curious, not always the privileged, escaped the plague and mixed their maths with their music, their poetry with their astronomy. Staging plays meets designing palaces. Inquisitive printers stumbling towards photography and its mad gene pool.

I'm a retriever, typical of my generation, idly acquisitive, learning by doing, glad that things talk.

But this is 'here and now'.

Sitting on the meeting rail of a south-facing sash window sits a chipped glass prism, a survivor from the mechanics of a tank periscope. Beyond, assorted plants and trees interfere with the fall of light, the buds and leaves of a fig, a clematis, a stand of poplars and a middle-aged ash. There are a few brief intervals every afternoon when sunlight makes it through this obstacle course to arrive at the lens. This fleeting stuff, like the whole mischievous world of shadows, mostly lacks witnesses.

The happenstance of these few encounters may come to dominate my

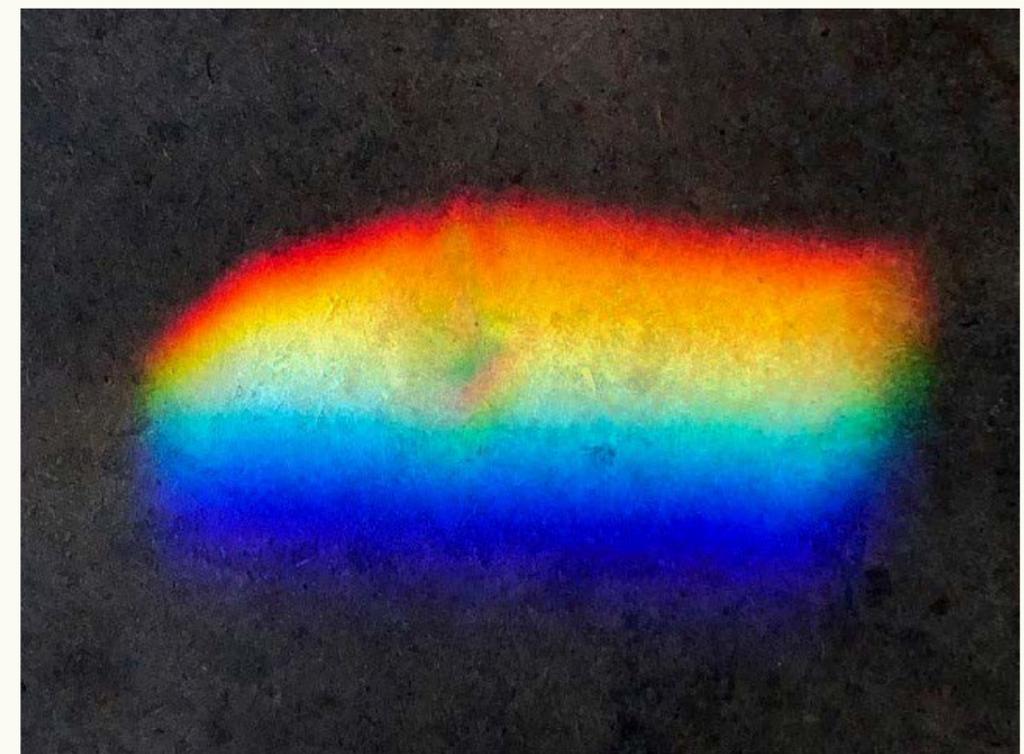
memory of these weeks.

Once asked by Richard Long how he came to art, Richard Wentworth replied, 'When you walk away from things, you walk into others.'

Encounter and happenstance sit at the heart of Richard Wentworth's sculpture and photographic work, mixed with a long-standing respect for how things occur, where they come from and how they are wrought.

Richard Wentworth, born 1947 in Samoa, now lives and works in London.

Richard Wentworth, *Marking Time (Spring 2020), 2020*. Photography by the artist. Courtesy the artist, Lisson Gallery and Peter Freeman Gallery New York.



# Ruth Whaley

*The Gaze*, 2020



Ruth Whaley, *The Gaze*, 2020. Gouache on cold-pressed Fabriano watercolour paper, 22 x 22 cm (8 7/8 x 8 7/8 in).  
Courtesy the artist.

## From 'O Sole Mio' to *The Gaze*

The lilting melody of 'O Sole Mio' is both a love song and a celebration of life. In addition to the original lyrics, the music has been used in a hymn, 'Down from his Glory', and as a rock song, 'It's Now or Never'. Its rhythm echoes the phases of the day and years, from glorious sunrise to softer darkness, from ecstatic celebration to quieter peace. We each get different meanings in response to music. I remembered the wonder of Pontorno's hesitant angel, gazing up at a young woman in a blue cape in Santa Felicita, Florence. That led to my small painting *The Gaze*.

Within washes of warm to cool colours I placed an angel and a rose. In Western literature and art these images are frequently motifs of love and religion. A figure looking up and a flower opening, morning to dusk, as the Earth turns – just as 'O Sole Mio' suggests the daily turning from light to darkness and back, offering hope for future renewal.

Ruth Whaley's paintings are inspired by her childhood in England and Germany. By drawing on family conversations, photographs, letters, and anecdotes, she evokes specific emotions and the vividness of past feelings. Her main inspiration comes from old black-and-white and sepia photographs. One snapshot often leads to several paintings of varying degrees of realism and colour. Working mainly in oils and watercolour, she uses monochrome and muted tones to acknowledge the uncertainty of memory and subtle changes in colour temperature and saturation to adjust emotional moods.

Ruth Whaley, born in England, now lives and works in New York City.

## Reflection by Lekha Poddar

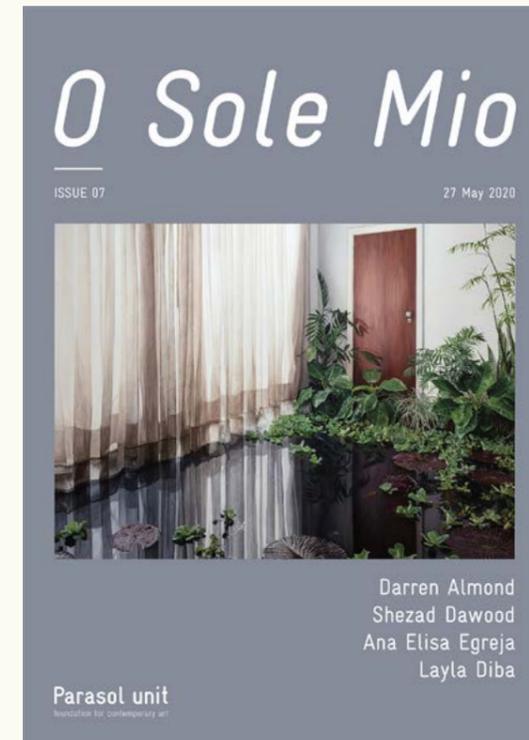
As we find ourselves confined physically, in an unprecedented moment in time, it's natural to ponder about things as we knew them and to wonder. The work that's been drawing me in these days is an installation by the artist Iqra Tanveer. Looking at this work entitled *Paradise of Paradox* is an exercise in seeing. What is one looking at, the dust or the light or nothing and everything, at once? The dust won't be seen without the light and the light without the dust would just be the banality of brightness in a pitch-black room. The dust suspended and moving in circles against light is not an alien sight, most would remember it as effectively 'staring into nothing', gazing at the particles dancing in the ray of light shining through the window at a particular hour of the day – a fitting visual representation for 'O Sole Mio' – and a hope, for there cannot be any light without the dust, the darkness.

Art collector, Lekha Poddar, is the founder of the Devi Art Foundation, one of India's most innovative, not-for-profit art



Iqra Tanveer, *Paradise of Paradox*, 2011. Light and dust particles. Dimensions variable. Installation view at *Deeper Within its Silence* group show in Okhla, South Delhi. Courtesy the artist. and Devi Art Foundation.

## Upcoming Issue



ISSUE 07 featuring works by

Darren Almond  
Shezad Dawood  
Ana Elisa Egreja  
Reflection by Layla Diba

Words by Ziba Ardalan, Koushna Navabi, Richard Wentworth, Ruth Whaley and Lekha Poddar. Copy edited by Helen Wire. Design by Chahine Fellahi and Kirsteen Cairns.