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Review: Omar Chowdhury Experiments with Faith and Form at 4A Gallery, Sydney

by Nicholas Forrest 17/07/14 11:04 PM EDT

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Omar Chowdhury, Locus I (still), 2014, single-channel, 1.33:1, 1080p ProRes 422 (delivery H.264), colour, stereo, 2:24:20. Courtesy the artist. Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art with the assistance of the Keir Foundation and the Edward M. Kennedy Center for Public Service and the Arts, Dhaka. Close

WHAT: [“Omar Chowdhury: Ways”](#)

WHEN: May 30-August 2

WHERE: 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 181-187 Hay St, Haymarket NSW 2000

WHY THIS SHOW MATTERS: [Omar Chowdhury](#) is an up-and-coming Australian-Bangladeshi artist who is fast developing a reputation for his detailed, multifaceted, and multilayered audio-visual installations which challenge the conventions of the moving image and interrogate the boundaries of screen-based artworks. His process is complex and his conceptual framework is challenging, but at the center of his practice is a desire to explore what he describes as “the power that spatiality has on our intellect and emotions.”

Currently on show at the **4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art** in Sydney is Chowdhury’s first solo exhibition, “Ways.” The exhibition comprises a new body of four moving image works that were created over a two year period on location in Old Dhaka, Bangladesh where Chowdhury embarked on a journey of discovery and investigation into the spiritual processes, places, and theology of the region. The result is four engaging and engrossing screen-based artworks comprising a total of more than six and half hours of dense video footage.

Chowdhury himself is an atheist, which raises questions relating to context and ideology. But when viewed in the context under which the works were conceived and developed, the theme and subject matter gains relevance and significance that transcend its spiritual origins. Chowdhury refers to his works as “minimalist sculptural installations” and the screen as an “object.” When experienced in this context, the people, places, rituals, and routines that are depicted acquire the status of sculptural components while at the same time retain their place as constituents of an existential meditation on the human condition.

The centerpiece of the exhibition, the two-channel video installation “Locus I, II,” was

commissioned especially for the exhibition by the 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art with support from The Keir Foundation. “Locus I and II” are both studies of the rituals, processes, architectures, and ecosystems of spiritual sites in Old Dhaka. “Locus I” was filmed on location at a Hindu spiritual site and “Locus II” at an Islamic mosque.



“Locus I and II” screen on opposite walls within the 4A gallery space, requiring that the viewer watch either one or the other. Throughout the three plus hours of footage that comprise the two works the viewer is confronted by scenes of religious ritual and domestic routine: grooming, washing, exercising, chanting, prostrating, praying, eating, to name a few. The actions are often repetitive in nature, drawing to mind the mechanisms of kinetic sculpture. The scenes range in duration and intensity, but all evoke the same tension and anticipation that pervades the entire exhibition.

The success of “Locus I and II” lies in the palpable sense of momentum and compulsion that they generate, making it difficult for the viewer to extricate themselves from the installation. Although there is no discernable narrative structure, the concept of the narrative as a vehicle for progression and engagement is a key characteristic of the works. The different scenes cohere within conceptual framework of the installation, but also stand strongly as individual works in the own right, allowing the viewer to enter and exit the work at any stage.



Chowdhury describes his work as a “model of spiritual practice” and a “presentation of a focused and concentrated form of being in and looking at the world with commitment and tenuous yet generative faith” – in Chowdhury’s case a secular faith in the world. It is this duality of form and ideology that makes his practice so significant. And although he is by no means the first artist to challenge the boundaries of the moving image, his use of the screen as an experimental vehicle for exploring the experiential and the transcendental is compelling and intriguing.

Omar Chowdhury lives and works both in Sydney, Australia and Dhaka, Bangladesh. In 2014 he

has solo exhibitions at the 4A Centre for Contemporary Art and at ALASKA Projects in Sydney as well as MOMENTUM, Berlin. He has exhibited his work in galleries, Institutions, and festivals in Australia, Asia, and Europe.

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