



# OMAR CHOWDHURY FORM AS BEING

10 September —  
05 October 2014

  
**MOMENTUM**  
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# Introduction

MOMENTUM is pleased to present the first solo exhibition in Berlin of the lyrical and cinematic video works of Australian-Bangladeshi artist Omar Chowdhury.

Made in a deep, two-year immersion into spiritual sites and spaces in Dhaka, this ambitious body of works explores the processes, materials, and theologies of spiritual practice in a formalist yet rhythmic accumulation of imagery, sounds and meanings.

Encompassing the places, rituals, music, lives, and beliefs of holy and lay-believers, the artist has created a complex and absorbing series of works that combine and re-purpose fictional, documentary, and experimental techniques to create a rich, philosophical and phenomenological enquiry into religious practice and its representation.

# Reviews

‘The artist’s long and unhurried videos of Bangladeshi life are demanding viewing, but audiences will be rewarded for their commitment. ... He has created a remarkably powerful work of art on the social manifestations of religion.’

— Andrew Frost, *The Guardian*<sup>1</sup>

‘His detailed, multifaceted, and multilayered audio-visual installations challenge the conventions of the moving image and interrogate the boundaries of screen-based artworks. The result is ... engaging and engrossing screen-based artworks comprising a total of more than six and half hours of dense video footage.’

— Nicholas Forrest, *BLOUINArtinfo*<sup>2</sup>

1 <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/australia-culture-blog/2014/jun/03/omar-chowdhury-review-a-wilful-disregard-for-convention>

2 <http://au.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1046467/review-omar-chowdhury-experiments-with-faith-and-form-at-4a>

# An Index of the Divine

## Murtaza Vali

For Omar Chowdhury making is a ritual, a spiritual means through which transcendence may be attempted and possibly attained in this world. His works are the result of extended periods of deep immersion in the communities, sites, and events that are their subjects. Like a mystic ethnographer, Chowdhury spends years doing field research, simply inhabiting and observing his subjects, eventually identifying who, what and how he wants to shoot. Taking cues from the teachings of Zen Buddhism, Chowdhury—who operates his own camera and works with a small crew of three—attempts to be wholly present whilst filming, taking cues from and intuitively reacting to the specific visual, spatial, sensorial, and phenomenological characteristics he encounters on site. The countless hours of footage shot while on location, some totally unplanned, others carefully composed and scripted, are reviewed and gradually distilled and edited into films of substantial length. Long, dense condensations of experience and memory of specific spaces, times and events, Chowdhury's films push the limits of our capacity as viewers. Experiencing them is also a ritual of sorts. Affect and meaning accrue gradually, finally rewarding our faith and continuing engagement.

Chowdhury's installations could be characterised as visual ethnographies that investigate and reflect on the changing status of the traditional—of rural life, of religion and spirituality—in the modernising East. However, his motivations are more subjective and deeply personal, driven by aesthetic and formalist concerns. His works avoid the many pitfalls of traditional ethnography specifically by introducing techniques, forms and structures borrowed from the history of avant-garde film, art cinema and experimental documentary. There is no authorial voiceover; ambient sound dominates the soundtracks. Chowdhury edits to create a particular rhythm or pace, dividing footage up into discreet spatial and temporal packets of filmic data; the continuity of orthodox cinematic reality is shattered, each resulting shard offering its own perspective—minimal, conceptual and abstract. This formal abstraction introduces a critical distance from the subject without entirely othering it. Similarly, the stationary camera and the extended duration of many of the shots subvert the easy logic of identification with the image central to conventional film. Instead, these strategies demand significant commitment and investment from the viewer resulting in a peculiar intimacy

between the audience and screen image that resists exoticisation of the latter. Viewing Chowdhury's films is a phenomenological experience, akin to encountering the Minimalists or Light and Space artists; we are repeatedly reminded that perception is always an embodied act.

Rigorous, rhythmic and ritualistic, Chowdhury's three moving image installations hover between modernist autonomy and postmodernist embrace.

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The single channel *Torsions* (2014) is divided into two chapters, each capturing the distinct multi-sensory experience of different religious processions—one Hindu and the other Shia Muslim—that wind through the narrow crowded streets of Old Dhaka. The first chapter opens with an intense close up of the side of a young man's head as he shuffles around, tying one end of a rope to a roadside pole. *Torsions* is marked by precisely this sort of intense proximity between camera and subject, a total submersion of the recording apparatus (and through it the viewer) into the spatial, temporal and sensorial thickness of the event it is attempting to capture. *Torsions I* focuses on the Roth Yatra, a procession honouring Krishna, during which a chariot housing idols is pulled through the streets, accompanied by throngs of singing, dancing worshippers. Such processions always involve months of careful planning and both chapters of *Torsions* show the build up and the preparations undertaken before the event even begins through a series of

largely stationary shots. In *Torsions I* we see a man bathing and groups of singing and dancing worshippers eager to get started. Through what follows, however, the camera is rarely stationary. Mobile and restless it is constantly turning, twisting, pivoting as it navigates the devout masses. In one of a few silent sequences Chowdhury follows the idols being carried out of their sanctum; he is jostled around like one might expect of a person in a crowd caught up in religious fervour. Sunlight breaking in from above threatens to bleach the frame and the image eventually loses its sharp focus dissolving into a shifting abstract composition of pale undefined shapes and searing white highlights. The sound starts up again, drumming and chanting punctuating the grumble of the masses, as the filmmaker, camera, image and viewer are absorbed into the blinding sensorium of the surrounding crowd. And for just a few seconds the ineffable becomes perceptible.

Chowdhury uses distinct means to achieve comparable effects at later points in *Torsions I*. A long sequence shows women gathering in front of a marble platform that fills the left edge of the shot. Some touch their foreheads to the ledge; others caress it with their hands, pressing palms together in a gesture of deference. Throughout, the divine object, the idol being worshipped, rarely enters the frame. Instead, here and through the scenes of chanting and dancing that follow, Chowdhury focuses on acts of devotion, on the body language, movements and facial expressions through which people perform religious belief, on the

often very material and physical encounter between human body and religious entity. Through this approach divinity is made manifest through the worshipping body. Transcendence is achieved through unrelenting focus on the immanent.

The subject of *Torsions II* is a commemoration of grief, not joy. Over ten days and nights and reaching a crescendo on the day of Ashura, Shias gather to collectively and ritualistically remember and mourn the massacre of Hussain, the Prophet's grandson, and his family and followers, at Karbala, in modern day Iraq. Like the first chapter, *Torsions II* begins with a series of shots that establish the setting and show the extensive preparations. And it also highlights the small gestures of devotion, reciting mumbled prayers into upturned hands, attempting to gain blessing by rubbing inscriptions, by sprinkling water, by holding onto and tying threads to the grills that border the shrines. Despite the different tenor of the proceedings there are many unexpected similarities: the rhythmic beat and repeated chanting that keeps the procession moving; the groups of swaying, twisting bodies, sometimes bloodied, as men collectively self-flagellate, most dramatically with blades; and the chaos of a crowd caught up in religious fervour. Finally, both chapters underline attempts to achieve spiritual transcendence through not despite the human body.

No thought, no reflection, no analysis,  
No cultivation, no intention,  
Let it settle itself.

— Six precepts of Tilopa<sup>1</sup>

If *Torsions* is about sense and event, *Locus I* and *II* (both 2014) are about space, time and the everyday. Meditations on the architectures of belief, both physical and ideological, each presents a portrait of a place of worship, a distinct spiritual locus in Old Dhaka: *Locus I* was filmed at an ISKCON<sup>2</sup> temple while *Locus II* documents activities at a Sunni mosque by the side of the Buriganga River. Neither structure seems particularly ornate or monumental making them especially apt sites for Chowdhury's investigation of the quotidian practice of religion yet hinting at its innate expression of ideology, wealth and power. Shown on facing screens, they are a succession of carefully composed long shots, each captured using available light with a largely stationary camera. Barely moving, the apparatus feels heavy, weighed down, anchoring the images, sounds and actions it captures in the space and time of their unfolding. Rarely featured in mainstream cinema the stationary camera has been used extensively by avant-garde filmmakers, such as the Japanese master Yasujiro Ozu, who used its capacity for capturing presentness to visualise the Zen Buddhist ideas of transcendence. While this is also true for Chowdhury, in his case the stationary camera may also serve as an instrument of emplacement, of rooting himself to the country of his birth.

The bulk of the sequences in *Locus I* are shots of monks and worshippers completing the modest, repetitive tasks and actions that are a necessary part of the daily routine of worship at the temple. Some prepare offerings and

cook and serve food while others clean and groom themselves. They all appear totally absorbed in what they are doing, no matter how humble a task it may be and the focused cinematography emphasises the simple and literal beauty of such sequences. There are expected moments of transcendence as young men, crowded into a room, work themselves into a trance through drumming and chanting. But there are unexpected ones too, like a twenty-minute long shot that places the viewer across from a monk or devotee seated on the ground behind a low tabletop. The extended duration forces us back from the unrelenting progress of filmic time back into the present of real time as we sit with him as he asks for and waits for his food, eats his fill, periodically chanting and singing in rapturous joy. It pushes the limits of our ability as viewers to focus on, be attentive to and draw meaning from the filmic text. Like religious belief, it tests our conviction and rewards our commitment.

Locus II similarly explores the unique space and time of a Sunni mosque. This work is also punctuated by sequences showing people engaged in daily tasks. As the *adhaan* or call to prayer begins, Chowdhury cuts to a curious but beautiful shot of a one armed man, standing alone on the structure's unfinished roof, carefully trimming his facial hair despite his handicap. It is a subtle but evocative image that emphasises the simple actions that surround belief. In contrast to Locus I, the spoken word seems to dominate the ritual life of the mosque. We follow a small group of the devout into a nearby

industrial building where they go door to door proselytising and recruiting residents for prayers at the mosque. We hear a preacher recount, in macabre detail, the differential fate of the mortal remains of believers and non-believers on the day of judgement. In yet another sequence, the mosque's muezzin enters and solemnly recites the Quran into a microphone. However, this recitation is not, or not only, an act of worship but also a test of the mosque's broadcast system; religious ritual can be both exceptional and incidental, an index of the divine or a simple extension of everyday life.

The juxtaposition of these two site-portraits reveal both similarities and differences between the rituals and rhythms of worship conducted there. The films show these sites not just as places of worship but as spaces for living and communing, for resting and eating. These spaces promising transcendence through religion remain undeniably physical, material, and corporeal and their everyday immanence demonstrates the importance of always being attentive to the present, to the ever fleeting now. That sort of presentness is itself transcendent.

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Though Chowdhury's motivations extend beyond mere anthropology his approach could be considered the cinematic equivalent of what anthropologist Clifford Geertz famously termed "thick description," a mode of ethnography so rich in detail that it reveals knowledge not just about the specific subject of the study but also its broader social and cultur-

al context.<sup>3</sup> While his multi-channel moving image installations overwhelm and immerse us in a density of cultural information, both consequential and seemingly incidental, their minimal and abstract structures help guide us through the abundance without limiting our own capacity to see, feel, think and understand—to come to our own in-

terpretations and conclusions. Together they provide intimate, fascinating and multifaceted insights into the changing fate of traditional forms of life.

*Murtaza Vali is a writer, editor and curator based between Brooklyn, U.S.A. and Sharjah, U.A.E.*

1 Watts, Alan, “Six Precepts of Tilopa,” quoted in *The Way of Zen* (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 1957), pp. 152–153.

2 International Society for Krishna Consciousness, more commonly known as the Hare Krishna movement.

3 Geertz, Clifford, “Thick Description: Toward and Interpretive Theory of Culture,” *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 3–30.

# Works

Torsions I, II, 2014,  
1 channel, 103m23s, HD ProRes,  
1.78:1, Colour, Stereo  
Stills and trailer: <http://omarchowdhury.com/index.php/recent/torsions-i/>; <http://omarchowdhury.com/index.php/recent/torsions-ii/>

Locus I, 2014,  
1 channel, 149m25s, HD ProRes,  
1.33:1, Colour, Stereo\*  
<http://omarchowdhury.com/index.php/recent/locus-i/>

Locus II, 2014,  
1 channel, 70m30s, HD ProRes,  
1.33:1, Colour, Stereo\*  
<http://omarchowdhury.com/index.php/recent/locus-ii/>

# Shows

This exhibition originated at the 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney

Ways  
29th May — 2 August 2014  
4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney  
<http://omarchowdhury.com/index.php/presentations/2014-4a-centre-for-contemporary-asian-art/>

Torsions  
7 February 2014 – 9 February 2014  
National Gallery of Art,  
Dhaka, Bangladesh  
<http://omarchowdhury.com/index.php/presentations/2014-dhaka-art-summit/>

This exhibition will travel to an Australian regional art museum in 2015.

\* 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.





Video Still, Torsions I, II, 2014, 1 channel, 103m23s, HD ProRes, 1.78:1, Colour, Stereo



Video Still, Torsions I, II, 2014, 1 channel, 103m23s, HD ProRes, 1.78:1, Colour, Stereo



Video Still, Locus I, 2014, 1 channel, 149m25s, HD ProRes, 1.33:1, Colour, Stereo



Video Still, Locus I, 2014, 1 channel, 149m25s, HD ProRes, 1.33:1, Colour, Stereo



Video Still, Locus II, 2014, 1 channel, 70m30s, HD ProRes, 1.33:1, Colour, Stereo



Video Still, Locus II, 2014, 1 channel, 70m30s, HD ProRes, 1.33:1, Colour, Stereo

# Biography

Omar Chowdhury produces detailed installations created in extended spiritual and empirical immersions into sites that are conceptually and experientially demanding.

His formalist yet deeply felt works hold in generative tension various polarities: narratives and the surreal, materiality and the immaterial, rhythm and chaos, humour and melancholia, power and weakness, and memory and forgetting. Out of these frictions and cohesions he creates a densely woven and deeply metaphoric language of moral inquiry.

Often working with small crews and cinematic infrastructure, he spends years in both isolated and crowded ecologies to detail epistemological and ontologic questions that are centred on the ambiguities of our consciousness, of time and materiality, and their representations in thought and history.

In 2014 he has current and upcoming solo exhibitions at Shepparton Art Museum and Galleries UNSW. He is the recent recipient of a Bengal Foundation Commission (2014), a finalist for the John Fries Award (2014), received an Australia Council Skills and Development Grant (2014), an Edward M. Kennedy Grant for the Arts (2013), and an Australian Cinematographer's Society Gold Award. He has shown works in galleries, institutions, and festivals in Australia, Asia, and Europe. He was born in 1983 and studied at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. He currently lives and works both in Sydney, Australia and Dhaka, Bangladesh.

<http://omarchowdhury.com>

# MOMENTUM

MOMENTUM is a global platform for time-based art, with a mission to promote the work of and enable exchange between exceptional international artists, galleries and institutions while continuously reassessing the nature and relevance of time-based art. MOMENTUM is a Gallery, a Residency, a Salon, a Collection, a Public Art initiative and a Network active in several parts of the world. By enabling exhibition, discussion, collection, creation, and exchange, MOMENTUM is a platform which challenges the notion of time-based art in the context of both historical and technological developments. The key ideas driving MOMENTUM are: Collaboration, Exchange, Education, Exploration, and Inspiration.

Kunstquartier Bethanien 134  
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Wednesday – Sunday  
13.00 – 19.00, and by appointment.

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# Support

The artist would like to thank the following people for their support and guidance in the making and presentation of these works:

Kate Vinen, Masud Rana, Utpol Roy, Phillip Keir, Leslie Marsh, Murtaza Vali, Mark Tanner, Mark Gisbourne, Rachel Rits-Volloch, Cassandra Bird, Emilio Rapanà, Isabel De Sena, Aaron Seeto, Toby Chapman, Pedro de Almeida, Ye Wu Ye, Sadia Rahman, Remeen Firoz, The monks of ISKCON Temple, Wari, Dhaka, The staff of Nobabpur Mosque in Old Dhaka, The staff of Hosni Dalan Shia Masjid, Old Dhaka.

This exhibition originated at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney. MOMENTUM and the artist thank all those who made this exhibition possible including The Keir Foundation, .CHB Collegium Hungaricum Berlin, Australia Council for the Arts, EMK Centre, and Eidotech.





**Opening**

**Wed 10 Sep 19.00**

**11 Sep — 05 Oct 2014**

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**Dialogue**

**With Mark Gisbourne**

**Sat 04 Oct 18.30**

**InsideOut**

**Screening**

**03, 04 Oct 20.00 – 23.30**

**Collegium Hungaricum Berlin**

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