

Installation view of **JITISH KALLAT's** *Epilogue*, 2011, 753 pigment prints on archival paper, 31.7 x 39.4 cm each, at Art Basel's Art Unlimited sector, Basel, 2012.

All images courtesy the artist, unless otherwise noted.



INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

# A QUESTION OF TIME

By Karin Zitzewitz

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Jitish Kallat at Midcareer

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In a conversation about his retrospective at India's National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) this year, Jitish Kallat revealed a meaning he had secreted in *22,000 Sunsets* (2001)—part of a series of paintings in which Kallat simulated the degradation of the televisual image, using as his subject the crowds in Mumbai's streets and train stations. Some of Kallat's crowds were mob-like groups, acting as one, but this canvas shows a loose assembly of individuals, unknowingly unified by their shared contemplation of the sunset, made visible in thought bubbles. What Kallat reported to the NGMA audience was that the number in the title—22,000—approximated the number of days his father had lived before passing away at the relatively young age of 62. The number connected this early painting to *Epilogue* (2010–11), in which Kallat measured his father's life-span through lunar calendars, resulting in the 22,889 images of the moon re-created with carefully torn roti. These seemingly distant works—made a decade apart, in different mediums, and at divergent scales—are unified, Kallat argues, by a concern with time.







(Opposite page, top)  
**JITISH KALLAT**, *22,000 Sunsets*, 2001, mixed media on canvas, 152 x 213 cm.

(Opposite page, bottom)  
**JITISH KALLAT**, *The Cry of the Gland*, 2009, 108 C-prints, 61 x 46 cm each.

Kallat's NGMA retrospective provided the artist with a natural pause in his fast-paced career, calling for a collective assessment of his body of work thus far. While its catalog republished major essays from across the 25 years covered by the show, each tethering Kallat's work to his experience residing in the city of Mumbai, the exhibition itself asked new and longtime observers of his work to replace this place-based framework with one more overtly concerned with questions of time. This is the shift involved in seeing *22,000 Sunsets*—a painting that reflects on the conditions of media and everyday life in India's largest city—as a meditation on the fleeting nature of life. Now, as Kallat would be the first to say, physics and metaphysics alike tell us that space and time are just different ways of looking at the same thing. But for a contemporary art discourse that drew attention to art from Asia primarily by championing its ability to capture a sense of place, this is a significant move to make. And it has important stakes: a claim to represent universal experience, rather than particular or personal narrative.

In his practice, Kallat has encouraged the move away from the framework of place by engaging carefully with scale, a tactic that finally registered with me when he placed *Powers of Ten* (1977), Charles and Ray Eames's short film that depicts the universe from various logarithmic distances, at the entrance to the 2014 Kochi-Muziris Biennale. *Epilogue* also provides a good example of how scale functions in Kallat's work. It plays with physical perceptions by comparing a moon that we know is vast even though we see it as quite small to roti, the proportions of which we experience directly through touch and understand in relationship to our bodies. The work finds a timescale that is similarly broad and intimate, by representing a universal lunar cycle in the medium of a daily repast—roti is, after all, often invoked in common speech as a metaphorical currency of everyday life. When exhibited, *Epilogue* collapses the journey of a life into a space that, in part because of the repetition of similar images, is typically traversed by viewers in a number of minutes. In *Epilogue* we find a fulcrum point in Kallat's practice, symbolized by what could be called the “cosmic roti,” with one foot in place, grounded in a particular experience, and the other in time, understood in universal terms.

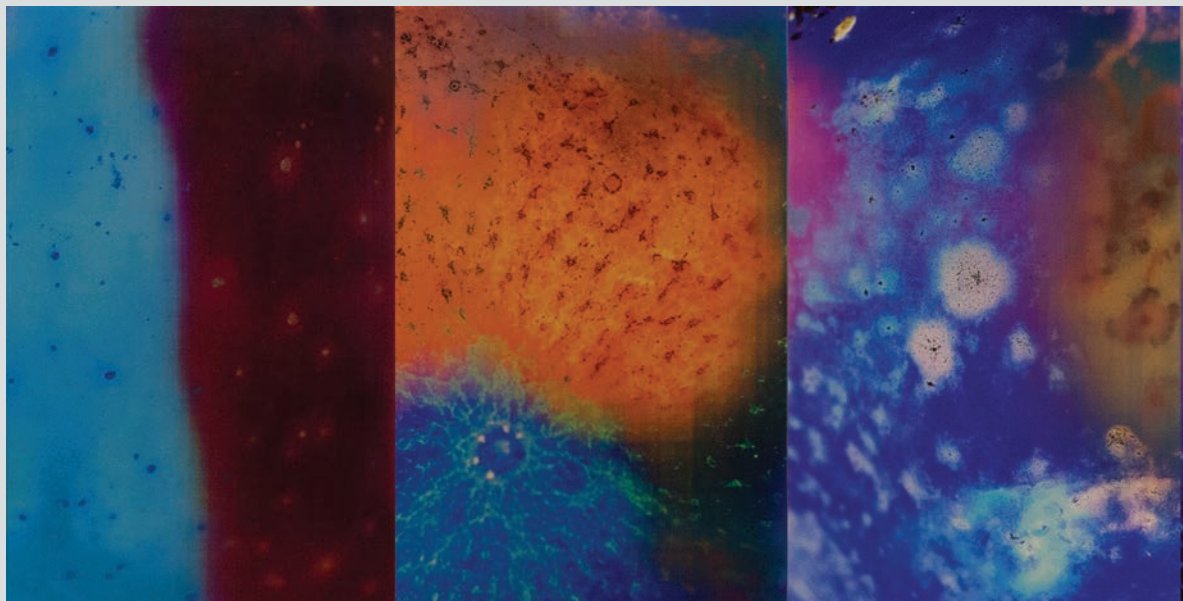
In its serial structure, *Epilogue* refers back to a place-based work, *The Cry of the Gland* (2009), for which Kallat photographed the shirt pockets of more than 100 men, weighed down with pens, tools and wads of cash. The images capture the visually inelegant but metaphorically rich practice of holding one's valuables close to the heart, safe from all but the most audacious of pickpockets. Each of the 108 photographs are enlarged by six to eight times their real-life-size and placed in a series, monumentalizing a drab detail of urban masculinity. *The Cry of the Gland* collapses the artist's daily practice, pursued obsessively over a long period of time, into a single moment of viewing. A similar conceit is found in Kallat's photographs of post-collision car bodies, *365 Lives* (2007), as well as in *Cenotaph (A Deed of Transfer)* (2007), a group of lenticular prints of paired photographs of Mumbai walls, before and after demolition. It picks right up from the use of the lenticular format in *Death of Distance* (2007), which juxtaposes a news story about a 12-year-old girl who committed suicide because her family could not afford the one-rupee fee for a school lunch with a triumphalist advertisement hailing the “death of distance,” in the reduction of the cost of phone calls

within India to the same amount. The lenticular format allows these two scales of value to coexist as uncomfortably as they do in the city. *Cenotaph* also recapitulates an original inspiration for paintings Kallat made in the 1990s, which was the patina of the Mumbai city wall with its layers of posters and paint.

It is clear that the city, with its inescapable cruelty, continued to inform Kallat's practice at least up to the moment of *Epilogue*. *Sweatopia (The Cry of the Gland II)* (2010) reuses the photographic series' title for a massive painting that art historian and AAP Paris desk editor Deepak Ananth describes as an abstraction of Kallat's earlier crowd paintings, such as *22,000 Sunsets* or *Quarantine Day* (2003). As he argues, despite Kallat's departure from more literal images of urban alienation, *Sweatopia (The Cry of the Gland II)* is "a no less disturbing summation of moral and political entropy."

Yet, as mentioned, *Epilogue* also led the artist away from the cosmopolis and toward the cosmos, approaching a scale at which space and time are commensurate. This set of works also plays on the style of astronomical rendering referred to in *Epilogue*. Take, for example, his animation of the cosmic roti image in his hypnotic video, *Infinitum (Here After Here)* (2014), in which an array of roti moons, laid out in an elegant circle, experiences a full lunar cycle. Many of these works maintain a connection to concrete experience by their linkage to food, while visual technologies defamiliarize their images. An earlier example of this exploration is in *Forensic Trail of the Grand Banquet* (2009), in which X-ray images of food are animated to look like a rendering of an expanding universe, the kind of image astronomers might produce to visualize the beginning of time. This work points forward to *Sightings D9M4Y2015* (2015), a series of seven lenticular photographs of the skin of fruits, shown in negative and positive colors. The work uses macrophotography to play upon the resemblance of the surface of a plum, say, to the rendered image of a supernova, just as the title likens his simple code for the date of April 9, 2015 to the contemporary system for naming newly discovered stars. (Kallat has always loved a good pun.) This work explores the convergence of time and space as well as the manner in which technologies of image-making allow for collapses in scale.

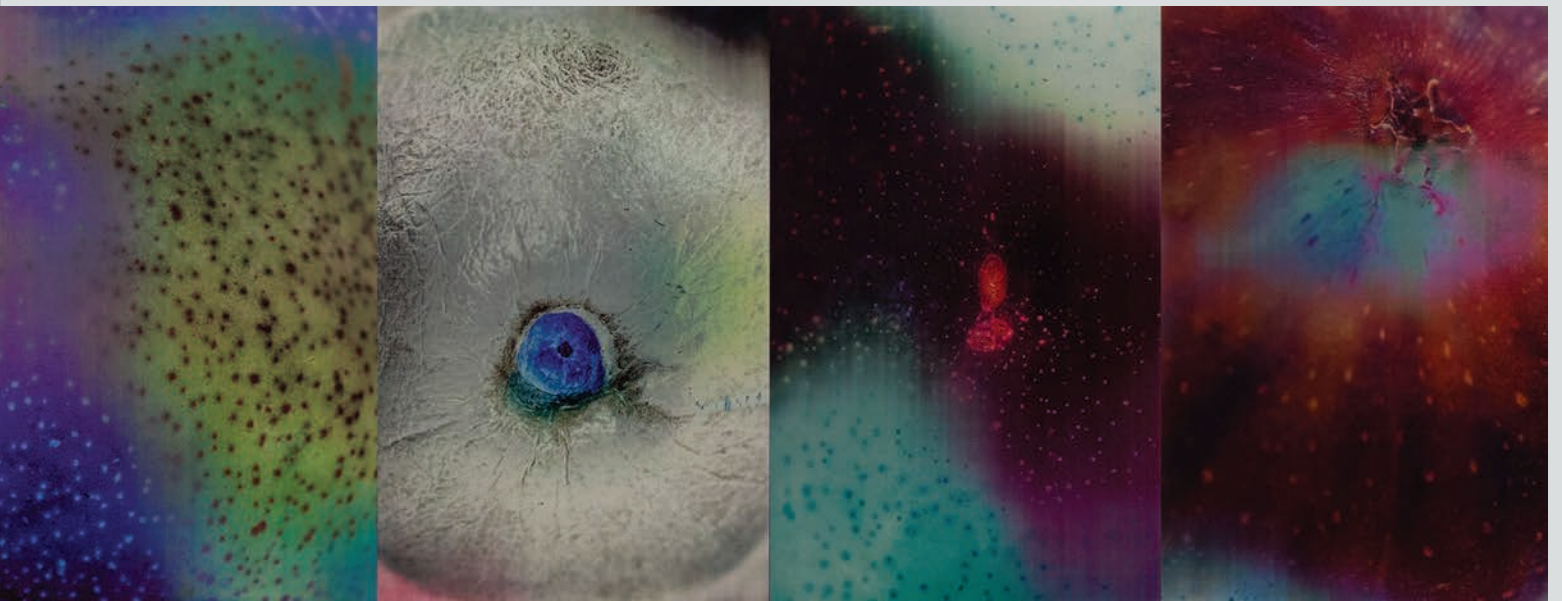
Of all of Kallat's works, the ones most genuinely engaged with time are his wind and rain studies, which employ timed processes in their production. Like his earlier, astronomy-related works, *Rain Study (The Hour of the Day of the Month of the Season)* (2016) visually imitates a mode of rendering the cosmos, in this case, a star chart. The drawings are created by exposing



(Opposite page, top)  
Details from **JITISH KALLAT's** *Cenotaph*  
(*A Deed of Transfer*), 2007, 20 lenticular prints,  
43 x 66 cm each.

(This page, bottom)  
**JITISH KALLAT**, *Sighting D9M4Y2015*, 2015,  
2015, seven lenticular photographs, 73.66 x  
320 cm.









(Top)  
**JITISH KALLAT**, *Wind Study (The Hour of the Day of the Month of the Season)*, 2015, burnt adhesive and graphite on Arches paper, 170 x 114 cm.



(Bottom)  
**JITISH KALLAT**, *Wind Study (Hilbert Curve)*, 2017, burnt adhesive, aquarelle pencil and graphite on paper, 228.5 x 140 cm.

a sheet of paper to rain for a specific amount of time, which is measured in breaths taken by the artist and recorded on the paper. The resulting splatters are overlaid with large circles of quick-drying acrylic pigment, creating irregular patterns like those found in the night sky. They are a form of automatic drawing, representing a withdrawal of the willful intention of the artist, whose presence is marked only as the means for measuring the passing seconds. The process involved in the series *Wind Study (The Hour of the Day of the Month of the Season)* (2015) is somewhat different. Kallat initiates each work by drawing a network of lines connected by node-like circles. Moving outside of the studio, he then covers a line with flammable solvent and sets it alight, allowing the flame to scorch the paper, as guided by the wind, before it is blown out. The process is repeated at different times in varying wind conditions, with the resulting image resembling depictions of the cosmos, tying them back to *Epilogue*, though they are nothing more or less than records of the interaction between intuitive drawing, a chemical reaction and the wind.

Perhaps it was the desire to retreat further from astronomical representations that motivated the form of his latest series, *Wind Study (Hilbert Curve)* (2016), on show at Templon Gallery in Brussels from September to October 2017. In the works, Kallat's hand is guided by the continuous fractal space-limiting curve discovered by the mathematician David Hilbert in 1891, which today has important applications for the mapping of data. He traces this single line through its various scales across sheets of paper up to eight feet in length, burning as much of the line as possible while retaining the pattern's legibility. As in his earlier wind studies, the works include snatches of writing—thoughts Kallat jotted down when working on the piece—which become unintelligible later in the process. “While making the Wind Studies,” Kallat tells me, “I see an inescapable parallel between this mysterious turbulence and flow of mind and the inexplicable flux and current of the wind.” The retreat from the intentional mark allows Kallat to explore thought as a temporal process, and to consider the personal at its properly cosmic scale.

*The exhibition “Jitish Kallat: Here After Here, 1992–2017” was curated by Catherine David, and was presented at the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, from January 14 to March 14, 2017. “Jitish Kallat: Covariance” was shown at Gallery Templon, Brussels, from September 7 to October 28, 2017.*