



HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES

A Virtual Reality Journey to a Remote Corner of the Himalayas

Shezad Dawood's new exhibition at Timothy Taylor gallery consists of ⁵⁴Screenprinted canvases, bronze and concrete statues, and a central virtual reality experience that interpolates visitors to various worlds of experience

Tausif Noor | October 14, 2016



Installation view of 'Shezad Dawood: Kalimpong' at Timothy Taylor (all images © Shezad Dawood, courtesy Timothy Taylor)

LONDON — Writing of the Westin Hotel Bonaventure in his treatise, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Frederic Jameson proposes that the glass building, with its ambiguous entryways and meandering paths, functions as a hyperspace in which the visitor's subjectivity succumbs to its surroundings. The visitor, according to Jameson, is unable to "locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world." Jameson regards the building as a product of a society that has been deterritorialized by capitalism and globalization; our inability to fully position ourselves within the confines of the building's maze mirrors our inability to ~~com~~prehend the global economic and social networks that define contemporary ^{Shares.} society.

Shezad Dawood puts us on even less solid footing in *Kalimpong*, his first solo show at Timothy Taylor gallery. Titled after the politically significant hill town in West Bengal near the Sikkim border, the exhibition consists of screenprinted canvases, bronze and concrete statues, and a central virtual reality experience that interpolates visitors to various worlds of experience, starting with Kalimpong's storied Himalayan Hotel. Dawood's attention to historical context spares the exhibition from the trap of gimmick, the virtual reality portion instead serving to illuminate the canvases as something of the sublime.

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Shezad Dawood "Expedition" (2016), acrylic, screenprint, and textile on canvas

The exhibition is an exercise in suspending one's idea of territory and space, underscoring the Buddhist influences that have historically characterized Kalimpong and continue to shape its politics today. Dawood's virtual reality explorations are grounded in Esoteric Buddhist teachings that intimate that the collapse of time and space is a means for disavowing the ego; for the artist, Kalimpong provides an approach to this tenet *vis-à-vis* its tactical location on the Himalayan border. As a site both revered as a religious sanctuary and routinely used as a meeting point for military operatives, shrouded in mystical folklore and implicated in international affairs, Kalimpong seems to serve as a foil for Dawood to explore the dimensions of facticity and fiction. Extensive research into Kalimpong's history prevents his exploration from being merely banal or superficial.

With the aid of a patient gallery attendant, I donned the virtual reality headset in a darkened room. Dawood constructs five different scenes that correspond to different moments of historical significance in Kalimpong's recent past, from the 1920s and '60s to the present day. The hill station was a site of trade and commerce among the neighboring regions of India, Nepal, and Tibet; under colonial rule, it was a temperate administrative town to which the British came to escape India's heat.

Kalimpong's British heritage is the focus of the first VR scene, set at the Himalayan Hotel, which served as a refuge for figures as illustrious as [Prince Peter of Greece](#), [Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay](#), and David MacDonald, the 19th century British trade agent and political officer whose descendants still inhabit the hotel. Using a remote, visitors immersed in the VR environment can explore the hotel's lobby and passageways, which predictably harbor secret entryways and trapdoors that allow you to proceed to the succeeding levels.



Shezad Dawood, "Kalimpong" (still, 2016), VR environment, duration variable

The other four levels attend to Kalimpong's mystical and mythic legacy. One zone situates you in the caves of the *naldjorpas* — reclusive monks and magic practitioners — who were the subject of interest of explorer and esotericist [Alexandra David Neél](#), who met with the 13th Dalai Lama in Kalimpong in 1912 and would later gain notoriety for disguising herself as a beggar to travel to the forbidden region of Lhasa. Another zone leads to a trek through the snowy Himalayas, where you chance upon the Abominable Snowman, the discovery of which was the pet project of [Tom Slick](#), a Texan billionaire whose privately funded adventures in the mountain range were thought to be covert CIA operations. The most satisfying portion is saved for last: where, after tramping through virtual passageways and caves, you experience an enlightenment of sorts, floating above the material world in an immersive web of light.

It's easy to get sidetracked by the novelty of the virtual reality project — it was my first experience with the technology, and by all measures a positive one — but its relationship to the exhibition's other elements is what makes Dawood's show worth witnessing. The minute details of the historical significance of Kalimpong as a strategic military site — during the Sino-Indian War, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru condemned it as a “nest of spies” — are hard to parse, and meandering through the Himalayan Hotel and dodging the Abominal Snowman sometimes feels like a pointless game of *Clue*. Dawood's ventures into virtual reality add a phenomenological bent to Jameson's notion of postmodern hyperspace, insofar as the artist's fictive reimagining of history necessitates that we as visitors place ourselves in a narrative that he's written. For Dawood, as for Jameson, the task at hand is to get our bearings. It is the totality of the experience and level of care Dawood took to imagining each of these spaces, rather than the competing streams of historical facts, that are impressive.



Shezad Dawood, “Kalimpong” (still, 2016), VR environment, duration variable

It was after I had stepped out of the virtual reality room and back into the gallery to view the canvases that I could appreciate the careful precision of Dawood's craft. Each canvas is a recognizable landscape of Kalimpong that combines textile, acrylic paint, and screenprint to destabilize our perception of background and foreground. Particularly enticing are the *Cave Variation* canvases (2016), which are set against a black and neon pink expanse of fabric titled “Tantric Wallpaper” (2016). The floral

printed panels of fabric that make up each portion of the *Cave Variations* are recognizably *nakshi kantha*, embroidered quilts stitched from old saris and fabrics that are native to the Bengal region. Layered on top of these are screenprinted and acrylic splotches of the Himalayas, where the startling white paint highlights snowcapped peaks against the orange shadows and two large zones of black paint. The combination of the different materials is not exactly seamless — borders and edges are clearly visible and demarcated — but it is the tension between the stultifying and dynamic elements of the bright paint against the textured fabric, and the spots of color against a muted digital print, that makes the work so engaging. Here, Dawood subtly hints at Kalimpong’s history via its geography, offering the viewer a new space to position herself, but, much as in the virtual reality of *Kalimpong*, no space to get comfortable — a pleasing trick.



Shezad Dawood, “Kalimpong” (still, 2016), VR environment, duration variable



Shezad Dawood, "Kalimpong" (still, 2016), VR environment, duration variable

Shezad Dawood: [Kalimpong](#) *continues at Timothy Taylor (15 Carlos Place, London, UK) through October 22.*

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