



## SHEZAD DAWOOD'S *KALIMPONG*

by Sabine Russ

When I arrive in the lobby of Kalimpong's famed Himalayan Hotel, I move around clumsily and with caution. I'm wary of touching objects left behind by long-gone visitors, and the pop-up ghosts of soldiers, businessmen, and mountaineers startle me. Outside, I gain ease as I walk up a glacier path while flickering yetis bumble about. Marveling at the cubistic clouds and crystal-shaped mountains, I'm unfazed by glitches in the weather (such as snowflakes blinking in Technicolor). In a cave echoing with the deep drone of chanting, I dare to join a monk in lotus position. Rather impolitely, I lean over to look inside his head and gasp when I see his tongue, ears, and eyes floating inside the vacant skull. As I wonder if I'm witnessing the Heart Sutra in its embodied essence, my guide hurries me on to a colorful monastery and my final destination: a carpeted meditation room. As I closely study the gorgeous textiles on the walls, I fall through them and find myself in an astounding realm of outer space, floating among stars. When my guide suggests I take another step into the cosmic depth, I hesitate. Is this to let go of ego, attachment, and delusion? Is this to become one with everything? Is this what meditators spend lifetimes seeking to attain? As I'm about to make the leap, nervously clutching the plastic control in my hand, the blue outlines of the virtual reality cube signal the physical limits of my journey. I take off my headset and am back on the gray carpet of the Rubin Museum, reminded: This wasn't Kalimpong; it's *Kalimpong*, a VR artwork by Shezad Dawood, part of *A Lost Future*, an exhibition built around speculative narratives inspired by India's Bengal region.

It's impossible to do justice here to the rich layering and interfacing of cultural, political, and esoteric references, to Dawood's fastidious research into elaborate strands of fact and myth, and to his palpable delight in weaving them all together to offer an immersive and nonlinear experience that also asks profound philosophical questions about the nature of perception. *Kalimpong* in West Bengal is a treasure trove of lore: the former Kingdom of Sikkim, a chosen home of Tibetan Buddhists, was for centuries a gateway for trade—of both spiritual traditions and material goods. More recently, during and after British colonial rule, it drew politicians, explorers, spies, cryptozoologists, and other seekers to its high-altitude location. Texan oil magnate Tom Slick, for one, seemed to embody all of these roles, personally financing and leading several expeditions in search of the Abominable Snowman.

This peculiar mix of spiritual aspirations and geopolitical, economic, and other ambitions—often relayed by people with stakes in the stories told—lends itself well to probing the constructs of what we call "history" and "reality." And within the chosen medium, Dawood gets to ask further, Are our perceptions delusory whether we wear a VR headset or not? As philosopher Shakyamuni Buddha pointed out 2,500 years ago, most of us prefer to linger in our relentlessly projecting and wandering minds—the inbuilt virtual reality in our heads—rather than being present in the time and place we physically occupy. *Kalimpong* could be considered a simulation of comprehending the simulation. We cannot teleport ourselves into enlightenment, yet we can cultivate an intent to better distinguish between our thinking of what is and what actually is. In *Kalimpong*, we might get inspired to travel to Kalimpong.

*Sabine Russ is BOMB's senior editor.*