

CHANGING PLACES

HASTINGS MUSEUM & ART GALLERY

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TEXT BY STEVEN BODE



Dust to Dust, Imran Channa, installed in the Durbar Hall at Hastings Museum & Art Gallery. Photo: Mariam Zulfiqar

The Durbar Hall at Hastings Museum & Art Gallery is a facsimile of the ornamental interior of an Indian palace. Taking its cue (and its elaborate wood-carved curlicues) from palace architecture from across the subcontinent, it was made for the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London in 1886. As the name of that exhibition implies, the Hall offered an entry-level introduction for the Great British public to experience something of the art and culture of India but also acts as a kind of echo-chamber of Raj-era perceptions of it. At the close of the exhibition, the structure was purchased by the naval magnate and scion of the establishment, Lord Brassey, who subsequently adapted it as an annexe for his London property at 24 Park Lane, where it housed items from his and his wife's extensive collection of objects, and served as a recreational smoking room.

It is easy to imagine this Victorian mogul, whose father had made his fortune building railways across half the empire, relaxing in these burnished surroundings with a post-prandial cigar. It is equally easy to imagine the scene the morning after – with half-filled ashtrays dotted around the empty room. Or maybe I am being led to

think that by the jars of dust that artist Imran Channa has carefully arranged in the space. Mementoes of his journeys to the different heritage buildings in which he was invited to exhibit on the *Changing Places* tour, the jars are reminders of the leftover minutiae that are often missed by the broad sweep of history, but which, like sand in an hourglass, measure the inexorable passage of time. Channa also presents his ghostly drawing of the original Crystal Palace – the glass-fronted centrepiece of another showcase of the riches of empire, London's



Dust to Dust, Imran Channa, installed at Hastings Museum & Art Gallery
Photo: Mike Jones

Great Exhibition of 1851. Meticulously drawn, then partially erased by Channa himself, the picture has the wispy insubstantiality of a puff of smoke, the hazy outline of a pipedream or a reverie. Around it swirls a little cloud of sound, which gently broadcasts a spoken-word narrative, inspired by the fact that Lady Brassey, on one of her and her husband's numerous visits to the far-flung corners of empire, as recounted in her travelogue, *The Last Voyage*, had stopped off in Channa's home town of Shikarpur. Channa now returns the favour, rendering the story of his trip to Hastings, and other towns around Britain, as an exotic, romantic saga; a pastiche of a period-piece flight of fancy.



Detail of *Dust to Dust*, Imran Channa

In an adjoining room, in the main part of the gallery, is Desire Machine Collective's *Residue*, their atmospheric filmic study of an abandoned power station in Guwahati, Northern India. Where the Durbar Hall has been dutifully preserved, the power station has been left to moulder. A symbol of mankind's efforts to seek dominion over nature, this clanking cauldron of heat and fire, once a hotbed of energy and activity, has gone eerily quiet. A blot on the landscape, it is itself becoming blotted out by enveloping nature, slowly disappearing behind a tangle of creepers and vines whose leaf-work lattices are redolent of the decorative patterns that are a signature motif of the Durbar Hall.

The British empire was said to be the empire on which the sun would never set. At its noonday zenith, beating down on the disparate places that lay in its orbit, the strength of its presence made large parts of the map turn a bright shade of pink. Even as its light diminished, it cast a disproportionate shadow, one that continued to imprint itself on the psyche of many former colonies. The Durbar Hall dates from a time when empire was in the ascendant, but where India's star was rising within it – a part of the world that was becoming acknowledged for its cultural riches as well as its provision of material wealth. Although the Durbar Hall is a resonant relic of that imperial heyday, it is apt, perhaps, that the featured works by Imran Channa and Desire Machine Collective contrast the legacy it represents with emblems of

entropy, fragmentation, and wear-and-tear. The sun never shines on anywhere forever. Ashes to Ashes. Dust to Dust.



Residue, Desire Machine Collective, installed at Hastings Museum & Art Gallery
Photo: Mike Jones

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