

CHANGING PLACES

OSTERLEY PARK AND HOUSE
LONDON

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Situated in 140 acres of parkland flanked by the Great West Road out of London, Osterley House has often chosen to look in an opposite, easterly direction. Built in the 1560s for Sir Thomas Gresham, and extensively remodeled 200 years later by one of the Georgian era's starriest architects, Robert Adam, this impressive neo-classical villa was home to the Child family, wealthy City bankers with substantial holdings in the East India Company. Although there is no record of any of three generations of Childs ever having travelled to the subcontinent, the products and the riches of India certainly travelled to them, along what might be described as the British Empire's version of the Great Silk Road.



Osterley House. Photo: National Trust / Lyndsey Feeney

Embroidered silk bed-hangings and other ornate fabrics from India would have adorned many of the rooms of the main house, alongside porcelain, china and ivory objects from further to the east, as well as all the French furniture that the profits from international trade could buy. At the business dinners and society banquets at which the Childs would have shown off these prize possessions, the scents and tastes of exotic Indian spices would have suffused the room, just as their vibrant colours would have brightened it. (It is worth remembering that, for much of this time, nutmeg, for example, was worth more per ounce than gold.)

The main building at Osterley is closed for the winter, so the artists' works from *Changing Places* are being shown in the temporary exhibition gallery in what used to be the servants' quarters. If the opulent affairs of Osterley House were bankrolled, in part, by the material riches of India, it was here, in the engine room of the premises, that those affairs were meticulously attended to and carefully maintained. The back-end to Osterley's ostentatious displays of power and wealth, it is an interesting place to consider Britain's debt to India – and the longstanding, and continuing, traffic between the two countries.



Dust to Dust, Imran Channa. Installed at Osterley Park and House
Photo: Hydar Dewachi

To better monitor the lingering effects of that traffic, Imran Channa hit the open road in pursuit of his project, *Dust to Dust*. A week of journeying between the different heritage buildings on the *Changing Places* tour will have disabused him of any notion that the streets of Britain are paved with gold, but he knows that there is paydirt to be found in its layers of history, and the prestige that history confers. As if dusting the premises in the cause of forensic analysis, Channa swept the floors and corners of each building with a fine brush, before depositing the contents into small glass jars which he now puts on display. It was dirty work, humdrum work, repetitive work – but the story of how he went about it, recalled in a highly theatrical voiceover which emanates from

speakers nearby, is gilded, almost fantastical; a rags-to-riches tale that demonstrates, once again, that where there is muck there is brass.

Also included is Channa's partially-erased drawing of the 'Crystal Palace', the glittering pavilion that was the centrepiece of the inaugural Great Exhibition, which took place in London's Hyde Park in 1851. If this giant glasshouse (a hothouse devoted to the cultivation of modern industry and the flowering of the latest technology) had not been taken down soon after, and if the parkland it sat in had been left to grow wild around it, the scene might have resembled the one in Desire Machine Collective's film, *Residue*. A slow-burning portrait of an abandoned power station in northern India, the film shows what happens when a bastion of industry that used to loom large over the lush, surrounding landscape is gradually engulfed by it. Instead of the thrum of machinery, there is now only the hum of insects. Over the hard, sharp edges of stark, utilitarian architecture, there is now only the soft, slow creep of fungus and foliage. Video projected in an otherwise empty cellar that, in its time, would have been part of its own busy nucleus of activity, the piece has a haunting, melancholy resonance.



Funland, Bani Abidi, installed at Osterley Park and House
Photo: Hydar Dewachi

being threatened by censorship, and possible closure. As a marquee symbol of all this, a seaside amusement park lies in limbo, waiting to know its fate. Elsewhere, on another of the screens, a man sits by the edge of the sea, staring out at the horizon. Is he gazing into an uncertain future? Or catching a little moment of respite in this rapid tide of change? The dreamland of *Funland* has become a spectre hovering over the city. The Yellow Brick Road is being concreted over. But underneath the paving stones there is still the beach.

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Changing Places is a Film and Video Umbrella touring exhibition, supported by Arts Council England, Canal & River Trust, National Trust, City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council, Hastings Museum & Art Gallery, Phoenix Leicester, Feltech, Links Signs and Heritage Lottery Fund. Curated by Mariam Zulfiqar.



Residue, Desire Machine Collective. Installed at Osterley Park and House. Photo: Hydar Dewachi

The six screens of Bani Abidi's *Funland* are distributed across two adjoining rooms. While Osterley House owes its pre-eminence to an earlier period of global expansion, powered by Britain's colonisation of India and the platform it provided for trade with the Far East, Abidi's hometown of Karachi is experiencing many of the effects of present-day globalisation. Several areas of the old city are being transformed by property development and corporate speculation, with familiar landmarks being knocked down or swallowed up. Change is coming quickly – and from all sides. Although the planner's prospectus says one thing (Progress! Pleasure! Personal Freedom! Consumer Choice!), evidence points in a different direction. A much-loved cinema has been burnt down, a library is