Thread Whispers, Chapter 1
Of Rock and Apricot and Mountaintop

MONISHA AHMED

The Brogpas of Dha and Hanu have inherited many people’s traditions over the years. Inspired by legends of them being descendants of Alexander the Great’s Army and the last Aryans from three brothers migrating over the mountains from Gilgit, they have fuelled many creations in the form of stories. Shivani Gupta and Corinne Adam’s exhibition at LAMO this summer was part of that ongoing engagement with the Brogpas.

Using their rich tradition of oral literature, Shivani and Corinne explore the world they inhabit – from a man’s search for elusive love to Zawa, a woman whose husband has turned to art because of a curse, to a witch who devours the flesh of unsuspecting men and animals. But going beyond the spoken word, they looked at the visual performances of their stories by the proponents themselves, evoking their imagination and exploring the act of playing out the story against the backdrop of their lives. Photographs were visible through verbal interviews. It contemplated how communities investigate their history; the part factual memory plays in this and the part of imaginative reconstruction.

Thread Whispers of Rock and Apricot and Mountaintop

Water through your lenses
Participatory Photography Workshop

JUDITH MULLER

Picture is worth a thousand words”, is an often-repeated Chinese proverb. This idea was put to practice in a workshop I held at LAMO in April this year that focused on the method of participatory photography and mind-mapping to visualize water meant to people in Leh.

Living in a cold desert region such as Ladakh, people face several challenges when it comes to managing their scarce water resources. Water plays a crucial role for all forms of life and is affected by various processes in societies all over the world. Especially where water is scarce, like in Ladakh, these problems become very obvious.

My PhD project focuses on water issues and socio-environmental change in Leh. As part of this study I approached LAMO to hold a workshop where participants would use photography to collect ideas and images over the years. This method of participatory photography research aims at revealing opinions and perceptions of participants that may not be visible through verbal interviews. Mind-mapping was used as a first step, before the participants actually went outside and took photos, to do a kind of brainstorming of what water means for them. Everyone created a graphic on Tibetan fine paper with words that they thought of, when thinking of water. I was joined in the workshop by Otsal Jigme, a practicing photographer from Leh, who provided a theoretical and technical input on photography.

The photographs, later exhibited at LAMO, represented the diverse forms of water can have ranging from clouds, to streams and ice. They also visualized the various uses of water in Leh from water used to wash vehicles, to build houses with cement, to get drinking water, to perform religious rituals, and many more examples. A critical point of view on current social and economic processes often becomes visible through the images.

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Each photo selected for the exhibition is an individual artwork; each was both abstract and creative. Later, I interviewed participants to better understand the ideas behind them.

The experience of doing this workshop showed me how important and relevant the topic of water seems to be for many people in Leh, also the young ones. It taught me how worried most of the participants are about the future of water in Leh. I felt that the workshop was just a starting point that could lead to a much more intense project on water in the near future.

Are Leh’s glaciers receding?

TASHI MORUP

Ladakh is a region rich in story telling, and many people remember sitting huddled around the stove on long, cold winter evenings intently listening to their elders or professional story-tellers regale them night after night. Unfortunately, other forms of entertainment, especially television, have now replaced sessions like these. And as memory fades, stories get lost or forgotten for the future. LAMO is committed to ensuring that they are recorded and stay relevant, especially as they in-spire a search for a fantastical realism amongst the ordinary.

LAMO is a writer, teacher, and musician from Ladakh. In her free time she herds sheep, goats and horses where she lived for many years with stories from her past, showing us how they are accompanied by Kunzes Dolma that supply water to Leh town.

The first visit was to Nangtse and we were accompanied by Kunzes Dolma showing the receding Nangtse Glacier from Gangtse. Now 50 years old, Kunzes had spent her youth in Nangtse valley herding livestock. Along the three-hours trek she kept us engaged with stories from her past, showing us the abandoned Pulu (small house) where she lived for many years when she herded sheep, goats and yaks. She remembered names of different mountains including one named after the famous 12th century Tibetan Yogi Mila Raspa, who once wandered in the valley.

As we neared the top, with baited breath to see the glacier, but what awaited us there took all of us by surprise! There was no sign of the glacier except for a few snowlines on the mountain’s edge. For Kunzes it was even harder to believe as she had seen the mouth of the big glacier decades ago. “It was right here, the black cavity of the glacier so big that one could step into it,” she said holding her head in disbelief. She even believed that the black spot on the glacial mouth was due to charcoal used by our ancestors to build the glacier.

This myth in Ladakh about using charcoal to build glaciers was broken on our trip to Phulse glacier by Susanne Smith, Professor at Hedehberg University, who told us the opposite – she suggested that Europe faced the Little Ice Age in the 18th century, and perhaps this correlates with a similar impact felt in the Himalayas. Perhaps corroborating this is the story about the 12-year drought Leh faced some 70 years ago and the charcoal remains at Nangtse.

On the other hand, Phulse glacier, which I last visited in 2009 with eminent glaciologist Joseph Georg seen more or less the same. Susanne said this meant, the glacier is stable. However, if we look closely at the earlier images of the glacier we can see a marked difference in the sizes and note that it has receded too. The trip taught us the need to be vigilant of the glaciers and constantly monitor them, as they are important to Leh’s water supply.

Phulse Glacier in September 2016

Tashi Morup is Projects Director, LAMO
A Summer Internship at LAMO

TEVAKAPLAN

Old stone steps wind steeply upwards throughout the building. Simple wooden steps stand in for stone steps, crumbled away over time. As an architect and preservation student, I couldn’t have been happier working below the palace in Leh in the beautifully restored former residence of the Secretary to the King.

Munshi House taught me about Ladakhi vernacular building styles, focused on natural lighting, local materials, and interior versus exterior spaces. At LAMO, I was handed research to organise into a cohesive presentation. Knowing I needed a way to graphically represent the information, I began the process of developing a map of the five neighbourhoods in Old Town. I sought to understand how people interacted with the historic space they occupied. While the research provided numbers, the map tied together demographic information, cultural practices and spatial understanding. The project culminated with two publications; one delving deeper into each home in Khayakt and the other about LAMO’s Old Town exhibition investigating art projects and practices carried out in the neighbourhoods. The project garnered curiosity locally as Old Town moves towards developing awareness of historical and heritage value and educational programmes for both locals and tourists.

Teva Kaplan, a Masters student in Architecture and Masters in Preservation Studies, Tulane University, interned at LAMO in July.

SONAM ANGCHUK

I joined LAMO in 2012 as a Research Fellow. It was for a project on the Old Town of Leh, where I also live. My area of research was to visually document Old Town using both photography and video. I didn’t know how to use a camera or shoot film, but I had a keen interest in both. I had to choose one area of interest, related to architectural heritage and I focused on the rauvas (balcony).

Today, I work as LAMO’s Media Assistant. When I first joined the organisation, I had no knowledge about media or filmmaking. LAMO gave me a platform and an opportunity to learn about both. With more and more practice with the camera, I gained enough confidence to go out and shoot an entire event.

I started with filming events at LAMO, happenings in Leh town, and festivals in Ladakh. Gradually, I learned more. My photographs have appeared at LAMO exhibitions and Stawa magazine. The first film I worked on was a 5-minute production, called “Maaongpu” based on the 2010 flash flood in Leh, as a camera train. This year, July, not only did I get the opportunity to take photos and videos of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama but also got the opportunity to meet him. This was an opportunity I will always treasure and it would not have been possible if I were not working with LAMO’s Media section.

Now, I cover almost all the events in Leh. I really enjoy being in such a line as LAMO’s Media section.

Sonam Angchuk is Media Assistant, LAMO.

Digital mapping of Old Town Leh, Teva Kaplan

Traffic: The Growing Woes of Leh

RINCHEN DOLMA

People associate Ladakh with pristine beauty and clean air. While that is still true of villages, in Leh, it is very different. Here, life has become dependent on technologies in the name of development. People are adapting to a modern lifestyle, looking for comfort without much concern for the environment. Leh is now a hub of crowded guesthouses and hotels, a multitude of shops and restaurants, cafes, cars and Royal Enfield’s, of garbage and pollution. Negotiating a street in Leh by foot is impossible these days. It is not only the traffic but also the increase in pollution, dirt and its effect on health that are growing.

If I look back to my younger days, I do not remember there being so many cars on the road. It was only some army vehicles and very few private cars. But today, there are so many vehicles on the roads that they are proving to be narrow with lack of proper parking facilities, traffic signs and signals.

Looking at data from the Regional Transport Office (RTO) – in 1995-96 there were only 196 vehicles registered with it. Twenty years later, this number has risen to 1,649. This huge increase in automobiles over time is due to many factors but the main ones are an increase in number of taxis, surplus money to buy cars, loans given out by banks for cars, amongst others. And like everywhere, Ladakhis also aspire to own a car for basic need and sometimes, due to competitiveness. This increase is due to the huge and growing presence of the Indian army in Ladakh and the number of vehicles they play should also be taken into account.

This unanticipated increase in the number of vehicles affects the health and eco-system of humans and animals alike. It not only creates congestion on the road but also attributes to one of the leading sources of pollution, be it air or noise. Ladakh, being a desert area with not enough greenery to purify the air, makes the region more fragile to the toxins.

Without a systematic methodology to navigate this increase, it is proving to be a challenge in our everyday life. It is also proving to be a big environmental challenge. Though we cannot put a stop to the purchase of vehicles, efforts have to be made to inspire the people for the rising number of vehicles and regulation of traffic.

Rinchen Dolma is Project Officer: Media, LAMO; she is current...
RIGIN KALON

I can still vividly recall one lazy afternoon in Leh attending a Screenplay Writing workshop. The day had quite a hectic schedule of work for a Mumbai based commercial visibly relaxed and soothed in the magnificently beautiful Stok Kangri view. I had this great association with TM as he is affectionately known for years now and I feel at ease to talk about anything without the slightest fear of being judged, and absolutely enjoy his love for the things mundane and profound alike that he passionately discusses, flavouring them perfectly with his uncanny sense of humour and insight.

That spring day, on a whim, I expressed to slip in to the embrace of quality art and creativity as well in areas with low-literacy rates. Using walls in the community as a medium rather than words. Their Wallposter Comics Heroes Elevate Empathy - A Global Collaboration for Young People

ISAAC GERGAN

LAMO in collaboration with the Siddhartha Cultural and Wellness Society hosted ‘Heroes Elevate Empathy: A Global Collaboration for Young People’, and invited four schools from the Leh area to take part in a five-day workshop to look at comics and graphic narratives in the context of existing education structures. It was a professional filmmaker, an aspiring fashionista, a school teacher and a talented student all keen interest in the arts. I must say ‘an interesting bunch of enthusiasts to work with!’

The workshop ended up with each student making a comic strip of which we made large copies to strip in the market, Leh and VFX (MAAC Delhi). She interned the day I went stationary shopping, and VFX (MAAC Delhi). She interned the day I went stationary shopping, treating a witch called ‘Dungjonma’. We decided to call the programme “The Art of Scriptwriting.” Within that framework, the workshop was long intensive programme we managed to create a critical mass of interest in comic and illustration. We met in LAMO, York City and Stok, the LAMO workshop was designed to delve into the lives of these heroes through a range of skill and capacity building activities before coming up with writing, sketches and final portraits of the chosen heroes.

While different activities brought in equally remarkable results, I found our role play session the most noteworthy. Children were asked to relate themselves to the characters of our chosen heroes and were asked to talk about them and their role of a trusted guide and an initiator of skill and capacity building activities. We hold a brief session about art appreciation that included introductory talks on literature, music, poetry, painting and theatre. Filmmaking, as a creative form, is very diverse in its approach. To be a filmmaker, one must be fluent in all the above-mentioned arts and that is what we wanted to do, to immerse and interest as well.

How could one have a screenplay-writing workshop without getting to know the films, which are considered recent landmarks and have helped redefine filmmaking today. We saw Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu’s ‘Revant’, which won 2015 Oscar for Best Film and the other was Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s ‘Uncle Boonmee’ which won Palme d’Or at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival.

These films were very different in their approach towards storytelling yet both managed successfully to do it in their own unique style. That was the idea. To showcase these films and let the participants know the importance of reflecting our own visions, empathy, and ability to feel at ease to talk about anything with the predictability and boorishness of everyday life; that the city has unfortunately come to become of late.

To begin with I was pretty impressed with the turn out of the participants for the workshop. There were ten of them – most were students, then there from the predictability and boorishness of everyday life; that the city has unfortunately come to become of late.

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RIGIN KALON is a spiritual-seeker, film-maker and entrepreneur

I was desperately shopping for pens when I got distracted by a crowd of excited kids gathered around a wall, each one holding some colour pencils and coating furiously. Amidst all the heads I saw Joseph’s, interacting with the kids, a big smile on his face. The picture was clear. I thought to myself, ‘our Wallposters were a success!’

Conveying a message through illustration is sometimes much more effective than association with words. The idea of a ‘Wallposter’ comics came from Shadrab Sharma; the aim is to encourage communication, problems and challenges they face using images rather than words. Their Wallposter comics then encourages responses from others in the community because of the placement of the comics in areas of high-foot traffic.

The format of these comics, 4-panel strips, as a mode of communication is an effective way to address messages because they are short and concentrated on one theme. Because these comics are accessible and use illustrations to push forward messages, they work well in areas with low-literacy rates. Using walls as a platform for showcasing these comic strips to maximum viewers and encouraging the participants and encourages them to take ownership, but it also encourages debate in the society.

Joseph Michel (USA) and I both happen to share this interest in comic making and illustration. We met in LAMO, where we both were interning in the summer, and planned a comic making workshop with students. The workshop included a series of exercises, discussions and presentations. One of the exercises was ‘Exquisite Corpse’, a helpful way to get kids to talk and feel comfortable as co-participants. This exercise would trigger discussions, as my hero. I have always been interested in painting but never managed to paint anything. At school I never managed to develop the skills. I plan to meet up next summer and work further on developing the skills. I have, by science many technologies are coming up which can lead to many global issues, what do you think of that?'

I replied, ‘everything has advantages and disadvantages but for everyone. It is a question of whom one admires, and I had many people in mind and finally I chose Malala Yousafzai as my hero.

Keshav Wangmo, Central Institute of Buddhist Studies

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Isaac Gergan is Projects Officer, Arts LAMO

What I liked most was the role-play, wearing masks and conversing with the world. Someone asked me, ‘by science many technologies are coming up which can lead to many global issues, what do you think of that?’ I replied, ‘everything has advantages and disadvantages but for everyone. It is a question of whom one admires, and I had many people in mind and finally I chose Malala Yousafzai as my hero.

Kesang Wangmo, Central Institute of Buddhist Studies

Chadha Nehru is my hero because he makes filmmaking and a true hero. Heroes could be like superhero, or our parents can be heroes as well. But they are meaningful and not just people who do something heroic or even two people or more for everyone.
Open Studios - Art Camp 2016

TSETEN ANGMO

The memories of the summer are surrounded by a beautiful flower from the deep. The open blue sky seen from the LAMO courtyard and the intense discussions kept the artists engaged with their work. This is the fourth of the LAMO Art Camps, held each year in the summer, bringing together Ladakhi artists and artists from different art colleges in the country and some who have graduated. LAMO has thus become a platform where I along with my artist friends can express our thoughts through our respective mediums and show our work in Ladakh.

This year, the theme revolved around mountain environments and the experience of connecting through communities, change, loss and damage. This time, the focus was more on the process. It followed an open studio format where each artist chose a designated space at LAMO and made it their “studio”. Visitors to LAMO could engage with the artist while seeing the research and process method. It was a bit daunting to work in such a public atmosphere but also interesting to interact and get feedback from the audience. At the same time, it was fun to meet with other artists, explore each other’s world, understand their perspective as each artist came up with their own concept and techniques to render their piece of work.

In this, Chema Devje and Skatzal Onam tried to bring forward the gradual evanescence of culture in our daily lifestyle while Tashi Namgail looked at the concept of death in his artwork, showing a funeral procession by Artist Tashi Namgyal.

NIHARKA RAJPUT

The sheer melody of the cheerful hidden chirrups at the break of dawn fills every bird lover with joy. I have always been intrigued by nature’s sophisticated mechanisms, but my love for birds is unmatched. I am a Visual artist and a creative conservationist, using sculptural forms as my medium to investigate the loss of compassion in humans. While Paljor illustrated how the modern stigma of plastic is ruining the serene landscape of Ladakh. Among these, my work was more focused on the endangered species of Ladakh, talking about this through polygon designs that showed their limited mystifying existence.

We came to know what loss means to us from our perspective and the results were worth seeing and analysing, evoking in the minds of people that it is high time to value what you would might lose forever.

Tseten Angmo is a third year BFA student in Applied Arts, College of Art, New Delhi.

Isaac Gergan is Projects Officer, Arts LAMO

Working in a Traditional space

Isaac Gergan talks about his experience at this year’s Art Camp

The brown mud walls, the sooted ceilings, the textures that time had pressed on wood, the fading pigments on walls and weathered elements became an inspiration for this year’s Art Camp. As I deconstructed the traditional space of the historic Manishl House/LAMO Centre, these raised questions of the impact of architectural structure, traditional building methods, weathering and human touch. This method of understanding the space symbolically initiated my research, even though during the two weeks I found myself asking more questions than finding answers.

My interest in the elemental suddenly branched into topics of heritage, memory, time and tradition. How was what I was doing speaking to the space I was working in and vice versa? The initial process included collecting samples that spoke to my topics and creating sketches of these. For the second part, it was a natural transition to the camera, which became a tool to document and create. However the camera, the eye, the act of looking also became a subject to study. What was my experience and how did I photograph it? How did I frame the mud walls, stained pillars, the ceilings and spaces affect the understanding and memory of the space?

My installation became about highlighting the space I was working in. I chose a corner space that had all the elements of my initial interest: misshaped wall, blackened beams, a sky light and an old doorway, which had all their own energy and story. By re-employing empty frames, stones, thread and a painted canvas I could roll up in a corner, and other elements that were natural to the space, I created juxtapositions that either highlighted the space or gave new meaning. In an adjacent section, collaged photographs of these spaces and other parts of the building spoke to the installation. The experience of the installation, one that was felt as if one manoeuvred around it, and its consequence on memory, became the artwork. The installation then was simply an aid and technical element to react to traditional Ladakhi space. It was then a curried journey into memory, presence and place, playing on imagination, allowing this momentarily heightened experience to be re-projected onto many surfaces beyond where it was first experienced.

Niharka Ragini is an Artist/Conservator. Her residency at LAMO was supported by ATREE Foundation, Hunkashore.