The ambivalence of borders: Map art through the lens of North-East Indian artists

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Abstract

Borders and maps came under scrutiny in the last few decades. Accentuating the gap between the map and the territory, critical cartography attempts to unmask the assumed scientific objectivity of maps and to reveal their entanglement with power. Postcolonial theory adopts a similar critical approach towards cartography which replaces the earlier attitude of the anticolonial struggles towards maps and borders. This shift is characteristic of postcolonial theories that focus on signifying practices and presuppose that the coloniser's power lies in the ability to represent colonised histories, customs, cultures, and territories. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam question the deconstructionist tendencies within postcolonial theory and juxtapose them to the discourse of indigenous thinkers who underscore 'rootedness' and 'affirm borders'. In my article, I examine *A-PART—Stories of Lands and Lines* (23 July–16 August 2019, New Delhi), a group exhibition that explored borders through the perspectives of artists from North-East India. Curated by Pranamita Borgohain and Vikash Nand Kumar of Zero Gravity Collective, the exhibition featured artists whose voices are not always heard within the mainstream of Indian art. While the exhibition questioned, undermined, and challenged borders, it also foregrounded their productive functions. In my article, I underscore and analyse this ambivalent attitude towards borders.

Keywords North-East Indian art · Border · Identity · Map art · Border aesthetics

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1 Gateway

Sisir Thapa's *Gateway* (Fig. 1) extended an ambivalent welcome to the visitors at the Akar Prakar Gallery in New Delhi. Made of barbed wire and hung on the entrance wall, the small sculpture replicates a traditional gateway from Sikkim. The contradiction between the material and the form provokes conflicting associations. Thapa's sculpture could be seen as a welcome gate or a checkpoint, an invitation to discover the artist's world or a cultural border. Curated by Pranamita Borgohain and Vikash Nand Kumar of Zero Gravity Collective,[1] the exhibition *A-PART: Stories of Lands and Lines* (23 July–16 August 2019, New Delhi)[2] explored notions of land and borders through the lens of artists from North-East India.[3] Voicing 'peripheral' practices that the Indian art centres usually ignore,[4] the exhibition did not only reflect on geopolitical issues but embodied a political act. By exhibiting artworks under the brand of the North-East, the curators participated in the struggle over what Stuart Hall dubs the 'relations of representation'.[5]

Fig. 1 Sisir Thapa, *Gateway*, 2019 (Photo courtesy Pranamita Borgohain)

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[1] https://www.facebook.com/ZeroGravityCollective/. Accessed 09 February 2021.

[2] The exhibition featured the artworks of Dharmendra Prasad, Gopa Roy, Kompi Riba, Sisir Thapa, Thlana Bazik, Treibor Mawlong, Victor Hazra, and Wahida Ahmed.

[3] https://akarprakar.com/shows/a-part-stories-of-lands-lines/. Accessed 09 February 2021.

[4] Jigisha Bhattacharya underscores the peripheralisation of the North-East: '..the North-Eastern states of India have always been bordering on the fringes—geopolitically, socially and culturally as far as the narrative arc of the mainland India represents itself.' Jigisha Bhattacharya, 'Sentinels of Belonging—Tales from Our Lands' (*Akar Prakar*, 3 August 2019). https://akarprakar.com/sentinels-of-belonging-tales-from-our-lands/. Accessed 28 December 2020.

[5] Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities' in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (Routledge 2005) 442. Hall discerns a 'shift' in black cultural politics in the UK 'from a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself' (p. 444). In the first moment the struggle was directed against the seclusion of black artists and 'the stereotypical quality and the fetishized nature of images of blacks' (p. 443). The second moment is characterised by the problematisation and politicisation of representation and 'the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject' (p. 444).

Inclusion, however, has its own political ramifications, and *Gateway*, along with other works in the exhibition, manifests an anxiety not only from the erection of physical and symbolical boundaries, but also from their erasure. If Gangtok, Thapa's hometown, is marketed as the gateway to Sikkim, and Sikkim as the Himalaya's gateway, the barbed wire indicates to the metropolitan audience that they have a limited access to the 'stories of lands and lines' on display. A similar tension between inclusion and exclusion is reflected in the twofold framing that Akar Prakar, an art gallery operating in Kolkata and New Delhi,[6] provided for the exhibition. In addition to the curatorial note penned by Zero Gravity Collective,[7] the gallery published a blog by Jigisha Bhattacharya titled 'Sentinels of Belonging—Tales from Our Lands'.[8] The variation between the exhibition and blog titles not only broadened the range of motifs that the exhibition addressed, but foregrounded two different approaches to the geopolitics of borders. While the dual meaning of the exhibition title, 'a part' or 'apart', underscores the seclusion of the North-East from the Indian mainland, the title of the blog 'Sentinels of Belonging' does not question the dissection of the territory by borders, but portrays the artists as guardians of their cultural particularity.

2 Map art

During the last few decades numerous artists have explored geopolitical issues through cartographic themes and techniques. In view of the growing artistic interest in borders and mapping, various scholars have theorised this trend's motives and outcomes. Denis Wood argues that 'map art' undermines the scientific pretension of cartography and the alleged neutrality that maps proclaim.[9]

> The irresistible tug maps exert on artists arises from the map's mask of neutral objectivity, from its mask of unauthored dispassion. Artists either strip this mask off the map, or fail to put one on. In either case artists simultaneously point to the mask worn by the map, while they enter unmasked into the very discourse of the map. In so doing map artists are erasing the line cartographers have tried to draw between their form of graphic communication (maps) and others (drawings, paintings, and so on). In this way map artists are reclaiming the map as a discourse function for people in general. The flourishing of map art signals the imminent demise of the map as a privileged form of communication. The map is dead! Long live the map.[10]

Map art, according to Wood, undermines the distinction between scientific and creative cartographic activities. Whereas maps are usually gauged according to their correspondence with reality, Wood sees them as a 'form of graphic communication'

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6   https://akarprakar.com/about/. Accessed 01 February 2021.

7   The curatorial note was provided to the author by the gallery via email.

8   Bhattacharya, 'Sentinels of Belonging' (n 4).

9   Denis Wood, 'Map Art' (2006) 53 *Cartographic Perspectives* 5.

10   Ibid. 5.

that achieve their authority due to the operation of power.[11] Consequently, he shows how map art questions the naturalisation of the nation-state and undermines 'the arbitrary nature of national boundaries'.[12]

This critical approach towards modern cartography can unmask some of its cultural conventions, e.g., its north-centric orientation. As distinct from modern maps, the Arab cartographer Al-Idrisi who served in the court of King Roger II in Palermo, Sicily, charted the world map south up.[13] While these opposing cartographic customs manifest different cultural preferences, the global acceptance of the north-up alignment reflects a political domination. The emphasis on the discursivity of maps, however, understates their workability or the diverse relation that they develop with the territory. Modern navigators prefer Michelin maps, Waze, or Google Maps over the Roman *itinerarium* not only due to the power of convention.[14] By maintaining that the only difference between scientific and unscientific maps is the former's erasure of interested authorship, Wood replaces the positivist nativity of maps with a naïve discourse analysis. Moreover, by denaturalising official maps, Wood makes light of their productivity and the rhizomatic relation that they establish with the territory. Maps do not only reflect but also shape the territory, and, in a sense, contrary to Korzybski's celebrated declaration,[15] are the territory.

3 My native land

Shilpa Gupta's project *100 Hand Drawn Maps of My Country*[16] (Fig. 2) resonates with Wood's characterisation of map art as a critique of state cartography. For this project, she invited participants in Mumbai, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Montreal, Cuenca, and other cities around the world to draw the maps of their respective countries. Layering those hand-drawn maps on top of each other, the artist questions the monolithic cartographic representation of the nation-state by foregrounding the diversity of its imagination. By rendering the border fuzzy, the artist undermines the presentation of the nation-state as a homogeneous territorial entity. The compounding of the possessive singular pronoun 'my' and the collective national entity 'country' in the title seems to be ironic or at least contradictory. Instead of one homogeneous imagination of the national territory, Gupta foregrounds numerous individual articulations that blur the uniform cartographic representation of the nation-state. The repetition of this exercise in various locations underscores that the obscurity of borders is conceived by the artist as a synchronic rather than a diachronic problem, i.e., the instability of national borders is a structural rather than a historically contingent problem. Her ongoing project explores national borders from a non-specific location and views their indeterminacy as a global phenomenon.

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[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid. 9–10.

[13] https://www.britannica.com/biography/al-Sharif-al-Idrisi. Accessed 09 February 2021.

[14] *Itinerarium* is an ancient Roman road map.

[15] Alfred Korzybski argues that 'a map is not the territory.' Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics* (Institute of General Semantics 2000) 58.

[16] https://shilpagupta.com/100-hand-drawn-maps-carbon-tracings/. Accessed 07 February 2021.
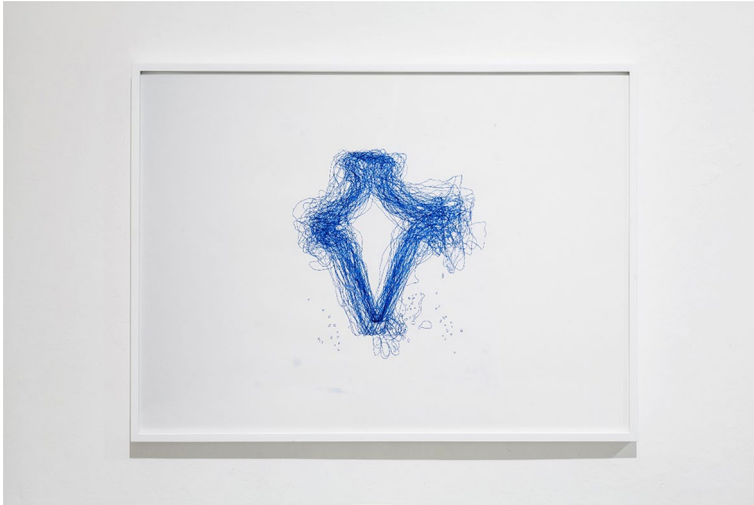
Fig. 2 Shilpa Gupta, *100 Hand Drawn Maps of My Country* 2008–ongoing (Photo courtesy Vadehra Art Gallery)

The sentiment of some of the artworks in *A-PART* is markedly different. The sense of 'rootedness' and belonging seems prevalent in the artistic production of Gopa Roy, Wahida Ahmed, and Treibor Mawlong. If in Gupta's title the amalgamation between 'my' and 'country' seems to be ironic or contradictory, Roy's *My Native Land* and Wahida's *For the Love of My Land* are devoid of cynicism. Roy paints with natural fibres and watercolour on a paper pulp that she prepares from bamboo leaves and sugarcane. The figures are rendered in earthy hues and are engaged in manual agriculture labour.[17] Her light boxes series *Metamorphosis* depicts the shift from manual to automatic agricultural machinery and manifests the artist's anxiety in the face of the transformation in the relationship of the Tripuri community with their land.

Similarly, the woodcuts of Treibor Mawlong, who lives in Meghalaya, indicate his angst from the gradual loss of the 'sense of belonging' (Fig. 3). He writes, 'Home is a space where one feels safe, protected and comfortable.… When that comfort is challenged, one feels threatened and insecure. This work (nine frame woodcut prints) is an artistic expression that attempts to communicate certain idea of struggles/challenges and existence.'[18]

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[17] https://emergentartspace.org/gopa-roy-native-land/. Accessed 09 February 2021.

[18] Artist note provided to the author by the curator via email.
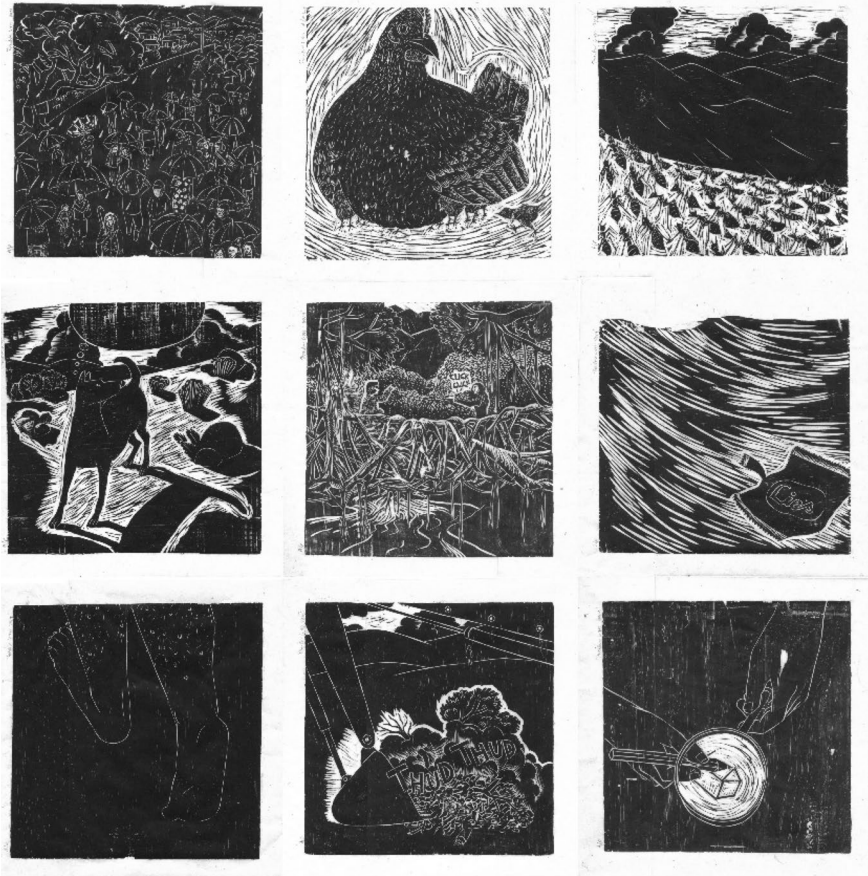
Artist :Treibor Mawlong
Title: Hills and tales
Size : 9x (32x32)cms for each panel {total size 96x96cms}
Medium: woodcut
Year : 2019

Fig. 3 Treibor Mawlong, *Untitled*, 2019 (Photo courtesy Pranamita Borgohain)

The dark and sombre prints narrate various episodes that make Mawlong's milieu unhomely: tourists click photographs over a rope bridge in the middle of the jungle, a huge mechanical bucket sweeps a village, and a surgical knife dissects a house under a magnifying glass. Mawlong's visual language is explicit and straightforward, making his critique bold and urgent. He does not advocate the erection of boundaries, but his woodcuts attest to their symbolic importance.
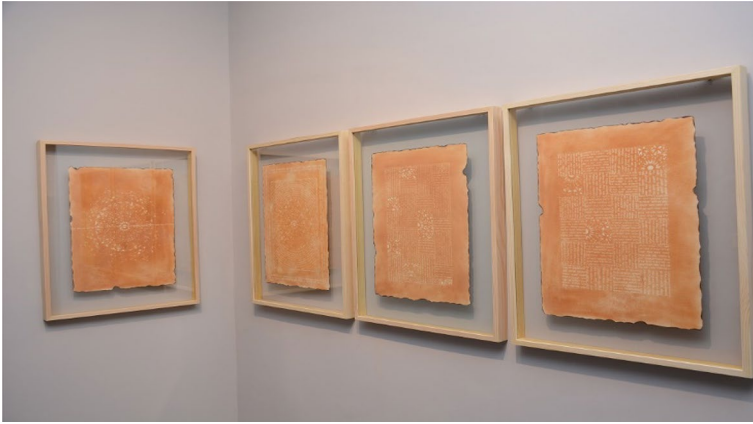
Fig. 4 Wahida Ahmed, *For the Love of My Land*, 2019 (Photo courtesy Pranamita Borgohain)

Wahida Ahmed replicates Persian designs in her series *For the Love of My Land* (Fig. 4). She sticks soil on paper and creates her drawings through erasure. The fragile design is blurry in some places, insinuating 'the metaphorical gesture of slowly fading peace and harmony in the region due to continuation of conflicts'.[19] Wahida, however, does not attempt to resolve these inter-religious conflicts by transcending local traditions. Instead, she is inspired by the 'Bhakti and Sufi movements', and foregrounds their vision of coexistence in 'pre-colonial secular India'.[20]

In addition to her soil drawings, Wahida erected a square chamber in the gallery space, made of black threads, that fused the shape of the Muslim *Kaaba* with the *triratha* design of a Hindu temple (*ratha*s are vertical offset projections or facets of a Hindu temple, and *triratha* refers to a temple with three such facets) (Fig. 5). On the outer walls, she attached the Assamese poetry of the 17th-century Sufi Saint Azan Fakir:

…
The Hindu climbs the pyre
The Muslim goes to his grave
Both return to the bosom
Of the same earth where they lived.[21]

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[19] Press release, *A-PART: Stories of Lands and Lines*. https://www.artforum.com/uploads/guide.005/id09956/press_release.pdf. Accessed 09 February 2021.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Translated by Syed Ahmed Shah. Artist's note received from the curator via email.

Fig. 5 Wahida Ahmed, *Untitled*, 2019 (Photo courtesy Pranamita Borgohain)

4 Border aesthetics

While map art, according to Wood, undermines official boundaries, Rosello and Wolfe's *Border Aesthetics* underscores their performativity: 'bordering processes influence everyone's way of being in the world.'[22] The destabilisation of the epistemic status of borders and the denaturalisation of maps, one might add, do not necessarily enfeeble their impact. The difference between map art and border aesthetics can thus be described as a shift from ontological to performative perspectives. Rosello and Wolfe 'care more about what one does with or around the border than about what the border is'.[23] Accordingly, instead of viewing a border solely as a 'linear obstacle' or an 'impenetrable division', border aesthetics employ terms such as 'borderland' and 'borderscape' to project 'that borders become liminal zones that not only separate but also connect divided entities and identities'.[24] Despite cautioning their readers that the perception of a border as a zone is by no means 'more utopian, liberal or liberating',[25] they cite Bhabha's concepts of liminality and third space in order to underscore the political potential of border aesthetics:

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[22] Mireille Rosello and Stephen F Wolfe, 'Introduction' in Johan Schimanski and Stephen F Wolfe (eds), *Border Aesthetics: Concepts and Intersections* (Berghahn Books 2017) 1, 3.

[23] Ibid. 7.

[24] Ibid. 11.

[25] Ibid. 7.

Liminality carries the subversive potential to posit a relationship and a separation simultaneously or, as Homi K. Bhabha writes, 'liminality opens up the possibility of articulating different, even incommensurable cultural practices and priorities'. It is a 'third space' enabling a cultural translation, denying essentialism. Liminality displaces 'the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives'.… Liminal space should also be considered as a location of contact, the negotiation of cultural values and of relational identity.[26]

Rosello and Wolfe maintain that while borders facilitate cultural essentialism, blurring them is a subversive political act.[27] This perspective makes a lot of sense from the viewpoint of European progressive intellectuals who fight xenophobia and the anti-immigration campaign, but it does not necessarily represent the geopolitical concerns of artists from other locations.[28] Ella Shohat and Robert Stam᾿ who critically juxtapose postcolonial theory to the positions of indigenous thinkers, underline a different approach to borders:

First, indigenous thinkers often see their situation as colonial rather than post-colonial, or as at once colonial, postcolonial, and paracolonial. Second, while postcolonial theory celebrates a cosmopolitan 'travelling theory', indigenous discourse often valorizes a rooted rather than a cosmopolitan existence. Third, while postcolonial theory revels in 'blurring borders', indigenous communities seek to affirm borders by demarcating land against encroaching squatters, nation-states, and corporations. Fourth, while Derridean-inspired postcolonial theory contests 'myths of origin', indigenous communities try to reconstruct their original languages and their original myths for the sake of their own survival. Fifth. While postcolonialism highlights the inventedness of nations and 'denaturalizes the natural' while enclosing 'nature' within protective scare quotes. Indigenous thinkers insist of love of a land regarded as sacred.[29]

Several indigenous concerns that Shohat and Stam trace in the Americas seem relevant for *A-PART*'s artists as we saw above. While map art and border aesthetics question or blur borders, some of the artworks on display underscore the inverse gesture.

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[26] Homi K Bhabha, 'The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha' in Jonathan Rutherford (ed), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (Lawrence and Wishart 1990) 207, 210. Cited in Rosello and Wolfe, 'Introduction' (n 22) 11.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Walter D Mignolo repeatedly underscores the impact of geopolitics on epistemology and the conception of politics. See, for example, Walter D Mignolo, 'The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference' (2002) 101(1) *South Atlantic Quarterly* 57.

[29] Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, 'Whence and Whither Postcolonial Theory?' (2012) 43(2) *New Literary History* 371, 374–375.

5 Local and global perspectives

In a similar manner to Shilpa Gupta, Reena Saini Kallat challenges borders and national cartography, but instead of accentuating their imagined and incoherent character, she highlights the discontinuities that the bordering process introduces and foregrounds an alternative cartographic perception. In other words, she engages with borders performatively and disregards their ontological status. Her series *Leaking Lines* (Fig. 6) depicts various borders and fortifications through maps made of electric wires and photographs. The maps and the photographs facilitate two modes of representation: symbolic and mimetic, respectively. The maps provide an abstract representation of the territory, whereas the photographic image makes it tangible; the photograph reveals only a segment of the border, while the map's aerial perspective offers a more comprehensive rendering of the territory. Furthermore, the symbolic language of the map enables Kallat not only to replicate but to add another layer of meaning. She places the borderline between torn wire meshes that denote 'a frayed web of connections that once held the terrain together'.[30]
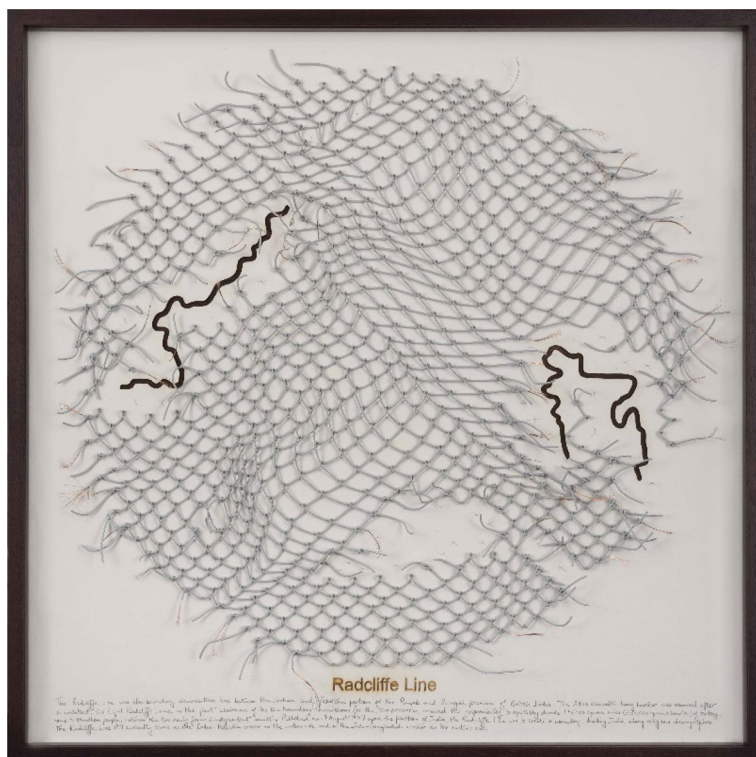

Fig. 6 Reena Saini Kallat, *Leaking Lines (Radcliffe Line)*, 2019 (Photo courtesy Nature Morte Gallery)

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[30] https://reenakallat.com/leakinglines2020. Accessed 09 February 2021.

Fig. 7 Reena Saini Kallat, *Woven Chronicle*, 2015 (Photo courtesy Nature Morte Gallery)

While *Leaking Lines* accentuates the divisions that borders create, in *Woven Chronicle* (2011/2016) (Fig. 7), Kallat undermines borders by introducing lines of mobility. The installation is made of electrical wires and meshes which are organised in the shape of the world map. The different continents and other geographical units are made of wire mesh resembling fences and are outlined with electrical cords in the shape of barbed wire. In addition to the demarcations of territories, Kallat indicates migratory routes with additional wires, and installs several speakers around the map that project 'deep-sea ambient sounds, slow electric pulses, the hum of engaged tones from telecommunications, mechanical-sounding drone, factory sirens, and ship horns intermingled with migratory bird sounds'.[31] The juxtaposition between the barbed wires and immigration routes, fences and migratory birds, makes the artist's intention fairly explicit.

> The flows and movements of travelers, migrants, and labor across the world have produced major social and economic implications as well as new forms of cultural exchange. It has allowed us not only to free cultural identities from a physical place, but to see us all as entwined in a symbolic web, as it were. The work was conceived with electric wires to form a drawing that will trace migration patterns globally, where multitude of actors interact without knowledge of the overall situation.[32]

Kallat represents migrancy as a tension between limitation and movement, barbed wires and fences on the one hand and freedom of 'cultural identities' from spatial confinements on the other. Moreover, immigration not only undermines boundaries, but reveals that humanity ('us all') is 'entwined in a symbolic web'.[33] This network,

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[31] Reena Saini Kallat, 'Woven Chronicle' (*Medium.com*, 17 November 2016). https://medium.com/insecurities/woven-chronicle-e494ea66e782. Accessed 28 December 2020.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

however, does not reveal itself intuitively to its 'multitude of actors [who] interact without knowledge of the overall situation'.[34] In order to facilitate a global perspective through which a 'Woven Chronicle' can be narrated, Kallat adopts the vantage point of modern cartography. The objective and neutral view from nowhere of Kallat's cartographic representation enables her to trace and conjoin discrete territories and travel patterns and to project them homogeneously. The installation itself, in a sense, reiterates its own visual message. It was displayed, without any further mediation and adaptation, in various parts of the world including the Vancouver Art Gallery, MoMA (New York), and India Art Fair (New Delhi).

Kallat's installation engages with two different cartographic operations. On the one hand, she denounces the divisions that cartographic lines introduce. Whereas spatial maps dissect the territory, Kallat's lines of movement underscore connectivity. By introducing mobility, Kallat undercuts the stagnation that maps usually enforce. Nevertheless, despite undermining this differential cartographic apparatus, Kallat utilises another cartographic operation to advance her migratory vision. In a similar manner to *Leaking Lines*, in which the map facilitates a perspective that is not available to the human hand that holds the camera, the representative mode of the map in *Woven Chronicle* enables Kallat to transcend the limited viewpoint of the actors who participate in her global network.

There is, however, a difference in the position that Kallat assigns to the cartographic perspective in *Woven Chronicle*. In *Leaking Lines*, the cartographic and the photographic viewpoints complement each other. If the map provides a wider vantage point that is not available to the camera lens, the photograph concretises its abstract depiction. *Woven Chronicle*, on the other hand, introduces a hierarchic order between the actors' limited vantage point and the all-encompassing view that the world map possesses. The historical and geopolitically specific perspectives of the actors are superseded by the view from nowhere that the map utilises and represents. Any kind of border that appears in *Woven Chronicle* is transcended in the name of the formal continuity that the cartographic perspective facilitates.

5.1 Land escape

For Dharmendra Prasad, immigration seems more a challenge that does not liberate his cultural identity from spatial limitations, but puts it in peril. His installation *Land Escape (Outsiders Will Be Outsiders)* (Fig. 8) underscores that in Prasad's world the need to move derives from poverty and economic inequality. The viewpoint of his installation is thus location-specific rather than global and is entangled with his own experiences. It explores migrancy through the perspectives of specific actors without proposing an 'objective' and universal view. If Kallat's map proposes a view from nowhere that can encompass but in fact supersedes every other perspective, Prasad declares in the subtitle of his installation that 'outsiders will be outsiders'.

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[34] Ibid.

Fig. 8 Dharmendra Prasad, *Land Escape (Outsiders Will Be Outsiders)*, 2019 (Photo courtesy Pranamita Borgohain)

Prasad was born in Bihar but migrated with his family to Assam in search of a decent livelihood. After completing his MFA from the University of Hyderabad, he returned to his native village and now moves back and forth between Bihar and Assam.[35] The decision to make the countryside the centre of his artistic activities is vital for Prasad. His art is not only inspired by but also endeavours to be in continuation of indigenous practices. His large-scale installations are usually made of crop residue (*bhusa*).[36] Instead of transforming this 'non-art' material into a work of art, one can sense the artist's protest and provocation through the sheer presence of his substance. Prasad does not attempt to depict the rural life of Bihar and Assam, but lets the indigenous world burst into the metropolitan milieu.

Land Escape is more 'tame' in comparison to Prasad's other installations, perhaps to suit the setting of a commercial gallery. The crop residue was piled in the corner and stuck to the wall to form a typical but melancholic Assamese landscape. The *bhusa*, however, did not come from the rice fields of Assam but from a wheat crop which is more common in Bihar. By fusing the Bihari residue with the Assamese landscape, the artist illustrates his conflicted cultural position. A similar yet inverted gesture is conveyed in the video that is projected into a tin box coated with *bhusa*. It was shot by the artist during a train journey from Assam to Bihar and portrays the gradual transformation of the landscape. While the landscape on the wall

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[35] Based on the author's personal interview with the artist.

[36] https://ficart.org/eaa-2019-d-p. Accessed 09 February 2021.

symbolises the artist's transition from Bihar to Assam, the video, which is played in a loop, indicates his return. Together they outline the to and fro of the immigrant and the constant (or looped) longing for a home return that can never be fully achieved. Alongside the landscape and the video, Prasad scattered sketch books containing portraits of landless farmers. These drawings manifest another aspect of what the artist dubs 'land escape'. Despite the fact that these modern vassals did not move from their native place, their land is drifting away from them.

6 Liminality and borders

Bhabha's concepts of liminality and third space[37] have influenced various theories that explore the politics of cartography and borders. Beside Rosello and Wolfe's border aesthetics,[38] which was discussed above, the literary scholar Graham Huggan analyses the cartographic strategies of postcolonial authors by elaborating on what Bhabha perceives as 'the ambivalence of colonial discourse'.[39] Bhabha, himself, does not engage with the decolonisation of maps or border aesthetics in literature and art directly, but he develops various ideas about borders while analysing the spatial allegories of the African-American artist Renée Green,[40] especially in *Sites of Genealogy*.[41] Common to Bhabha and his followers[42] is their suspicious attitude towards boundaries. This disposition, I proposed above, is informed by the geographical locations of its beholders. Bhabha's analysis is attentive to marginalised voices from a specific setting, namely the Western metropolis.[43] In the remaining part of this article, however, I will not underscore the geospecificity of this approach, but critically examine its presuppositions. I will argue that Bhabha et al.[44] predicate their theories on a limited conception of the relation between the territory, boundaries, and language. The boundary, I maintain, following Heidegger, is not only inseparable from its terrain, but also what makes its perception possible. Consequently, the blurring of borders does not 'liberate' the territory, but remoulds it through other demarcations that more than once turn out to be oppressive.

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[37] Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge 2004).

[38] Rosello and Wolfe, 'Introduction' (n 22).

[39] Graham Huggan, 'Decolonizing the Map: Postcolonialism, Poststructuralism and the Cartographic Connection' in *Interdisciplinary Measures: Literature and the Future of Postcolonial Studies* (Oxford University Press 2008) 24.

[40] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (n 37) 4–5.

[41] https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/4543/installation_images/37868. Accessed 08 February 2021.

[42] Rosello and Wolfe, 'Introduction' (n 22) 3; Huggan, 'Decolonizing the Map' (n 39) 24.

[43] For example, while the curators of *A-PART* engage with the relations of representation, as argued above, Bhabha and Green are concerned with what Hall calls the 'politics of representation'. Hall, 'New Ethnicities' (n 5) 444. Bhabha cites Green, 'Even then, it's still a struggle for power between various groups within ethnic groups about what's being said and who's saying what, who's representing who? What is a community anyway? What is a black community? What is a Latino community? I have trouble with thinking of all these things as monolithic fixed categories.' Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (n 37) 4.

[44] Rosello and Wolfe, 'Introduction' (n 22) 3; Huggan, 'Decolonizing the Map' (n 39) 24.

Sites of Genealogy[45] is a site-specific installation that 'displays and displaces the binary logic through which identities of difference are often constructed — Black/White, Self/Other',[46] by exploiting the museum's architecture:

> I used architecture literally as a reference, using the attic, the boiler room, and the stairwell to make associations between certain binary divisions such as higher and lower and heaven and hell. The stairwell became a liminal space, a pathway between the upper and lower areas, each of which was annotated with plaques referring to blackness and whiteness.[47]

The stairwell serves as a metaphor of the 'in-between the designations of identity'.[48] As 'the connective tissue' it 'constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white',[49] but also 'prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities'.[50] Bhabha, however, glosses over the installation's allegoric procedure and the transition from architectural symbolism to that which pertains to culture. Green establishes an analogy between two different orders that are not necessarily compatible with each other: architectural and cultural. The boiler room, the stairwell, and the attic are simultaneously spatial and discursive phenomena. They function by occupying confined spaces which are designed and interpretively used in a particular manner. If seen from an abstract and geometrical perspective, the differences between these spaces are contingent. It is only by spatial division and the diversity of utilities that the attic becomes an attic and the boiler room a space of mechanical engagement. The removal of walls and the alteration or nullification of those functions will not reveal a more primordial spatial perception. Their boundaries, whether explicit or not, are what confer their unique 'nature'.

Martin Heidegger[51] underlines the inseparability of architecture from language, and questions the priority that science gives to space-as-such over other lingual designations. The attic, boiler room, and the stairwell do not occupy a pre-discursive space but unfold different spaces by giving them distinctive character. Accordingly, Heidegger transforms the perceived notion of boundary: 'A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presenting.'[52] If space-as-such pre-exists other spatial entities, the boundary should be understood as a limitation, but since delamination is what consolidates the space as a space, the boundary is where something begins and not where it ends. Heidegger explicates this discourse-laden manner of perceiving spatial entities through the example of the bridge:

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[45] https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/4543/installation_images/37868. Accessed 08 February 2021.

[46] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (n 37) 5.

[47] Renée Green, cited in ibid.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (Albert Hofstadter tr, Harper Perennial 2001) 152.

[52] Ibid.

Always and ever differently the bridge escorts the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so that they may get to other banks and in the end, as mortals, to the other side. Now in a high arch, now in a low, the bridge vaults over glen and stream — whether mortals keep in mind this vaulting of the bridge's course or forget that they, always themselves on their way to the last bridge, are actually striving to surmount all that is common and unsound in them in order to bring themselves before the haleness of the divinities. The bridge gathers, as a passage that crosses, before the divinities — whether we explicitly think of, and visibly give thanks for, their presence, as in the figure of the saint of the bridge, or whether that divine presence is obstructed or even pushed wholly aside.[53]

Even though the bridge is not clearly demarcated by boundaries and walls, it becomes a bridge by virtue of the limited space that it occupies, or in fact opens up, and the various cultural meanings that are associated with it ('the last bridge', 'the saint of the bridge'). Similarly, as an architectural space the stairwell is not liminal, in the sense that Bhabha gives the term, but a defined space with a specific architectural identity, i.e., to link different spaces vertically. The stairwell does not connect by surpassing boundaries but by means of their differential operation and serves as a metaphor by eliciting rather than transcending lingual designations.

Bhabha cites Heidegger's alternative definition of boundary in the epigraph of the introduction to *The Location of Culture*,[54] but he reroutes his spatial theory and portrays it in a hybrid bent. Explicating his own interpretation of the postmodern condition as the meeting point of hegemonic Western discourses with marginalised 'histories and voices',[55] Bhabha writes:

It is in this sense that the boundary becomes the place from which something begins its presencing in a movement not dissimilar to the ambulant, ambivalent articulation of the beyond that I have drawn out: 'Always and ever differently the bridge escorts the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so that they may get to other banks.… The bridge gathers as a passage that crosses.'[56]

Bhabha metaphorises and thus inverts Heidegger's concrete architectural examples such as boundary and bridge. For him the boundary is the location of a new beginning not because it introduces partition, but due to its porosity. Liminality indeed 'displaces the histories that constitute it',[57] but the 'new structures of authority' and the 'new political initiative' that it erects are not necessarily redemptive.[58] The blurring of borders, following Heidegger, does not liberate a pre-discursive territory, but casts it into other geopolitical constellations, which, more than once,

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[53] Ibid. 150–151.
[54] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (n 37) 1.
[55] Ibid. 6.
[56] Ibid. 7.
[57] Bhabha, 'The Third Space' (n 26) 211.
[58] Rosello and Wolfe, 'Introduction' (n 22) 11.

suppress marginalised geographical configurations as in the case of the Mizo community that I discuss in the following section.[59]

7 Rih Dil

Thlana Bazik's project *Rih Dil Titi* explores a peculiar case of geopolitical displacement. Rih Dil (Rih Lake), one of the holiest sites for the Mizos, was re-territorialised by the India–Myanmar border.[60] A popular Mizo proverb underlines the irony of lake's current position: 'the largest lake in Mizoram is *Rih* Lake but it is situated in Burma.'[61] *Rih Dil Titi* (Fig. 9) is composed of texts, maps, paintings, sculptures, a short story, and various references to academic and non-academic writings. It explores the unique relationship of the Mizos with their displaced lake, which reflects, as it were, the conflicted position of their culture.

Fig. 9 Thlana Bazik, *Rih Dil Titi*, 2019 (display view) (Photo courtesy Pranamita Borgohain)

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[59] Bhabha's theory generates another fundamental problem. While approximating the 'theory of culture' to the 'theory of language', he does not perceive culture as that which fashions the individual, as Heidegger argues regarding language (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* [n 51] 144), but describes cultural hybridity as an ambiguous process of identification through otherness. See Bhabha, 'The Third Space' (n 26) 210–211. As distinct from spatial objects whose identities are wholly dependent on differential apparatuses, however, cultural differences do not (only) emerge from the process of identification, but from the plurality of historical experiences. The Assamese, Mizo, or African communities did not develop their unique manner of being in the world in opposition to other communities. The binary oppositions of black/white, self/other, identity/difference arise from the futile (but perhaps unavoidable) attempt to juxtapose different cultures. Even though cultural differences do not represent racial or ethnic essences, they are also not the product of signifying practices and processes of identification and othering as Sartre and others maintain. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (George J Becker tr, Schocken Books 1995) 49.

[60] Lal Dingluaia, 'Maps, Mission, Memory and Mizo Identity' (2018) 35(4) *Transformation* 240.

[61] Ibid. 241.

Since the second half of the 19th century, the Mizos have strived to protect their land by demarcating their territory.[62] The colonial invasion into the North-East led to a territorial equivocacy which worked for the benefit of the invaders.[63] The hunting ground of the Mizos, which was located between the area that the Mizos inhabited and the rapidly swelling imperial territory, became a liminal space of sorts. Nevertheless, the encounter between the indigenous spatial perception that conceived the hunting ground as sacred and the colonial secular viewpoint did not yield a 'third option' that transcended cartographic demarcations and boundaries. By instituting these plains as wasteland, the coloniser was able to expropriate them and used them to plant tea gardens.[64] The third space, in this case, 'sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives',[65] but those are colonial and oppressive. Since a space can emerge only though boundaries, geopolitics is always an exchange between different cartographic constellations and never a liberation from or bracketing of discursive constraints. The recent geopolitical struggles in the North-East also indicate that the ambiguity of borders works for the benefit of hegemonic forces.

The Mizo culture draws its inspiration from various sources. The majority of the Mizos converted to Christianity during the British Raj,[66] but still preserve their pre-Christian traditions. This kind of hybridity does not displace 'the histories that constitute it', but lets them coexist.[67] Bazik's contemplation on the destiny of the lake affirms the particularity of a hybrid and contingent way of being in the world. Even though cultures do not develop between walls but influence each other, they foster different 'characters'. Paul Gilroy argues for this kind of 'anti-anti-essentialist' position,[68] and maintains that Black communities around the Atlantic Ocean developed a common and unique culture which is nevertheless 'unashamedly hybrid'.[69] Rih Lake epitomises the hybridity of the Mizo culture. 'The pre-Christian Mizo believed that the spirits of the dead passed through this lake before reaching their eternal abode,'[70] and despite the conversion to Christianity '[f]olklores, stories and songs perpetuate the legend of the Rih lake and the name still holds a charm for these people.'[71] Bazik's short story 'Rih Dil Titi',[72] which narrates the visit of a Mizo family to the lake, accentuates the fusion between the local culture and Christianity. While the narrator is fascinated by the pagan roots of his community, his mother underlines cultural hybridity:

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[62] Ibid. 242.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Homi Bhabha, cited in Rosello and Wolfe, 'Introduction' (n 22) 11.

[66] Dingluaia, 'Maps, Mission, Memory and Mizo Identity' (n 60) 245.

[67] Homi Bhabha cited in Rosello and Wolfe, 'Introduction' (n 22).

[68] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Harvard University Press 1993).

[69] Ibid. 99.

[70] Dingluaia, 'Maps, Mission, Memory and Mizo Identity' (n 60) 241.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Thlana Bazik, 'Rih Dil Titi'. https://bazikart.files.wordpress.com/2019/07/rih-dil-titi.pdf. Accessed 09 February 2021.
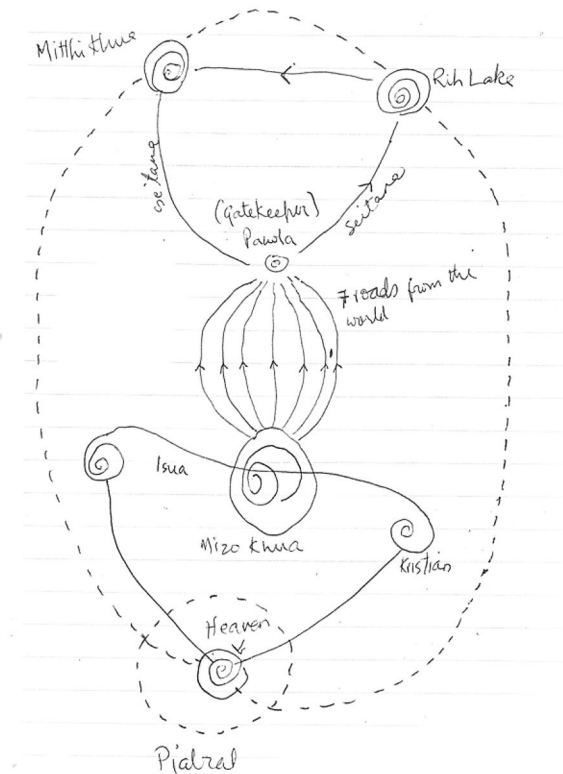
Fig. 10 Thlana Bazik, *Untitled*, 2019 (Photo from the artist's website)

A closer look at the conversion experience among Mizos has shown it to be a novel reformative process rather than a transformative one. The missionaries supported the domestication of Christian beliefs and appropriated many of the Mizo cultural practices into the brand of Christianity they were introducing. An example would be the concept of Pialral to explain the eternal heaven. Instead of striving to become Thangchhuah, accepting Jesus as their saviour would cement their entry to Pialral.[73]

The fusion between Christian and local beliefs is outlined by Bazik in a map that he recreates according to a cartographic chart from the 1900s (Fig. 10). The map integrates physical and metaphysical geographies along with Mizo and Christian terms: *Mitthi Khua* (the underworld) and heaven, Rih Dil and Isua (Jesus), *Pupawla* and *Seitana* (Satan).[74] Correspondingly, the barbed-wire sculptures that the artist places on pedestals at the centre of his display utilise both local and Christian symbols. Their circular shape evokes Christ's crown of thorns, while one of them is supported by three fence poles that resemble *seluphan*, a traditional Mizo post that

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[73] Ibid.

[74] The name of a mythical personage who lives at the junction of the roads leading to Mitthi-khua.

holds the skull of a sacrificed animal. Adjoining the two sculptures, Bazik places a mirror cut in the shape of Rih Dil, insinuating that the displaced lake 'reflects' the gradual displacement of his culture.

The juxtaposition between the lake and the barbed wire brings to the fore the ambivalent relation of the artist with borders. The border separates Bazik's community from its holy lake, but since his cultural vision is intrinsically spatial, the demarcation of boundaries is also vital, as discussed above. The border is represented as the crown of thorns inflicting pain and misery. Moreover, as a sign of mocked authority, the crown of thorns questions the border's legitimacy, and renders it as circular and fallacious, a signifier without signified that returns into itself. The crown of thorns, however, is an equivocal emblem, which was transformed into an insignia of spiritual sovereignty. Congruently, the boundary is not only arbitrary and tyrannical, but that which makes the Mizo spatial consciousness and sense of belonging possible and hence is placed by Bazik on the traditional seluphan. A boundary, as Heidegger argues, is not where something ends but where it begins.[75] Rih Dil itself, as a spatial entity, exists on account of its physical and symbolic boundaries. The Mizo tradition underscores this point by designating a unique name to the fence of trees that circulates Rih Dil, *Mitthi Pal*. Upon seeing the lake for the first time, the narrator of 'Rih Dil Titi' describes the fence of the dead in a language that might be read as metaphorical:

> We had reached the lake while I was deeply engrossed with my thoughts, and saw that the so called *Mitthi Pal* ran along the circumference except for a small area where we saw a small opening. The trees did act as a fences since the ground where they grew was characteristically *loose*.[76]

8 Conclusion

This article explores the geopolitics of borders through the lens of artists from North-East India. As distinct from the critics or adherents of borders that view them either as natural or artificial facts, I have argued, following Heidegger, that boundaries do not emanate from the entities they outline, or delaminate a pre-given space, but unfold space as space and make its perception possible. If space is always perceived through the mediation of language, the geometrical perception of space has no priority over other lingual and cultural designations. Accordingly, the blurring of borders does not reveal a pre-discursive territory, nor does it generate a deconstructionist epoche that brackets their function. Since every territory is given within boundaries—whether implicit or not—any blurring of borders recasts it through other cartographic constellations. Following Shohat and Stam's critique and in light of Heidegger's discursive approach to space and borders, I have examined how *A-PART*'s artists deal with notions of migrancy, liminality, and hybridity. Unlike the global view from nowhere projected by Gupta and Kallat, the geographical locations of *A-PART*'s artists inform

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[75] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (n 51) 152.
[76] Bazik, 'Rih Dil Titi' (n 72); emphasis added.

their attitude towards boundaries. Thus, while the cultures of the North-East were never stagnant, the artists underscore the perils that contemporary mobility poses. Liminality does not liberate spatial identities from the shackles of boundaries but reconfigures them through demarcations that might suppress them.

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