



Vikram Divecha, *Southwest window facade (cropped view)*, Gallery 354, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018, ink-jet print, 12 × 8".

Vikram Divecha

GALLERY ISABELLE VAN DEN EYNDE

The heart of darkness, according to Vikram Divecha, can be found on the other side of the southwestern wall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Gallery 354 houses wooden figurines and ancestral objects from Melanesia. Its windows overlook Central Park but are screened over, and the room is dimly lit to protect its fragile contents; the darkness is especially apparent when one enters the room from the neighboring Greek and Roman galleries. Trying to photograph its contents, Divecha at first managed to shoot only blank images. This experience of failure is recounted through a meditative voice-over in *GALLERY 354*, 2019, a re-created photographic darkroom replete with red safelight and trays of developing solution. The audio lasted about ten minutes, which happened to be the length of time our eyes took to adapt to darkness.

“Towards Opacity” was a tale of two apertures, two methods of capture and display: the museum and the smartphone. Divecha extended the colonial-museological mode of the Met out into the main gallery space in *The relationship between wood and sunlight*, 2018, where the artist restaged Gallery 354 from memory using wood scraps from the Columbia University woodshop in lieu of the items on display. These offcuts suggested Melanesian objects only in their verticality, but might equally have been read as the simplified placeholder images we encounter online before an image completely loads. A kind of formalist abstraction, known as “lazy loading,” could be seen in this phenomenon. Rather than being given the full sharp image or object, we were presented with blurry outlines: artifacts of slow internet connections—remember the pixelation of dial-up?—that trade detail for speed.

Google Images simplifies search results in a different way, analyzing an image and averaging it to a single color, the kind you might see when quickly scrolling through a search with bad Wi-Fi—or on the subway, in Divecha’s case. This inspired a series of paintings comprising color blocks that reproduce the aspect ratio of his iPhone SE, each one named for the search term that called it up. The keyword *mirror* brings up soothing pastels of blue, gray, and sage, while *childhood* produces buttercream, beige, and dark greens and blues. Things get more colorful with the blues and glossier pinks of *need* and the warm bright tones of *should* and *displaces*. These small paintings were hung in a long vertical strip that effectively conjured the sensation of scrolling. In the much larger versions hung in a nearby alcove, oils had been applied so thickly that they verged on impasto, and the resulting screen-to-canvas translation felt altogether too precious.

Especially lovely were a trio of aluminum-framed ink-jet prints of Gallery 354’s windows, shot in twilight, with the bare branches of the trees outside sometimes hauntingly visible through rips in the screen. The floor of the museum was implicated, too, with *Shadow over granite floor, Ancestor Figure (1979.206.1561), Gallery 354, Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2018, a photogravure print of a figurine’s elongated shadow presented as a diptych with its ghost print on granite tiles on the floor. The result is hauntingly beautiful, suggesting both the pregnant static of night-vision cameras on so many paranormal-activity shows and the little alien silhouetted in a doorframe of the “Mom said it’s my turn to use the Xbox” meme.

Nominally about failure, with passing references to opacity and fugitivity, the show rarely moved beyond aestheticizing it. But another ghostly failure was necessarily present here, too. The Melanesian gift economy known as the Kula ring holds that objects should always be returned to their owners, even as each ceremonial exchange increases both the social bond and the giver's and receiver's prestige. Gallery 354, scheduled to close for renovation in the fall, does not include Kula objects (shell disk armbands and necklaces), but the same principle might be applied. Ripped from their original and rightful owners and thoroughly denuded of context, what are the objects in Gallery 354 but lazy images that will never fully load?

— Rahel Aima

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