



Top to bottom: Out of India Collective. *Fragments of Khi + Ordo: The Dying Mermaid*. 2019. Video still. Image courtesy of the artist and Helsinki Contemporary



Tuomas A. Laitinen. *A Proposal for an Octopus*. 2019. Video still. Image courtesy of the artist and Helsinki Contemporary



Tuomas A. Laitinen. *Haemocyanin*. 2019. Video still. Image courtesy of the artist and Helsinki Contemporary

TENTACULAR THINGS

Confinement has this writer delving into what she can see from her window, and what she cannot see, including the intelligence of marine life, artists who frame their views and rooftop antics. As a perspective, it's a complex, fragmented visual world that offers prismatic takes on the skewed realities of our current conditions.

Words by Skye Arundhati Thomas

From my window I can see a cluster of wide, tall gulmohar trees in full bloom: a sea of bobbing carmine-red flowers. The gulmohar is native to Madagascar, but like most flora of the world, travelled to Asia, Europe and the Middle East in the 19th-century with the Colonial project. The British call it 'Flamboyant' and 'Flame of the Forest' and indeed, the trees flicker, their flowers moving like flames in the splintering (and rare) summer breeze. Here in India we are nearly a month into a nation-wide lockdown, and the view from my window is beginning to take on heroic proportions –

turning into elaborate metaphors around which I arrange a little indoor life. Most of all, I miss the sea. A friend sends me photographs of the Mumbai harbour, which occupies the view from her window. Among the sailboats I spot foamy, mossy green trails. "It looks like sargassum," she writes to me, "could algae be blooming?" It's probably pollution, I think to myself, remembering the last time I was on a ferry in that same water. I could smell the oil glinting off the small choppy waves, smarting like snapped-open live wires flapping in rain. It smelled electric that day,

a special kind of toxic. I breathed it in and let the fumes settle into my lungs. "We are the virus" declares a viral meme – in many different iterations, over and over. Indeed, we are, and we find ourselves wanting to desperately believe that our seas have cleaned up, and aquatic plants are thriving where they haven't for decades. "Maybe," I write back to my friend, adding, "I really hope so."

I have taken to zooming in and out of an interactive map of the world's seas on ocean-archive.org, which collates artworks and research about oceanic lives. While



This page and opposite:
Sohrab Hura. *Rooftop Series*. 2020.
Images courtesy of the artist

clicking around the Baltic, I stumble upon Finnish artist Tuomas A. Laitinen's short film *Haemocyanin* (2019), in which an octopus slithers into a twisted blown-glass object – its fine, tendril-like arms puckering over the surface; its balloon-like body distending through the object's tubular, valve-filled interior. Laitinen specially designed and made this object for the octopus, which is of the common species *Octopus vulgaris*. It's his rendition of a habitat cascade – when one species houses another. I often think of octopuses, living out their intensely subjective lives. So curious, so alone and yet so unmatched in their alien intelligence.

Each of an octopus's eight arms can think independently to its brain. An

octopus can change colours at will and squeeze into openings the size of its own beak. As philosopher Amia Srinivasan writes in the *London Review of Books*, "The octopus threatens boundaries." I wonder whether I could threaten boundaries too. In *Haemocyanin*, the octopus's body contorts through the glass as it moves; its gestures restless and uncertain. I can relate. How it edges through space, and how everything – both inside and outside – looks a little bit swollen, a little bit distorted.

A murder of crows rests on the tops of long-leaved eucalyptus trees in a photograph by Sohrab Hura, part of his ongoing series called *Rooftop* (2020). While I move inside a limited space, Hura has

been climbing onto the roof of his Barsati – a typically New Delhi rooftop flat – to make pictures of what he sees. Although Hura has access to the open sky, his navigations are still confined. "These rooftops feel like islands," he writes to me. He shoots mostly in the evenings, when people gather on their roofs or balconies. A lady pets her small, fluffy dog; a man in a powder-blue vest reads in a small nook; a couple plays badminton against a wall, while another embraces as the sun sets in front of them. The images are layered, their narratives plenty – given the decked nature of New Delhi terraces, several stories often play out in a single frame.

In a photo taken at twilight, Hura plays with exposure to stretch and extend the moon into an open spiral. It sits in the sky like a slinky, as if it were about to tumble down to the roofs below. In images taken at nighttime, Hura's lens peers at what's happening indoors: a young girl sitting at her desk, resting her face on her elbow, looking a little bored; a man stretching out in bed, maybe watching TV, as a synthetic glare lights up his face. The images are voyeuristic, but affectionately so, perhaps even a touch vulnerable. They are Hura's way of reaching out to those around him during a time of his own isolation.

I think about how Hura is lucky – he is able to approach the many lives around him. This perhaps makes him feel less alone. I compare his vantage point to mine, and I try to name the trees and potted plants that appear in his photographs: towering, conical ashokas, potted blue-violet periwinkles, bushy crotons in all the colours of fire. And of course the silver trunks of the eucalyptus, fragrant and efflorescent; the respite of neighbourhood crows, who flutter their wings and nestle into branches, with an unrivalled view of the pageantry down below.

