

LIFE IS ELSEWHERE

A group of artists from Calcutta are inspired by found images shot by an American soldier during World War II, discovers **Sayandeb Chowdhury**.



Alakananda Nag. *Untitled*. Multi-media installation. Inkjet prints on archival paper, various artifacts, audio recordings. 2015.
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This is the story of a shoebox. Its unpacking carries all the makings of an event typically laden with joyous serendipity. Containing 130 photographic negatives/prints, the box surfaced in a Chicago estate some time ago, carrying no name or legacy. Two American artists were drawn to its contents and began a search. After a couple of trips to India they found out that the photographs, of mostly rural Bengal in the mid-1940s, were taken by an American soldier stationed in the secret airfield of Salua, about 200 kms down south of Calcutta, who went around the airbase armed with a Speed Graphic 4x5 camera and randomly clicked pictures. Purportedly, the World War II was looming large but the pictures betray no sense of restive time. The images feature farmers, the rural landscape, myriad local livelihoods, children playing and posing, oddballs and drifters merrily thronging local public spheres, as is still common in rural India. In brief, the pictures could have been from any time.

These pictures are the primary source of the exhibition *Following the Box*. Though scarce in details and not very arresting as photographic material, the visuals pose simple but profound questions about identity, imagery, secrecy, war and territory. Does the world really shake and tumble during war? Can life go on peacefully in one hemisphere while the other one disintegrates? The artist-couple Alan Teller and Jerri Zbiral who found the box, developed upon the theme of the slippery origins of the box and decided to curate the exhibition (which ran from the 14th of February to the 7th of March at the Birla

Academy of Art & Culture, Calcutta), involving their own work and that of ten other artists working mostly out of the city. Perhaps, the curators felt that the photographs, in themselves, were of no great merit and, stripped of details, appeared listless. The participating artists were therefore asked to look at the images and build upon them. The result, in short, was quite out of the box.

Amritah Sen re-imagines her own family's photo-memory with those found in the box; Mamata Basak stitches an image-pattern through her new-era scroll; Sanjeet Chowdhury's video installation maps the young man's desire to return home; Chhatrapati Dutta's deft mix of popular iconography with archival images triggers questions about America's war strategy; Sarbajit Sen weaves a thrilling fiction about the GI's life with the camera; Prabir Purkayastha redraws the past life of the photographer before he came to the city (making great use of *Calcutta Key*, an actual guide to GIs coming to the city); Alakananda Nag, Zbiral and Teller's installations cleverly juxtapose possibilities of meaning and form, mining the many questions inherent in the back story. Aditya Basak, Sunandini Banerjee and Swarna Chitrakar, all known for their distinctive visual styles, stay true to their Madeleine. The works re-imagine the many concentric spheres that might have come together for an American soldier on wartime duty in a faraway land, stationed at a secret airbase, part of a unit that was planning a possible invasion of Japan. And in times of such obvious disquiet, just outside the airbase, the images reveal a life lived in a different key.