

## Otherwhile: Jitish Kallat's Art of Pure Quantities

— Sabih Ahmed

An uninterrupted graph sheet lines one side of Chemould Prescott Road in Jitish Kallat's latest exhibition *Otherwhile*. Imprinted on the delicate grid are fluid diagrams, a sequence of numbers, time-stamps and a progression of dates. Marking 25 years since the artist's first presentation with the gallery, a sense of time saturates this show. However, it is not biographical or experiential time that one is made aware of. Rather, it is a time of planetary and cosmic proportions.

*Otherwhile* presents Kallat's deep inquiries and heightened awareness of forces that are at once larger than what human imagination can grasp and infinitesimally smaller than what technologies can measure. The way Kallat navigates this complex terrain is through a careful arrangement of observations and intuitions that inform his practice. The exhibition is part of his ongoing journey into these explorations as an artist, which he has described as "having a go at something much bigger than you".

I had the opportunity of working with Kallat over the past two years preparing for an exhibition at the Ishara Art Foundation titled *Order of Magnitude*<sup>2</sup>. During the short period of time, we were both acutely aware of

and affected by the multiple waves of COVID-19 that had swept and upturned the world as we knew it. While the pandemic was all too real in the way that it unanimously impacted human population globally, it also produced a discourse of the world that could not have been more divided, segregated and bordered. The invisible virus changed the very regime of visibility. It revealed new limits of perception, mediation and representation in the current technological era. In its being global (in an economic and capitalist sense), planetary (in the geological and ecological sense), and worldly (in a political and social sense) all at once, the modes of knowing and experiencing the world on an individual and collective level simultaneously contracted and expanded. It is not coincidental how strikingly similar this sounds to the impacts of climate change. Such convulsions have put to test the very apparatuses of language, science, governance and social interactions. How does one visualise something that is so totalising and yet discrete, visible and yet occluded? What is the jurisdiction of these impacts?

### The Incommensurability of Numbers

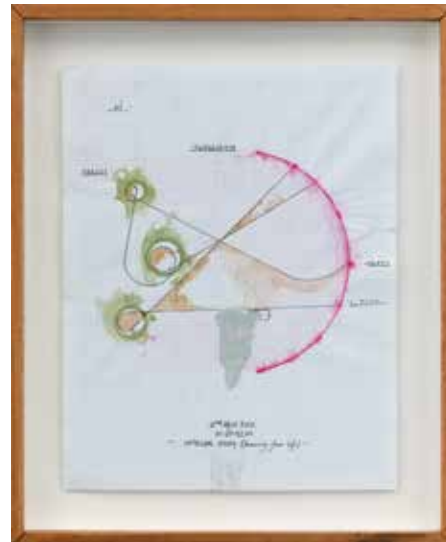
The graph mural on the wall, titled *Integer Studies (drawing from life)*, is one instance of Kallat measuring such impacts. Over a course of 365 days starting from the 1<sup>st</sup> of January

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<sup>1</sup> Telephonic conversation with the artist (2022).

<sup>2</sup> 'Jitish Kallat: Order of Magnitude', Ishara Art Foundation, Dubai (2022).





until the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2021, Kallat had been keeping a log of the world population projected by online algorithms in real time. Making note of the total population at the specific moment he sat to make a drawing each day, one sees an integer in the range of 7 billion repeating in these drawings, accompanied with a pair of smaller numbers of the people born and deceased until that hour of the day. The deaths were not limited to cases of those afflicted by the virus. Accompanying each day's log, Kallat would also draw a diagram that in the initial months of the year resembled statistical drawings. One could almost see these morphologies as a response to the mainstream media's obsession with statistics and graphs as a way to represent what was going on. Over time, the drawings mutate into what look like bodily organs, medical instruments and petri dishes of bacterial culture. In every one of those

numbers running along the wall, a global attendance call was conducted. Each of us were marked present as a single digit; various people we know and others we once knew had been marked absent. In those difficult two years, each day was a new variant. Each drawing of the series gave an image to this variant.

Many described the pandemic as 'the great leveller' of social inequalities. In time, it became evident how numbers, while seemingly neutral, were instrumental in erasing the asymmetrical conditions underlying so many deaths. After all, each number pretends to carry the same weight as the other. Ian Hacking famously described the period between 1820 and 1840 as the 'avalanche of printed numbers' that targeted the 'population' in Europe and America as an object of governmental analysis. Two centuries thereafter, the world population now appears entirely through statistical

projections that appear as natural facts. How does one go about measuring if the numbers themselves are incommensurable? In a short essay I had written on *Integer Studies* the same year when Kallat was still making this body of work<sup>3</sup>, I argued that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we enter a new regime of abstraction ushered by big data. As digital information takes centre stage in all forms of communication, there is an explosion of data-visualisations, simulations, graphs and statistics, be they about population rise, economic growth, carbon emission levels or calories count. However, these abstract visualisations are no more the opposite of representation, as one was used to seeing in 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism. On the contrary, data abstraction is hyper-indexical. It foregrounds the aesthetics of facts. *Integer Studies*

<sup>3</sup> Sabih Ahmed, *Integer Study* (drawing from life), Nature Morte Online Viewing Room, 2021.

brings both regimes of abstraction onto the same plane, the modernist one through painterly intensities, and data-abstraction through numerical figurations. Kallat's series interrogates the aesthetics of facts, rendering data as form and earmarking a shifting perception of the world.

### The World as Projection

One can find the world in the strangest of images. An unmistakable one is the *Blue Marble* taken by the crew of Apollo 17 in 1972. As the first photograph of planet earth, it transformed the way the world would be imagined thereafter. In 2012 a second *Blue Marble* was shot by NASA satellites. It bore a striking resemblance to its predecessor, but they could not be farther apart. This one was a compiled simulation based on an older relic. While it appeared to have been taken from one place at one time, it was in fact assembled



Integer Study (drawings from life) | 2021  
graphite and aquarelle pencil, stained gesso,  
organic gum on Bienfang gridded paper  
29.2 x 35.9 cm | 11.5 x 14 inches (each)

as a 'tiled rendering' from a series of digital images obtained from six orbits of the earth over an eight-hour period. The satellite that took the photograph was only 930 km above the surface of the earth, a distance from which it is impossible to have a full view of the planet unless one is at least 11,000 km away. Nicholas Mirzoeff recounts this image as an excellent metaphor for how the world is visualised today - assembled from innumerable pieces, carefully organised to look like one object. However, there are several ancestors of the *Blue Marble* that offered other contours of the world - from astrolabes of philosophical curiosity to maps of world conquests, from Gond paintings to mythological epics to songs of freedom. Many of those ancestors continue to live on, even if they are sometimes relegated into the backdrop.

Kallat has been excavating various map projections of the world. In *Postulates from a Restless Radius* (2021) he revisits the *Albers Projection*, a conic representation of the earth first rendered in 1805 by Heinrich Albers that is used in geological surveys until this day for the low distortion it offers compared to the rectangular atlases that circulate more widely. In *Otherwhile*, we see more works in a series titled *Echo Verse* that are based on planetary projections including the *Waterman Butterfly Projection* created by Steve Waterman in 1996 and evoking the famous butterfly map principle that was developed by Bernard Cahill in

1909. It is shaped after the truncated octahedron using symmetrical components that may be displayed in various arrangements. Yet another *Echo Verse* painting derives its shape from the *Rectangular Polyconic Projection* first introduced by the US Coast Survey in 1853 using non-concentric circular arcs above and below the equator line. The works based on the *Albers Projection* and the *Waterman Butterfly Projection* comprise of multiple segments. Both tower over the viewer. Imagine what orientation of the world one should derive from such renderings. They both evoke the map, but withhold it. While a faint graph undergirds the paintings, the weave of the canvases produce their own latitudes and longitudes. Whereas traditional maps offer the abstraction of land masses as separate from water bodies, the planet does not separate the elements based on such clear divisions. In Kallat's works, one sees a more elemental composition of the planet where you cannot tell what body or mass you might be looking at. These could well be magnified views of very small portion of the earth's surface, the ocean, or of the atmosphere. After all, land is moist, the oceans are muddy and air is heavy. They are all striated, polluted and radioactive in varying measures. Amidst the confluence of all these particles, one sees images of fossils, constellations, fractals, geometric patterns and clouds. The process of creating these paintings says a lot about the image one encounters.



Kallat worked on the two large canvases over long durations of time. In his own words, the works are a result of a realisation that a painting is first and foremost “a calibration of hydrating and dehydrating the surface”<sup>4</sup>. One could well imagine this being a description of looking after a garden. On the canvas, he rehearses what in geological time-scales would take millions of years where water is made to take its own course and pigments settle in their own way. The paintings in this exhibition are a reminder that analogue maps, just like simulations, are part of a long legacy of the virtual projections onto chaotic entities. Kallat’s paintings bring some of the chaos and entropy back to maps.

### Lenticularity

If the 17<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the advent of maps, microscopes and telescopes, and the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the inventions of photography, film and X-rays, the 21<sup>st</sup> century brings about a convergence of all media towards the digital. It is argued that digital images are technically not visual images at all. An ultrasound, for example, uses sound waves to compute digital information before finally rendering it into a visual. Unlike with analogue technology, in the digital age the surface and the image are decoupled. The same surface becomes a carrier for multiple images. One can say that an image now performs across surfaces, while

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<sup>4</sup> From a public conversation with the artist at his solo exhibition at Ishara Art Foundation, Dubai (2022).

surfaces become hosts to an array of images. In the *Epicycles* series, Kallat animates the instability of surface and images in an analogue medium. Kallat began this series in the early days of the pandemic lockdown in 2020, picking up cues from minute changes he observed in the immediate surrounding of his studio. A crack in the wall, a groove in the floor made by the leg of his chair, fallen twigs at the doorstep, over time made their way into his journal. These notations started to interact with historical archives as he used the same journal for keeping cut-outs from the iconic *Family of Man* exhibition catalogue curated by Edward Steichen. All these fragments finally came together onto an elusive lenticular surface, yielding a complex portrait of biographical time that appears and disappears in the interstices of historical time. The double-sided, multi-scopic, photo works play with stillness and movement almost reminding one of a *gif* on loop.

A lenticular surface foregrounds a very specific relationship with the image, one that is important to think about today in relation to transparency and opacity. Contemporary culture puts a high premium on transparency. Think of the importance given to technologies that help see clearer, farther, deeper and closer. The world is expected to be seen in high resolution, and technologies must aspire to facilitate this. Similarly, governments, art institutions and subjects are expected to function transparently. Together, they reinforce a model of

representation which advocates that everything must be constantly visible, legible and accessible. In response to this, we are aware of Édouard Glissant’s politics of opacity, and the right to withhold, the right to not have to explain or declare oneself. Lenticularity is a beautiful reminder of Glissant’s philosophical treatise on relationality, that transparency and opacity are never absolute or permanent conditions. Images, bodies, subjects and the world are relational. A change in the relationship between entities changes those very entities. *Epicycle* points to the relationality of archives – that when one changes the vantage point from where history is written or the archive is produced, a very different image of the past appears. Returning to MoMA’s traveling photography exhibition, *Epicycle* is a reminder that as influential as it was, it also came with innumerable questions. Susan Sontag had famously written following Barthes’ criticism, that, “[b]y purporting to show that individuals are born, work, laugh, and die everywhere in the same way, *The Family of Man* denies the determining weight of history - of genuine and historically embedded differences, injustices, and conflicts.”<sup>5</sup> *Epicycle* proposes a different encounter with the image, a different choreography in the archive and a different diegesis of history. With each work in the series, we encounter a montage and the fault lines of framing an image. The works suggest

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, UK, 1977.





Elicitation (Cassiopeia A) | 2021  
3D print SLS with Nylon PA12,  
placed on Bienfang gridded paper  
34.3 x 40.6 cm | 13.5 x 16 inches

that every image is always-already multiple, always-already infinitely exposed.

### Otherwhile

*Otherwhile* poses a series of open questions about scalar quantities – of events, space, matter and bodies that change in size but have no direction. For one, how does one measure a planet in constant flux? And what are the tools and techniques that art can offer to a world obsessed with counting-down and marking-up? It is only too common to associate numbers with growth and shrinkage, rise and fall, speed and slowness? In *Otherwhile*, there is neither a narrative, nor a hubris of control. Consider *Elicitation (Cassiopeia A)*, produced from NASA's open-source rendering of a dead star's remains from a stellar explosion 11,000 light-years ago, the light of which reached the Earth only in late 1600s. In its death, *Cassiopeia A* is said to have ejected about 10,000 Earth masses worth of sulphur, 70,000 times Earth-mass of iron, and three times the sun's mass of oxygen. The sculpture is placed on a stack of Bienfang gridded paper, the same surface for the year-long *Integer Studies*. Does one regard such a work as a compression of time, or its dilation?

The works in the exhibition – as in most of Kallat's artworks – emerge from chance encounters, fluid speculations and conceptual conjecture. They highlight with mathematical precision the coincidences between the personal, the historical and the cosmic. How

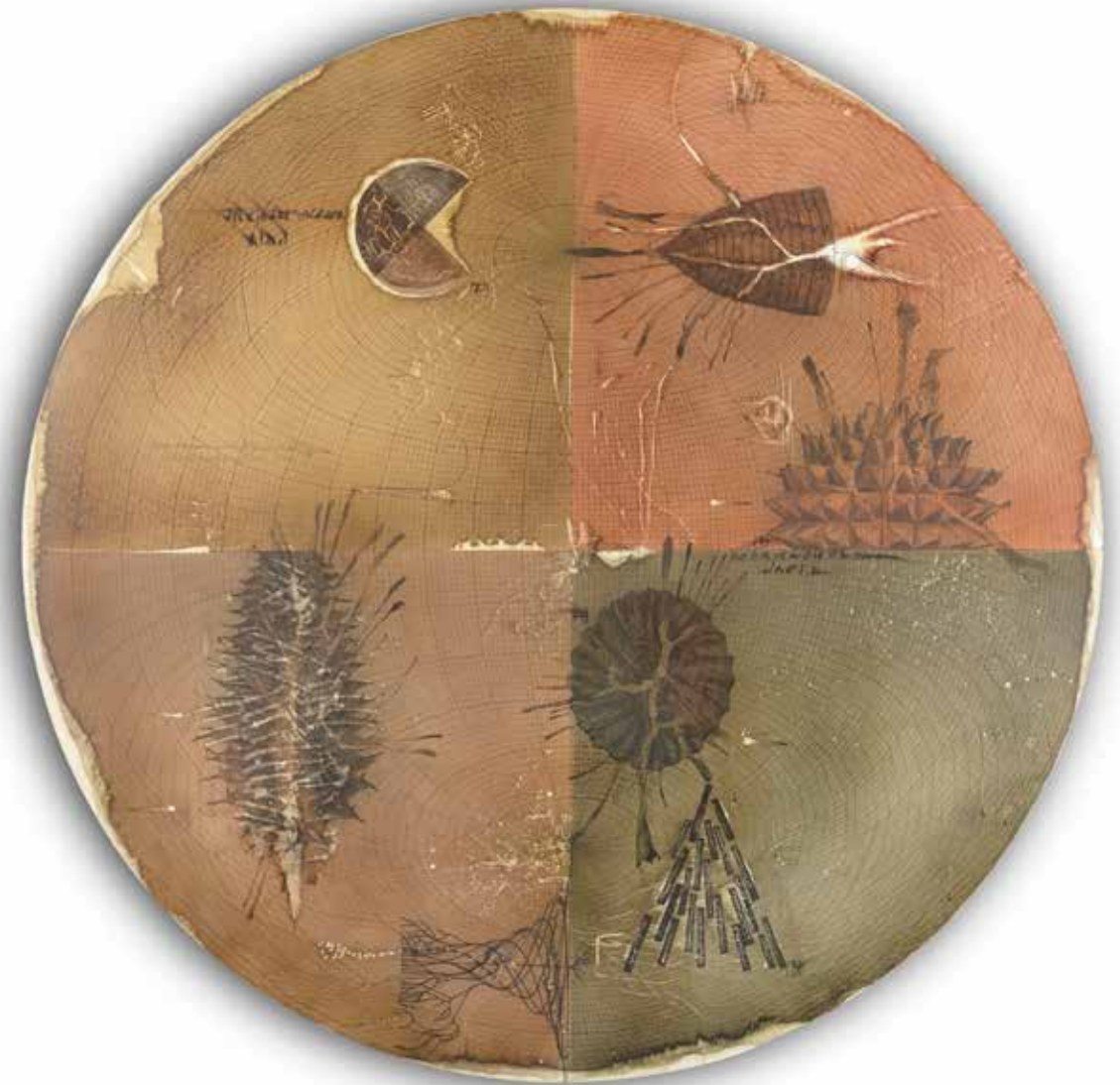
does one go about making such art? Kallat describes the process as simply “producing the conditions in which intuitions can come and visit my work”<sup>6</sup>. This show takes you to the space of the ‘meanwhiles’ and the ‘otherwise’ where intuitions occur.

Kallat has long been preoccupied with measuring, tallying, counting and enumerating. His works invite a constant readjustment of focal lengths and vantage points from where one sees microbial scales bearing planetary impacts. The scalar polarity in his works are reflective of a contemporary condition, one that signposts an aesthetic revolution we are already living amidst. If, since the Enlightenment, the paradigm of knowledge took for granted an anthropocentric measure of all human experience, experience today is anything but anthropocentric. It is augmented by data, chemicals, political fantasies and mass-paranoia. None of our senses has remained unchanged by these impacts. The aesthetic revolution of the image today bears consequences not just for the way we think of contemporary images, but for the way we think about all previous images as well. Contemporary art is shaped by and is reshaping the realm of experience. This is what we find instantiated in *Otherwhile*.

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<sup>6</sup> Telephonic conversation with the artist (2022).





Echo Verse | 2022  
mixed media on linen  
diameter: 198 cm | 78 inches





Echo Verse | 2022  
mixed media on linen  
diptych: 188 x 304.8 cm | 74 x 120 inches





Echo Verse | 2022  
mixed media on linen  
total dimensions, in 8 parts: 292 x 518 cm | 115 x 204 inches



Epicycles | 2022  
 double-sided, multilayer print on LPI lenticular lens, teakwood  
 115.5 x 93 x 19 cm | 45.5 x 36.5 x 7.5 inches





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Epicycles | 2022  
double-sided, multilayer print on LPI lenticular lens, teakwood  
136 x 110 x 22 cm | 53.5 x 43.5 x 8.5 inches



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