



# Amar Kanwar

January 12 – February 23, 2003

**The Renaissance Society**  
at The University of Chicago

# The Renaissance Society

**Museum Hours:**  
Tuesday - Friday: 10 am - 5pm  
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Chicago, Illinois 60637  
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## Amar Kanwar

**January 12–February 23, 2003**

Opening reception: Sunday, January 12, 2003, 4:00 - 7:00pm  
featuring a discussion with the artist at 5:00pm in Cobb Hall, Room 307

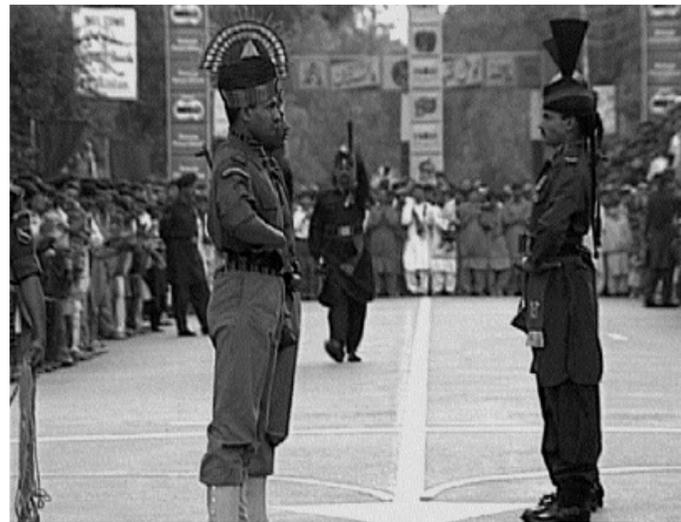
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**Amar Kanwar**  
***A Season Outside, 1998***  
video still featuring Indian and Pakistani soldiers on their respective sides of the border in the outpost of Wagah

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**Amar Kanwar**  
***A Season Outside, 1998***  
video still

## Border Anxiety



1947 marked the birth of two nations, India and Pakistan, as British colonial rule was transferred to sovereign states that together formed the bulk of what was once British India. The states were partitioned along religious differences with India's population being largely Hindu and Pakistan's Muslim. Amongst the obstacles, however, were 565 princely states scattered throughout the region that, although under British rule, did not belong to British India proper. A lapse in colonial authority meant these states would technically regain their independence. The months leading up to partition were filled with intense diplomatic wrangling as these states were given the option to join either India or Pakistan. All but 11 joined India.

The consolidation process wasn't always smooth. In October of 1947, when Pathan tribesmen from Pakistan threatened to overrun the Kashmir valley, its Maharaja requested military assistance from India which granted the request only after he signed documents acceding the territory, with its largely Muslim population, to India. Troops were flown in, the raiders were pushed out of the valley and a ceasefire zone established. After agreeing to refer the border dispute to the United Nations, the Indian government also promised to hold a plebiscite, a regional election in which Kashmir's populace would decide to whom they would pledge allegiance. Also part of the cease-fire agreement was the understanding that Pakistan would withdraw its forces from the area. Neither side fulfilled its commitment.

According to the work of New Delhi-based filmmaker Amar Kanwar, the conflict in Kashmir represents a border anxiety running throughout India. For Kanwar, this political crisis is but one example of the country's many unresolved social and political tensions. The exhibition will feature three of Kanwar's films which are a mixture of documentary, poetic travelogue, and visual essay. Narrated by Kanwar, *A Season Outside* (1998) uses India's northern borders as the inspiration

for a personal and poignant meditation on the source of a violence acculturated through centuries of ethnic and religious conflict. Ritual military patrols and ubiquitous coils of barbed wire mark the point where the historic Grand Trunk Road traverses the international border where "only the butterflies and birds are free to cross or rest on the wire as they do not disturb the circuit." The white line running across the road has its origins in the communal conflict that led to the Partition of India. It is also the symbol Kanwar has chosen to begin his search for new insights into the age-old yet omnipresent need for a politics of non-violence.

Produced specifically for this exhibition, *To Remember* (2003) is a portrait of Birla House, the site of Gandhi's assassination, which occurred January 30, 1948. Located in Delhi, Birla House has become a gallery and shrine attracting hundreds of visitors daily. This short silent film is an homage to Gandhi as well as the visitors who embody the spirit of his pacifist teachings.

*A Night of Prophecy* (2002) was filmed in several diverse regions of India (Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Nagaland, Kashmir) and features music and poetry of protest and tragedy performed by regional artists. The sources of anger and sorrow vary from inescapable, caste-bound poverty to the loss of loved ones as a result of tribal and ethnic assertion for autonomy, that led to violent confrontations with the government. A stunning glimpse of India's diverse ethnic groups and topography, *A Night of Prophecy* is particularly telling as an investigation into the notion of a pluralist state which seems to recede against the backdrop of a surge in militant, Hindu nationalism. Clearly, the historical turn of events, from non-violence to nuclear armament, suggest a deep ambivalence about Gandhi's legacy. Then again, when turning the other cheek, he never specified to the left or right.

### RELATED EVENTS

#### Artist Talk

**Sunday, January 12, 5:00 pm**

This event will take place in Cobb Hall, Room 307, directly below the gallery.

#### Lecture

**Thursday, January 30, 6:30 pm**

**Vinay Lal**

**"Eunuchs and Patriots: The Sexual and Cultural Politics of Gandhi's Assassination."**

Lal is a professor of History at the University of California, Los Angeles. He writes on a wide variety of subjects for periodicals in the U.S., India and Britain. Some of his recent essays have been collected in *The Poetics and Politics of Dissent: Essays on Indian History and Culture*. Other publications include *Empire of Knowledge: Culture and Plurality in a New Global Economy* and the forthcoming *History of History: The Career and Politics of a Form of Knowledge in Modern India*. His talk will focus on the context and politicization of Gandhi's death. This event will take place in Cobb Hall, Room 402, (down the hall from the gallery). FREE

#### Reading

**Sunday, February 2, 2:00 pm**

**India Radfar**

Radfar is the author of *India Poem* (Pir Press, 2002), a beautiful reflection on the country for which she is named. *India Poem* is intimate and fragile. As Louis Landes Levi notes, "This book travels inwardly to reach the continent we always knew was there." This event will take place in Cobb Hall, Room 402, (down the hall from the gallery). FREE

#### Lecture

**Sunday, February 16, 2:00 pm**

**Lise McKean**

**"Primary Sources: Kanwar's Travels"**

McKean is the author of *Divine Enterprise: Gurus and the Hindu Nationalist Movement* (University of Chicago Press, 1996). She was a research associate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago and former managing editor of *Public Culture*. McKean was recently called upon to testify before the Senate regarding the surge in Hindu nationalism. This will serve as the backdrop for her reflections on Kanwar's films. This event will take place in Cobb Hall, Room 402 (down the hall from the gallery). FREE

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