Amar Kanwar
January 12 – February 23, 2003

The Renaissance Society
at The University of Chicago
Border Anxiety

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

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 tangle in colonial authority meant these states would technically remain independent. 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 railways were pushed out of the valley and a caretaker zone established. After agreeing to 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 rhetoric, and visual essay. Named 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 accumulated through centuries of ethnic and religious conflict. Ritual military parades and ubiquitous coils of barbed wire mark the point where the historic Grand Trunk Road traverses the international border where “only the butterflies and locusts are free to cross or rest on the wires as they do not disturb the circuit.” The white line running across the road has its origin 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 agenda yet unspoken need for a politics of non-violence. 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 irresolvable caste-bound poverty to the loss of loved ones as a result of tribal and ethnic assertion for sovereignty, 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 exceed against the backdrop of a surge in militancy among the Hindu right. 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.

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Museum Hours
Saturday, 10 am – 5 pm
Sunday, 12 – 5 pm
Tuesday – Friday, 10 am – 5 pm

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