

Bilocation

Harminder Judge

Harminder Judge's video *Bilocation* is a portrait of two tensely intertwined places: Kedleston Hall, Derbyshire, UK and Coronation Park, Delhi, India. Like any portrait Judge's work captures its sitters at a particular moment, from a particular angle; it shows its subjects in a particular light and expresses particular narratives. Kedleston Hall was built as an ostentatious family seat, a private country manner to rival Chatsworth House. Coronation Park was the setting of a huge public celebration, the 1903 'Delhi Darbar', an extravagant procession staged to mark the coronation of the British monarchs Queen Alexandra and King Edward VII. The owner of the first site, Lord Curzon (1859-1925), Viceroy of India (1895-1905), orchestrated the Darbar held in the second.

It is not immediately apparent which frames of Judge's video are shot in which location. The work opens with the elision, or collision, of very British Victorian statuary with the very un-British landscape of a park in Delhi. Judge's decision to show the video within a 'shack' made from the low fi materials of Delhi's vernacular architecture heightens the sense that one is experiencing the merging of two worlds. In its original setting in the verdant, manicured grounds of Kedleston Hall this shack with its tin roof and gaudy, weathered paint echoed the juxtaposition of formal Victorian statues with an Indian park. Read with the title *Bilocation* these wrong-footing devices lead to the question: is any sense of certainty appropriate when approaching sites with such complex cross-cultural histories?

As the characteristics of the work's subjects emerge it becomes clear that this is a document of contrasting approaches to heritage across two locations. Contemporary approaches to the two locations relate to their distinct origins. The way that they are used and viewed reflects political and cultural changes in both places, and perhaps more fundamentally, cultures of preserving and remembering in Britain and India.

Kedleston was built as a permanent, monumental hall, a palatial eighteenth century take on the Roman villa. A temple to the arts rather than a home, Kedleston was a statement about wealth and status. The central portion of the house, formed of a series of 'State Rooms', was used only for grand occasions and within this a number of chambers designed as a royal suite lay

dormant awaiting a state visit that never came. As Viceroy of India Curzon did not actually inhabit Kedleston Hall for much of his life. His major addition to the existing property took the form of a museum designed to house his collection of 'Eastern' artefacts. The Eastern Museum fixed objects from Curzon's sphere of influence in dark, Edwardian cabinets.

A sense of stasis pervades *Bilocation*. Judge presents Kedleston Hall as a soulless place in which history and culture are static and unchanging. This house, now governed by The National Trust, represents Britain's obsession with preservation. Images of objects under glass and fossils in the surface of stone depict the results of this conservation as stultifying; the dead eyes of taxidermy birds and people collected in photographs stare out, glassily. The British people in *Bilocation* are largely old, some of them are disabled and many of them look confused. They imbue the already mausoleum-like space of the hall with a sense of inertia and lifelessness. Judge surveys Kedleston with a cold eye. He uses devices to film the hall - the fish-eye lens and worms-eye view – that distance the viewer from the scene. In his version of Kedleston the lives of living things stop.

Coronation Park was also built as a demonstration of power, wealth and politics but it was by nature a more public space, open to change. It was designed to host and mark an event and an element of the celebrative bustling scene of the 1903 Darbar remains. Judge depicts the park as a place of living culture where patches of vivid colour punctuate the landscape. People of all ages move purposefully about, working the land amongst colonial statues, they play and hang out on Victorian monuments; they wheel irrigation systems around on bicycles. They *live* there.

It would be dangerous for Judge to suggest that India is a simple place inhabited by care-free people who enjoy a naive way of life and *Bilocation* does, at moments, verge on a problematic depiction of ennobled workers, but it benefits from certain ambiguities. The landscape of Coronation Park is in parts barren and the site's hot, dusty poverty is tangible. Black sheeting flaps listlessly in the wind. This tarpaulin, the material utilised for military body bags, shields the park's restored statues against the elements but it looks more suffocating than protective. The statues have been maimed before- they are representative of the contested heritage of British Colonial rule- and their wrapped stone heads evoke images of the bagged heads of those subjected to torture.

Bilocation is not a straightforward comparison of two contrasting sites. It allows for equivocal responses to emerge. An ambiguous, opaque soundtrack accompanies the video. This is formed of largely indecipherable, slowed-down syllables of a post-colonial poem, voiced by a Western singer. The words are elongated and squashed like a malleable material, but if the poem is too abstracted to be decoded the vulnerability of the soundtrack's wavering voice is not.

In one sequence Judge's camera lingers on a shelf of books. Presumably once owned by Lord Curzon, the books' titles include: *Is Life Worth Living?*, *Democracy and America* and *War and Policy*. This momentary, pithy observation tinges the grandeur of Kedleston with a sense of irony. The scene references greater narratives of power, rule, democracy and imperial decline. It acknowledges that the characters and histories of Kedleston Hall and Coronation Park are multi-faceted and not easily captured.

The final section of Judge's work, in which hundreds of images flicker and flit on screen, is an admission of the artist's inability to absorb, comprehend and neatly re-package the history of these complicated sites and their respective histories. It is a demonstration of possible narratives that hints at multiple layers of information and potential readings. Throughout *Bilocation* Judge uses close-up shots of different surfaces – paintings, shell, textiles – to allude to the complex strata of history that is present in each image that forms this portrait of two places.