



ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN ARCHITECTURE

ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF MIGRATION AND DISCRIMINATION

Turkey, Pakistan, and their European Diasporas

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6 Art and the 1947 Partition of South Asia

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The Partition of colonial India in 1947, which resulted in the postcolonial nation-states of India and Pakistan at the very moment of their independence, continues to be of momentous consequence in the lives of millions. Modern nationalism in South Asia has largely succeeded in sustaining ethically repugnant notions of unwanted others in the national body politic. This nationalism works primarily at both the elite and the popular levels by foregrounding stereotypes and discouraging face-to-face encounters with the complex humanity of others. Despite this, the vital work of numerous writers, musicians, filmmakers, and artists continues to inspire others across borders and beyond narrow identitarian affiliations. The aesthetic dimension of life in South Asia is thus radically political, in the sense that it allows us to imaginatively and affectively participate in a universe where a constrained sense of belonging is positively challenged, and one's sense of being is invited to be enhanced in open-ended ways.

— Despite having transpired seven decades ago, the Partition continues to reverberate in the lives of so many of those who did not witness 1947 first-hand, yet who remain captivated by its complex after-effects. These include the persistence of second-order memories inherited from the first generation and from literature, film, and photography; the psychic awareness of the dispersal of familial structures and friendships across hostile borders; and the loss of affective ties to specific places associated with familial memory. Above all, today, it is a synecdoche of the uncanniness of the contemporary encounter—the pull of intimacy as well as the struggle for coming to terms with unfamiliarity—with the diverse others inhabiting the vastness of South Asia in an era where exclusivist nationalism and irredentist identitarian claims still remain dominant.

*The Dawn of Freedom (August 1947)*¹

These tarnished rays, this night-smudged light—

This is not that Dawn for which, ravished with freedom,
we had set out in sheer longing,

so sure that somewhere in its desert the sky harbored
a final haven for the stars, and we would find it.

We had no doubt that night's vagrant wave would stray towards the shore,

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that the heart rocked with sorrow would at last reach its port.
 Friends, our blood shaped its own mysterious roads.
 When hands tugged at our sleeves, enticing us to stay,
 and from wondrous chambers Sirens cried out
 with their beguiling arms, with their bare bodies,
 our eyes remained fixed on that beckoning Dawn,
 forever vivid in her muslins of transparent light.
 Our blood was young—what could hold us back?
 Now listen to the terrible rampant lie:
 light has forever been severed from the Dark;
 our feet, it is heard, are now one with their goal.
 See our leaders polish their manner clean of our suffering:
 Indeed, we must confess only to bliss;
 we must surrender any utterance for the Beloved—all yearning is outlawed.
 But the heart, the eye, the yet deeper heart—
 Still ablaze for the Beloved, their turmoil shines.
 In the lantern by the road the flame is stalled for news:
 Did the morning breeze ever come? Where has it gone?
 Night weighs us down, it still weighs us down.
 Friends, come away from this false light.
 Come, we must search for that promised Dawn.

In his prescient poem written in 1947, the progressive writer Faiz Ahmed Faiz expressed the sense of weary disappointment, of dreams betrayed and unrealized, at the end of the formal process of decolonization. The dawn that was promised by political independence did not result in a new day bathed in clear, limpid light, but was tarnished. The poem perceptively suggests that the subsequent trajectories of South Asian nation-states will remain freighted by the hindrances of the colonial and pre-colonial eras, rather than marking a clear break from them. Nevertheless, in much of the poem, Faiz celebrates and affirms the difficult and consequential journey of fellow travelers, towards a utopia vividly evoked by metaphors of classical Urdu poetry. He ends with a fraternal call to continue this excursion: "*chale-chalo ke vo manzil abhi nahin a'i.*" Saadat Hasan Manto is another important voice that witnessed the Partition without nationalist illusions. His short stories are vividly sketched vignettes of the innumerable fantastic and sadistic everyday encounters that attended the Partition.

While a number of artists who experienced the Partition, such as Satish Gujral and Tyeb Mehta, did respond early to its effects in their work, others approached it only in metaphorical and indirect ways,² and by and large there was a structure of experience and feeling that most artists and filmmakers sought to transcend.³ However, contemporary practice by a growing number of South Asian artists—most of whom did not experience first-hand either 1947 or the 1971 liberation of Bangladesh—is now beginning to grapple with the latent complexity of Partition's effects, which extends from grand nationalist,

geopolitical, and identitarian agendas into the most personal and intimate aspects of the self.

The resurgence of artistic engagement with the question of Partition undoubtedly has something to do with the resonance of what theorist and film scholar Bhaskar Sarkar has identified as the latency of the “Partition experience” on the psyche. This experience is not to be conflated with simply witnessing or experiencing events first-hand; rather, it has a “spectral or negative presence,” and a “temporality all its own, one that runs alongside and yet is out of sync with the present.”⁴ Sarkar further notes that this structure of experience is “marked by deferral, gaps, and uncertainties, providing no guarantee of the eventual assimilation of the experience within a coherent history, or of therapeutic closure.” The experience, then, is not only individual, or belonging only to those who witnessed it directly, but extends its effects collectively to society in strange ways and works insidiously across generations.

Contemporary cultural and artistic practice is uniquely placed to address this second-order predicament as it executes a modality of address that seeks neither metaphorical sublimation nor adherence to established artistic form nor legitimacy via the “national modern.” The contemporary work of art offers no transcendence and no attempt to redeem events and crises into a utopian metaphor. Rather, it resolutely refuses all claims to authenticity and insistently maps the multiple dislocations and antinomies of the social field.⁵ It is characterized by its being both *fully immersed in-its-time*, yet also *simultaneously out-of-joint with it*, and therefore not bound by the “timeliness” of its demands or by the sense of “reasonably” addressing only what is politically and socially pragmatic. Much of contemporary art ethically critiques our conceptions and practices of modern institutions, such as the nation-state, which were meant to usher us into an enlightened new age, but which can no longer suppress the violent memories of their founding or their unassimilable exclusions and remainders.

In the arena of contemporary art, this crucial work being performed by artists, curators, writers, galleries, and museums—whether located in South Asia or beyond—is therefore of immense significance. It is important to recognize that art provides us and successive generations with intellectual and affective resources for rethinking our stances, and these effects may address immediate conditions or they may be latent, proleptic, or prophetic. From this perspective, it does not matter whether the art is accessible or difficult, how widely the work circulates, or what the specific identity of the artist is. Contemporary artists from across South Asia and its diaspora continue this journey, producing creative and unexpected works in diverse media that address individual and collective dilemmas of South Asia in the contemporary era. They offer critiques of the present that remain weighed down by narrow identitarian affiliations, and proffer a generous vision of a future (“*manzil*” in Faiz’s poem) in which independence, equality, and the fulfillment of human potential can find a better and more universal realization.

My own awareness of the significance of Partition is artistic and scholarly in the professional sense, of course; but, above all, it is deeply personal. Growing

up in Karachi during the 1960s and 1970s in a family with parents who had both migrated from India after 1947, I grew up with many recollections of a familial and social life that was intangible and distant to our life in Pakistan. My mother's family, which had been based in Lucknow and Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh, traces itself as members of the Rohillas, and to quintessential middle-class doctors, professionals, and civil servants that Aligarh University produced for a couple of generations. They were deeply invested in Urdu language and literature. On the other hand, my father's immediate family was based in Bombay, but the extended family was from the small town of Godhra in Gujarat. The numerous members of the Gujarati-speaking "Godhra community" that had migrated to Karachi formed an elaborate labyrinth linked by intermarriages, and they were above all interested in trading and other business activities. I recall seeing very few historic or current photographs of family life from India, which my family evidently did not possess. Long before the era of instantaneous electronic communication and intensified image circulation, my relation to these sites and events of familial history was uncanny. Members of both sides of my family have remained in India; many others migrated to Pakistan and subsequently to Canada, the US, Europe, and the Middle East, forming a dispersal that can no longer be gathered in any stable territory that is "home."

As an artist, my engagement with the legacy of the 1947 Partition began with a fortuitous meeting in 1996 at an exhibition in Copenhagen with Indian artist Nalini Malani, who had moved from Karachi to Bombay following Partition. We discussed an alternative "celebration" of the 50th anniversary of the independence of India and Pakistan, as well as Partition, in 1997. This resulted in an exhibition that traveled to New Delhi, Bombay, and Lahore.⁶ And we collaborated to develop the work *Bloodlines* in 1997.

But the work could not easily be made together—partly due to visa and travel restrictions—and its original and recent editions have therefore been fabricated by professional embroiderers in Karachi. Its recent exhibition in India is an important milestone in my continued engagement with these tangled legacies.⁷

The 1947 Partition was the original impetus for the *Lines of Control* project—and the one that impelled London-based curator Hammad Nasar to question the strange and haunting absence of artists who would address it directly. The importance of 1947 and 1971 for younger artists became very evident to me in my involvement in the *Lines of Control* project, first as an artist, and later also as co-curator. The exhibition eventually included the work of over 30 artists and groups, and also included *Bloodlines*.⁸ The insistent questions and ethical demands that the artworks in *Lines of Control* raised—in a probing but fragmentary manner—were articulated and further illuminated by critical insights in a symposium, and more durably in essays in the *Lines of Control* publication that brought the works of artists in proximity with the research of scholars who offered insights into many of the questions that the artworks make visible.⁹

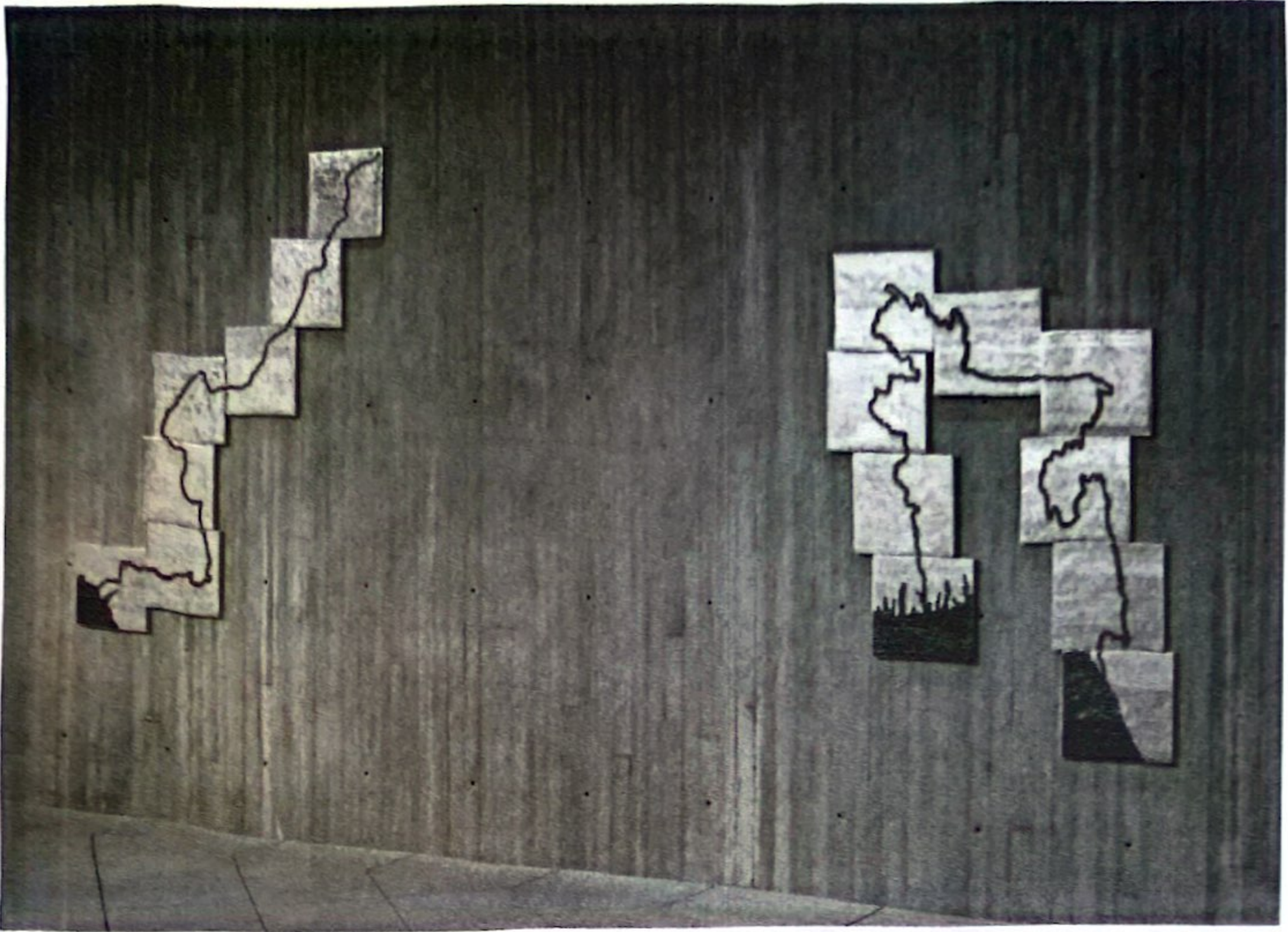


Figure 6.1 Nalini Malani and Iftikhar Dadi, *Bloodlines*, 1997 (refabricated, 2011 by workshop of Abdul Khaliq, Saddar, Karachi).

Sequins and thread on cloth. Two sections: 165 x 187 cm and 124.5 x 159 cm.
Courtesy of the artists and Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai.

The Partition marks a momentous, deeply contested series of events in the history of modern South Asia, and has been the subject of much scholarly work, biographical recounting, and continued provocation for contemporary artists.¹⁰ Its aftermath continues to foster mistrust and violence between the governments and the peoples of India and Pakistan. How does one arrive at the “truth” of the Partition today? How can its histories be comprehended and their complex and contestatory claims untangled to arrive at some form of reckoning? Since the event is so overdetermined and official history texts are so clearly tendentious, one has no choice but to look at the various kinds of evidences that constitute its historical archive. Much of the history of the Partition is recounted in official papers, by accounts of the people involved in the decision-making process, or the oral memories of those who were subjected to its unsettling effects. Within the range of materials in the historical archive, the photograph arguably occupies a unique place in providing a view of how Partition impacted everyday life, without ideological manipulation. But is this really the case?

One might imagine that because the Partition happened in the full light of history during the mid-20th century, and since it marks such a monumental series of events, one would find a variety and profusion of photographic evidence documenting its complex dimensions. However, what circulates instead is an extremely limited number of photographs. There are numerous photographs

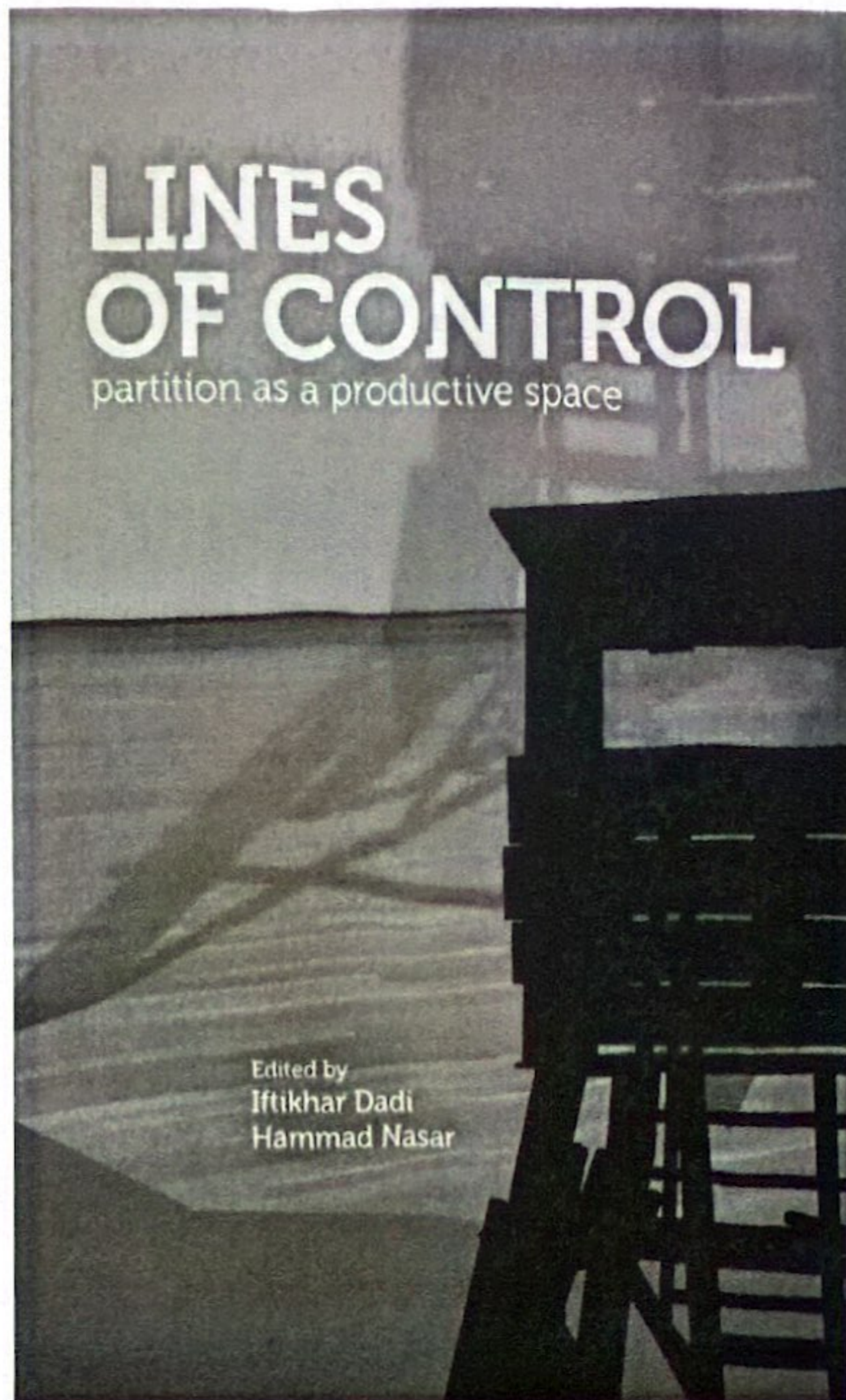


Figure 6.2 Cover of Iftikhar Dadi and Hammad Nasar, eds., *Lines of Control: Partition as a Productive Space* (London; Ithaca, NY: Green Cardamom; Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, 2012).

of leaders engaged in negotiations or addressing masses of people leading up to the Partition. But the few photographs of ordinary people, migrants, refugees caught in its maelstrom have been taken by primarily Western photographers such as Henri Cartier-Bresson and, most notably, Margaret Bourke-White. These were published not in South Asia but as photo essays in American magazines such as *LIFE*. Today, when one seeks visual evidence of the Partition in everyday life, one encounters only this small body of photographs, and one struggles to reconcile the powerful yet fragmentary and limited scope of this archive with the tremendous scale of widespread violence and physical and psychic displacement that the Partition engendered.

The artist Imran Channa's engagement with the photographic archive of the Partition unearths key issues in the remembrance and narration of history. Channa translates archival photography into abstraction. This is accomplished through a rigorous practice of drawing and erasure. Central concerns of Channa's extended investigation revolve around the question of historical truth associated with the photograph, and how our understanding of history remains malleable to ideology despite the ostensibly stubborn veracity of photographic evidence. If even the most reliable visual artifact in the archive cannot guarantee truth, how can we situate ourselves as subjects of history? These questions are

absolutely central to subjectivities in South Asia today, as we individually and collectively seek a responsible relation to our history, beyond the siren song of exclusivist postcolonial nationalisms.

Since its inception in 1839, photography has been associated with an unparalleled truth claim, arguably much more so than other kinds of artifacts, such as written accounts or history paintings. The photograph has been seen to provide a measure of truth that is manifest and visible (and this widely accepted conviction has paradoxically not weakened even in our era of Photoshop manipulation). One way to understand the continued force of this belief is by theorizations that locate the photograph as an indexical medium. Just as the fingerprint is an index whose presence guarantees that the very person whose fingerprint is recorded was not only present but physically pressed a part of their body to leave a trace, similarly, the photograph-as-index is also an artifact created through a direct impression of whatever is placed before the camera lens. As soon as the exposure is made, the photographic negative faithfully records the very presence of the landscape, object, or person (of course, framed by camera placement, choice of lens, and exposure time, etc.). But even if the photograph was staged or set up in such a way that it creates an image that departs from "reality," nevertheless the final photograph is nothing other than a material and mechanical tracing of all these actions performed in its making, which is its truth. Also, the photographic field of view does not make distinctions between the objects placed in its view, and records all without hierarchy, producing a powerful set of responses associated with realism.

This realism is a major factor in the truth-effect the photograph evokes; "the photograph cannot lie," critic John Berger had insightfully noted, but he immediately qualified this by observing, "by the same token, it cannot tell the truth; or rather, the truth it does tell ... is a limited one."¹¹ This is because a photograph is nothing but an artifact that freezes a moment into a flattened rectangular space, and disconnects this rectangle from the ceaseless flow of time. It can never be equated or synchronized with the fullness of actual presence. Even in the most saturated instances of photographic ubiquity, we have but a finite number of photographs, taken from selected angles at discrete and discontinuous moments in the continuous flux of time. The photograph thus provides us only with fragments—social hieroglyphs—whose meanings individuals and societies continually strive to fabricate and secure later. To create these new significations for legibility, the photograph must be immersed in a new discursive context quite different from its ordinary space-time continuum, and this necessary act of reinscription is also where the meaning of the photograph is reworked.

Channa has utilized two kinds of photographs in the making of these works. The first is a set of personal photographs, which he understands to be a "personal archive." These are everyday photographs of life in Shikarpur, Lahore, and of various events and landscapes of ordinary character. The other works are comprised of historical photographs of India's Partition in 1947.

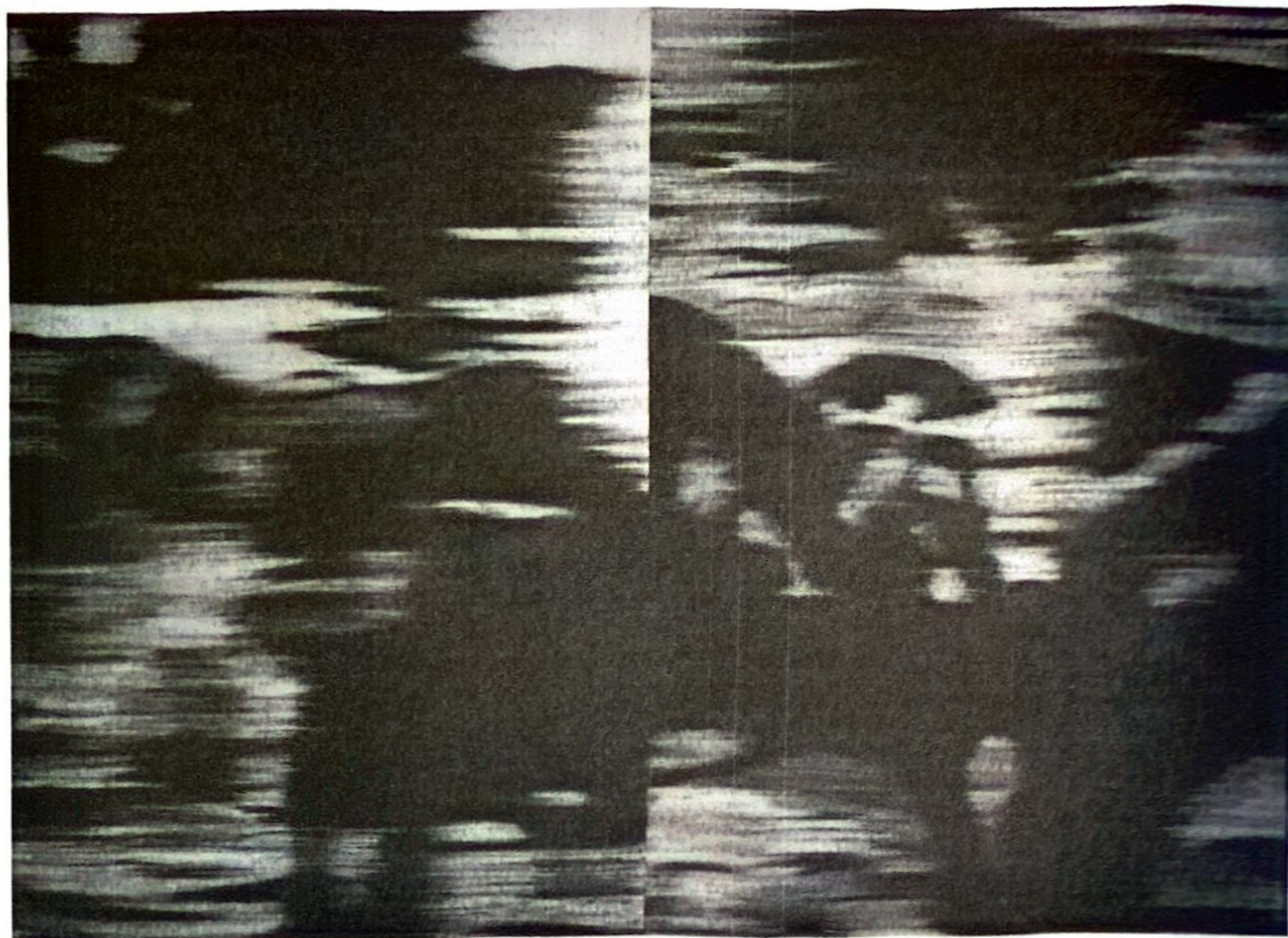


Figure 6.3 Imran Channa, *Memories Series*, 2015.
Graphite on paper. 29 x 43 in.
Courtesy of the artist.

In *Memories*, both archives are deployed but in such a way that it becomes impossible to identify their source, while the series *Eraser on Paper* and *Error* are based entirely on the Partition photographs.

Channa bases much of his work on these iconic photographs of the Partition. His process in all three series involves first producing large-scale drawings using a dark pencil such as a 9B, to create an enlarged realist image faithfully based upon the archival photograph. After the drawing has been completed, Channa practices a laborious process of erasure and reinscription, effacing the legibility of the original image. This process of erasure is extremely arduous. It involves a very considerable effort and is physically painful on the muscles and fingers of the artist. This sense of bodily involvement, pain, and fatigue, as Channa reworks and erases the photographic image, creates an embodied act of creative destruction leading to a kind of new inscription, which insists on the necessity of the substrate image even as it seeks to question its veracity and its positivist transparency. Channa, of course, cannot give us the “truth” of the Partition, or even of his own personal past. Instead, these works offer another kind of evidence, that of continued psychic disturbance that is produced when history—in large and small ways—is remade and in turn molds our lives, and how this process of fabrication is ceaselessly and continuously inflected by power and ideology.

Erasures and reworkings are handled by the artist in three different ways, specific to each series. In the series titled *Error*, the drawings are erased in such



Figure 6.4 Imran Channa, *Eraser on Paper iv*, 2015 [work in progress].
Graphite on paper. 52 x 35 in.
Courtesy of the artist.

a manner that the original image creates thick arc-like smudges across the surface of the paper. The end result is a tension between two pictorial languages simultaneously at play in each work. The remaining ghostly outlines of the original drawing are now overlaid with abstract expressionist form. The delicacy and fineness of the underlying image is interrupted by the gross smudges, in a manner in which neither can be detached from the other and each one interrupts the other. These works evoke a sensation of profound tension between abstraction and realism. These two modalities are also analogues for any methodological understanding of history itself. Is history to be entered through the concrete and the evidentiary, best exemplified by the specificity of the photograph and by all of its indexical claims? Or is the Partition better apprehended with a kind of abstracted affective overview, especially by those of us who did not experience its events first-hand? To put this another way and interpret the character of the lines and the strokes literally: is specific history recorded by the fine line to be contrasted with the sensory phenomenology of the broad brush?



Figure 6.5 Imran Channa, *Eraser on Paper iv*, 2015 [final work].
Graphite on paper. 52 x 35 in.
Courtesy of the artist.

Now let us turn to the works in the *Eraser on Paper* series, which are similar to works in previous series such as *Erasure drawings* (2013). Here, however, the drawing has been completely erased, leaving behind only the spectral outline and shape of the original drawing. Without referencing the original source-photograph, it becomes very difficult to reconstruct the original image—all that one can make out now is an uncanny landscape characterized by ghostly shapes that trigger a resemblance to things one might have seen before—associations with unfashioned forms that one struggles to situate and define. These works evoke tentative, hesitant, but nevertheless dissonant resonances with prior imagery stubbornly lodged in the crepuscular regions of one's memory.

In the *Memories* series, the act of erasure proceeds not towards evacuation and lightness, but towards density and opacity. Channa completes the original drawing faithfully, just as in the other series. But now the work is methodologically erased in regularly spaced steps with the assistance of a ruled surface. The first erased drawing, which still retains a smudged original image with vertical or horizontal orientations, is then redrawn and erased again, a process that is repeated several times, until the massed dense black outlines are interrupted by striations of horizontal or vertical patterns, endowing the heavily



Figure 6.6 Imran Channa, *Error ii*, 2015 [work in progress].
Graphite on paper. 22 x 30 in.
Courtesy of the artist.

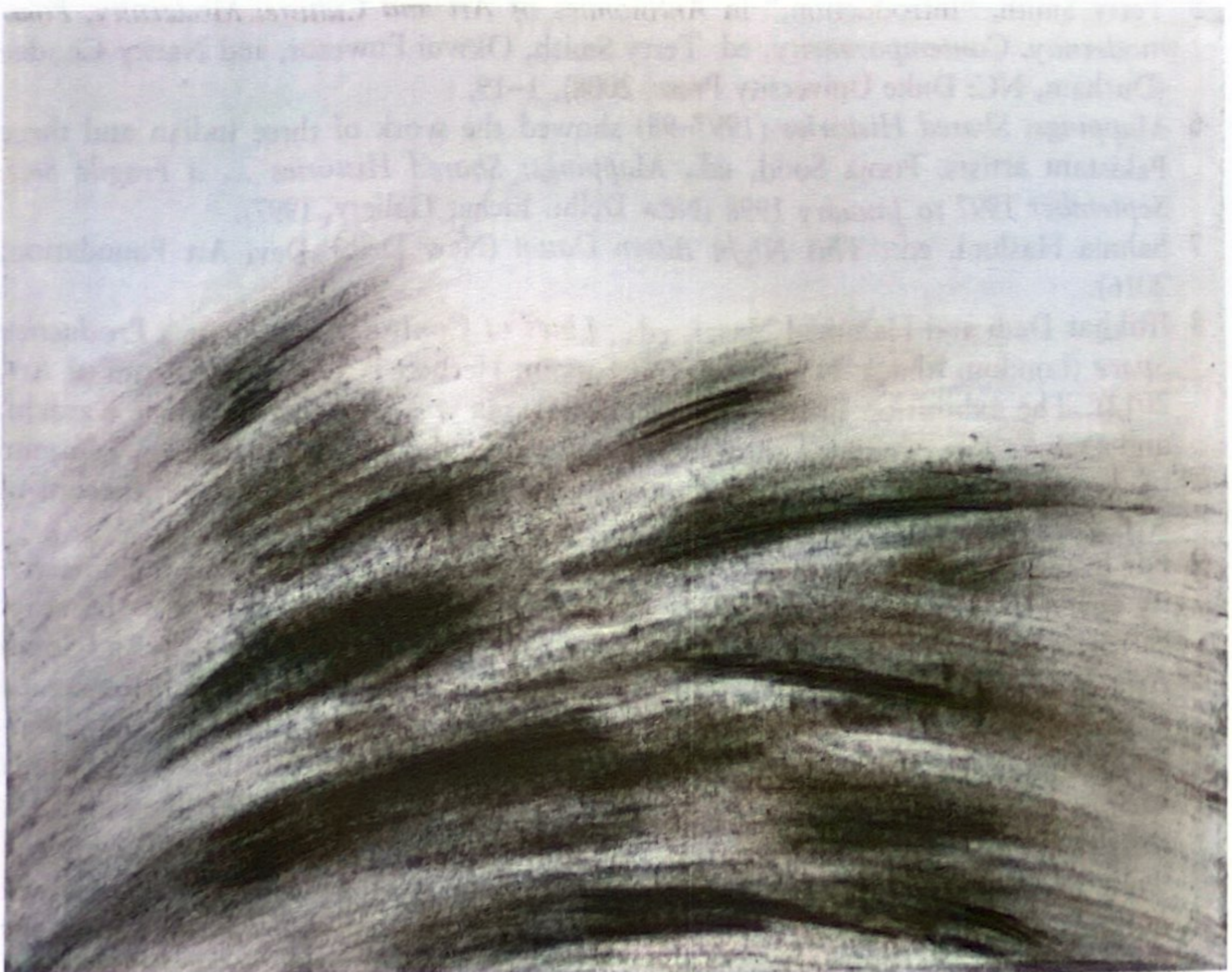


Figure 6.7 Imran Channa, *Error ii*, 2015 [final work].
Graphite on paper. 22 x 30 in.
Courtesy of the artist.

worked final image with instability and dynamism too. Unlike the faint ghostly shapes in *Eraser on Paper*, here the association is much bleaker, resonating with mental specters of darkness and oblivion. But since the striations are evenly spaced, curiously the final drawing also retains a quality associated with the photograph—the character of a mechanically produced image, but one that is abstract. This tension between the regularity of the striations and the primeval organic shapes of the massed forms can be allegorized as the tension of the individual lives that are caught in modern ideological regimes that grind on, and the gyres of history continue to turn ceaselessly, over the bodies and lives of individuals and communities. Moreover, in these works the personal archive is equated with the historical archive—this correspondence suggests that even one's own personal memory is not secure, but open to a process of reinscription beyond one's own conscious perception.

Notes

- 1 Faiz Ahmed Faiz, "The Dawn of Freedom (August 1947)," trans. Agha Shahid Ali, *Annual of Urdu Studies* 11 (1996): 87.
- 2 And according to film scholar Bhaskar Sarkar, popular Indian cinema after 1947 situated the experience of Partition in "displaced, allegorical forms." Bhaskar Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 30.
- 3 As Sarkar notes, the issue was not forgetfulness; rather, "there was a surfeit of ... mostly disturbing memory that stretched the limits of credibility and haunted people in inchoate ways." Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation*, 28.
- 4 Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation*, 30.
- 5 Terry Smith, "Introduction," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 1–19.
- 6 *Mappings: Shared Histories (1997–98)* showed the work of three Indian and three Pakistani artists. Pooja Sood, ed., *Mappings: Shared Histories ... a Fragile Self: September 1997 to January 1998* (New Delhi: Eicher Gallery, 1997).
- 7 Salima Hashmi, ed., *This Night Bitten Dawn* (New Delhi: Devi Art Foundation, 2016).
- 8 Iftikhar Dadi and Hammad Nasar, eds., *Lines of Control: Partition as a Productive Space* (London; Ithaca, NY: Green Cardamom; Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, 2012). The exhibition in its early manifestations was shown in London, Karachi, and Dubai. The expanded show was exhibited at the Herbert F Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University (2012) and at Duke University's Nasher Museum of Art (2013–14).
- 9 For instance, Sumathi Ramaswamy analysed the intensive visual, cartographic activity engendered by the Partition and features the remarkable work of the "barefoot cartographers" who continue to produce bazaar prints that visualize India and South Asia in ways that are often at variance with official mappings. Naeem Mohaiemen sensitively examined the historiography of 1971, pointing out its lacunas and absences, including its contradictory effects on everyday lives and also the way in which various political groups have deployed the narrative of Bangladesh's liberation for their own ends. And Aamir Mufti's essay offered an extended reading of the life and work of Zarina Hashmi as an exilic artist whose abiding references to the visual outlines of a home and to the Urdu language are situated with reference to "a life

lived on the verge of disappearance but with a strange resolve and repudiation of oblivion." The essays are included in Dadi and Nasar, eds. *Lines of Control*.

- 10 For a summary of scholarly and biographical approaches to the Partition, see David Gilmartin, "The Historiography of India's Partition: Between Civilization and Modernity," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 74, no. 1 (February 2015): 23–41. On the work of contemporary artists dealing with Partition, see Dadi and Nasar, eds., *Lines of Control*; Hashmi, ed., *This Night Bitten Dawn*.
- 11 John Berger, "The Ambiguity of the Photograph," in *The Anthropology of Media: A Reader*, ed. Kelly Askew and Richard R. Wilk (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 53.