

FRIEZE

Amar Kanwar Tells Only Half the Story

*Ahead of his Serpentine Galleries exhibition,
the artist considers how ambiguity might offer resistance in a world shaped by violence*

By T.J. Demos (September 30, 2026)



Amar Kanwar, *Such a Morning*, 2017, video still. Courtesy: © Amar Kanwar and Marian Goodman Gallery

What we are facing at this point in time, regardless of which country you are in, is a devastating situation in terms of the acceptability of violence, authoritarianism and the need for vengeance,’ the Delhi-based artist Amar Kanwar tells me earlier this summer. Indeed, as global authoritarian powers disseminate violence-justifying propaganda through algorithmic governance and AI-mediated representation, they produce a world that is progressively programmed, automated and rendered legible according to the logics of calculation and control. Against this regime, Kanwar’s art offers a different mode of knowing – one that preserves ambiguity and invites political agency precisely through what remains unresolved. What if the most meaningful stories are those told only in halves, Kanwar asks? Such a proposition asks us to embrace incompleteness and indeterminacy as conditions of aesthetic experience. While this is hardly unprecedented as an artistic strategy, it acquires renewed urgency in an age increasingly governed by instrumental reason.

In Kanwar’s new video installation *The Charcoal Man* (2026), debuting this month at Serpentine North in London, the mysterious titular character embodies what the artist calls ‘the half-story’. Kanwar describes him as ‘a figure who is omnipresent and recycles across histories and geographies, inhabiting us all with fear, resentment and unease’; someone who ‘has a power over us’.

The charcoal man is a spectral, shadowy subject, perhaps an allegory of the unconscious. ‘There are many subtexts and metaphorical meanings in who he is, who he could be and what he does,’ Kanwar notes. ‘He is not violent or incendiary or *only* a trickster, but could still come close to all of these

perhaps, in feelings, in gestures.’ This figure is Kanwar’s psychological entry point and representational conceit to the piece’s monumental subject: the 1947 Partition. The momentous division of British India into the independent states of India and Pakistan triggered one of modernity’s largest, most violent migrations, with approximately 15 million people displaced, up to two million deaths and severe communal and sexual violence wreaked across the newly riven Punjab and Bengal regions.



Amar Kanwar, *The Charcoal Man*, 2026, video still. Courtesy: © Amar Kanwar and Marian Goodman Gallery

“The present is connected to the past, which is also partly fictional, mythical, constructed.” - Amar Kanwar

Kanwar’s seven-channel video unfolds through 12 stories, all written by the artist, which draw freely from history, mythology, oral traditions and folk wisdom without clear boundaries between them. ‘The present is connected to the past, which is also partly fictional, historical, mythical, constructed,’ Kanwar stresses. Mirroring this expansiveness, images and texts circulate across multiple screens without a fixed sequence, dissolving distinctions between fact and fiction, interior reverie and external event. Viewers will be invited to navigate these overlapping worlds, where meaning arises not through linear narrative but via association, resonance and the half-told story.

This approach is characteristic of an artist whose films and multimedia installations have consistently probed the intertwined politics of power, violence and justice through philosophical inquiry and poetic invention. Kanwar’s international stature is reflected in his participation in four editions of Documenta, between 2002 and 2017, which is where I first encountered his work, at the 11th edition curated by Okwui Enwezor. Kanwar presented *A Season Outside* (1997), a mesmerizing meditation on the histories of violence and division between India and Pakistan. Filmed at the Wagah border crossing, where a nightly ritual of lowering flags and closing gates unfolds and soldiers parade before crowds of spectators as a meticulously choreographed performance of nationalist spectacle, Kanwar’s reflective narration interrogates the cycles of oppression, vengeance and terrorism, asking whether Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence might interrupt the compulsion to answer violence with violence in the name of political transformation. Conceived in contemplation of the question of how to respond to violence, Kanwar’s film, he describes, takes ‘the form of an essay – sometimes almost political, sometimes philosophical, sometimes analytical, sometimes thinking aloud’.

It was in 1984, while studying history at the University of Delhi in the city where he was born 20 years earlier, that Kanwar first encountered political and environmental violence that fostered his enduring commitment to social justice and shaped his philosophical and artistic trajectory. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, triggering widespread retaliatory violence against Sikhs. Just over a month later, a toxic gas leak at the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal killed thousands in the immediate aftermath and exposed hundreds of thousands more to lethal chemicals in what remains the worst industrial disaster in history. 'I was upset and shocked at the brutality,' Kanwar confesses, and at the 'complicity of corporations and administrations; I took up film because it seemed interesting, more open, without rigid academic and examination systems.'



Amar Kanwar, *The Face*, 2004, from 'The Torn First Pages', 2004–08, video still. Courtesy: © Amar Kanwar and Marian Goodman Gallery

After earning an MA in film from Delhi's Jamia Millia Islamia university, he decided that filmmaking was too costly a profession to pursue and instead took a position as an occupational health and safety researcher in the coal-mining region of Madhya Pradesh in central India. 'Going down a coal mine and witnessing the life of miners is enough to shift something inside of you forever,' he tells me. He later returned to filmmaking and began exploring documentary cinema, eventually expanding into the multi-channel video installations for which he is now internationally recognized. *The Torn First Pages* (2004–08), a 19-channel piece commemorating a Burmese bookseller imprisoned for removing state propaganda from the opening pages of books, weaves together evidence of oppression with modest acts of resistance, exploring how the struggle against dictatorship remains ongoing. For the mixed-media installation *The Sovereign Forest* (2012), Kanwar brought together 'poetry as evidence', as he puts it, with questions around justice and sovereignty through constellations of moving images, texts, objects and archives.

In early 2014, I travelled with Kanwar from Delhi to Bhubaneswar, Odisha, to see a semi-permanent iteration of this latter piece, installed two years prior in development with journalist and activist Sudhir Pattnaik and filmmaker Sherna Dastur. It had opened as an evolving archive to which (mostly regional) visitors could contribute testimony, and later appeared at documenta 13. I was researching for my book *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (2016), which investigated how artists internationally were responding to environmental violence through a growing ecological sensibility. During several days together, our conversations ranged across art and politics, rural ecologies, Adivasi cosmologies and environmental movements, including the Naxalite resistance to

corporate extractivism and state violence. I remain struck by Kanwar's quiet humility, moral seriousness and philosophical insights, which for me are indissociable from his art. This is also movingly expressed in his sustained commitment to rural communities, far removed from the art world's recognition and its career-building rewards.

In *The Charcoal Man*, geopolitical conflict, psychic drama and perceptual uncertainty intersect in stories dispersed across multiple screens, embracing partition as an ethical and aesthetic condition. Although rooted in the Indian subcontinent – and shaped by the experiences of Kanwar's own parents which, as he told me, reverberate through him as intergenerational trauma – its central insight extends far beyond this particular context. While the piece references B.R. Ambedkar's anti-caste politics and Gandhi's relation to Partition, as the artist described to me, ongoing cycles of violence in Narendra Modi's anti-Muslim Hindu nationalism, Donald Trump's xenophobic authoritarianism and Benjamin Netanyahu's genocidal ethnostate would also seem to be implicated.

The question is not whether the charcoal man exists, but how one responds to him: whether by repressing his presence, projecting violence onto others or, as Kanwar proposes, encountering him through the half-story. In the artist's distinctive magical realist style, fractured narratives are ultimately a means through which to recognize the fractured self, making possible a relation to alterity grounded in the patient acceptance of ambiguity and unknowability.

"Kanwar's films assemble open-ended narratives that resist interpretation." - T.J. Demos

In this regard, *The Charcoal Man* continues the trajectory of Kanwar's recent works – including *Such a Morning* (2017) and *The Peacock's Graveyard* (2023), both included in the Serpentine show – promising a powerful aesthetic experience shaped by adagio tempos, sumptuous imagery and a sustained attentiveness to visual and sonic details. Kanwar's films unfold slowly and deliberately, assembling open-ended narratives that resist definitive interpretation. Like fragments of a larger puzzle, their stories invite viewers to make unexpected connections without ever resolving into a single meaning, even while this aesthetic openness is inseparable from political urgency.



Amar Kanwar, *Such a Morning*, 2017, video still. Courtesy: © Amar Kanwar and Marian Goodman Gallery

Such a Morning, an 85-minute film, interweaves two narratives. One follows an unnamed Indian mathematician and scholar who withdraws deep within a forest and into an abandoned railway carriage, transforming it into a sparse dwelling and site for contemplation. The other centres on a saree-clad elderly woman who sits calmly with a rifle as the house around her is methodically dismantled by a group of men. Kanwar's camera lingers over ordinary actions and quiet moments: the scholar lays a mattress on a rusted bedframe, improvises a chair, assembles a simple writing desk and begins recording his reflections in what he calls the 'almanac of the dark'. Although intertitles punctuate the film, the relationship between the two narratives is unexplained, remaining elliptical and evocative rather than expository. Are these two figures estranged counterparts inhabiting different temporalities? Or are they allegorical responses to crises – one retreating into contemplative solitude, the other confronting the world through the latent possibility of violence?

The Peacock's Graveyard, a 28-minute, seven-channel video installation, approaches a similarly complex narrative architecturally, with a spatial field in which simultaneity, juxtaposition and choreographed multiplicity replace the singular perspective of a conventional cinematic frame – although Kanwar also experiments with layered temporalities within the single-channel format of *Such a Morning*. The installation unfolds as a sequence of five episodes, each presenting a symbolic character: a corrupt, merciless priest; an executioner injured by a branch from the gallows tree; a wealthy landlord who breaks his word to his most impoverished tenant; a president returned through reincarnation; and two lifelong companions whose persistent conflicts are finally brought to an end. As Kanwar has written of the kaleidoscopic collection of stories, they 'lay the groundwork for reflecting on our unbearable arrogance, delusions and deep desire for violence.'



Amar Kanwar, *The Peacock's Graveyard*, 2023, video still. Courtesy: © Amar Kanwar and Marian Goodman Gallery

Toward the end of *Such a Morning*, the circumstances surrounding the protagonist's withdrawal gradually come into view. Through a series of letters addressed to former colleagues, his university chancellor, neighbourhood children and others, the protagonist reflects on the condition that led the 'Department of Psychology' to conclude he was 'incapable of being happy'. In response to his colleagues' brutality, the scholar reflects, in metaphorical prose, that numerals are merely patterns within an ever-shifting web of relations, where the only permanence is that 'nothing is permanent'. To the chancellor, he writes: 'May I humbly inform you that I think the curriculum of the university needs to be changed.' Changed into *what*, however, the film refuses to specify. Instead, Kanwar's work embodies

art's fundamental capacity to register, inhabit and resonate with profound historical crises whose meanings remain unresolved. The temporal horizon for his ethical poetics is, in this sense, epic.

To invite viewers to dwell in uncertainty within an expanded durational cinema is no small ask in today's attention economy. Yet, it is precisely this economy's world-destroying unsustainability that Kanwar's films quietly contest. As he and I agreed, we need new curriculums, new pedagogies – a call made all the more urgent as universities and other civil and cultural institutions face continued neoliberal dismantling and political assault, in India and elsewhere (and indeed his films inspired a series of seminars on free speech at The New School, New York, in 2018–19). Kanwar's art of half-stories cultivates a mode of attention that might be compared to philosophy, psychology or spirituality. But when I spoke with the artist, he avoided those grand terms, favouring instead the informal poetry of lived experience rendered cinematic. This points to his politics of aesthetics: wielding ambiguity with beautiful forms, and seeking, in humility, the possibility of perceiving otherwise.

Amar Kanwar's work is on view at Serpentine North, London, until 31 January 2027