

The Artist Creating a New Mythology for the North Pole

Inspired by her own journey to the Arctic Circle, Himali Singh Soin upends traditional stories of exploration in her new commission for Frieze.

By Tess Thackara



The artist Himali Singh Soin in her live-work space in East London.

Credit: Carlotta Cardana

In her sunlit live-work space overlooking Brick Lane in East London, the artist Himali Singh Soin is spinning a narrative about the farthest reaches of our planet. Singh Soin, a poet and artist from north-central India, has spent the past couple of years contemplating, among other things, the earth's polar caps. "It's a blank screen to project so much on it, it's almost asking for hyperbole and fantasy," she says. "These two spaces seem like the closest to outer space."

Singh Soin is primarily a writer of poetry and art criticism, but her language also spills off the page and into immersive audiovisual environments, film and spoken-word performances that often dwell on the environment, issues of identity and the nature of deep time. She's made recent appearances in exhibitions and performances at Somerset House, the Serpentine Gallery and Whitechapel Gallery

in London but is lesser known to audiences outside the United Kingdom. With a new commission from Frieze, that looks set to change.

On a roving residency aboard a sailboat in the North Pole in 2017, Singh Sooin met the science historian Alexis Rider and learned that Victorian-era Britain was abuzz with anxieties about the imminent arrival of another ice age. As British explorers set out across the globe in the 19th century, fears of the colonial “other” became tangled up with paranoid fantasies of far-flung environments invading their shores — of glacial infiltration or contamination. Satirical drawings in Punch magazine imagined polar bears turning up in English fields. The artist Gustave Doré composed a scene in which the River Thames and London’s skyline had frozen over, while a “Southern Savage” loomed on its banks. And Mary Shelley wrote her 1818 novel “Frankenstein,” in which the explorer and ship captain Robert Walton ventures to the globe’s icy periphery in search of the unknown and encounters Victor Frankenstein and his haunting story.



Singh Sooin considers herself a poet first and foremost. Her latest work, “*We Are Opposite Like That II* (2019),” is part of a larger series of poems she made in response to her experience of the North Pole.
Credit: Carlotta Cardana



As part of her practice, Singh Sooin stages experimental spoken-word performances, often accompanied by moving images and live music.
Credit: Carlotta Cardana

Singh Sooin also learned that, unlike glacial parts of Canada or Scandinavia, the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard has no native peoples and no mythology. Now, the North Pole has become the blank canvas for the artist’s own imagined mythology — what she calls “an old-school, Ovidian story of metamorphosis,” which has earned her a Frieze Artist Award. At the London fair in early October, she will show “*We Are Opposite Like That II*” (2019), a fantastical film that offers a feminist answer to masculine explorer narratives and colonial unease, and which meditates on ice as an archive of stories

that risk being lost to glacial melt. (The film will also be broadcast on the U.K.'s Channel 4 this fall.) Singh Soin herself plays an equatorial, tropical creature who transforms into ice: a figment of the Victorian imagination, perhaps, but also an agent who animates and awakens the permafrost to become a “vibrant, living, breathing” entity.

The artist, 32, grew up in Delhi and attended university in the United States and London, but her relationship with the Arctic extends back to her childhood. Her father is an explorer, and not long after she was born, he traveled to the Arctic to study the erosion of the ozone layer. Her parents founded a travel company together, and Singh Soin makes annual expeditions with her family to “the edges of the mainstream map,” as she puts it, where she collects folklore, sand, seeds and imagery.

In one way or another, Singh Soin says, all of her work is “about creating speculations or alternate cosmologies.” She’s drawn to fantastical writers like Italo Calvino and Jorge Luis Borges, and folk stories like the Buddhist Jataka tales from India. While aboard the Arctic-bound ship, she quickly became absorbed by the “history of conjecture” that has taken root in the North Pole, the theories that have settled there. “I was reading about the history of the Arctic, and I immediately loved the idea that the Arctic and Antarctic may have been tropical paradises in the past, that they were teeming with mosquitoes and dinosaurs.” In response, she began to invoke what she describes as her own “alienness” in the Arctic, by bringing symbols of her home up onto the deck — an orchid, or a pineapple.



On her travels around the world with her family, Singh Soin collects folklore, seeds and imagery.
Credit: Carlotta Cardana



The artist often explores the nature of time in her work. Pictured here, an hourglass in her apartment.
Credit: Carlotta Cardana

In her new Arctic narrative, she hopes to give equal weight to visual art, science and other sources of knowledge and interpretation. Among the many forms of expression that she’s folded into her film —

it includes not only the artist's performance, poetry and video footage of the Arctic but also archival materials from the journals of Victorian-era explorers and Rider's research — music tells another story about the North Pole. Singh Soin's partner, the musician David Soin Tappeser, has composed an original score, performed by an all-female quartet, that accompanies the film. It incorporates fragments from the Romantic era of classical music, including Edward Elgar's "The Snow," as well as Singh Soin's recordings of the Arctic soundscape, and responds to her field notes about latitudes, longitudes and temperature variations. Tappeser was thinking of what it might mean to create a folk music of the Arctic.

Through each of these different mediums, Singh Soin has given the ice a voice, placing it in the position of "an elder," she says. And while she wants to avoid producing a pedagogical narrative about climate change, there are subtle lessons here. One, perhaps, is that we ignore listening to and learning from the environment at our own peril. Another is to be attentive to the power of stories. She tells me a tale that reads like a parable: At the beginning of the 20th century, the British explorer Ernest Mansfield went to the Arctic convinced he would find gold. Instead, he found marble. He moved 50 families to Svalbard and founded the New London marble mine, but when he brought tons of the material back to England, the permafrost evaporated and it turned to rubble. "There are so many stories of how ice has insisted on itself and acted as an agent of decolonization somehow," Singh Soin says. "I do think this piece is also about love, about a deep love for the landscape and a sense of loss."