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Aaditya Aggarwal

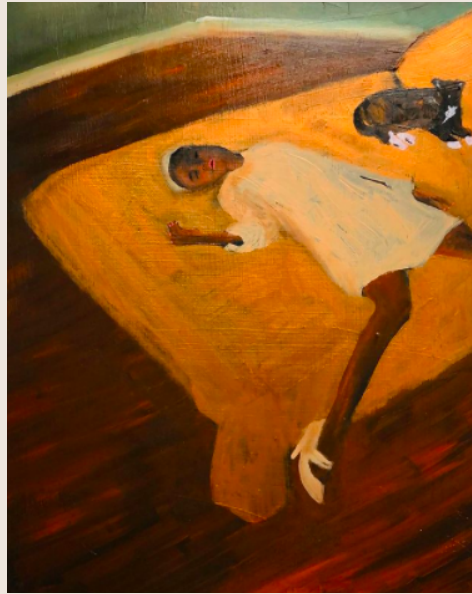
**Between Recline and Repose**



Dayanita Singh, *Go Away Closer*, 2007

It is late afternoon and the subject of Dayanita Singh's photo has returned from somewhere. Caught mid-repose in *Go Away Closer*—the photographer's 2007 book collection of novelistic portraiture—the titular image seemingly depicts an adolescent lying face down on her bed. Aloof and still; fatigued, sideways; legs dangling, carefully adrift; shoes teetering off, in an attempt to not muddy the sheets.

An image of a departed devotee, she matches painter Danielle McKinney's church-going subject lying, flailed in resignation, on her mustard-hued bed, studied by her housecat, in the mahogany-bathed [After Worship](#) (2020). Unlike McKinney's girl, Singh's subject resists facial capture, emulating instead a version of Geneviève Daël's silhouetted woman gazing out of her vast window from within a darkening room in [Une matinée silencieuse](#). With limbs that curve diagonally across the image, Singh's subject punctuates, fetal like an apostrophe or a comma, while shelves of books fade darkly into the background. Soft daylight from a nearby window falls onto her neatly folded and tucked bed sheets. Recently wrinkled by weight and stroked with fine shadow grids, fabric reveals both time of day and the room's denial of light.



Danielle McKinney, *After Worship*, 2020

Flooded with memory, Singh's subject loosely resembles the solitary occupant of Anique Jordan's 2019 photo [\*These Times\*](#). Here too, the reposed subject is turned away, her back facing us. The bedding bears traces of recovery, crumpled covers evoking a nocturne of mourning, followed by the cruel reminder of persisting loss the morning after. Jordan's subject is conversely presented in stark, perpendicular concealment, rejecting the noirish heft of Singh's shadowy figure; the former holds an almost reserved weight—the solitude of someone living alone, tasked with the bruising, lonesome project of grief and recuperation.



Anique Jordan, *These Times*, 2019 / Chantal Akerman, *Je tu il elle*, 1974

In singular residence, the supine figure is Edward Hopper's recluse; in a pink slip dress, she is bereft of her immediate family or any body heat in [Morning Sun](#) (1952). She is left to war or to contend, uninterrupted, with her own demons, inside four-walled quarters. Atop a bare mattress—as in Chantal Akerman's diaristic 1974 feature *Je tu il elle*—the lone child-woman writes in the epistolary form, scooping powdered sugar out of a paper bag every few minutes for sustenance. Akerman's phlegmatic protagonist, ego-depressed, is urbane yet agoraphobic. She emanates a “corpse-like” form, similar to one that [Steffanie Ling attributes to a picnicking non-actor](#) in Tulapop Saenjaroen's experimental short *People on Sunday* (2019). Gazing upward, blankly in stasis, Akerman's protagonist is as desolate as Saenjaroen's figure, with a stale respite, fixated in seclusion.



Tulapop Saenjaroen, *People on Sunday*, 2019

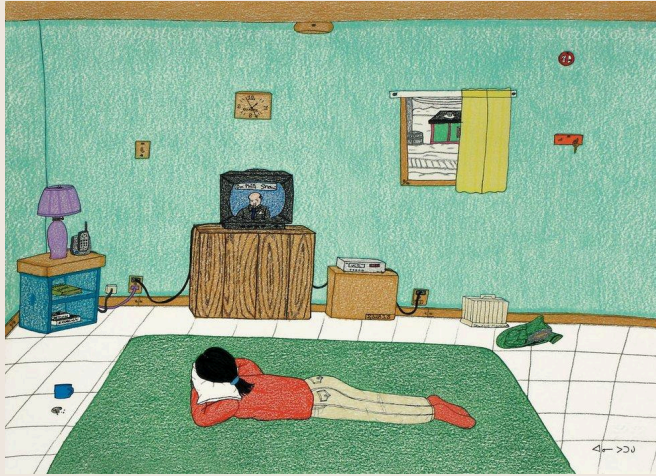
Singh's subject, on the other hand, seems less alone. Possibly, the *Go Away Closer* muse lives with family, her bedroom ascertaining a distinct sanctuary within a household. Stilled mid-gesture, she emulates the slant of Henry Moore's [Falling Warrior](#) (1956–1957), suggesting a yawn, then sprawling for brief seconds. Perhaps she turns in slow motion, moaning as the sun sets. Her outdoor world

is cordoned off, the remnants of city life colour her withdrawn manner — like Shelley Niro’s *Sleeping Warrior - Dreaming of Life in the Sky* (2012), in which a bespectacled, suited professional reclines upon a diwan. Collaged against a black-and-white urban backdrop, his dreams are crowded with an aerial view of skyscrapers that were [built en masse by Mohawk ironworkers](#).



Shelley Niro, *Sleeping Warrior - Dreaming of Life in the Sky*, 2012 (detail)

Accompanied indoors, seemingly, by distant sounds of waning traffic, Singh’s photographic subject echoes the porosity of urban life. She resides inside a version of Moyra Davey’s “South-facing apartment on the 11th floor” in *Burn the Diaries* (2014), co-written with Allison Strayer, where her home embodies “both a sundial and a camera.” She intimates time of day, imitating the anatomy of a clock — “in nausea, play, and intention, enjoying the noise of the world while her head’s bent, focusing on breathing,” as Kathleen Stewart and Lauren Berlant note in *Couplets*, a collaborative text for *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*. In this manner, Singh’s outstretched girl ticks like the hour hand from sunset to dusk.



Annie Pootoogook, *Dr. Phil*, 2006

A resigned adolescent flailed in quotidien remove, she recalls Annie Pootoogook's young subject lazing on her living room floor. In *Dr. Phil* (2006), the artist's signature colored-pencil drawing stages a domestic scene in Kingaait, Cape Dorset. Her protagonist lies recumbent on a green mat, head resting on a pillow as she watches *Dr. Phil* on TV. The scene ripples with lulling noise, a monotonous refuge. She, too, faces away from the spectator.

While Pootoogook's subject contains a rapt stillness, Singh's subject exudes the fatigue of midday activity. Both are lulled by the din of the household. In *Burn the Diaries*, Strayer denotes this particular state as a precursor to slumber: with "limbs flat, eyes closed," both seem to "convalesce in the darkness"; on the brink of rest, but not quite *in* it. Singh's subject, in particular, "hovers just beneath the surface of sleep, where it is warm as a sea pool." Stealing minutes of daybreak, her face immersed into folds of cloth, quieting a sweaty restlessness. Allegedly, she is an offspring of imposing parentage; city-bred, it seems, or a daughter of means, of inherited dilemmas.

The supine figure can be traced back to early works like Titian's amorous [Venus and the Lute Player](#) (1565-70), George McCann's lustrous [Reclining Figure](#) (1932-35), or Raja Ravi Varma's aristocratic [Reclining Nair Lady](#) (1897), fanned by her lower-caste maidservant, in colonial India.

Although stationary, the resting muse is a cautious agent. She particularly activates in moving images. A dark-maned Sarita Chowdhury's smitten Meena on the phone with her lover, a sheet of white satin slipping down her naked belly, in Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1991); Audrey Hepburn sprawled girlish in slapstick slumber in Blake Edwards' *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961); or, in stark severity, a regally browed Joan Crawford's Mildred Weatherby in Robert Aldrich's *Autumn Leaves* (1956). The final still is alerted by a sharp throw of light bathing Crawford's face.

Angled in moody physicality, the supine protagonist is a palpable firework. Her corporeal repose simmers with motive, containing a storm inside.



Mira Nair, *Mississippi Masala*, 1991 / Robert Aldrich, *Autumn Leaves*, 1956

Dayanita Singh's bed-positioned figures, equally cinematic, negotiate an erotics of rest, ranging from forlorn to disillusioned, from coquettish to conspiring. In *Zeiss Ikon* (1996), a woman looks into the camera as she barely rises from bed, which is adorned with a printed pattern of leaping fish. "She would probably get up if it weren't for the restraining arms clasped round her waist by the man beside her," notes Sarah Kent in [her 2013 review](#).



Dayanita Singh, *Zeiss Ikon*, 1996

More recently, Singh's horizontal muse was an aging Mona Ahmed — the late New Delhi-based trans woman belonging to the hijra community who had been the subject of her 2001 series *Myself Mona Ahmed*. In Singh's later work *Mona and Myself* (2013), Ahmed is sprawled on a dimly lit couch, her countenance searchingly plaintive. Two decades prior, the photographer captured a younger Ahmed with her adoptive child, both nearly spreadeagled on a bed, in *We lie around like a normal mother and daughter* (1992). The mother lies on her back while facing the ceiling, a telephone to her ear, her daughter's head heavy atop her ample belly. Dressed in a floral-printed salwar kameez, Ahmed's flailing figure livens in her bursts of floral print, amid a crowd of cluttering elements that witness her: her daughter; her daughter's framed photograph of the child; a doll.





Dayanita Singh, *Mona and Myself*, 2013

The latter image ascertains kinship, its postures oddly not unlike a still from Phillip Kauffman's 1988 film adaptation of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Here, however, two lovers, Tomas and Sabina, rest in post-coital ease — one's head cushioned carelessly on the other's chest. This stance is unlike the defeated rest of Tomas' wife Tereza — a slight, flushed Juliette Binoche — who is depressive, even malodious, in her erotic languour, deadened by an engorging heaviness.

Fleetingly, in a scene where her pale physique floats on a twinkling turquoise swimming pool, Tereza echoes Singh's fatigued subject from *Go Away Closer*. With limbs in partial suspension, both characters match a still from Ana Mendieta's 1974 film *Creek*, where the artist lies afloat in a stony stream of glistening water.



Phillip Kauffman, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 1988

“Because the body is a weight although it’s also lightness,” argue Stewart and Berlant in *Couplets*. Singh’s collapsed protagonist, weighed in uniform, slumbers with this tension. She is similarly moored between sensations of heft and hush — hers, however, is a thick *indoor* stupor. She searches for lightness, perhaps from the words of others.



Dayanita Singh, *We lie around like a normal mother and daughter*, 1992

Not so much in a state of prolonged rest as in a moment of suspended remove, Singh’s subject is resigned to the dull assaults of growing up. Her mind seems abuzz with the background score of elderly chiding — a rite of passage in girlhood — from Jamaica Kincaid’s 1978 short story *Girl*: “This is how you smile to someone you don’t like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely.” The chastising script envelopes her retreat, as solid as it is fluvial; her bed, a plank tense with midday reverie.



Ana Mendieta, *Creek*, 1974



Phillip Kauffman, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 1988

Singh's lying subject is thus reluctant but duty-bound, her laterality precarious; her posture an obligation to resume, if not entirely recommit, to the physicality of public life — tomorrow, in the next hour, soon, now. After all, the figure in repose is a relational being, in the midst of social negotiation, caught between familial gesture. Buoyant, mid-stasis, she hints at candour beyond her reach. She contorts at twilight, distant from the happenings outside. But in her room, prone and supine, at least she melts.

**Aaditya Aggarwal** is a film curator, writer, and editor based in Toronto. In 2023, Aaditya was the Warner Bros. Curatorial Fellow at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) and an Online Fellow at the Flaherty Film Seminar. Aaditya's writing on film is published in outlets such as *C Magazine*, *Rungh Magazine*, and the *New Inquiry*. He also programmed the ongoing series 'Desirous Discords: Romantic Melodramas of Yash Chopra and Douglas Sirk' at TIFF Cinematheque.

'**Between Recline and Repose**' is the seventh in [a series of newly-commissioned texts](#) developed as part of [Artes Mundi 10](#), showing in Cardiff, Swansea, Newtown, and Llandudno between October 2023 and February 2024.

Curadur ffilm, sgwennwr a golygydd yw **Aaditya Aggarwal**, sy'n byw yn Toronto. Yn 2023, derbyniodd gymrodoriaeth Warner Bros. gan y Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) a chymrodoriaeth gan y Flaherty Film Seminar, ac mae ei sgwennu ar ffilm yn ymddangos gyda *C Magazine*, *the New Inquiry*, *Rungh Magazine*, ac eraill. Ar hyn o bryd, mae'n gyfrifol am y rhaglen 'Desirous Discords: Romantic Melodramas of Yash Chopra and Douglas Sirk' yn y TIFF Cinematheque.

'**Between Recline and Repose**' yw'r seithfed yn ein [cyfres o wyth ysgrif gwreiddiol](#) wedi'u datblygu yn rhan o [Artes Mundi 10](#), sydd ar ddangos yn Abertawe, Caerdydd, Drenwydd a Llandudno rhwng Hydref 2023 a Chwefror 2024.