

## Sutapa Biswas: Lumen

16 October 2021 -  
30 January 2022



Sutapa Biswas, *Lumen*, 2020. Film Still - *Elbow and Mirror*. Single channel digital film. Sutapa Biswas © Sutapa Biswas. All rights reserved, DACS 2021. Photo: Carlotta Cardana.

Kettle's Yard is pleased to announce a major solo exhibition of Sutapa Biswas (b. 1962, Santiniketan, India) which will include an important selection of works from throughout the artist's four-decade career, as well as a major new film commission. A companion exhibition will take place at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in 2021. This will be the most significant presentation of Biswas' work in fifteen years.

The exhibition at Kettle's Yard surveys Biswas' wide-ranging practice, from early works on paper to photography and moving image that explore belonging, beauty and systems of knowledge and power. Born in India and raised in the UK, Biswas played an important role in anti-racist activism in the British artworld in the 1980s, appearing in landmark exhibitions such as *The Thin Black Line*, curated by Lubaina Himid at the Institute of Contemporary Art in 1985. Biswas was active at the confluence of Black feminisms and the Black Arts Movement, and her work continues to explore race, gender and identity, as well as family, migration and history.

Biswas first attracted attention as an undergraduate at the University of Leeds for her important mixed-media work, *Housewives with Steak-knives* (1983–5). On display in the exhibition, the work claims a radical position for Black and South Asian women in British society and questions the limits of western art history. The large two-metre-tall canvas is taken up with a

modernised Kali figure holding the severed head of a white politician in one of her four hands, as well as reproductions of Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* in another. *Housewives with Steak-knives* will be shown alongside Biswas' rarely screened video work *Kali* (1983–5). In part documentation of a performance, *Kali* was originally made while Biswas was at Leeds in direct response to the art history teaching she was exposed to there. Biswas attempted to exorcise the imperial legacies of the University's Fine Art and Art History Department, personified in the form of her tutor, and renowned art historian, Prof Griselda Pollock, who is one of the performers in this work. A collision of references to South Asian, European and North American art, as well as contemporary issues including apartheid animate this important video work.

The works included in the exhibition at Kettle's Yard engage in different ways with the themes of family, memory, history and time – ideas that have long concerned Biswas, and which also motivate the new film commission *Lumen* (2020-1). At once explications of experiences of migration, and meditations on love, becoming and desire, Biswas' work explores fundamental aspects of being as well as the everyday and the banal. In the video *Under my table* (2006) for instance, Biswas occupies her infant son's perspective as he plays under a table. Biswas's still camera captures the movement of the tablecloth in the wind to fantastical

*mata ne* (2015) – a recent filmwork, the title of which translates as ‘return ye to me’, made while on a residency in Beppu, Japan – Biswas captures women speaking about their experiences of life, love and giving birth.

Biswas’ semi-fictional film *Lumen*, gives the exhibition its title and will show at Kettle’s Yard and BALTIC. Filmed on location in India and England, working with cinematographer Martin Testar, *Lumen* summons Biswas’ maternal ancestors, through a monologue written by the artist, to retrace her own steps from Bengal. Using rich sound and colour, she evokes memories such as her view from the ship on the journey between Mumbai and Dover. The artist’s personal history overlaps with other maritime histories, from the Atlantic and Indian Ocean slave trades, to post-emancipation British colonial trade and post-colonial migration. The work also implicates the film’s three institutional supporters in these histories: it draws on the material resonances of maritime trade at Kettle’s Yard, in the form of seventeenth-century Delft tiles in the collection, as well as the long histories of transit associated with the Tyne, which flows adjacent to BALTIC. *Lumen* was also part-filmed in the rich interiors of The Red Lodge Museum, Bristol Museums, that housed prominent Bristolians associated with the Slave Trade and the Abolition Movement.

Sutapa Biswas will also partner with the Red Hen Project in North Cambridge on a series of events about literacy. Following on from Kettle’s Yard’s successful collaboration with the Red Hen Project in 2020 resulting in a new publication for children on Alfred Wallis, this new project will also produce a children’s book inspired by Biswas’ work.

*Lumen*, a new publication produced to accompany the exhibition, includes contributions by Anna Arabindan-Kesson, Sutapa Biswas, Alina Khakoo, Courtney J. Martin, Griselda Pollock, Amy Tobin and Alessandro Vincentelli. *Lumen* has been published by Ridinghouse, BALTIC and Kettle’s Yard. This book details Biswas’s career from its origins in the British Black Arts Movement in the 1980s, to her important photographic installations of the 1990s, and her subsequent major moving image works, including her newly commissioned film *Lumen*. The first substantial publication on the artist in over 17 years, it includes two new conversations with the artist, two commissioned essays as well as a republication of Griselda Pollock’s seminal text on Biswas’s work, along with a Postface reflecting on their relationship in the decades since the essay’s original publication.



Sutapa Biswas, *Housewives with Steak-knives*, 1983-5, Oil, acrylic, pastel, pencil, white tape, collage on paper mounted onto stretched canvas, 2450x2220mm. © Sutapa Biswas. All rights reserved, DACS/Artimage 2021. Photo: Andy Keate.



Sutapa Biswas, *Lumen*, 2021. Film still. Single-channel digital film. Sutapa Biswas © Sutapa Biswas. All rights reserved, DACS 2021. Photo: Carlotta Cardana.



Sutapa Biswas, *Synapse II* (Part I of a diptych), 1987-1991, Hand-printed black and white photograph. Dimension: 112x132cm. Sutapa Biswas © Sutapa Biswas. All rights reserved, DACS 2021.

## Notes to Editors

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This exhibition has been developed in partnership with [BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art](#), Gateshead and is accompanied by a new publication designed by Kajsa Ståhl of Åbåke and co-published with BALTIC. The publication is supported by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Manchester Metropolitan University.

*Lumen* (2020–21) has been co-commissioned by Film and Video Umbrella, Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge and BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, with Art Fund support through the Moving Image Fund for Museums. This programme is made possible thanks to Thomas Dane Gallery and a group of private galleries and individuals. The commission has been additionally supported by Autograph, supported by Arts Council England.

The companion exhibition 'Sutapa Biswas: Lumen' runs 26 June 2021 – 10 March 2022 at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art.

## About Sutapa Biswas

Sutapa Biswas' (b.1962) works are shaped by her observations about the relationships between people and the places they live in. Her work first came to prominence when she exhibited in the landmark exhibition 'The Thin Black Line' (1985) curated by Lubaina Himid. Born in India and educated in the UK since the age of four, Biswas is especially interested in how larger historical narratives collide with personal narratives. Underpinned by an interest in colonial histories and how this relates to gender, race and class, her art is nuanced by the ways in which oral narratives reveal the human condition and their relationship to our collective histories and to questions of time.

Biswas earned her BA from Leeds University in 1985, followed by a postgraduate degree at the Slade School of Art in 1990 and was a research student at the Royal College of Art. In 2017 she joined Manchester Metropolitan University, UK as Reader in Fine Art. Venues that have hosted Biswas' works include: Tate, Yale University Art Gallery (New Haven), The British Museum, 'Mixed Bathing World 2015' Triennial (Beppu, Japan), 6th Havana Biennial, Neuberger Museum (New York), Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto), Melbourne International Arts Festival, Whitechapel Gallery (London), Arnofini (Bristol), Iniva (London), and ICA (London). Biswas has also held solo exhibitions at Nara Roesler (Brazil), Douglas Cooley Gallery (Reed College, USA), Leeds City Art Gallery and The Photographer's Gallery (UK). Her artworks are represented in collections including: TATE; Arts Council England; Reed Gallery, USA; Graves Gallery, Sheffield Museums and Galleries, UK; Cartwright Hall, Bradford Museum and Art Gallery, UK; Oldham Art Gallery, UK; Rochdale Art Gallery, UK; Stanley and Audrey Burton Gallery, University of Leeds, UK.

## About Kettle's Yard

Kettle's Yard is one of Britain's best galleries - a beautiful and unique house with a distinctive modern art collection, and a gallery exhibiting modern and contemporary art. Supporting this is an established learning and community engagement programme, archive, and programme of chamber concerts. In February 2018, Kettle's Yard reopened after a two-year development by architect Jamie Fobert. The new Kettle's Yard includes state of the art new exhibition galleries, generous education spaces, a café and new welcome areas. Kettle's Yard's mission is to contribute to society by inspiring and engaging audiences through art, learning and research of the highest quality. We believe that great art should not be the privilege of the few, but for everyone. Our values reflect Kettle's Yard's creator Jim Ede's support for artists and belief in art's power to make us look again and change how we act in the world.

[www.kettlesyard.co.uk](http://www.kettlesyard.co.uk)

## About BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art

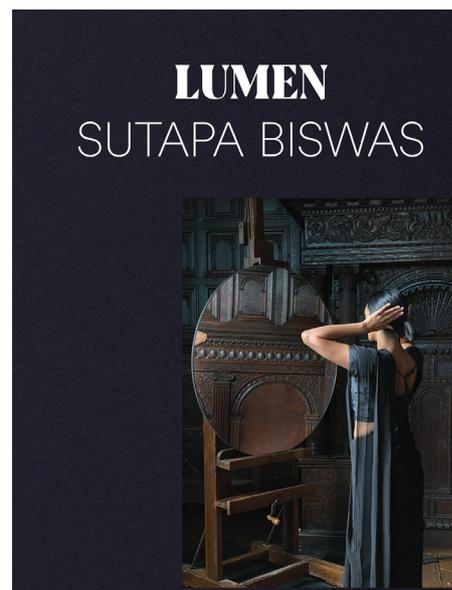
BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art creates and produces exhibitions, events and learning opportunities which explore the role of artists from across the world. Located on Gateshead quayside, BALTIC has 2,600 square metres of exhibition space, making it the UK's largest gallery dedicated to the art and artists of today and tomorrow.

<https://baltic.art>

## About Ridinghouse

Ridinghouse is dedicated to publishing the best of art writing and criticism, revisiting art history and exploring individual artists and specific projects. Founded in 1995 by Karsten Schubert, this London-based press focuses on producing high-quality, beautifully designed, engaging and informative art publications.

[www.ridinghouse.co.uk](http://www.ridinghouse.co.uk)



Front cover. Visualisation courtesy of Ridinghouse, 2021