

Viraag Desai

THE PLACES WE WILL NEVER OWN

Paintings on canvas | 2025-26

This body of work emerges from my long association with the grand but fading architectural spaces of Bengal and Bangladesh. During years spent working as a production designer and participating in residencies, I spent countless hours inside old rajbaris, museums, and once-magnificent houses—places layered with history, memory, and quiet neglect. What struck me deeply was not only the architecture of these spaces, but the lives they hold. Many of these spaces are inhabited not by their original owners, but by caretakers who live and work there year after year. They hold no legal claim to these houses yet experience them as their true homes. Their daily routine of sleeping, cooking, repairing and watching creates an intimate relationship with spaces built for another time and another class of inhabitants. Within these houses, multiple tensions coexist. There is the slow but persistent reclaiming of architecture by nature; creepers breaking through walls, light filtering through broken shutters, dampness softening the old ornamentation. There is also the contrast between past grandeur and present fragility: marble floors dulled by time, chandeliers hanging over empty halls, ornate balconies overlooking empty courtyards. These buildings stand suspended between memory and decay.

The Places We Will Never Own reflects on this condition of temporary belonging. The caretakers inhabit the spaces fully, yet ownership remains forever elsewhere - historically, legally, socially. The title acknowledges this paradox: how one can live within a place, protect it, and form deep attachments to it, while still remaining outside its legacy.

The paintings are constructed through a layered process combining photography and composed 3D renderings. These references allowed me to choreograph space, light, and perspective before translating them into paint. In doing so, I re-learned how the visual language of photography, depth of field, optical phenomenon, lens flares, can be simulated on canvas. Using both brush and airbrush, these lens-based effects were recreated in paint, resulting in a cinematic series that blurs the boundaries between memory, documentation, and constructed image.



In the sleep of the liminal
72 x 72 in
oil on canvas

Inspired by Goya's etching 'The sleep of reason brings forth monsters', this work talks about the liminal space between occupancy and ownership, past and present, interior and exterior, as nature creeps into spaces meant for humans.



The Weight of Watching
24 x 24 in
acrylic on canvas

The latticework on the grills and windows of these old colonial-era houses has always struck me for the way it shapes light, atmosphere, and mood within the space. In this painting, the scene is set inside a storage room of an old manor, where most of the statues are carefully covered and sealed for preservation, creating a quiet, suspended environment where light filters through the patterned grills and settles softly on the shrouded forms..



The Unrelenting Gaze
24 x 24 in
acrylic, oil on canvas

Set within a fictional museum, this painting places a statue of Raja Rammohan Roy, a central figure of the Bengal Renaissance, whose reformist ideas helped challenge oppressive social practices. In the scene, his statue gazes across the space toward a child who has been placed there as a quiet guardian of the room, creating a layered moment where history, memory, and the present occupy the same watchful silence.



Daydream of Stone and Shadow
60 x 60 in
oil on canvas

This painting reflects on the quiet distance that often exists between Indian teenagers and the opposite sex, shaped by social codes, hesitation, and unspoken boundaries. The scene also draws a visual contrast between past and present forms of ornamentation: the flashy, contemporary “bling” worn by the boy stands against the intricately carved jewellery adorning the statue beside him. Through this juxtaposition, the work brings together two very different expressions of adornment, one rooted in historical craftsmanship, the other in modern youth culture. As ideas of beauty and identity continue to shift across generations.



The crimson reliquary
48 x 48 in
oil on canvas

An old building, partially converted into an aquarium shop while still functioning as a residence, becomes the setting for this scene. The quiet slowness of the evening settles over the space, mirroring the gradual, almost imperceptible way trees and vines creep across the structure, slowly enveloping the house and softening its edges with time.



A last light
48 x 48 in
oil on canvas

The day of commercial activity at the aquarium shop slowly winds down. Outside, the landscape is barely visible, revealed only in faint glimmers of starlight, punctuated by the warm glow of sodium lamps, creating a quiet transition from the bustle of the day to the stillness of night.



Choreography of Repair
60 x 60 in
oil on canvas

When a space is left in disrepair for decades, the overgrowth that takes hold is not easily undone. Reclaiming it demands physical effort and persistence. In this painting, labourers struggle through dense vegetation as they climb upward toward the light—an image that suggests both the difficulty of clearing the past and a determined movement toward a more hopeful future.



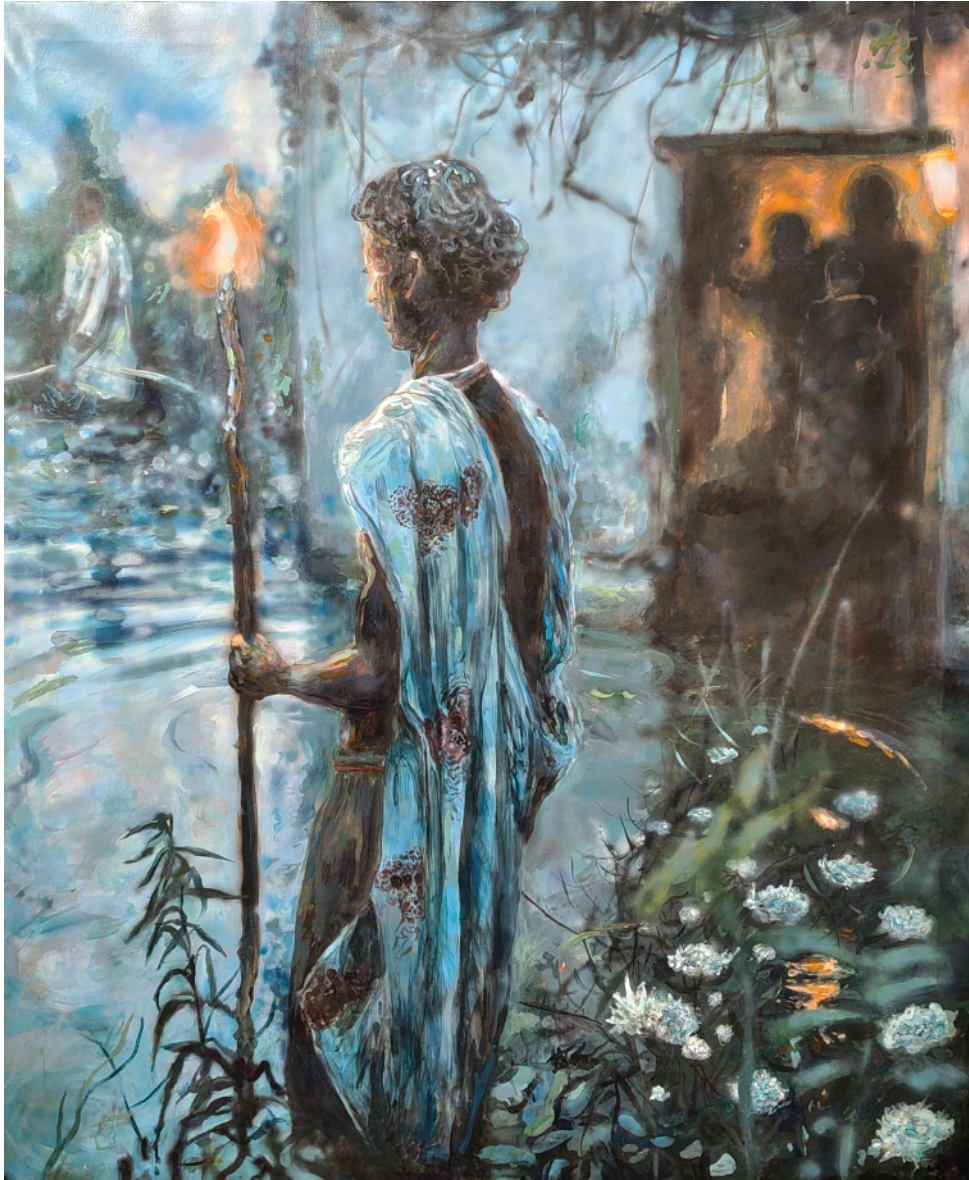
Beyond the dotted veil
60 x 60 in
oil on canvas

Broken lattices entwined with creeping vines create a dotted veil of light filtering into the space. Through this softened, fragmented glow, an aged figure looks out over an overgrown garden - an image that evokes the fading of a time once lived, the slow and inevitable end of an era.



The Memory of Water
60 x 60 in
oil on canvas

Houses that were once private and exclusive can, over time, become communal spaces, far more accessible to the public than they once were. This work reflects on the kinds of everyday activities that begin to emerge around such transformed spaces. In the painting, water serves as a metaphor for the shifting relationship between past and present, its reflections and distortions suggesting how memory, history, and contemporary life overlap and reshape one another.



After the storm
30 x 40 in
oil , acrylic on canvas

In the countryside, where the ravaging effects of nature, especially floods, can blur the boundaries between interior and exterior spaces, the idea of shelter becomes uncertain. In this scene, a man stands guard at the threshold of what he claims as his space, holding his position even as the surrounding environment challenges the very notion of inside and outside.



The creeping dawn
36 x 48 in
oil on canvas

The glare of the morning light, combined with the optical distortions created by reflections in a nearby pond, blurs the distinction between living figures and statues. In this shimmering light, people become almost indistinguishable from sculpted forms, creating a moment where the animate and the inanimate seem to merge.



Edge of the ochre penumbra
36 x 48 in
oil on canvas

A quiet moment of contemplation unfolds in a patio, where the interplay of light with foliage and mesh screens creates an ephemeral atmosphere. The shifting patterns of shadow and filtered light transform the private space into something fleeting and delicate, as if the scene exists only for a brief moment before dissolving again into stillness.



Awake in a floating city
60 x 60 in
oil on canvas

Painted during the floods that affected Kolkata in September 2025, this work takes a broader view of an older part of the city, areas where housing remains relatively affordable and often rent-controlled, yet lacks the modern infrastructure found in wealthier neighbourhoods. In the aftermath of the flooding, the only way to reach residents with basic necessities is by hand-rowed boats moving slowly through submerged streets, while the distant skyscrapers of the city rise in the background, underscoring the stark contrasts that exist within the same urban landscape.



First light
48 x 48 in
oil on canvas

Every morning, vegetables and fresh produce make their way into the city, often carried by hand over long distances from surrounding rural areas. This painting captures one of the staging grounds for that daily movement of goods. Set in a subterranean space, it depicts the moment when the first light of dawn filters in and the day's journey toward the metropolis begins.



The house they grew up in
60 x 60 in
oil on canvas

IN PROCESS

Set within an abandoned house on a hillside, a space that has gradually become a communal landmark for those living nearby, this painting explores the kinds of activities that begin to gather around such places. Within the quiet, weathered structure, moments of play unfold alongside quieter, more contemplative pauses, revealing how forgotten architecture can take on new life through the everyday presence of people..



Moon pool at dusk
48 x 48 in
oil on canvas

“Moon pools” or openings at the bottom of a ship that allow one to look directly into the ocean, serve here as a metaphorical space for pause and contemplation. In this imagined setting, the pool becomes a quiet refuge in a city rising under construction. The figures resting in the water occupy an ambiguous position: are they the owners of the property enjoying a moment of leisure, or labourers briefly reclaiming the space for rest after an intense day of work...?.



Standing Guard at the Threshold
48 x 48 in
oil on canvas

The man tasked with watching over this contemporary sculpture likely spends far more time in its presence than its owners ever will. Yet he looks away with quiet disinterest, his gaze drifting elsewhere. The moment brings into focus a subtle cultural disconnect between contemporary art and the broader public who are often placed in closest proximity to it, yet may feel little sense of engagement with it.



Custodian of Luminance
48 x 48 in
oil on canvas

Certain kinds of contemporary art require constant tending and care, much like the plants that surround them. Set within a terrace garden, this painting shows a caretaker polishing and maintaining a sculpture. In the quiet intimacy of this act, a gentle relationship seems to form between the man and the object, as he gazes into its inner world, suggesting a moment of connection that goes beyond simple maintenance.



Afterglow
48 x 48 in
oil on canvas

A moment of respite during the renovation and repainting of an old building being adapted into a modern environment. The workers pause briefly from their labour, occupying the in-between space where past architecture and present transformation meet.s



Shrine to an inverted world
72 x 72 in
oil on canvas

IN PROCESS

A mirror-like shrine stands at the center of this scene, tended and guarded by those responsible for its upkeep. Its reflective surface creates a space for abstraction, functioning almost like a portal into another realm of perception. At the same time, the painting reflects on the subtle disconnect that can exist between certain works of art and the people tasked with maintaining them.



Building of a Paradise Lost
48 x 48 in
oil on canvas

Inspired by the dramatic spiraling compositions in Gustave Doré's illustrations for *The Divine Comedy* by Dante, this work reimagines that upward motion in a contemporary context. The spiraling forms are replaced by scaffolding, the skeletal framework that supports the grand albeit temporary structures built for large-scale events. The painting draws attention to these unseen foundations: the labour, materials, and provisional architectures that make spectacle possible. הרהר



The Making of a Demi God
72 x 72 in
oil on canvas

IN PROCESS

Gigantic, imposing artworks seen at fairs, weddings, and large public events are often built through the skill and ingenuity of teams of labourers, using whatever materials and resources are available. In this painting, one witnesses the assembly of a towering, god-like figure, its surface being adorned with faux jewels. The work is not just about the spectacle of the finished object, but also the collective labour and craftsmanship involved in bringing such temporary grandeur into being.



Ways of seeing
36 x 48 in
oil on canvas

A quiet moment of reflection unfolds as a room undergoes renovation. The mirror-like tiles, etched with intricate engravings, catch the light and the gaze, their surfaces hinting at narratives of labour and craftsmanship. In this reflective space, the tiles become more than decoration—they suggest the often-unseen work that underpins and sustains every layer of civilization.



The Square and the Tower
48 x 48 in
oil on canvas

IN PROCESS



Behind the red veil
36 x 48 in
oil on canvas



Untitled
36 x 36 in
oil on canvas