Nothing Everything | detail, 2016. Mixed media on canvas, 147 x 143 cm.
The sky was the insipid color of skimmed milk as I poked my way through the faintly dystopian premises of an industrial park to meet Govinda Sah at his South Wimbledon studio. Surely, I thought, an artist who grew up in southeastern Nepal, not far from the foothills of the Himalayas, then lived in the Kathmandu Valley, must feel uninspired gazing out at this less than dramatic vista. From the home of the world’s highest peaks to the penultimate stop on the Northern Line seemed a rather precipitous decline in natural wonder.

Looking out the artist’s studio window, I posed a rather cynical question to him: had he found inspiration in England precisely because of such banality? Had the dreary indignities of British winters forced him to look inwards to conjure the kinds of sublimity he once had on his doorstep? Impervious to sullen self-indulgence, Govinda refused to take the bait. With infectious enthusiasm, he insisted that there was something truly remarkable about English skies. Where I saw fog, Govinda spied clouds capable of racing across the horizon, an unusual phenomenon in the deep valleys of his homeland.

Clouds have long been a source of inspiration for Govinda. In his student years, he recalls painting en plein air in the early morning, watching the rising sun melt away the mist around Kathmandu, with molten clouds bubbling up like froth on the face of the mountains. He was just as enraptured by the cloud studies of John Constable and the stormy seascapes of J.M.W. Turner, which he saw reproduced in the art books he assiduously saved up to buy. After earning his Bachelor’s Degree in Fine Art in Nepal and an MFA in Bangladesh, he moved to London in 2007 to pursue a second MFA at Wimbledon College of Art. Stepping into Tate Britain, he realised for the first time that Turner was English. He recalls:

“I hadn’t bothered to read the text in those books, but just went straight to the pictures! When I first saw the actual works, it was as though I was filled with the spirit of this artist who taught me so many things. What Turner did was really extraordinary, and I consider myself – honestly – to be one of his disciples...Later, when I saw Constable’s paintings at the National Gallery, I realised I was living in the place which produced these two great masters...it definitely confirmed how right I was to come to England. That’s karma, if you like!”

During his studies in London, Govinda’s disparate sources of inspiration began to coalesce into a singular vision. The insights he had gleaned from his studies of nature, both in Asia and Europe, fused organically with the images he admired from past art. Indeed, some of the appeal of Govinda’s paintings lies precisely in our inability to disentangle the two. As Ruskin observed, our mental picture of clouds is replete with ‘blue and white reminiscences of the old masters.’ Govinda does not just paint clouds, he paints what we believe they look like, observed through the prism of the art of the past.

Yet it would be a mistake to think of Govinda’s paintings simply as skyscapes. In recent years, Govinda has become just as interested in cosmology as meteorology. While...
 Birth of a Star (2010). Oil and acrylic on canvas, 180 x 120 cm.

Salvation (2011). Oil and acrylic on canvas, 148 x 148 cm.

neither simply illustrative, many of the paintings Govinda has produced this decade evoke the extraordinary phenomena witnessed by the Hubble Telescope: Apocalypse (2010) and Illusion and Truth (2013) blast outwards like supernovae, while Begin (2010) and Untitled (2012) crackle like nebulae, an effect he achieves through his signature process of blending acrylic and oil paints – an anathema to most painters! At times, Govinda makes cosmological connections explicit in his titles, as in Birth of a Star (2010). On several occasions, the artist has spoken at international conferences dedicated to exploring the intersections between art and science, and enjoyed fruitful conversations with astrophysicists.

Rather than obviating the need for artistic depiction, recent discoveries have required the imagination of artists more than ever. This was powerfully demonstrated just this year when a team of scientists announced that LIGO had for the first time detected gravitational waves, a billion light years away. For many people, the only hope of grasping some sense of such esoteric phenomena was through the rendering of artists. One could easily imagine Govinda being tasked to depict such phenomena, and indeed his canvases with cut-away centers strikingly evoke, among other things, the mullity of black holes. But what I suspect inspires artists the most about Govinda’s work is not how his images parallel their discoveries, but how they anticipate spectacles yet to be experienced, or even imagined.

Guided by what the painter Wassily Kandinsky called the artist’s ‘inner necessity’, Govinda imagines a cosmos of boundless possibilities. The questions he asks in his work are just as much those of the theologian as theoretical physicist. And indeed, Govinda does not see a radical difference between the two disciplines, which both pursue truth, as they understand it, at the outer reaches of human conception. ‘Knowledge exists outside all of us’, comments Govinda, ‘and for me, painting is the activity by which I reach out to discover it. The truth isn’t within us: it surrounds us.’ While many contemporary artists shy away from talking about truth, preferring instead to speak of culturally constructed meanings and the incertitude of signs, Govinda feels completely at home with such diction, unashamedly invoking theological concerns. His titles confirm these interests, including Transcendence (2012), Salvation (2012), Illusion and Truth (2011), and Paradise Lost (2008). What is notable in these names, and even more so in conversation with the artist, is his deep yet eclectic approach to religion. He moves nimbly, without anxiety, between Western and Eastern points of reference, invoking Milton’s epic Christian poem on the one hand, and the Buddhist concept of naya (illusion) on the other.

This ecumenicity owes a great deal to the religious milieu of the artist’s native country. Nepal’s 2011 census confirmed Hinduism as the faith of an overwhelming majority of Nepalis at 81.3%, with Buddhism at 9% and Christianity at 2.6%, the smallest percentages adhering to Islam or ancestral religions. Despite these numbers, which suggest clear divisions between Hinduism and Buddhism, a strong connection with the Buddha runs across religious boundaries. Siddhartha Gautama, as the Buddha is best known, is believed by many to have been born in the region, and is worshipped as a divinity by many Hindus in Nepal. Growing up, Govinda recalls, no one breathed onto the canvases like brushstrokes. In Birth of a Star (2015), one of Govinda’s largest works to date, smoke billows up from the bottom of the composition before igniting into a luminous shower of colour, like the grand finale in a display of fireworks. Even when he paints tempestuous skies and cosmic explosions, Govinda seems to find himself drawn, ineluctably, towards an underlying order. The celestial forms which unfurl across his compositions do so with axial symmetry, evoking the structure of mandalas, the cosmic ‘maps’ common in Nepalese art. Occasionally, Govinda begins his canvases with a grid. Even as he pushes himself toward the unknown, it seems Govinda cannot imagine a universe without logic and purpose. These blasts of astral energy might also be interpreted as signals of divine presence. In the Bhagavad Gita – the Hindu scripture which Govinda keeps by his studio window – the warrior Arjuna beseeches Lord Krishna to reveal himself in his universal form. Krishna subsequently bestows Arjuna with ‘divine eyes’ (11.8), whereupon Govinda reveals: “If hundreds of thousands of suns rose up at once into the sky, they might resemble the effigy of the Supreme Person in that universal form. At that time Arjuna could see in the universal form of the Lord the unlimited expansions of the universe situated in one place although divided into many, many thousands.”

In the mid-2000s, during a time of tremendous change for both Nepal and the artist himself, the imagery of Govinda’s canvases began to evolve. The figures of divinities and devotees which once populated his paintings began to disappear and the celestial dramas of his mature work began to take shape. As overtly religious symbolism faded from his canvases, however, metaphysical questions increasingly percolated to the surface: Why is there something instead of nothing? Why, and when, is there order instead of chaos? Is divinity immanent or transcendent? Intuitively, Govinda began to shape his canvases in the technique and structure of sacred texts. In a recent painting, The Shadow is Darker than Black (2014), he trades sackcloth for canvas, covering it with chalky black paint. From a distance, it appears solid, but on closer inspection the perforated surface allows tiny pinpricks of light to poke through like a constellation. What appears to be a painting about absence becomes, paradoxically, a piece about presence.

In another technical innovation, Govinda recently completed a series marked by streaks of smoke, deftly
If gods no longer occupy the centre of Govinda’s canvases, as they did in much of his earlier work, divinity has by no means disappeared. It is simply everywhere instead of somewhere, transcendent instead of immanent.

Govinda identifies God with Nature, but not in the dry, deterministic manner espoused by Spinoza. Divinity for Govinda is not merely another way to describe the mechanisms of the universe, but an active, palpable presence in the world around us. Clouds, he tells me – in a way that seems to stretch beyond metaphor – are the earth ‘inhaling and exhaling.’ Nature can also be violent, as the artist knows all too well from the devastating earthquake which struck central Nepal in April, 2015, while Govinda was visiting family. When he was finally able to return to London, Govinda recalls that for months he had trouble believing the earth was solid under his feet. In his dreams, he continued to feel the aftershocks with terrifying proximity. Govinda regards such natural disasters as reminders that the earth has its own life, and its own furious way of recalibrating and reasserting its power in the face of manmade changes. Although Govinda has been painting cracks in his canvases for several years – with such illusionistic prowess that from a distance they often look like flaking paint – the Gorkha Earthquake lent these fissures a jarring immediacy. The cosmic explosions in Govinda’s canvases are, at the same time, seismic convulsions. The entire universe seems to rattle and rumble with terrifying power.

This sublime imagery has a venerable provenance. In Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition, Robert Rosenblum hypothesised a common thread connecting Turner, Caspar David Friedrich, and other titans of nineteenth century landscape painting to twentieth century Abstract Expressionists such as Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still. Rosenblum lavished special attention on Augustus Vincent Tack, whose craggy forms, like Govinda’s, defy easy divisions between abstraction and figuration. In Tack, Rosenblum notes both ‘thundering chaos’ and ‘awe-inspiring symmetry,’ a binary that serves just as well to describe the tensions at play in Govinda’s work. For Rosenblum, such qualities are born out of an attempt ‘to find, in a secular world, a convincing means of expressing those religious experiences that, before the Romantics, had been channelled into the traditional themes of Christian art.’ Visually, Govinda fits perfectly into Rosenblum’s genealogy, extending the tradition of the Northern Romantics into the twenty-first century. But what about the cultural dynamic sketched by Rosenblum? Coming from a country replete with religious imagery, from traditional thangkas to mass-produced posters, Govinda’s problem was never how to find the spiritual, but rather how to share it. The impulse to ‘seek the sacred’, as Rosenblum puts it, assumes that the sacred has been either hidden or lost. For Govinda, neither is true. The sacred surrounds us. We need only learn to look with ‘divine eyes.’

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Cambridge, May, 2016

1 John Ruskin, Modern Painters, 1860, London.
3 Ruskin, op. cit.
4 A Sense of Wonder, op. cit.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
Reflecting Colour (with detail), 2015. Mixed media on canvas, 180 x 120 cm.