

THE GROUND ZERO CHRONICLES

Examining the First World War's legacy of violence, Priyanka Choudhary's *1914-2014* reflects on several sites of conflict, notes **Karanjeet Kaur**.



Priyanka Choudhary. *Jallianwala Bagh*. Digital print on Hahnemühle ultra smooth photo rag. 16" x 24". 2013.

In *NUL to Now*, Priyanka Choudhary's 2010 solo at Gallery Maskara, Mumbai, a large scaffolding made of crisscrossing bamboo logs burst out of a wall. *Pubic* was the resounding showstopper that offset the hushed violence of a number of near-monochrome canvases with slashed, nail-studded surfaces. Four years later, Choudhary returns to the same gallery with another solo with coterminous concerns. Titled *1914-2014*, the exhibition was on view from the 10th of January to the 28th of February, comprising installations, digital prints and a performance. This time, Choudhary's engagement with violence escalated in scale and included specific historical events and sites, resulting in a series of ruminative exhibits with fewer pointy edges.

The show featured video and photo documentation of Choudhary's 2013 performances. One of the five sites, Ypres in Belgium, bears a direct link to the First World War. August 2014 marks the centenary of the outbreak of the War. The other sites of conflict – Tlatelolco in Mexico, Soweto in South Africa, Jallianwala Bagh in India, and New York in the United States of America – each with a seemingly different trigger, are milestones along the juggernaut set in motion by the War. In each of these cities, Choudhary visited memorials to soldiers or victims with a pacifist act of dissent: she took a charkha and spun thread, which she later wrapped herself in, with variations at every spot. At Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, Choudhary was bound in cobweb of threads to a sprawling banyan tree, mirroring the inescapability of the massacre's victims. In South Africa, where students protested the introduction of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction, resulting in the bloody Soweto Uprising (1976), Choudhary asked people to write on her bound body in their language.

A day before the exhibition concluded in Mumbai, Choudhary walked in the city's Fort area, stamping the word 'You' in

vermillion along the streets. The artist passed some of the sites of the 26/11 terror attacks along the way. The trail led back to the gallery, where Choudhary read from an anthology of war poetry by English poet and soldier Siegfried Sassoon. Who did she address? A large boulder seated in a wooden chair opposite her. Perhaps, a nihilistic comment on the pretensions and futility of dialogue in peace processes.

In her sculptures, Choudhary put marble – connoting both decadence and death, the bookends of any war – to canny use. *¿Quien?*, a composite of 42 wall-mounted marble and steel tiles, was the most striking. The English approximate for the Spanish word 'quien' is 'who'. Choudhary made the installation after her performance at Tlatelolco, where the massacre of civilian dissenters, a few days before the 1968 Summer Olympics, was washed of all traces the morning after. While the marble tiles in the composite were inscribed with fragments from epitaphs, memorials and poems, disembodied limbs and appendages in moulded wax appeared to fade into the steel plates. In *Falling*, bullet-ridden marble slabs embedded in red sand, mirrored a soldier/civilian's teetering after being shot.

Each of the artworks and performances served as reminders of the pervasiveness of brutality. Two of the exhibits, however, were only tangentially linked to the show's internal logic. The X-ray film and lightbox *Lump*, in which everyday objects took on an ominous hue, were dully reminiscent of airport security screenings. The large, baroque chandelier in *The Drop*, signifying perhaps the upset of order or the end of grandeur, also felt rather square. Barring these off notes, *1914-2014* scored with its economy. You wouldn't mistake it for a powerful anti-war statement, but as a quiet, dignified consideration of conflict, it was pitch-perfect.