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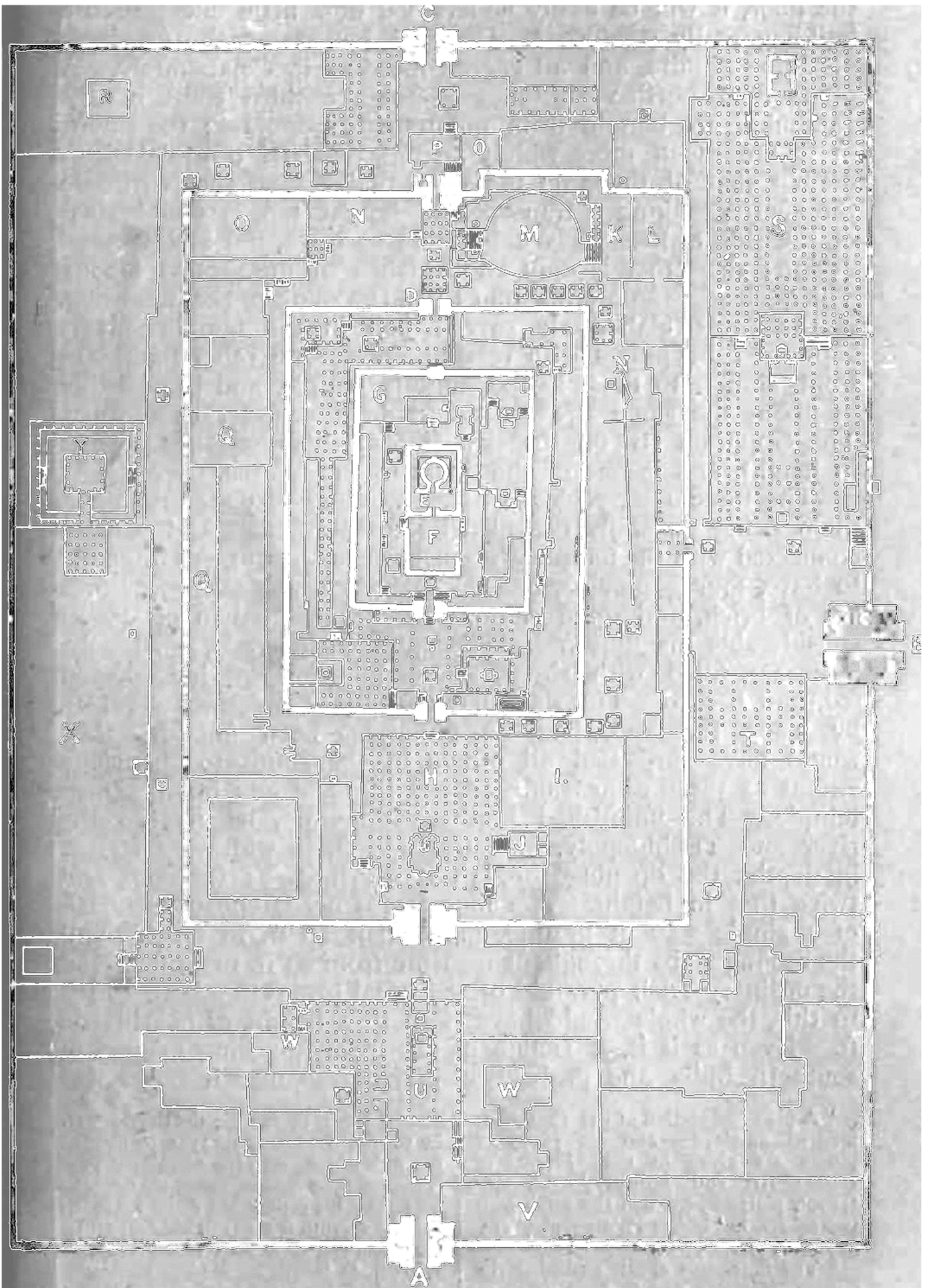
TEMPORARY ISLAND
SHIFT Residency Exhibition
June 26–August 3, 2019

Bitter Nature
Pradeep Dalal

A few exquisitely painted botanical studies made by Zain al-Din, Bhawani Das and others from the 18th century at the Metropolitan Museum of Art got me hooked on natural history paintings in Indian art. I slowly made my way to their precursors, like the magnificent paintings of flora and fauna made by Ustad Mansur for the Mughal court in the early 17th century. I learned that Mansur was also a great “illuminator” and that he made exquisitely detailed border decorations with plants and flowers and intricate patterns of birds and animals. I looked at these paintings as they were reproduced in books at home and then visited some of the actual paintings by Mansur, Govardhan, Manohar and others at the Met itself!

I made copies of these album pages on tracing paper and found myself drawn to the geometrical elements — asymmetrical rhythmic placements of rectangular and triangular shapes filigreed with obsessive floral patterns. I also made copies of these pages, so as to encourage a blurring and softening of all of the fussy detail and to remove the seductive color. I wanted to see what a low-fi, graphite-gray image of the original gold and jewel-like paintings would look like. I then made modest prints by inking etched copper plates, marveling at how the mottled vegetal pattern registered in shallow relief on fine art paper. As I scanned these prints and printed the photographs, another kind of image emerged. One with a condensation of detail, less delicate and stranger than the original. I also mixed etching inks and was struck by how the colors of my prints — the rich umber and ochre browns and pale yellows — translated into digital photographs. I selected five images in which I separated each of the border elements from a manuscript by Mir Ali and centered them — an extraction and distillation — to see how the smallest marginal units of composition might hold their own.

I also wanted to work with something more directly sensed and experienced. I chanced on a small public garden within the precincts of a temple town in south India and recalled the intense experience of sitting under trees filled with thousands of cacophonous crows and parrots in total darkness. The lights would be switched on and off at regular intervals, perhaps to save electricity. A group of images I made in the park alternate between daylight and night views. There was a statue of Queen Victoria in this park, celebrating her proclamation as the Empress of India in 1877. At that time, the British introduced the Indian Penal code which contained the notorious Section 377 making sexual activities “against the order of nature” illegal. After 150 years it was finally overturned in 2018. My desire for a deeper understanding of nature falters.



Plan of Srirangam Temple, four of seven inner enclosures, from "History of Indian Architecture" by James Fergusson, James Burgess and R. Phené Spiers, 1910.