

# Drawing Parallels: Binary Play in the Artist's Drawings

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Drawing, as the most ancient form of externalised human expression remains a force of contention through each evolving decade and century as to its place in the directory of the visual arts scene. While it is seen as a distinguishing form of documenting an ad-maker's thought process leading to visual representation, it is a craft form that celebrates the conquest of the multi-faceted human mind and its trembling body into a powerful imagining.

The recent works of India-born, Singapore-based artist, Parvathi Nayar offer a particular intervention in conceptualising drawing, whereby she aims to push the boundaries of principles bordering notions of self-identity: familiar/unfamiliar absence/presence, subject/object. Through her scopic drawings, Nayar remarkably achieves a peculiar yet critical linkage of composition, deconstruction, and representational detailing into a lively and engaging, informed and informative set of visualisations that constitute an important contribution to the genre of drawing. Besides being visually arresting, part of her drawings' importance derives from the way they transcend disciplinary boundaries.

In this way Nayar's works become part of the contemporary debate on the hermeneutics of drawing - a landscape where the definition of drawing is continuously de-centred and re-thought. For years, artists and art educators have debated the efficacy of drawing to art-making especially in the face of technology-inspired integration of forms and genres. The symbolic and imagined possibilities of drawing allow those interested in art and design to embrace it as an expressive and analytical tool. It sits alongside a range of scientific and industrial considerations from architectural expressions to ethnographic renditions to scientific documentation to fashion illustration. Many art schools the world over, suggest that drawing is a key determinant of visual culture and that-art-makers must necessarily learn to draw in order to visualise the physical world and imagine the metaphysical world around us. In this instance, drawing is a state of mind. One school of thought rejects drawing for its devotion to the clinicality of its existence, while another seeks to embrace its capacity to build core foundational skills in the visual arts.

Leaving aside drawing's mechanical presence and its capacity to serve as a research engine of discovery, that is, it allows for an art-maker to 'discover' something through the process of drawing- as incidentally, Nayar's drawings suggest – it is valuable to consider drawing within the context of its potential to be clearly and definably representational in its own right. That is, it is an art form with its own narrative code illustrated in visual form – as Nayar's drawings exemplify. Nayar's engagement with drawing harks right back to her childhood – her first primordial attempts, with sticks of charcoal lying around the house that her mother used to sketch with – but in a more formalistic sense, is rooted in her training in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where she obtained her first degree in art. From childhood sketches to more formal art education

to apprenticeship with Professor Viswanathan at the Government School of Arts, drawing along side painting has remained a key determinant of Nayar's visual culture. Drawings from this time include detailed portraitures and preparatory sketches for paintings, dealing with the properties of drawing as expressive mark and as compositional tool.

Nayar moved to Singapore in the late 1980s, where she continued to attend weekly life drawing sessions with a group of Singaporean artists that call themselves Group 90, and exhibited with them. Still, from 1991 to 2003, Nayar's art practice predominantly privileged paintings as the finished representational codes of social themes/philosophical ideas, which drew inspiration from issues in Indian socio-political thought. The works were presented largely as collaborative interdisciplinary exhibitions like *Time Cycles*, (Alliance Francais Singapour, 2002) consisting of paintings, film and computer animation, or *Zodiac: A Confluence of East and West*, (Art Seasons Singapore, 2003) combining drawing, painting and calligraphy.

If painting appeared to be the predominant tool of Nayar's oeuvre at this stage, it is useful to note that drawing, interestingly enough, did keep manifesting as a 'signature' aspect of Nayar's art, whether in the life drawings; or wall installation of drawings (*Celestial/ Encounters*, Utterly Art, Singapore, 2003); or pen-and-ink works (*Pulp Friction*, curated by the Singapore Art Museum, 2001) or in hybrid paintings. The latter - as in the *Time/Chance* series - is instructive of Nayar's art processes in how they mixed together the arts of lithography and colourisation. The sensibility of the works is rooted in pushing the boundaries of the drawn line, though, at the time, Nayar regarded them more as paintings than an exegesis of the draughtsman's art.

In reading works as these, Nayar's drawing sensibilities are seen to clearly parallel another form of mark-making: writing. Her work as an arts writer writing about art in rising Asian economies, broadened her visual and research scope. Her outlook was determinately global and her art scope rootedly Indian. Maintaining a strict regime of drawing or painting daily, she compartmentalised the art and the writing; yet there is the intriguing spillover of the objective writing aesthetic into the realm of the subjective visual aesthetic, sustaining a sense of (self) control and (self) expression on paper whether in the written or drawn mode.

The year 2003 marked a critical fork-in-the-road for Nayar. To begin with, Nayar culminated one trajectory in her body of work, in a major publication of her artworks. Titled *Passages*, the artist-book was released at Singapore's Asian Civilization Museum with essays by art writers including a title essay by noted Asian art historian T.K. Sabapathy reflecting on her work. This capstone project served as platform for Nayar to move her art-practice to another level and another place: London.

That same year Nayar packed herself off to the United Kingdom armed with a Chevening Scholarship from the British government to undertake a master's degree at the world-renowned Central Saint Martins school of Art and Design. This was to chart new waves in her artistic practice. While in London, Nayar was exposed to the works of notable contemporary draughtsmen and-women such as Paul Noble, Vija Celmins and Julie Meheretu, as well as the drawings of masters like Rembrandt and Da Vinci. She delved deeper into the meaning of mark-making, both as an end in itself, and as a tool to express other ideas. Intimate and impromptu art salons with her fellow classmates, conversations with other St. Marlins lecturers like Paul Eachus and meetings with London-based artists like Zadok Ben-David were all to influence her thinking, and consequently, her art. She played with silkscreen printing on transparent layers of cloth; digital photography; computer manipulations of found images; using materials like resin and wood; and even performance and video art, as a way of letting her visual vocabulary expand without preconceptions.

The process of obtaining her master's degree was an intense year of engaging with new knowledge and ways of seeing. It was not necessarily an easy time, exhilarating in many ways, but also frustrating and challenging. Nayar describes today, how her formative art education and imaginings were critically challenged and questioned, a process that moved her from her preferred zones of practice to new conceptualisms that were defining art-making in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Though her graduate show was an installation of paintings that explored ideas of size, fragmentation, narrative, and the act of seeing, these concerns were to work their way into her drawing practice as well. Significantly, this illuminatingly dark period was where Nayar reclusively returned to her first principles of art-making: drawing. It was the start of a reflective and meditative body of work, which led her to explore a range of materials including wood as a means to support her drawings. In a surge of new found enthusiasm, Nayar entered one of these wood-based works for the prestigious Cecil Collins drawing competition in London and won the joint-first prize in 2004.

Post London and back in Singapore, Nayar continued to devote most of her energies to the examination of mark-making by means of the pencil. How the rigid yet absorbent surfaces of her meticulously-prepared wood panels received the mark, seemed to depend on the manner which the mark-maker's will translated into physical force and control, leading to an unconscious immersion in the phenomenology of mark-making.

Upon her return, she participated in several key group shows in London, Indonesia and Mumbai where her drawings were seen to come into their own. However, the most significant were two major solo exhibitions in Singapore, *drawing is a verb: an installation* (Arts House, 2006) to *win, lose, draw* (ARTS Singapore 2007, where she was the only artist invited to create an installation at the international art fair); these signaled a landmark shift in Nayar's engagement with drawing. "How can viewers experience my drawings?" she asked herself: the results were two series of work that limited themselves to the colourful world of the monochrome, which played with size, and were presented within self-contained worlds. Working with a Mauritius-born, Singapore-based designer, Soon Kin, she created spatial parameters within which the viewers had to engage with the work. Viewers experienced the phenomenology of drawing as both finished product and ongoing process, with non-linear texts written by Nayar as a guide through the maze.

Her current work *Race* (2008, Dubai), drawn from an ongoing body of work, the *Creation Absolute/Existentialist* series extends this vision. Nayar says the play on the word 'race' is deliberate. On the one hand its proclivity to suggest cultural determinism, and yet, on the other hand, its suggesting of capitalist drive allows Nayar to parallel and play with two extremes. *Race* also invites interpretations that revolve around male competition, the procreative push to immortality and the relationship between 'neutral' genetic code and 'charged' social constructs based on race, class and economic standing. Perhaps, there is a certain transgressive questioning as well, where the male body is presented as a certain essentialised maleness, while the sex act, the act of procreation, the act of pleasure are all viewed through a scientific prism. These new works parallel and foreground Nayar's research interests in science, nature and the existential possibilities of globalisation and capitalism, and provide the viewer an interesting opportunity to study the artist's own ocular desire.

A central feature of the Nayar's works since 2006 is the playful engagement with the dialectic between subject and object, and the subversion of drawing as the indexical mark. As 20<sup>th</sup> century postmodernism powerfully and cleverly unpacked centuries of philosophical debate from Plato to Kierkegaard, from Lyotard to Derrida, on the depth and breadth of the power co-relation between subject and object, the gaze of science was decoded in postmodern discourse for its exactitude and its investment in object as outcome over the subject as discovery. As Jean Baudrillard points out "the sciences are incapable of according a definite status to their object.... The object is not what it was. In all areas it evades us. It now appears only as a fleeting trace m

computer screens. At the end of the experimenting, the most advanced sciences can only register its disappearance... Ultimately, science has never stopped churning out a reassuring Scenario in which the world is being progressively deciphered by the advances of reason. This was the hypothesis with which we 'discovered' the world, atoms, molecules, particles, viruses and so forth. But no has ever advanced the hypothesis that things may discover us at the same time as we discover them" (2001).

Nayar's work calibrates this im/possibility of discovery, of being discovered. They harness the realities of the artist's aesthetic and abilities to explore contemporary concerns. Art writer/curator Ahmad Mashadi sees Nayar's return to drawing as "a significant form that affords a controlled and unerring strategy to advance her conceptual aims ... isolating particular image fragments and (re) rendering them as seemingly abstract forms that straddle between the 'familiar and unfamiliar', referencing science on one hand, and symbolisms on the other. In doing so, she constructs a dialogic space that encourages a constant oscillation between the factual and the speculative" (2007).

This fascination with the poetics of science as a way to describe the world, so we may see the familiar revealed anew, positions the current trajectory of Nayar's art. In Nayar's drawings, for example, art writer Hazel Lim, finds inquisitive ventures into the microscopic world, where the "tactile, fibrous quality of cell formation and the first inception of life are painstakingly drawn as monochromatic renderings" thereby becoming "synonymous with the idea of a chance unfolding of the universe - a universe at its brink of becoming - and a dialogue between being and non-being" (2007).

Nayar's drawings are a visual expression of the coming together of many significant aspects of the artist's personality, interests, skills and questionings. They provide a great degree of visual coherence, balance and order akin to a pointilistic essay form, yet also provide an archeological dimension - the viewer can penetrate through layers of pointillist dust to a core, or learn from the penetrative journey. This penetration proves to be an ode to the discontinuity in the subjectivity of the self, promulgated by the postmodern, as evidenced in the discontinuity in postmodern architecture, discontinuity in psychoanalysis and discontinuity in history. The parallel worlds of self and other may be im/possible to bridge, and yet historically, many continue to bridge these through critical interventions that make sense for a particular world designed around one person's scopic eye. The fragmented narratives of Nayar's obsessively rendered drawings eloquently capture her point of view as she seeks new continuities in a crowded world.

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Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*. London, Verso, 2001

Ahmad Mashadi, *win lose draw: Recent Drawings by Parvathi Nayar in win lose draw exhibition catalogue*, Singapore, 2007

Hazel Lim, *Colors of creation, Narrating Chance in win lose draw exhibition catalogue*. Singapore, 2007