

(Title essay for Soft Spoken curated by Bose Krishnamachari, presented by Bombay Art Gallery, 2007, Mumbai)

Scale and Subjectivity in Parvathi Nayar's Drawings

A conversationⁱ between Parvathi Nayar and Ong Keng Sen, artistic director of TheatreWorksⁱⁱ, moderated by Ashraf Safdar, in the company of Nayar's drawings in her Studio in Singapore.

ONG KENG SEN (OKS): What immediately comes to mind when confronting Parvathi's work is that notion of how the entire universe is in our body, from the subatomic, to the microscopic, and to the terrestrial – and non-terrestrial - landscapes. The works take the cliché “our body is the universe” and puts that into a different time and space. It's about starkness and nakedness on a larger, universal scale. Scale, that is, as an engagement with time and space, facilitated between the viewer and the viewed. And in a way that's what I think we are doing here, as we engage with the work.

ASHRAF SAFDAR (AS): I agree. You can't view the work without negotiating its scale, and that's a good way to open up the discussion; would you say the choices of scale are a deliberate manipulation of the viewers' body, in how they view the work?

PARVATHI NAYAR (PN): Well, that's part of it, isn't it, the small-scale work does invite – or force – you to come up close to “see” what you are “looking” at. As for the bigger ones, when you're too close it doesn't make sense, you have to step back to make sense of the mark-making.

AS: It's a play between the intimate and the epic – which is an aesthetic you've worked with a lot, as well, Keng Sen. And like Parvathi's work there's been a pared down sense to many of your recent productionsⁱⁱⁱ. What do you think this aesthetic achieves?

OKS: It's a kind of austerity that comes into play, a starkness, a rigor. If you just zoom in - whether on a face^{iv}, or the pigment cells in a face^v - the austerity of expression allows the creation of a much more naked encounter; not necessarily a more emotional encounter, but a starker encounter.

PN: The notion of austerity, and paring things down allows a certain primary-ness, the sense of an intimate dialogue, because it's just the surface and the mark-maker. It is like when you film people Keng Sen: it's the camera and that person, nothing else^{vi}. There is nothing to hide behind. I'd like to believe it is returning to the first works of art man created, on the sand, in the caves...

OKS: On another level, in Parvathi's work, whether it is subatomic particle or moon crater^{vii} I think they are all to scale as well.

PN: Yes they are.

OKS: There is an “obsessiveness” in the process of creation. Because it is so well done, it almost looks like a computerized rendition. Because it is so meticulous, you almost don't see the mark on the paper as a mark. Unless, of course, you go close and determine the mark to be - an indexical mark?

PN: The notion of mark-making is there when you come close, especially for the large-scale ones. In the small-scale ones it is much more subtle, you really have to engage with them to realize its there. With the small-scale ones, I have tried to get them as close to the original as I physically can. The intent, as you point out, is not photo-realism but an indexical mark.

AS: There is that initial moment of encounter when you might see it as a design, or as an abstraction. But then you think, “What is this?”, and you realize that since it’s done with that level of obsessiveness, you’re not looking at an arbitrary design, at just “anything”. But where do you think this sense of ambiguity arises from Parvathi?

PN: Probably from the fact that I’m only doing a fragment of the image. Unless you’re familiar with the subject, you’re not going to know immediately what it is. Then, depending on whether you’re talking to me at the show, or reading the title, or bringing in a certain kind of baggage – such as a medical background or an interest in pictures sent by space probes – certain images resolve themselves. At that point you probably realize that everything you are seeing is more a play on hyper-realism than abstraction.

OKS: It is a nice contradiction. It also occurs to me that it looks machine-made but what you are really dealing with is the impeccability of the hand-made. This makes Time complicit in their creation in a different way. I wonder, as an aside, at some future date, whether you would think about a way of exhibiting that would reveal the process to the viewer.

If you see a charcoal drawing, it’s an obvious hand-made expression of the charcoal. Whereas here, it’s really controlled, in a way, which makes the subjectivity more ambiguous.

The obsessiveness, you know, brings in a different kind of subjectivity - a subjectivity that is being used to produce a seemingly objective finish. That is a parallel with my work. The end product has the guise of looking objective or indexical or like a documentary. But I actually don’t think of it like that. It’s extremely subjective, what you choose to put up, and the way that you cut through the material. For instance, Parvathi, you are manipulating these markings, these tracings, these primary source images, and hence it becomes even more complex because you are re-writing the mark.

AS: So it sounds as though neither of you buy that whole “death of the author” school of thought^{viii}. Or is it that the success of the project - whether the indexical mark or the documentary – arises from the very fact that it inevitably ends in “failure”, and thereby creates a new subjectivity?

PN: Don’t you think so? I mean, though I try and be as obsessively close to the original, “I” have still picked the original, further, “I” have determined which fragment of the original I will render – and “I” have picked the way to render it. With each mark, you are making a decision. Where the mark is going to land, how heavy it’s going to be, what weight it’s going to be. Are you going to hold back, or are you going to hit the board with everything you’ve got? However objective you are trying to be, isn’t objectivity in art doomed to failure?

OKS: No art is ever “honest” not a photo realist painting or hyper-realist drawing or documentary theatre. But what is this honesty or objectivity? The intent of Parvathi’s drawings with regards to a viewer is more that you are asked to re-look at the way you look at things - than the presentation of the things “as they are” I believe.

Going underneath the surface of these drawings from another angle, are you influenced by the history of Indian art at all, in its interest in embellishment? I could read in references to the Indian miniature, for example, in the scale and detail of some of the work.

PN: Well, we did study miniatures as part of the art history component in college. Even though their scale was small, you would be foolishly reductive to look at miniatures as “small paintings”. They too were a play of scale; a play of scale allowed a certain effect to happen – such as the idea of intimacy, the handheld, the invitation into a world.

OKS: There is almost some kind of genetic memory about the work...

AS: And a certain “returning to roots” in the detail.

Another way Parvathi forces us to reorient our view of things is by eliminating color from her drawings. Would you agree Keng Sen?

OKS: I love the fact that it’s “color-less”. It says more to me than something with color, like a white on white by Robert Ryman. The tension between universality and austerity manifests itself in different ways without color – and there are lots of ways to really explore this. In Parvathi’s work it is perhaps through decisions such as how heavy the mark is using different grades of pencil that give you different shades, different layers.

PN: The heaviness also depends on the force I use to make the mark. When it’s dark, I’m really hitting the surface, hard. The lighter grays are softer marks. As you say Keng Sen, the work is a physical expression as well: the intensity with which I make or don’t make the mark.

AS: It’s a play with Time too isn’t it: 2-d drawings preserved – like specimens – in a 3-d case, they’re sculptures, but primordial ones, sculptures of the past... a fair assessment?

OKS: But the works are very “present”, very “now”. Parvathi is dealing with science, quantum physics, the bubble chamber, the internet, space. But ultimately she is “drawing” these things, not making videos. She draws them, so it comes back to drawing, which, you could say, is the oldest art form. Yet it’s also contemporary. Does this mixture represent your personal worldview Parvathi?

PN: The cavemen drew, but the cavemen couldn’t have done these drawings because they represent a contemporary way of looking at the world, not their way of looking at the world.

The reason for the existence of these drawings is an appreciation of the intricacy of the world around me. Maybe there is something beyond this world, maybe there was something before. I’m happier to believe that there is/was but in the end, we cannot know.

But in thinking of those things it is so easy to ignore the “now”. The present is such a fleeting moment; even as I speak it, it is already the past. As someone who does not always acknowledge the present, for me, the drawings became a way to acknowledge it, to try and make sense of the complexity of the present. You think you know the world but I’m trying to tell you no you don’t, here it is, see it a little differently.

Perhaps that’s at the root of my fascination with quantum physics. At the basis of all our so-called stability is chance.

OKS : Or probabilities.

ⁱ Nayar’s finished works and work-in-progress, were the points of departure for the conversation on December 1, 2006, Singapore. The discussions were continued via email over the course of the month. This monograph is an edited version of these exchanges.

ⁱⁱ TheatreWorks is a Singapore-based, internationally active theatre company with a focus on pan-Asian interdisciplinary works.

ⁱⁱⁱ A specific reference is to Ong’s 2006 work *Diaspora*, commissioned by the Singapore government for the IMF/World Bank talks held in Singapore. *Diaspora* used among other imagery, tightly composed portraits of faces that were projected onto super-large screens.

^{iv} *Diaspora* used among other imagery, tightly composed portraits of faces that were projected onto super-large screens.

^v The reference is to a work-in-progress in Nayar’s studio - *Locating Presence: Pigment*, 124 x 84 x 6.5 cm, graphite on wood, 2006.

^{vi} *Nayar is continuing to refer to Diaspora.*

^{vii} *The reference is to works in Nayar's studio - Locating Presence: Crater, 124 x 84 x 6.5 cm, graphite on wood, 2006; Locating Presence: Trace, 124 x 84 x 6.5 cm, graphite on wood, 2006*

^{viii} *Death of the Author (1967) is an influential essay by French literary critic Roland Barthes; first published in the American journal Aspen; essay later appeared in an anthology of Barthes' essays, Image-Music-Text (1977).*