

Seeing the verb in a drawing

‘You must copy in miniature the world He has drawn. One where everything is carefully chosen, the profusion of nature simplified, men and women incomparably beautiful, everything as precious and perfect as He willed them to be.’

“Kunal Basu, The Miniaturist.

Sometime towards the end of the 14th century and at the beginning of the 15th century in the history of Western art, there emerged a new trend that would, in the language of contemporary corporate discourse, expand the artist’s job description.

If up till the 1300s, it was enough for an artist to learn ancient formulas for representing the leading figures of the biblical text and then to apply this knowledge in ever-new combinations, then gradually, his job took on a new dimension. This was that of making studies from nature and then transferring them to his pictures. The artist “began to use a sketchbook, and to lay up a store of sketches of rare and beautiful plants and animals” and the ‘public which looked at the artist’s works began to judge them by the skill with which nature was portrayed, and by the wealth of attractive details which the artist managed to bring into his pictures.

But while the public may have been enchanted by the wealth of details of a painting and the sketchbook, drawings did not command the prestige or price of a painting. If few medieval drawings have survived till today is because artists would not have otherwise spent money on a costly piece of paper to sketch momentary impressions.

Yet, despite economic forces, drawings remained an ideal medium of experiment and the experimental Renaissance brought a prestige to drawings and rough sketches. For artists, such as Leonardo Da Vinci, drawings were an ideal medium for experiment: just think of his Visions of the End of the World and The Deluge to name but a few. As historian Daniel Boorstin once wrote: “The capacity for achievement, to which drawings were clues, came to be revered almost above the achievement itself.”

Now, 600 years later in the first decade 21st century where technology and the mass media have inundated and intoxicated the sense with images of all sizes and colors and where there is even a greater hunger for more, the simple drawing, of black on white, of ink or graphite on paper or wood or whatever the medium is, can perhaps come across almost as an anachronism, an activity best left as a sketch for a work to be completed or an activity for the apprentice.

But, in its own deceptive simplicity owing to its minimal use of colors, the drawing itself can be viewed as a response, or even as counterpoint to the market or to popular taste. Here, most recently, in the 1st decade of the 20th century, artists have gradually come to explore with this medium, the highly meticulous and detailed qualities the drawing offers creates a distinct aesthetic and experiences of its own. In fact, it has been noted that since the 1990s, drawings have rarely been as widely represented in the biennials, art fairs, and exhibitions as it is at present. To take but one instance, the widespread acclaim which British artist Paul Noble has achieved with his stunning and highly detailed and meticulous depiction of the fictional city Nobel Newtown (and mentioned his other pencil drawings) is testament to the renewed interest in this medium.

More recently in Singapore some artists, such as Donna Ong For instance, have also employed this medium, creating works that are starting in their detail.

It is within this historical context then that Singapore artist Parvathi Nayar's *drawing is a verb*: an installation, comprising a series of pencil drawings on wooden blocks takes place. Yet, in its own way drawing is a verb: an installation, defies convenient categorization stems from what Parvathi has tasked herself as an artist, That is, to paraphrase the words of Indian novelist Kunal Basu's protagonist in *The Miniaturist*, to "show what the eye cannot see."

And indeed, the drawings in this exhibition are precisely about what the naked eye cannot see: fragments from found images of things of nature as seen through a microscope or telescope. These images include tracks of sub-atomic particles in cloud chambers; the surface of the moon; the pigment of the human skin.

But a work becomes art when it has elements inherent within itself that transcends its obvious and immediate purpose. And here, Parvathi's works are more than just about the traces; of a presence. In more ways than one, her works in this exhibition truly makes the viewer aware of what the eyes cannot see, and here it is not just the subject matter of the work that is revealed to the naked eye.

Throughout all her pieces in the exhibition, the incredibly detailed treatment of subject matter - all of which are actually invisible to ordinary sight - draws one's attention to the act of reproduction or perhaps in this sense, recreation itself. Here, the exhibition is not just about a finished product but rather, the labour intensive nature of the chosen mode of expression of the artist, i.e. the drawing, has itself become an object of admiration. Given the clarity of line and form which drawing as a medium permits, it is impossible to look at Parvathi's drawings and not be aware of the process of their creation.

At another level, Parvathi's treatment of her subject matter, that of presenting in a scale that the human eye deems acceptable for sight, images of things which otherwise cannot be perceived by the naked eye in the form of two-dimensional drawings on gesso-ed wood blocks have actually revealed something else that the eye usually does not see: ourselves in an exhibition. When faced with the image of the pigment of a skin in a size that we know is exaggerated or the close up of the surface of the moon whom most would never be able to see in reality without any magnifying aid reproduced with such detail by the human hand, our perception is suddenly shifted.

We question our own physical size and space: are we actually dwarfs or giants? Here, the very manner in which the works are displayed, that is within an installation intentionally devised to create different ways of looking at an exhibition beyond just the chronological or thematic further make us question about the space we as humans inhabit.

As Parvathi says of the intent of her works: "Why fragments? Well, it is as simple as the fragments being a way of talking about the fragmentary nature of our lives. There is also the issue of scale - it has been suggested to me that perhaps, the small works were created as a rebellion, originally, against the society of the spectacle (to borrow

from Guy Debord) - and the artworks in the world getting larger and larger for the purposes of shock or to make an impact or subsume the viewer by the sheer weight of their presence.

"Hence, I felt the need to get back to intimacy, to seduction, to invite the viewer into the world of the painting - hence the smaller scale. But the works were never about being "small". They were about scale and the presence of the large works to counterpoint the smaller ones. Small, large are all relative terms, and need each other to create terms of reference."viii

Indeed. As John Berger once wrote: "Images were first made to conjure up the appearance of something that was absent, "*drawing is a verb: an installation*, truly then conjures up the appearance of things that are usually absent from our daily lives: our knowledge of things we cannot see and our knowledge of our own bodies.

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