

The Pencil of Nature: Drawings by Parvathi Nayar

By Ken Feinstein

When William Henry Fox Talbot published the first photo book, *The Pencil of Nature*, he gave the world the photographic vision. A way of seeing that could not exist without the camera. All he wanted to do by creating the camera was take the tedium out of drawing. Reinventing vision was the farthest thing from his mind. But reinventing was what he did. Using chemistry and physics, to allow us to grasp parts of reality, and put them into images. The scientific principles behind the apparatus became visible. Not only was photography born, but also the scientific image was born.

The scientific image is the visualization of a theory. It is not so much the old adage of “seeing is believing”, as it is “seeing is explaining”. Because it only depicts a theory, it gives us just a moment in the ongoing process we call time. The whole process is the life of a thing depicted in its entirety. Being just a moment in duration (time) it is by its very nature fragmentary. It must explain a process, so it also has to be narrative. To take a moment out of duration is to distort the process depicted. This is why it must stay within the narrative tradition.

Diderot wrote about the *tableaux vivants*, the image as the most heightened part of the story; that single image that encapsulates the entire narrative. This is what the scientific image must be. In this way we view *The Raft of the Medusa* and the fertilization of a human egg in the same manner. This image shows, and tries to explain, at the same time. Is this an inherently contradictory function? Yes, and this paradox is what creates the distortions which allow these images to become something else; to have meaning, to be seen through the filter of aesthetics, to become art.

This is where the work of Parvathi Nayar comes in. She takes these scientific images and reverses Fox Talbot's process. She turns photographs back into drawings. Brings them back to their source. Asks us to wonder what is the meaning found in these biological processes.

Looking at these images, we see a process. We want to give this a narrative. It appears that one is natural to us. After all we learned the logic of cause and effect. We learned about reproduction in school. But this is enough for the image presented; is the narrative I see here actually in the images? We are just getting frozen moments in time, slice of duration, fragments. If there is a narrative here, it is by its very nature, fragmentary. This is the view of our worlds that Nayar gives us any other kind? Isn't the way we see the world fragmentary? As a contemporary artist engaged in contemporary cultures and events, Nayar is not afraid to give us the world as we experience it. She does not use the fragmentary narrative as a way of talking down to the viewer. Rather she is talking to us; she treats us as equals. The gaps in the narrative are there because she thinks we know enough to fill in the missing pieces. It is not a strategy of brevity. Rather, as

Gilles Deleuze states, meaning is found in how the parts are put together. This cinematic vision is now just life vision. It is found everywhere; going back to Deleuze, it is a paradigm of our age. So why shy away from it? Why pretend that it is not there? Artists use the language of their times.

As an Indian artist trained in the west, Nayar incorporates elements of both cultures in unique and subtle ways. She uses the fragmentary, not because it is a postmodernist trope, but rather because it is part of the worldview of her native culture. A culture that has understood ambiguity in ways that western cultures are just starting to address in any meaningful way. It is not a worldview based on cause and effect. It faces the chaos that is nature without having to force it into the order of reason. We look to images for meanings. As a way of making order out of chaos. To explain the world to us. We want things to make sense. Nayar's images question this. Do we need a god to explain this to make sense out of the chaos? Does science explain the process and meaning, or do we have to look elsewhere for meaning? Where should we look? A few places seem obvious, religion, science and art.

Nayar sees that explain is not the same as knowing. Knowledge is not an end unto itself. It is always knowledge in service of – what? Not only does she know this, but she also shows it. She lets us see it in the images she makes, and more importantly, in how she groups and displays them. This is evident from the present installation *I sing the body electric* (Mumbai 2008), which is part of a larger body of work the *creation Absolute/Existentialist series*.

For these images live as much in series as they do by themselves. They emphasize the seeming randomness found in the function depicted. Looking at them you can't help but wonder how many of these things can actually happen? Do they show us the hand of (a) god? Do they show how sheer numbers overcome seemingly impossible odds?

Does it even matter?

In the end is it not that the understanding allows us to navigate our way through the chaos, knowing that we are always part of it. Looking at the seeming impossibility of human reproduction on the cellular level, one has to see that we are made up of these chances. We are the impossible. Philosophers such as Jacques Derrida talk about human acts such as love and forgiveness as impossible. Yet by doing this, they are not denying the existence of such things. Quite the opposite, it is the impossible that is the most human. We are the impossible. This is a very profound thing to think. It is a bold thing to depict. Not only does she give us the impossible, but she also does it with the natural ease of the possible.

This brings us back to where we were earlier: what is inherent in the telling of the narrative? Why does Nayar make it fragmentary? Does she – or is she just bringing us reality in a purer form? Is this why her work is pencil drawing? Traditionally the artist does sketches as preparation for the final work, a painting. The pencil only used as an aid to a final greater end, the painting. It implies a hierarchy of art. The painting is always supreme; the sketch may be more

direct than a painting, but is lesser; black-and-white is lesser than a color of the painting – these are all judgments from the history of art. The actual validity of these judgments is one of the things that Nayar is redefining. She is not questioning them, because she has already come up with the answer. These hierarchies are not valid. They do not have a reason to exist in a contemporary art context.

Again, looking at Deleuze and his comments on cinematic vision, the destruction of hierarchy of art is very much emblematic of the current paradigm of thought in our time. It demonstrates the essence of postmodern thought. That we live in an age without a great overriding narrative defining everything. As much as the Cold War doesn't define us, neither do the conflicts between high art and low art methods. Drawing can be the final work. Drawing can have any scale it wants. It can be intimate or motivational. It can be used as singular objects or as part of a greater installation.

As you walk around this exhibition you will be experiencing this last point. The work here functions both as individual. Piece and as a greater whole. This again goes back to how we normally experience images. We see multiple images all day. Be it the ads on the roads and TV or the number of images we take of granted in newspapers and magazines. We see images in contexts of multiplicity. Most of the time this multiplicity is rather random. It is not planned. At this exhibition we are getting a rare privilege of seeing what the planned joining of images can do. Each image has a beauty and power of its own. As a whole the power is almost overwhelming. As a media artist and theorist, I have to confess that the first time I ever saw one of Nayar's drawing installations, for the first time in my life, I wished I could draw.

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I William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature*. Self -published from 1844-47

II Ronald Barthes, Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein *from Image-Music-Text*, Stephen Heath, translator. Hill & Wang, New York, 1978.

III Painting by Theodore Gericault, 1819. In the collection of the Louver, Paris.

IV Gilles Deleuze, *cinema 1: movement-image*, Hugh Tomlison & Barbara Habberjam translators. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986.

V Jacques Derrida, *On cosmopolitanism and forgiveness*, Simon Critchley & Richard Kearney editors. Routledge, London, 2001.