

Win Lose Draw

RECENT DRAWINGS

By Ahmad Mashadi

Parvathi Nayar describes her practice as being rooted ‘in the ideas of the narrative and at ways of looking’. In recent years, she has focused on drawings, not as preparatory sketches, but rather as a significant form that affords a controlled and unerring strategy to advance her conceptual aims. She initiates such interest by 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.

Win lose draw is parvathi’s latest series of drawings that centres around the notion of the “fragmentary” – incomplete and scopic views of the human egg and sperm in various stages leading to the first division of the fertilized cell. These drawings are obsessively rendered by way of the pencil lines marking on primed wooden panels. This fragment is a realist representation of the observation in nature. Yet, it also functions as a metaphor of creation and order, dimensions of being, the vastness within the finite – and the culture that anchors our regard for ourselves, our place in the order of things, and our sense of destiny. The fragment therefore acts to initiate an interpretative space that is fluid, and accommodative of individuated experiences.

The following dialogue between parvathi and myself are consolidated from a meeting and conversation in her studio, followed by several email exchanges.

Ahmad Mashadi:

The exhibition will be composed of works from a single series. It may be regarded as the most conceptual among your undertakings. Can you describe what eventually the audience will see in the exhibition?

Parvathi Nayar:

The idea is to use a selection artwork from my **win lose draw** series of drawing, which have been drawn in a “signature” range of sizes from the very small to the very big. Miniature and gigantic: our world as we experience it, is neither, and both. On the surface, the human scale seems to lie outside these two extremes; but subconsciously, we sense that our world really does go beyond the human scale, and that it is a mixture of the gigantic universe we live within and the sub – microscopic elements that constitute it.

Are you thinking about a spatial configuration that anticipates the manner in which the audience may engage with the works as a single unified experience? If there are physical constraints to the space in question, what would have been your preference or intent for the exhibition as a formal experience?

Win lose draw is a specially commissioned installation for ART Singapore, in which my graphite drawing on wood are installed within a specially designed constriction, that has been worked out by soon kin and myself. The idea is for this experience to be both playful and profound. The installation uses the metaphor of the game – and the physical experience of the constricted intimacy of the womb – to talk of how our lives are governed by choice and chance.

The installation allows you to experience an art form that you thought you knew – pencil drawing – in a different way. When walking through this installation, as viewers realize what it is they are seeing and experiencing. They will – I hope – relate to the drawings in a different way. I think it was the cultural theorist John Fiske who argued that familiarity is a good ground from which audience can create their own resistant meanings.

These are drawings, close – up realistic renditions of the human egg and sperm in stages of their coming together and contact, the kind that we can only observe through the microscope (or to be realistic illustrations in books and magazines). There is of course a certain formal articulation, a considered approach in composition, depth and tonality, executed with a technique that is seductive, a series of pencil lines and dots forming shapes that are readable yet abstract. They are evocative in sustaining our attention. An almost sublime experience of an inner universe. It is also a description of an ongoing contest or struggle by its inference to gender and strategies. The interpretative possibilities are many. What makes drawing a compelling thing at this stage of your career?

Drawing is something I have always enjoyed as an activity when I was young and as an “art” when more grown up. It has always been part of my oeuvre in that sense, and probably pre-dates the painting. But I had thought of drawings as preparatory ideas, marks of thought that would form the basis of future paintings. Now my art practices have come to a point where I see drawing as an end in itself, as a way of saying things that other forms connote say- or which other forms express more imperfectly. I don’t think of myself as having “given up” painting, I have no doubt I will return to it. But right now the possibilities of drawing are all – consuming in their expressiveness, purity and honesty.

For these drawings series, you have ventured away from the multi – chromatic and expressionistic as seen in your past paintings, opting for a formal style that is clinical and precise in its appearance. The emotive resonance that we associate to your earlier figurative works may be said to have been replaced with a form of detachment. A “here-it-is-as-matter-of-fact” approach would you say?

Well, black-and-white drawings are a sort of liminal point between my world and the viewers. Do you think the black and white drawings function as a sort of heterotopias? In other words, the drawing occupies two realities; they are familiar and yet not, they are fragments of the real world, yet the world is colored and my drawings are not...

Yes, they certainly function to encourage a play of association ... there are many interpretative possibilities. For starters, one striking feature is that each image is enclosed by a white frame that is actually part of the support. The framing looks as though that we are either looking at the Polaroid or a 35mm transparency slide (in the case of the sperm) or a view through the microscope (in the case of the egg). You also secure the drawings in acrylic boxes that will remind the audience of the aesthetic of the "laboratory" or a "specimen"

The Polaroid, the transparency slide, the specimen box... in a way I suppose I'm trying to reiterate the "indexical" nature of the mark, as well as the preciousness of the handmade drawings.

On the subject matter... one would argue that it is not disjunctive to the conceptual concerns of your past practices; the question of what constitutes the gendered, ethnic body must have a certain resonance in these works that we are looking at today. The investigations into the body, as a field of signification and contestation, are brought down (or enlarged) to its microscopic or fundamental level. Of course, the formal articulation introduced in the works complicates the subject matter. The emotive immediacy of the human body is displaced by its molecular constituent, ie, the scientific. This shift allows arguments to be made more complex, from culture to nature.

Yet, it is also conceivable that these drawings may be regarded-by some-in reference to your ethnicity. Your drawings may be highlighted for its nuanced (some may argue direct) reference to cosmology, and the various creation myths, allowing one for examples, to implicate and mobilise the large body of Indian philosophy, and even Hindu religious precepts, into the readings of your work. Further, your approach to drawing can be read as a form of meditative exercise. As such, such reading insists a civilization significance and attribution (perhaps even a burden?) on these works. That runs perilously close to the risks of essentializing you and your practice to a predetermined set of expectations. Do you necessarily regard this as a risk?

I am at peace with my culture construct actually- I am Indian, and have grown up in India, been exposed to Indian myth, Hindu thought and philosophy, but have then traveled out of India and lived in many different places – and primarily Singapore – and am a product of these travels and changes as well. In that sense, therefore, the linkages between the artwork and Indian creation myths are seen to have relevance; after all the Indian myths do suggest the "playfulness" of the gods as well as the elements of chance and inexplicability in our world. At this same time, the works cannot be limited exclusively to such readings or expectations.

The open-endedness as an artistic strategy – that space of interpretative play that you refer to – is perhaps best to be seen in relation to experience (viewing and reading) as a negotiation process between individuals and objects mediated by contexts. Such contexts have been discussed through varied means in our conversation. Another element in this mediating context is the title of the series as a little, what do you want win, lose, and draw to invoke?

Different responses to the eternal question of why we are here, why we exist, take the act whereby we as humans are created: thousands, millions of sperm race to the single egg, which itself is one that has matured randomly? – From a cult of many. In win lose draw there is a winning pair and the end game results in new life. You could call this predestination; or you could call it a roulette wheel of chance where there are winners and losers, and some who just break even; or even contestants on a racetrack. The installation also asks you to consider that this end result is just one of the many possibilities that could have resulted from this game. There is also a level of wordplay in the word 'draw' that seeks to remind viewers that they are negotiating the hand-made, hand-drawn act of creation as well.

(Ahmad Mashadi is the Head of the NUS Museum)