



GEOGRAPHYS

A NOTE ON THE EXHIBITION
GALLERY TEXT | MAY 2011

Two bodies sit within a landscape, perhaps a warm garden, looking out at the same point in the distance. The figure on the right reclines slightly, her awake body faces the other figure and the viewer, warm, but unoffering. The artist paints nudes, blurring the contours of the female body, making them indistinct against the vegetation, treating both figure and ground with the same smudges, empty space, pressings, erasures and sfumato, placing the nudes among plants, as though interchangeable with the vegetation, each one only a shape, a geography, eponymous with the exhibition.

THE GAZE

The artist does not draw in the faces, a very private comment, believing that it is the body and not the face, that ever draws the gaze. Therefore she incorporates the gaze, in order to allow her figures to look back at it. The nude on the right, whose body is more folded within itself, her back almost to the viewer, wears, disarmingly, a crown of thorns. A figure of meek entrapment, her face is turned against her body, at the viewer. The artist has written in a letter, "I realised the strokes resembled Christ's crown of thorns, and I elaborated on it. I was conscious of something defiant while painting, I tried to put that defiance into the stance of the figures". In the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ understood that he was to be betrayed, and that garden brings up an emotional state, of agony and suffering. These shy, quiet women could have been figures of lust, erotics, espied upon; but in the turn of a face, a calm gaze settles on us, dispassionate and seeing. Why are we in this garden, with this composed, female Christ-figure?

A GARDENER'S SENSIBILITY

Upon ascending the throne of India, Babur, established elaborate gardens of paradise, to remind him of the cooler climes of Central Asia. But those who understand gardening know the limitations of soil and climate. Babur pined for the sweetness of the melons and grapes he had known in Samarkand and the gardens in deserts. He incorporated his nostalgia for these elements into the miniature paintings commissioned by the court or into the marble inlay of the palaces. In her gardens, the artist includes flora of different climes, broad

leafed ficus with feathery ferns and reeds, creating imagined gardens of joyous fecundity, woodlands or jungles, more than the manicured gardens of the Mughals. A pleasure exclusive to this genre, the scapes have a gardener's sensibility, an escape through an act of creation.

PERSPECTIVE

Planes slip between aerial and horizontal view: this shifting between planes, is the experience of *Brazil* certainly one of the artist's most intriguing works, which remarkably appear as a single continuity, till the eye adjusts to the stratospheric height of an airplane, looking down at Brazil, then at the water's edge, with the detail of jagged waves as they break on land, to the mysterious, luminous darkening sky rising above in the distance, before the first stars. Perspective also occurs as repetition, where the shape of a geography, remains in mind, for years together, creating an obsessive body of work about changes in perspective, that has the quality of an evening walk. The shapes of her landscapes and the body, both, converge as geographies. Treated with the same kind of lines, where a Sausage hill traces the lines of a woman sleeping and a desert scape holds memories of a man's back. The substantial, hard, unmoved basaltic rock face of Dhimru, with its deep clefts and sheer valley, changing colour from golden to deep purple and presenting different shapes even during the length of an evening walk, serves as an obsessive subject, but also, an emotional reconfirmation of its immortality when compared with the lives of those she loves.

INTERLAYERS

The image can remain with the artist for over a year, captured in mind from her weekly walks in the hills, aerial views from a plane flying over the Australian desert, or of the sheer drop into the sea from the Isle of Man, the Krishna valley at Mahabaleshwar, the harsh scape of Ladakh, compounded by her interest in tree forms, till it finds release on paper. Statements, findings, travels, memories too personal to write into poems, she prefers to chronicle them in the coded interlayers of her landscapes and nudes.

FRISSON

"I think it is the effects I have used in my oil paintings that I am trying to get into my charcoal works. The drawings began as very realistic and studied attempts, later I began to blur the lines. I use water with the charcoal, to give it a watercolour effect, gesso to give the palette knife and contoured effect, and of course, I love the eraser." She has an interesting relationship with the use of material. Her first work more than three decades ago started with the use of boot-polish and a spare piece of plywood, often using wire-mesh or broken panes of glass to create visual inter-layers in her canvases, brought about by the adventure of experimentation and the lack of art supplies. In this series, she has used for paint the red laterite soil of Khandala, and a subtle tone of grey created from crushed stones to delineate the contours of a body or the panoramic Western Ghats.

The artist has also been experimenting with a technique she developed through the momentary frisson of dragging wedges and shapes of charcoal over textured white spaces. Spontaneous, yet meticulous, created by the repetition of a gesture, turning into a motif, the leaves of a tree are disjoint from its branches, but seen from a distance the motifs gather, readable as a tree. The same fanning of the charcoal - here a leaf, there a bird, here used to form a figure - this style, that so defines the artist, and is representative of her, may be described as a quality of abstraction, related to her sense of confidence and mastery. Treating the nudes, as she treats the landscapes, lessening the relief of the human against the background, there is rather a dissolve that occurs, and a sense of abstraction to which both nudes and plant forms, in these charcoals, tend. Yet the abstract vocabulary is not the same for all, since it is ever determined by the tactile givens of a chosen surface, the softness of the charcoal, the round or sharp edge of the eraser, how the charcoal breaks into squares, where the figures are not made up of lines, as much as connecting wedges of shapes, myriad, distinct; then distorted by smoky hazes of smudging with fingers, sharp flecks of the eraser, or broad shaves of gesso with a palette knife. Gesso, a white base beneath acrylic

painting, used by the artist over the charcoal, creates spaces that are opaque or layered, perhaps depicting the mist, when one views the extensive Mahabaleshwar valley from a disused temple perched on the edge of a chasm.

She has written, "While I am drawing the sheets of monsoon or the crags of mountains, I feel I am right there, among them. In a certain sense, these works are a form of lifting. Escaping claustrophobia." How does the human body fly? Feel unconfined? There are forms of flight, experienced in film, in writing, and here in the artist's paintings, making of them, manuals for flight. Though most of the works are in a small format, the subjects are of huge, wide open spaces, unfettered and unconfined. In reality these landscapes are smattered with wires and telecom towers, signboards and fences demarcating private property. The combed effects seen to layer the works, code in these.

TESTAMENT

All is aloof, just there, and unconcerned, yet with a presence that fixes the compositions into the textures, charcoal and pencil that determine them. The 'expressions' - be they landscapes or nudes have a certain disinterested shyness, a neutrality which draws the viewer towards how the artist handles space and matter. Many 'expressions' are submerged within their own consciousness, content to wait till the scapes re-form in the viewer's eyes. Conversations with as many silences, as the spaces of white, caesuras, pauses. The range of emotional states in this exhibition is varied, complicated, shaded, each time particular - testaments recorded in charcoal. Something adjusts in the viewer. Toward a memory, or a new possibility of feeling. That each work has a different temperament, testifies to its emotional content, coded as it may be, in the minuteness of gesture, a tilt of the chin, or thoughtfulness in the way the hand tussels the grass, which gives the the garden its credence, and the crown of thorns its sense of strength and resurrection that overcomes betrayal and loss.

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The artist is gifted with synaesthesia, she can hear colour, see music as moving shapes. Shernavaz Colah learnt oil painting from her parents, beginning in earnest when in her twenties. She has written a monograph on the Sri Lankan '43 Group artist, Justin Daraniyagala. She edited a series of books on community initiatives in sustainable development and the environment. She has a long career within the Tata group in communications and sustainability.

