

## ***Negotiation in Contested Space***

Exhibiting the works of: Jyothi Basu, Pooja Iranna, Baiju Parthan, Sumedh Rajendran, K.P. Reji, N.N. Rimzon, T.V. Santhosh, and Gigi Scaria

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Modernist and post-modernist modes of aesthetic and conceptual representation continue to engender a symbiotic relationship with the contemporary languages of fractured narratives, forms, and often unstable contexts; the more so perhaps to render the experience of being, - in an increasingly complex world - as a search for languages that capture a fraction of this interplay, revealing an ongoing negotiation of contested space.

In search of these languages, the artists in *Negotiation in Contested Space* formulate their roles as the directors of spaces suspending modernist, traditional, and contemporary uses of representation by crafting supple languages accommodating multiple subjects, objects, and contexts by staging these in the occupation/s of contemporary space. By making specific choices in myth-making, symbology, architectural framing, and perspective, these artists claim their place of occupation as the frame within which systemic structures, individual narratives, forms, and context engender one another's negotiation.

Jyothi Basu's *Wall Paper-3*, oil on canvas, uses perspective to stage his language. *Wall Paper -3* presents three hierarchical and distinct perspectives; the distant facades of buildings, interspersed with lego-shaped trees, replete with lidless eyes gleaming out of the arches crowning buildings; the centered shadow of a bomber plane imposing a bird's-eye view upon the painterly surface; and a red brick cross superimposed on the center, containing six comic-book symbols of explosions within its arms. The use of these perspectives stages a hierarchy of views - ground, air, and the cross as stand ins for games - and centers fluidity in Basu's language while the playful comic-book explosions carry ominous undertones; as director Basu is the mischief-maker who delights in leaving the viewer entranced in the details of each perspective. As the creator of contested space, Basu stages the plasticity of our existence in tightly packed buildings, amidst unreal trees, watched by eyes from the top of facades recalling HAL 9000 the errant computer from 2001 A Space Odyssey, and overseen

by destructive shadow, firmly in the sphere of cold war aesthetic without the tranquility of post-war western consensus and consequent supremacy to back up ideological struggle; proposing a state of constant war at every presented hierarchy.

Pooja Iranna's *A Thousand thoughts to Build and Only One to Bring Down*, stages the language of architecture to create sculptural elements that bind with the instability of human existence. Constructed using acrylic and collage cut-outs to create jigsaw like pieces - some that stand out up from the surface of the paper - the work makes the viewing experience sculptural, tactile, and fragile. Representation of the human element takes its form in the visible composite construction of edifices intermittently fragmented, suggesting the frailty of a structure that could be compromised by one unstable foothold, or obstacle. Balancing a double representation of the structure and construction of human thought, the work effortlessly folds into its own the vulnerability of the constructs governing language and thought, where complexity v. binary (the disruption of sculptural elements v. the deceptively flattened surface) is a contested place requiring constant negotiation.

Gigi Scaria's sculpture *Under the Water*, and watercolor, *Roots*, stages sets of binaries; between above and below, horizon and beyond, and between planned space and naturally occurring space. In *Roots*, the horizon cuts across the center of the paper, cleanly delineating the space in half. Two constructions take their place side-by-side: a bridge holds up nameless mostly uniform, uninhabited buildings, with dark windows facing away from the sun, while its red veined roots under the horizon line creep towards the depths of darkened unmarked space; on the same plane in the corner rises a green rock with a winding road whose prism-like angles reflect varied shades of green; while it's underneath - it's mirror image is another set of uninhabited buildings. Notable, as in most of Scaria's work is the flatness of the background - a clean even surface of silver and grey unmarked by the vicissitudes of lived space staging the formlessness of time against which human construction swings between rebirth and destruction.

*Under the Water*, a metal sculpture presents an even bleaker view. Reworking the bridge, the sculpture removes the element of water marking the resonance with *Roots* as a finite space contained by the sculpture, open and seemingly bereft of life. The sculpture echoes the use of architectural space as the edifices of constructed primacy. What remains of this contested space when its human inhabitants and its life-giving elements are taken away? Possibly the same thing that happens when

the subject is removed from the occupation of collective space - the viewer as the only observer who remains to negotiate the parameters of reentry.

Basu, Iranna and Scaria's works are notable for the absence of the human element - all three together elaborate and bind architectural structures upon which human frailty, perspective, and collective space impose instability. While the human element here is physically absent, it is integral to the foundation of each work with each artist capturing the ever evolving mediation between presence, absence and representation, often in favor of process, structure, and imposition.

Shifting to an exploration of symbolism, Baiju Parthan's *Aqua Regia* takes alchemy as its language, to contest rebirth through elemental transformation and attainment of perfection. Parthan's considered space is the process of myth-making in the context of alchemy. Aqua Regia (royal/noble water), a mixture said to dissolve gold and platinum, resounds with the Philosopher's Stone. Denoted here by the rearing lion with the symbol of rebirth in the form of the sun and phases of the moon above its head, Parthan's symbol for royalty, also stands in for the ascension of man attaining supremacy over nature-based belief systems. The foundational myth of the enlightenment, the primacy of reason over belief, and the scientific organization of knowledge is here enclosed in the symbology of alchemy deftly linking the attainment of knowledge to a far older knowledge - in the need for myth-making and symbolism.

Framed in the background against the latitudes and longitudes of our planet, Parthan perhaps suggests that myth-making continues to evolve in relation to the symbols of our primacy - those symbols, now quantified measurements. If rational knowledge is implicated by political machinations, Parthan thus begs the question: in the contested space of quantifiable knowledge and evolved politically-implicated symbolism, what are the possibilities for myth-making, when our primacy is constructed as nearly absolute in every sense?

Complimenting Parthan's work, Sumedh Rajendran's works use symbolism in relation to the mechanistic messiah. Rajendran's mixed media collage, *Untitled*, frames a footless man grasping towards a headless fleeing animal, with hills in the background forming a horizon, sending wisps of metal roads outward to the feet of the two bodies tethered to each other in an overwhelmingly isolated landscape linked only by metal. The human, perhaps reaching out to capture, or in search of

comfort extending a hand to the only other metallic embodiment in the same plane. Alongside the work of Iranna and Scaria, Rajendran's collage also leaps into constructed architectural space by way of material use, echoing the complexity of transitional flimsy constructions of internal occupied spaces, while the precarity of a metropolitan city's teeming inhabitants makes armored existence a futile endeavor in an open-air, collectively occupied shifting space.

Meanwhile, Rajendran's mixed media on paper, *Untitled*, carries echoes of Otto Dix's bleak and dark drawings of the horrors and the trenches of World War I; the work does not afford its inhabitants any protection or armor. Packed, as the elongated bodies are, so tightly together that a hint of the dark spaces of occupation trickle from between them and surround them; carrying the feet of fellow travellers as they walk upon the hunched shoulders of those below them; black gaping holes litter the center of the paper running mainly across the faces and the shoulders of a line of bodies below gazing bewildered forward or at their feet. Rajendran tackles the space of work, of jobs, of armor, of the daily departure of bodies to contained spaces - footless, for perhaps they cannot leave - with fellow headless companion bodies occupying often the same spaces, suggesting invariably the fragility of their existence - not framed by architectural elements as it were, but by the collective human occupation of already occupied spaces. Returning the human to these contested spaces, Rajendran's works here, offer a bleak indictment of the forces constraining our lived experience, but offers a respite in the ability of bodies to reach for the companionship of others jostling in the same constrained space.

Of the works in the exhibition, perhaps only N.N. Rimzon's paperworks can claim the creation of a space in harmony with its conceptual and physical components. In a recent essay Marta Jakimowicz describes Rimzon's propensity to extend a holistic sensibility into '...current reality (where) he sees people and other entities as participants in a continuum of eternal, past, and current states punctuated by cosmic and mundane rhythms in the cycle of living, dying, and rebirthing, where benign forces coincide with damaging ones on all levels from the familiar to the political, none being independent of the others.'

Rimzon's works defy abstracted language formations of contested space. He uses charcoal and pastel on paper to suggest mediated time between symbolism and abstraction. By outlining and *not* filling in voluminous forms such as: the elliptical at the base of each work; the pots that gather

together at center of one work; the silent sentinels of houses and walls; and the figure of the man holding up a torch; Rimzon exposes paper to the vulnerability of time, allowing volume and time to occupy the same space, while negating neither. Note, while human, human constructions, and the barks of living trees derive from outlines, the stars the skies and the moon framing the top of the paper are fully filled in, suggesting their absorption of/in time. The ground crossed and delineated, the darkened windows of houses, and the receding rectangular shape in the ground are filled in with dense charcoal and pastel. The symbols of birth (the pots), of rebirth (the torch), wells of memory (the rectangular shapes in the ground), and the lyrically intertwined boughs of trees, and coconuts tucked under their branches, suggest symbology situated as a mediator between formed time, and formless abstraction. The role of mediator also changes as the viewer's gaze moves from the top of the page to the bottom. Each component shifts as the other does. Viewed in relation to one another, and the whole, the occupants of this complex interplay propose a space that is seductively composed. Not a clash, or contested space certainly, but a space of mediation created by its occupants and embodied with abstraction and symbols.

K.P. Reji's diptych *Fishes Under the Broken Bridge* tackles the politics of public space. While not wholly contested by some of its occupants, Reji's public space, in which its occupants are by turns content, playful, and generally going about their business of leisure is framed by an interplay of friction and intimacy. Reji creates in the foreground, framed by sand at the bottom and interrupted trees above, a place for school children and their playful time off. Surrounded by school bags, some play with frogs, while two doze, even as one boy straddling a branch of a tree lowers a dangling cockroach into the open mouth of the dozing boy below him. In the background, a broken bridge divides the canvas in half, interrupted only by a plane half sunk into the blue waters. The bridge is occupied by people fishing while seagulls hover above looking for an errant catch.

The work is notable for the peace which prevails - deceptively so. The petty cruelties enacted by the children - the frog in the tin box, the descent of the cockroach, the slightly smug, buddha-like smile on the boy in the trees whose face is almost hidden by leaves - all suggest the politics of intimacy, or daily routine, lived out in open spaces. In the distance, the people on the bridge seem benign by comparison, but gathered along with the seagulls make a private wait for a bait to bite, a dramatic experience. It is not just the seemingly mundane activities of people that animates the work, rather it is the intimacy of lived-in space that is so occupied, and filled with micro aggressions, which makes

public space the site of contestation. This is Reji's language: intimate actions and interactions, informed by the private narratives of its occupants, enacted in public space.

T.V. Santhosh's canvases both *You Have A New Notification* tackle the veracity of the image by creating four perspectives. The first, in writer Santhosh S.'s words, 'through a curious linguistic initiative (of subverting a media image from its positive into its negative, creating the archive) he proposes that the negative is not the archival truth but the self-annihilating same of the positive. These works also propose that the copies which claim the representative status of the real through the spectacular nature of presentation, production and dissemination actually and virtually construct a one-dimensional world.' Santhosh S's proposition whereby this image constructs an internally unstable one-dimensional world, is here countered by the external placement of the negated image as the sole subject within the frame, which pushes the viewer to question the usually-in-tandem elements of content and form, now at oppositional ends in the spectrum of veracity and, of the process through which a viewer evaluates credibility. Placing this on a spectrum allows Santhosh to suspend the image, in a no-man's-land of sorts, positioning the image as fundamentally and doubly (internally as well as within the frame) unstable. Further, the 'real' in relation to the image echoes the same parameters of selection as in where one image is 'real', so is one set of people, as is one ideology, as is the populist who speaks for 'real people.'

Embarking on this instability the second perspective offered to the viewer is the faces of the negated image of a schoolgirl gazing serenely at the viewer, while in the second canvas, the face of a soldier from the Seema Suraksha Bal (Border Security Force) serving at the Wagah Border that divides India from Pakistan. The soldier gazes beyond the viewer, while the schoolgirl engages with the viewer. What makes both faces unstable is the interplay between the bright crosses occurring intermittently on the face of the canvas (the third perspective), denoting movement, while a background of deep green foliage of leaves and star-shaped flowers, deceptively anchors the fourth perspective.

Creating this complex play of shifting realities, generated at the center by the instability of the image Santhosh effectively turns the entirety of the canvas into unstable ground, destabilizing any claim to the 'real' on part of the viewer, the artist or the occupants of the image, and further implying that *any such claim from these constituents is necessarily outside of their awareness of this constructed reality.*

Together the works suggest the one axiom in contemporary art narratives that undergirds the exhibition: namely, that the 'real' from one perspective to another is necessarily constructed - by individuals, by the spaces that they occupy, and the manner in which they are in these spaces. If these constructions are not recognized, awareness is often supplemented by myth-making reusing and updating symbols: the constructions that are recognized as such, are created to *denote the complexity of the 'real'* that works in tandem with myth-making in order to exclude and divide, and only rarely to include and build, a subset of the 'real' for use only by those who speak the self-same language in an act of imposing primacy, or delineating boundaries.

The range of reactions to the 'real' often result in one-dimensional languages created in response to complexity amidst contested spaces as constituted by the passage and migration of languages forming, breaking, arguing, and delineating one another. The artists in this exhibition stand against that simplification and present instead, the complexity of negotiation, the increasing precarity of constituents, and the constituent power of inhabitants to create their own, often fractured, 'realities', drawing a line through every level of unstable frame that shifts in accordance with its internal contexts, thus marking in parallel the negotiations contemporary art must continue to make with its frame, context, languages, representation, utility, and realities, when so much else of the 'real' occupies a viewer's distracted gaze. In this, the exhibition, *Negotiation in Contested Space* represents itself as a contested space in a mediated search for new constructions of evolving languages.

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