

## *The Uncertain Body*

*The world is not a solid continent of facts sprinkled by a few lakes of uncertainties, but a vast ocean of uncertainties speckled by a few islands of calibrated and stabilized forms<sup>1</sup>*

Today, it is hard to come across artists who are not anguished by the current fragility of the planet. Walter Benjamin had an epiphany in early 20<sup>th</sup> century when he saw the modern artist, Paul Klee's drawing of *Angelus Novus*, a figure that appeared transfixed in time. To this German philosopher, it captured the deadly ambivalence of modernity and he interpreted it as an angel walking backwards towards the future. With this allegory, Benjamin dismantled the very core of modernity- progress and social emancipation. The image of this angel of doom and destruction has loomed heavily on many thinkers, as if it had a prescience of our current debacle. In 21<sup>st</sup> century, Bruno Latour goes as far as to lament that if only this angel had turned around and gazed ahead, it would have witnessed the scale of destruction left in the wake of modernization and perhaps, the current environmental, political and economic catastrophe could have been averted, so to speak.

Rakhi Peswani also proposes a similar anachronism, a glance backwards towards the past, but towards the anti-technological. This carefully cultivated 'primitivism' is not to be confused with how European modernists deployed it to escape tradition, to start all over again and to see the world with 'innocent eye' borrowed from elsewhere. It is staged carefully by a return to raw and inexpensive materials, and almost to an *arte povera* aesthetics. Thus, by turning her back to the technological, her works foreground the organic and the amorphous via the sheer materiality of wood, metal, jute, wire, wool, cloth and thread on the one hand and the labour of craft on the other. It is sensation itself that becomes the primary subject matter on a skin like surface, on which wounds offer themselves as textures. In sculptural installations, many amorphous objects hang from the ceiling in a precarious balance, casting a doubt in our minds if they are dead or living, something that the English language captures in its distinction between 'hung' and 'hanged'. Their precariousness precisely comes from occupying this middle ground. It remains to be seen if her invocation of death and the abject is a contemporary *memento mori* or a poetics of melancholia.

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Peswani's practice in this body of works cuts across painting and sculpture just as it encompasses different spatial registers. They fill out the white cube space across its walls, floors as well as the spaces in between. Out of the nine works, three are sculptural installations, two on the floor and four works are placed on the walls. What binds them all is the theme of a phenomenological encounter with the body in

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2005). p. 245.

an expanded sense: a body of works, artistic labour creating a body and a world of bodily sensations. How does the laboring body of the artist meet the world of nature that includes dead insects, bark of wood, plants, and so on? How does she give an afterlife to them as artistic forms? This transformation of matter into meaning happens through language which imprints thoughts on it. But this is not a smooth process. Where material from nature is made eloquent by laboring fingers of the craftsman, where it acquires language to speak as threads get sown on cloth slowly and painstakingly. The difference between writing with a pen and embroidering words on a cloth is enormous and what makes these two activities asymmetrical is labour and time. You can slow down language by turning to a thread and a needle to embroider words; sewn words speak with effort but they are more intimate as they have lived with the artist's labour much longer.

My intention here is neither to privilege artistic labour nor the persona of the artist but to reflect on labour as a conceptual category in this body of works. How is raw material formed by labour? How does the artist's labour modify the form as the expression of her agency or does the labour ultimately consume the maker through an artistic fatigue, best embodied by *Prognosis (diptych)*. Far from celebrating this form of labour, Peswani looks back at Goya's *Sleep of Reason* in which the Spanish artist appears slumped under the weight of his imagination or fatigue of work; at Albrecht Durer's muse in *Melancholia*, who though weighed down with exertion, struggles to look up to heavens. Interestingly, as noted by the art historian, Erwin Panofsky, the ponderous figure of *Melancholia*, was originally a figure of a miser taken from Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*.<sup>2</sup> It is through artistic labour that Durer transformed it into a muse. For Peswani too, these iconic art works by European artists serve as archetypes that speak across cultures about artists who labour with their minds and bodies. They are regarded by her as the exemplars of "the fragile figure of the craftsman and the exhausted figure of a laboring body" which allude to her own practice. If words are laboriously sewn on cloth, bringing the world of feminine craft on par with the activity of reflexive thought, she proposes another kind of artistic labour; that of hanging a bundle of firewood from the ceiling, as for example; a gesture whereby ordinary wood regains its objecthood to speak back to us. At the other end of this regime of labour lies slowness as a virtue to be cultivated and it is here that embroidery held up as an activity that slows you down but also sharpens thinking. To labour or not to labour or rather how to labour is itself an artistic decision.

a. *Primal Reminders: (A Precarious Balance)*

A spinner treats spindles only as implements for spinning, and flax only as the material that he spins. ...<sup>3</sup>

Peswani works against this logic of reducing objects to equipment that Marx notes in his analysis of labour. When an object is seen only as a tool, it loses its own presence, its materiality. In language, it is like the transitive verb, which refers to a direct object whereas the intransitive verbs, having no object refer back to themselves ('kill' someone as opposed to 'die'). A hammer is only a means of pushing a nail

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<sup>2</sup> Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* was published in Venice in 1645 and was a handbook for Italian and later European artists to draw the allegorical figures from. See Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*. Doubleday, 1955.

<sup>3</sup> David McLellan Ed., *Karl Marx, Selected Writings*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, p.496.

into wood. At what point does a hammer as an entity is restored into being ? Only when it loses its use value. Only when a knife goes blunt or a thread becomes weak, do their makers enter our awareness.<sup>4</sup>

Peswani arrives at a sculptural solution to this challenge when she decides to suspend objects from the ceiling; as they imperceptibly sway, they present themselves as ‘having arrived’ as objects of thought.

“I have also tried to locate images from agrarian and rural societies that are closer to nature. Images that may also be reminders of working class lives: of collecting twigs and piling them for the end of the day to create the hearth at home, the jute sack which is often used to store grains and other agriculture commodities.”<sup>5</sup>

Her artistic labour empties them of their original use value, pulls them out of an agricultural context and the very change of orientation from their place on the ground to that of vertical suspension imbues them with new poetics of form. Just like the exquisitely painted dead insects, these hanging objects exude a poetics of its material; it is hard not to think of the Japanese poetic form, haiku, that shares with these objects a minimalism of execution (limited words) and fullness of affect by opening up an infinite chain of meanings and evocations.

When these suspended objects enter the arena of an installation, they dramatize the contradiction between the use value and display value of objects. While the hanging sac, a bundle of sticks etc. that the metal wires carry and hold in place are displayed for contemplation, the wires that carry out the function of hanging them must forego their visibility as equipment ! What do these six suspended objects offer to the viewer who walks through them in close proximity? Each one of them is a unique art work crafted by using most easily available and inexpensive material; they range from a heavy, ponderous knotted sac to transparent fish bone structure with a log of wood, a twisted cloth, wiry hair and black wing like shape in between these two poles of heaviness and lightness. The stress on the amorphous shape recalls the poet, painter and sculptor, Jean Arp’s unstructured forms but only a glance upwards towards the ceiling dispels any such connection with the modernist aesthetics; it shows the grid of metal frame now pushed above the eye level. The grid form<sup>6</sup> so central to works by Piet Mondrian or Kurt Schwitters is occluded from vision and consigned to a pure instrumentality. The stage is clear for the objects to emerge in full splendor and material sensuality, shattering the abstraction of the grid. Are these objects then staging a return of the repressed body ?

b. *Primal Reminders (Experience of Innocence)*

“The works also started as a small exercise of archiving and recording dead insects found during the pre-autumn days at a residency in northern Japan.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Marx continues:

A blunt knife or weak thread forcibly remind us of Mr. A., the cutler, or Mr. B., the spinner. In the finished product the labour by means of which it has acquired its useful qualities is not palpable, has apparently vanished. 408. *A History of Economic Thought: A Reader*, eds. Steven G Medema and Warren J Samuels, London, New York: Routledge, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Artist’s statement in personal communication.

<sup>6</sup> Rosalind Krauss has reflected on the primacy of the grid to modern art, which also underpinned the dominance of abstraction. See *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT, 1986, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

But how does a theory of labour connect with the death of an insect?

A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality.<sup>8</sup>

Marx did not live long enough to see the telos of his anthropocentric definition of labour: that the earth and its vast resources will be squandered for human use to the point of its almost imminent extinction. Dead insects that Peswani encountered in Japan give a lie to such a humanist definition of labour. The rivalry between animal and human labour that Marx has set up reads like a tragic farce in our times. Today, nature and culture can hardly be neatly set apart when in fact they are deeply entangled. The dead insect who perishes before completing its life cycle bears the consequences of the overwhelming seepage of culture into nature. On encountering dead insects during her residency in Japan, she arduously set upon following the trail of these dead insects. Rescuing these dead but beautiful insects, she resuscitates them through her artistic labour and breathes life into them on fragile paper. As if to redress the hierarchy between insects and humans, each of them are painted as portraits, exuding such a sacred aura that they demand being handled with gloves. Or are they envisaged as nature's own *memento mori*? Recall that these painted insects are on what the artist refers to as "reading cards" as they are meant as much to be 'seen' as 'read.' They also double up as reminders of the asymmetry between life and death - life may not be certain but death always is. In Peswani's work, dead insects are tenderly sought and collected and reproduced by the artist as an aesthetically alluring but existentially uncertain bodies.

If *Primal Reminders (Experience of Innocence)* expect the viewer to kneel down and hold the cards of painted insects as sacred *memento moris* with gloves, on the walls are *Primal Reminders (Our Bodies)* that are meant to be seen while standing. They consist of hand embroidered Calico cotton panels that are arranged on the walls at varying levels.

If the dead insects which are resurrected by the act of painting serve as moral parrhesia of nature, in the Calico panels, words literally enter her works. When nature speaks through things like dead insects, words too can be turned into things that twist and turn before the spectator; the latter is directly interpellated and hailed as You - *Your Vision, Your Dreams; Your Soul* and so on. Sewn words wriggle and writhe, now thin, now corporal: "Vision" truncates, "Dreams" double up, "Loss" loses opacity, "Thoughts" float and thus the embroidered text forms a *rebus*, half speech and half image and open up an interstitial space where thought touches matter and words perform their rhetoric before the spectator's body.

a. *Remnants of Someone Dead in the Body of Someone Living*

*Skin is not simply a receptacle but an elastic organ progressing through time...<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes, New York: Vintage Books, 1977, pp. 283-4.

<sup>9</sup> Jakub Zdebik, "Skin Aesthetics as Incarnation: Gilles Deleuze's Diagram of Francis Bacon", *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, volume 34, Issue 1, March 2008, pp. 149-164.

Peswani has had an abiding interest in points of transition or exploring meeting points of different frontiers. Rebus is a perfect metaphor for this in-between space, a meeting point between images and words; a meeting point between the dead and the living; a meeting point between the inside and the outside. What better example of the in-between surface than skin? In bodies, whether of human or otherwise, it is the skin that connects the outer and the inner. Skin is not just an extension of a surface but a depth, best explained through a crumpled cloth that can infinitely play with the fold.

A cloth or a woven textile can easily double up as skin; a stain, a mark or a tear can evoke a chain of metaphors for the abject body. Via the fold,<sup>10</sup> the body is constantly turned inside out to reveal its infirmity, its vulnerability, its fatigue and its boundedness to time. The abject body as the uncertain body stirs memory even if it has a strong presence in the here and now. The most eloquent figure that plays out this logic is the tightly folded, “inward looking” sac, that hangs darkly from the ceiling as the ball of convoluted folds, confounding the line between the interior and the exterior

Fold is not just about space, about the body and its perpetual crisscrossing of the outer and the inner but equally concerns time. It crumples the straight line of teleology, complicates time and strikes at the heart of certainty. When time is folded like a cloth, it is hard to predict how history and event touch each other; through these *primal reminders*, the world is interpreted as a body of infinite folds whose surfaces twist and weave through compressed time and space. Ultimately, these works propose a powerful argument for anachronism on the one hand and the uncertain body on the other.

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<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Trans. Tom Conley (London: New York, Continuum) 1993.

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