

Interim Report 2010

I would like to include an excerpt from my proposal for the grant by way of an introduction and for easy reference:

With much of the field work completed, there still remained something that was unexpressed – which was my own journey through unfamiliar regions. The community at Vatva had also stabilized financially through Himmat's initiatives. It also became apparent that one could not romanticize tragedy, nor those that were affected by it – in spite of the kind of perspective that they could have gained by living through 2002, the conflicts and petty quarrels persist, and multiply as the community gains in economic strength. One's own needs as an artist begin to come to the forefront again, especially the need to be able to act independently, unhampered by factors that arise from acting as a group. What survives the interaction however still remains amongst the community in terms of the confidence and skills gained.

Reaching back again to 2002 sometimes seems regressive – but that was the beginning of the story, and can be represented as such, a memory set in stone: hence the painting 'Interior: 2002'. Moreover, subsequent events, including 26/11, reinforce the need to reflect on it. Gujarat is a specific context, but in turn represents the world as it is today. Indeed, considering the series of misfortunes that have plagued the state since the earthquake of 2001, it presents an apocalypse in a nutshell – which is in fact the subject of my paintings. The ethics of representation is also uppermost in my mind, as is the need to represent in different ways at different times, impelled by real reasons for doing so. How does one speak the truth through images? Is it possible to detect falsehood? Is it possible for the image to speak about issues in a manner that does not feed upon the dark drama of horror, therefore impelling its creation? Is it possible to create an aesthetic that is not dependant upon surplus, that could still function in the absence of that surplus? One that cannot be appropriated and misused to create conditions that are in direct conflict with it aims, as frequently happens in the political arena, for instance?

Some of the questions that came up vis a vis the project when it was first proposed would in fact be answered through the process of showing it. It was impossible at the time to actually predict the exact nature of the outcome, or plan how it would be disseminated. The form of one depends on the form of the other, and the act of display will create yet another framework for demonstrating inter-relationships and functions that mutate and thereby survive through time.

Within the present context, one functions as a chronicler of events - maintaining a distance appropriate to one's own position in relationship to these events and to the

temporal distance of six years that separates the two. One also traverses the distance between the pressing need to act in the public sphere and the need to process the experience into material that one could refer to in future for answers, or in search of some extra-verbal/extra-lingual? – as in extra-sensory - trace of the experience itself. To present visually all that I have written above would perhaps be central to the exhibit. One would need to weave together the strands of the self and the other into a symbiotic entity, artistically as well as at the human level, besides placing each segment, or segment of segments, within an appropriate framework, taking into consideration the available space and resources as yet another factor that qualifies the present moment.

During the course of the last year, I have concentrated largely on the paintings, as they would take the longest to complete. I am working on several simultaneously, I tend to complete them together in a kind of final, unified movement. The two photo-essays, Mahakali versus Mega-city and Gandhi Ashram to Vatva are ready for print. It would be better to print them just before the show to minimize possible damage.

The paintings have become more ambitious in scale and number than originally intended, but should in all likelihood be completed, along with all the other work, mainly printing - by the end of the year or at the very latest by March 2011. I would therefore like to make a request for an extension of the grant period at the appropriate time.

Apart from considerations of time, the paintings are prioritized for the reason that they represent a completely new body of project-related work, one that also underpins the project in relationship to private practice – or even, to widen the implications further, the public project within the context of art practice, how it could give it a real direction, and a much needed infusion of fresh blood. I think it is important to underline this relationship to prevent an unhealthy binary from developing any further – that of an ineffective and indulgent art practice versus more public-minded art projects. Often the result of this binary is neither art nor community. The best aspects of both are sacrificed - the life-long devotion (with its own set of socio-economic issues) that craft entails, as well as any real or lasting possibilities for social change. What then are we left with?

As regards the logistics of showing the work, there seems to be a need for a kind of curatorial input that was not very clear to me initially. It is this aspect that has fallen behind in terms of timelines, as it seems to need consistent effort in the direction of correspondence, co-ordination, meetings, etc. I have discussed the shows with the gallery that represents me, Sakshi, which will provide support in Bombay, and with Mamta Singhania of Anant (who had the ideal kind of space in Lado Sarai in New Delhi) which subsequently closed due to the economic slowdown.

I am currently actively in correspondence with a curator in Delhi, and with another gallery that I have shown with in the past, but it might take a couple of weeks for things to concretize on that front. Whether it works out in this particular instance or not, this would be the direction to follow, and there are many options. I have spoken to George Jose (who has been mentioned in my proposal for the grant) who seems to agree, and who is in touch with other curators in the course of his work with the Asia Society. A team of two working on the curatorial front would create the efficiency required – though the grant funds would have to be re-structured at that juncture.

I could further discuss this with Shai and Sumana when we meet.

Below are some other grant related activities:

October 2009

Invited by Khoj for a conversation/event involving public projects. We had Stephen Wright, who teaches Philosophy at the College de France as the main speaker/moderator. We reviewed and critiqued public projects undertaken by artists associated with Khoj.

The books:

Typed out and edited the journal that I had kept while engaged with the fieldwork at Vatva. There is an existing format that I have followed with the four earlier books that I have made – and which I will continue to use. A digitally printed copy will be part of the work that will go into the show. Another small book has been formatted already and is ready for print.

Two interviews:

With Rollie Mukherjee for Art and Deal, December 2009

With Tania Roy for Sakaal, July 2010

The Paintings

1. Interior: 1997/2002 (complete)

A group of four panels, the first one dates back to 1997 when I first moved to Baroda from Madras – the chronicle begins here.

The first panel was made in 1997 – there are formal differences in the way the painting is handled which indicate that it belongs to another time frame – the inclusion of this panel within that context is deliberate – as it marks that moment as the beginning.

The red panel: the image in the centre is that of the burning autorickshaw that appeared in several newspapers and magazines during the riots. It is intended that it should be a

recognizable image, it refers to that particular moment in history, within the context of communalization and the accompanying violence. It is set in a ruby – a memory set in stone. But it recedes behind the reflections that partially obscure it – because to invoke that moment in all its horror would be equal to re-creating it. It is after all a memory now, and it is a deliberate choice that this is clearly stated, visibly translated, through painting. The ruby is associated with blood, but is also a precious stone – as every crisis also denotes a moment of clarity that is also an opportunity for change.

The panels on either side are based on studies of my earlier studio in Nizampura – where I worked at the time. They reflect another, more personal perspective – the simultaneity of experiencing a particularly traumatic moment which manifests itself physically, within and without – and the studio spaces where it is processed, by necessity, in order to survive that moment.

2. Terminus Erraeus (complete) (two panels)

The monkey belongs to a species known as the Hanuman Langur – common in Gujarat – we see them all over the city. We have, in fact taken over their habitat.

The burning tail is of course an obvious reference to our mythological past. The monkey is however female.

The words Terminus Erraeus – terminus of course means the end of something, but erraeus is a fragment of a word from a torn piece of packaging paper that further lost its original meaning when I worked it into a sketch for a painting. In my mind, it bears a resemblance to the word ‘error’ – the title therefore signifies a fatal error.

It could also be read as a reference to the Bajrang Dal – or its Nemesis.

The three monkeys in gold represent Gandhi’s utopic principles - the reality of course threatens to consume us all. The painting also speaks of the danger of combining religion with politics – Gandhi’s moral fibre could sustain that particular combination and still remain uncorrupted - but set afloat in our world, misappropriated – what does it unleash ? An open question, poised, to destroy or to re-generate, as the monkey is.

Painting of Shah Jehan (almost complete) Size: 8ft/10

The painting of Shah Jehan, one of the six girls, is based on a photograph that was taken while she was undergoing treatment for her burns, six years ago.

While going through the waste pieces of fabric stored – or rather dumped – in a small room in the centre at Vatva, I found some samplers that were early examples of the women’s attempts to re-discover and hone their sewing skills. These have been scanned directly and were used to compose the two panels on either side of the central one of Shah Jehan herself. The panels are digitally printed.

There is a title, but it is a secret. In one of our conversations while working together in the field, Monica and I discussed the many small cruelties that mark human interaction, no matter what people might have experienced together. Some of the women at the centre

would address Shah Jehan as 'Jaleli', The Burnt One. I could not get that out of my mind, but would not wish her to come upon a portrait entitled 'Jaleli', even if it does not resemble her closely enough.

Therefore the alphabets that constitute the word are on pieces of folded paper which are ablaze, and scattered at her feet. Not legible or close enough to one another that people will actually be able to string them together into one word, decipher what it spells out, or its meaning.

Around her are motifs from the samplers, the threads weave into the scars that mark the central figure – the history of the struggle to overcome, through sewing and embroidery, traditionally feminine but also surgical skills.

4.

Untitled (almost complete)

(Three Panels, 8ft/8 each)

The panels on either side are based on photographs from 2001 that Ilesh Vyas (who owns Lalita, the digital studio where I work) had taken on trips to Kutch soon after the earthquake. The central panel is sourced from a very grainy newspaper photograph of the site of a bomb blast. The fissures are circular in formation, with a devastated core. It resembles a gigantic flower – in fact very close to the kind of motifs that are on the samplers from Himmat, and in the background of the painting of Shah Jehan. The painting explores this relationship – in corresponding colours.

When I began, it was with a sense of wanting to make large drawings in paint, in black and white – I was tired with the degree to which my painting process had slowed down. But in creating a scarred landscape, I was caught again, in a different way, by the nature of the strokes that I used – layer upon layer, time upon time of these till a certain fluency came into being, and a realization - of the Skeleton of Space. The fact that there are also recognizable traces of bones in the painting strengthens this vision of space – and of mass graves, some forever undisturbed by the light of discovery and questioning.

Often, thinking about what I am working on at the moment, the phrase 're-writing genres' (in terms of the portrait, the interior, the landscape, the still life, against the political climate that we are dealing with) comes to mind. Things change at the foundation, at a formal level – and considering that the formal has evolved over decades and sometimes centuries - this change is far more significant than overt depictions of specific events.

(Almost complete)

5.

Untitled (just begun)

(Four or five panels, 8ft/4 each)

Based on stills from the INSAF film, Gujarat Carnage, it is a series of devastated interiors, Still Life re-written. I have just begun working on this.

6.

The Lace-Maker (half complete)

(8 panels, 15"/15 each)

The title is borrowed from a film by

An Autobiography in Fragments is a series of prints - of fragments from earlier (prior or external to the project) bodies of work. I had a set that was defective – and have started overlaying them with embroidery motifs - in white - from Himmat. Four panels have been completed. It signals the inclusion of the ‘other’ in an area that is intensely personal – as an autobiography would be – and also implies that in healing the other, one heals oneself.

7.

Untitled

8ft/5

(Not yet begun)

This will be a single panel, and the only self-portrait in the series. It is based on a still from Cutting Chai, shot by the girls, and more specifically from a segment that Tahera shot.

There is a significant shift here in the larger context of my work, where the self-portrait has occupied centrestage – here, I am merely the narrator, barely visible herself, but revealing a series of events.

Vasudha Thozhur
Baroda 2010