

Twisted Tales: Between Images and Words

Mimi Radhakrishnan's recent works with evocative titles and sensuous surfaces make persuasive arguments about the discursive nature of art. They overturn the modernist suspicion of the literary. Given her early formation in Santiniketan as a printmaker combined with her interest in literature, she gives a contemporary twist to the age-old conventions of storytelling.

The art of storytelling was emphatically rejected by modernism in the west. With its invocation of the coordinates of time and space, storytelling could not occur without turning to the past. The story of modernism begins from the time the past becomes a problem¹. In India, modernism follows a different dynamic given its colonial prehistory. Storytelling as a mode of representation could not be kept at bay for long. With the entry of women artists since the 1970s, story telling took on quite different resonances because it also entailed not only the stories told but also the story teller, the self of the artist.

Before women artists came on to the scene, the self of the artist, even though complicated by avant-garde movements, was assumed to be arguably singular but largely masculine. With the onset of modernism, claims for unique subjectivity of the artist got shriller but more articulate until the post-modern turn declared the artist dead! It was no coincidence, observed a number of women artists and art critics that this moratorium on artists occurred just when women artists had begun to gain visibility.²

So at a time, when a number of male artists began to register discomfiture with their signature on their paintings, women artists not only emphatically left them loud and clear on the surface of their canvas but they embraced autobiography as the most powerful trope to tell their stories, mixing strands of the historical and the fictitious, laying open wounds of their past trauma with a dazzling alacrity much to the consternation of fellow artists and the public.

Rather than declaring the artist dead, women artists in India and in the west, in a retake on the 'self' challenged its understanding as a monad and opened its multiple interface with ways of making, of handling the visual language both materialistically and subjectively. As if arguing that a pure self is a myth, yet not abandoning its pursuit by understanding that it is at all times mediated by language, visual and verbal, by another's stories and so on.

Stories as Allegories: Allegories as Stories

It is in this sense that women artists in their simultaneous grasp of the figurative and the autobiographical let the political enter as if through the backdoor, through the kitchen, the intimate spaces of domesticity. This doesn't, mean that the public domain remains unrepresented. In Mimi's works at least, patriarchal spaces are localized through specific events in public sphere, as for example, a visit of a religious Guru or a community gathering. Rather than falling back upon the tired cliché: the personal is political, one would have to discern the latter in the way public space is represented; the Chamatkarababa series which turn a religious discourse attended by the community into a farce. The bodies of women circulate as both objects of desire as well as repression and delineate tenuous divide between the public and the private. Caricaturing the patriarchal authority, Mr Pillai, Manikutti with her Lover seems to suggest that the only way to show women's desire is via an allegory and in this case, a story.

She passionately follows the lives of the maids and servants beyond their official roles in a household; their desires, aspirations, ambitions find visibility in form of portraits where they have "proper names." Even women from privileged background have tales of claustrophobia to narrate where economic freedom compromises other modes of being, particularly their access to the public sphere. Tracing a trajectory from Amina Begum Bibi's cloistered existence to Miss Niloofer's place in a university is neither a simple story of progress nor a celebration of Indian democracy but about social utopia being the most compelling component of progressive politics: the right to dream is a step towards a better future.

Before we consider the following series of works as portraits, an idea resisted by Mimi, it is important to place them between two poles of the iconic and the narrative; the former freezes a live figure or an object from the space-time continuum and make them directly confront the viewer and the latter unfolds laterally involving inter-relationship between several figures. Even the singular figures, seemingly iconic, remain part of a narrative far exceeding its outward frame. In other words, portrait figures are condensed narratives, the latter supplied by the title. This is how time and memory implicate one another in Mimi's paintings.

The papier-mâché "portraits" of unknown individuals which bear proper names but hint at marginalized identity- Joseph Murma, the adivasi migrant worker, Mary Topo, the santhal girl dislocated in a city, Amina Bano Bibi, a Muslim housewife. Allusions to the oxymoronic "portraits of the insane", by the French Romantic, Theodore Gericault are hard to miss, gesturing at the limits of that genre; traditionally intended for representing the elite and the powerful. How do the subalterns occupy the space reserved for the dominant in our society is a question that the artist asks herself with her painstaking patterning of the frame and lavish attention on the decorative motifs? It is ultimately with her inscription of her own persona within the narratives that she denies herself the distance of a comfortable critique. In her Framed by a Tourist Map: From 1 to 13, she juxtaposed the logic of the space which is cartographic with that of place plotting her own journey through the tourist map mocking at her own predicament as an artist/tourist and the compulsions of tourism industry.

Inhabiting the Space between Painting and Writing

For Mimi, writing and painting stories merge into one another in a continuous process. One can write paintings as much as one can paint verbal stories with one difference- that is to do with material technique involved in painting. For writing, one merely requires a pen and piece of paper and yet it poses more of a conceptual demand on oneself than painting. It is possible for an artist to get obsessed with a process of painting or a specific motif and let it bear the brunt of one's moods; one can scribble meaninglessly repeating one stroke over another, piling them up without any reference to any recognizable object but writing does not allow such graphic scribbles or doodles.

Both her paintings and short stories show imprint of her autobiographical style in which simple transient events like traveling to a momentous memory of family reunion invade with equal intensity. There is something premeditated about the private iconography that opens itself to the compulsions of techniques and exigencies of working conditions. Printmaking has been the area of specialization which she acquired in Santiniketan whereas painting has been the medium of compromise which was first imposed upon her when she moved to Delhi. Interestingly within printmaking, it was lithography that suited her style of working, as pointed by her mentor, Somnath Hore. Being the most direct process, lithography approximated the act of sketching the most. Lacking similar studio facilities for colour lithography in Delhi, her turn to painting was inevitable. In a sense, she taught herself painting in the solitude of her studio which can be both exhilarating; a learning process without any institutional constraint, at the same time, daunting when the paint and the surface refuse to follow the artist's will.

From Printmaking to Painting

We normally use two categories of artists- one trained in an art school as opposed to the naive autodidact. But Mimi insists that even an artist, highly skilled in a specific medium, may step into the territory of the latter exemplified by her own transition from printmaking to painting. At the time of deep crisis while wrestling with the intractability of oil painting, she would draw strength from her memory, of what Ramkinker Bajj used to tell his students about how he learnt about the technique of painting: it was from a salesman at the G C Laha paint shop in Calcutta that Kinker

discovered the joy of oil painting and paints' changing texture and viscosity when mixed with linseed oil and turpentine!

So how would a printmaker handle paint? It is in this crucial question that I locate a contemporary concern in the disjuncture between her technique and her content. The technique of oil painting taken up by her allows direct contact with the surface of the canvas but the form that builds up under the execution of her brush draws from a repertoire of the always and already seen, known and experienced. In the *Swirl Called China* is a mis-en-scene of images considered Chinese in tourism brochures. No wonder that in the titles of her works, there is a recurring reference to "memory". At the level of content, she registers the mediatedness, a necessary technical imperative in Printmaking but now applied to a mode of representation. This makes her combine the expressionist potential of oil painting, essentially stroke based with a printmaker's obsession with the procedural, working from one palimpsest to another. Again, her writer's acumen of writing page after page translated well into painting layer after layer, as if a long narrative and strings of characters have been telescoped into a painterly spectacle.

Where do I place Mimi's recent paintings within the larger tapestry of contemporary art?

Today it is easy to protest against any simple notion of art as progress which originates with the Paleolithic cave paintings and culminates in the most contemporary art forms like installations and electronic arts. It is possible to argue that what marks any given painting as contemporary is not through the degree of its proximity with new technology but its capture of the contemporary experience. Rather than falling into the modernist binary between tradition and novelty, the question is to what extent the traditional medium of oil painting yields translation of our contemporaneity, the "now-ness" of our moment? In Mimi's recent works, it is encapsulated by the mode of interweaving between storytelling and traveling: of crossing over cultural boundaries of countries, of memory transfers of a mode of experience of a locale, however alien in terms of one's own, of appropriating a detail from one frame of reference and placing it in a new setting via a superbly variegated painterly language.

Travel as a Trope

How she invokes the notion of space and place mapping it on to the global dimension of traveling and the local one of being.³ In other words, the phenomenology of space while airborne in a plane is distinctly different from the ontology of place experienced in the concreteness of a locale while walking through the lanes, the streets or a city square taking in with its sights, its smells, sounds and its touch. At the end of every travel, in the intimacy of her studio space, Mimi would paint from her memory which dictates its own logic to the seen reality. As Proust had long intuited that memory rejects the linear time but zigzags lawlessly connecting the now and the then in a bewildering instantaneity.

Exceeding the genre of visual travelogue, Mimi's paintings set up an imaginative geography mixing up codes of a popular guidebook with that of a sublime, visionary topography. Quirky humor runs like a barely hinted thread across the stories directed as much at others as her own self as the characters of her stories, both equally real and fabricated at the same time. Mimi sets up for herself an impossible task of transcending the realm of the discursive and to catch the real outside the normative in *Catching Buddha Unawares While Leaving the Cave!* That public monuments may have a secret life of their own never captured by the tourist gaze allegorizes Mimi's desire for a space beyond representation, vindicating her flights into fantasy.

Although the choice of her medium remains traditional, her mode of rendering paint with an almost obsessive interest in the ornamental motifs invoke the metaphor of weaving; with her repetitive application of brushstrokes, she mimics the activity of a craftsman. As a result, the painted surface plays visual tricks on the viewer when viewed from far and near: what appears like a broad play of

painted areas from a distance dramatically reconfigure into sensuous details moving at another pace, on closer look.

While the medium of painting embraced by her is oil painting but the mode of application of paint is that of a miniaturist so that her brushstrokes range from the most expressionist to the most painstakingly detailed; one motif engaging her attention for days

Even in her most evocative landscapes painted after her Mauritian trip with its blue skies and translucent sea, it is the figures of the immigrants and the dodos that bring to the foreground Mimi's crisscrossing of the boundaries of the historical and the mythological. She urges us to re imagine another time and another history where the dodos were not feasted out of existence nor the "natives", the indentured laborers flogged in public places and treated as fodder for the sugarcane industry. In an imaginative reversal, they get transformed into fairytale characters where they are surrounded by plenitude and the promised prosperity that they had risked their life for. Is this a counterfactual following the narrative of "what if" only a pictorial rhetoric? Or whether it is the painter's strategy to ask new questions about the past from her location in the present is left to the spectator's social imagination.

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