

*THE BODY AS VESSEL*  
Notes for the Catalogue by Geeti Sen

The body is the primal source for celebration and expression in the visual arts. It is also the site of male and female identity, of gender discrimination and discourse over the past century. Artists in India have challenged patriarchal modes of representing the woman's body, the myths that compromise her existence. Foremost among the pioneers have been Anupam Sud and Gogi Saroj Pal, working from the 1980s to introduce images which defy established conventions of beauty. Their ingenious ways to 'untame' the woman remain relevant even as perspectives are changing.

It is asserted that contemporary art has "gone global" in the twenty-first century. Opportunities provided by the global network and circulation across continents have opened up to fresh influences, experiments in new mediums and modes of production. New insights are grounded in the temper of the times. These perspectives are seen in works by Mithu Sen and Puneet Kaushik represented here to explore new territories of the body. Born from fertile imagination, their works are possessed of quirky humour and at the same time poignancy. Their vision reflects the conditions of a world which is fragmented, torn asunder even as ironically it is better connected. As has happened with the world, so also the human body reflects these conditions of insecurity, temporality and fragmentation.

Indian tradition and sensibility however conceives the body to be sacred, a universe within itself. The body as microcosm, replicating the larger universe, is to be found in many cultures. But the idea of the body as *sacred geography* is perhaps unique to India. "The body is a mystical terrain to be explored like the streets and sanctuaries of a holy city by a pilgrim" comments the British writer/photographer Richard Lannoy. Lines by the medieval poet Sahara express this essential belief which is explored ritualistically in the practice of Tantra.

*I have walked with pilgrims, wandered around holy places.  
Nothing seems more sacred than my own body.  
Here flows the sacred Jamuna and the mother Ganges  
Here are Prayaga and Kashi  
Here the Sun and the Moon.*

The idea of the universe within flows from the poetry of Kabir who invokes the body as a secret garden within, abundant with fruits and flowers.

*Yaggate antara baag bageecha.*

This body is built of chromosomes and molecules, of millions of blood vessels, veins, arteries vibrating with life and energy. This body is composed literally of earth, water, fire, wind and air. Indian tradition attests that the five elements of nature of the *panchatattvas* compose the body. In her works on handmade paper Shrambhavi inscribes this ritual significance of the body, relating its essence to the universe beyond.

In our lives this belief manifests itself in experience. When Malavika Sarukkai dances the dance she has choreographed titled *Kashi*, she turns and turns her body as though the river Ganges flows through it... In an interview she mentions her experience, of what transpires in a sublime moment of transcendence.

*The dancer's body, the medium or paatra, is really filled with different energies... Internalising something is not just practice; it is a kind of harmony of body and mind. And I believe that the sattvik energy frees the body, lightens the body. It is as though the body is lit with a luminosity—as if your cells are actually feeling another energy through it, as if you are on another frequency.*

My idea for this exhibition grew from this inspired conversation: of the body as a dynamic vessel composed of different energies. The body is also a vessel to engender/create the human embryo, an aspect explored by artists Anita Dube, Sheba Chhachhi and several other artists. The concept is large enough to invite infinitely different meanings and perspectives!

This exhibition invites viewers to reflect on the implications of global influence. Indian sensibility has sought a different interpretation of the body than is generally inferred in Western art. In the west the body was regarded as material substance, an object or a model to be rendered in its perfection. *In India the body is still looked at not only in its external manifestations but by exploring its hidden, internal resources.* Fortunately for me, the work of five outstanding artists invited to show at this exhibition resonates with this concept – in different ways that are individual, idiosyncratic and occasionally, universal in implications.

## II

From the 1970s feminists, activists, writers, artists and performers have addressed themselves to rewriting a history of the woman's identity, in asserting her freedom. The body is reclaimed as their own – not as a passive object of the gaze but as the impassioned *subject of desire*.

From 1971 Anupam Sud focused on the body exposed, male and female – and her mastery of musculature remains unrivalled! A recent conversation with her students Shukla Sawant and Subba Ghosh have disclosed her father's passion for

body building, of conversations at home about perfecting the body. But what gave her the temerity to defy conventions in printmaking? Her figures do not comply with norms of beauty or eroticism. In their naked purity they combine stoicism with strength. She asserts:

*My prime need was to remove distinctions between society – because I feel we are one race, with no distinctions in colour and caste. That is why you will see there is no colour in my etchings.*

*It can also be argued that the idea of nakedness involves isolation in the struggle of the individual attempting self-definition on one's own terms.*

. Anupam's early prints emphasize the anonymity of human beings, their faces obscured. The play of light and shadow accentuates the movement of bodies in the collusion between women and doctors in *Darling Get me a Baby Made*, 1979, in the vulnerability of women in *The Pickup Girls*, 1980. Her narratives alert us to social debates of the 1980s and feminist interrogations of which she was keenly aware; but she remained the discreet outsider, looking in on streets, pavements, lampposts, battered buildings that bind an estranged couple in *Dialogue*, 1984.

This perspective suddenly changes. The urban narrative is replaced with the single figure of a woman, poised at the edge and looking out into space beyond the picture frame. No figure depicts this more powerfully than *Persona* in 1988, where the woman stands with her back to the mirror. Conspicuously gendered by a table scattered with cosmetics, lingerie and a wig of hair, she holds up a mask to shield herself. She defies the gaze of an ageing voyeur whose face is reflected in the mirror which she shuns.

This emboldened vision renders the woman with a powerful identity. A dramatic shift takes place when distinctions between the subject and artist collapse into one shared identity. When our discussions began in 1994, Anupam was working on the concluding print in this series which I call after her etching as *The Ceremony of Unmasking*. Her new print titled *Laundry* was tacked up to one wall of her studio, so raw that it looked as it could bleed. Torsos hung up to dry like clothes on a line with no heads, their legs dangling, twisted, one blood red – were these vessels her identities from the past? She offered one wry comment: "It is the outer skins of ourselves which are hung up to dry."

Through the body Anupam explores psychological relationships. In 1995 she makes her statement on matrimony when a man and woman are compressed into the foreground – their hands are interlocked but they remain remote from each other. They are trapped *Between Vows and Words*. In the stifling silence the hypocrisy of words such as love, desire, tenderness resonate around them.

In her recent work from 2005 Anupam uses familiar themes which she subverts in meaning. Referring to Manet's infamous painting of the reclining nude in *Olympia*, she introduces a man reclining on a sofa while the woman stands in the position of authority. The roles are reversed, with ambivalence as to who is the object and who desires! *Draupadi's Vow* is mesmerizing where the epic heroine from the Mahabharata is resurrected -- but not in the moment when she is disrobed, lost by the Pandava brothers in the game of dice. Anupam reminds me,

*Do you remember when Draupadi was dishonoured by the Kauravas?  
She vowed that she would not tie her hair again until she saw the  
blood of Duryodhana.*

With her wild tresses of hair flailing the air Draupadi is not shown vulnerable. Her taut and tense body is pushed into terrifying closeup as she waits, biding her time for revenge. In the margin Anupam introduces a contemporary woman stripped to her underwear, a daring exposition. She is a metaphor for many women who might face the dilemma of Draupadi, their bodies on sale.

The idea of reclaiming identity is central to explorations by Anupam and Gogi Saroj Pal. Until recently Gogi also focused on the body naked; she recalls her early paintings were met with contempt by male artists at Garhi art studios. Mythology offered her a fabulous range of icons of metamorphosis which she explored – images of *Kamadhenu*, the wish-fulfilling cow, *Kinnari*, half bird and half woman, *Urvashi*, the woman as centaur ridden by Kartikeya. In this new vocabulary of eroticism the woman-as-beast becomes her trump card. Through them she parodies the ideal woman imaged as Sita and Sati and Shakuntala.

For the first time Gogi introduces a historical persona from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Binodini, the celebrated actress from the golden era of Bangla theatre was cast in roles from Sati to Shakespeare's Cleopatra to Bankimchandra's literary heroines. Her most challenging performance as Sri Chaitanya brought her rave reviews – how could a woman, a 'public woman', play the role of a mystic and religious reformer? The great sage Sri Ramakrishna came to watch the performance and blessed her. Legend has it that she retired from the stage profession immediately thereafter – at the age of twenty-four. Her poignant memoirs *Amar Katha* were used as the stuff of popular melodrama enacted in plays and *jatras*.

Gogi's intentions have changed now from flaunting the erotic body, from subverting tradition. "My concern was to recover her spirit behind the body".

*It took me many years to paint Natti Binodini. I collected photographs of her wherever I found them. I am so unlike her but I understood her...*

*History has forgotten -- her except to dramatise her as the stereotype of the "fallen woman" which she called herself. Yet her achievements in her acting and her writings show her to be impassioned and alive – She was never passive!*

*The theatre compelled her to play many different roles, which led to contradictions within her. The irony is that she wanted to play the roles of middle class women, to be one of them -- which she could not be. Yet she was so good as to play the role of Chaitanya Prabhu – where she was able to transcend gender!*

Due to her role playing Binodini's body is like a vessel, possessed of different qualities in each image. Gogi drapes her in a sari to impart a "regional identity." In the first instance she wears a typical white sari with red border with her black hair left loose, holding a bouquet of red flowers. In the next she is serene in a yellow sari, with eyes dark and lustrous like the doe's, her face round like the moon and her body in full bloom. Here she assumes her role of Shakuntala. In the third her *ghungat* falls off to reveal a body and face yearning for fulfilment – against the shadows on red ground she possesses the devotion of Sita. In the fourth she is confident and at ease, smiling with a small yellow flower planted on her feet. In the fifth her body language changes dramatically. She is young and defiant, her slim figure opening up to the world like a flower.

For the first time again, Gogi experiments here with handmade paper. Colours create a wash effect where flowers and clouds float out from the background. Flowers in Binodini's hands, on her feet and in the background are metaphors. They intimate the cycle of life for an actress/ woman as she moves from the bloom of youth to maturity to old age. Binodini kneels with a bouquet of red flowers at her feet, in a poignant gesture of offering herself.

A woman's body is shaped through experience. Myths of origin from all over the world speak of the body being shaped out of clay. *Maati* means clay; it also means man or flesh, establishing a primordial bond between the two. Kabir sings of this bonding, of the clay being first kneaded and beaten then into shape by a wooden ladle. In Gujarat and Rajasthan the vessel storing grain and rice is created in human form, with a neck and spout at the top to pour in the grain and a womb to take it out. This was displayed at a seminal exhibition by Haku Shah at the Crafts Museum, titled *Maati, Form and forms of Mother Earth*.

Inspired by the poems of Kabir, Shrambhavi Singh creates her paintings linking the body to vessels – restoring them to a primeval sense of the sacred. She observes:

*When the potter constructs an earthen pot all the five elements are used. The pot is made of earth, shaped with water, baked in fire, stirred by the wind, created under open skies.*

*In my paintings I use acrylic and graphite. I introduce Elements from nature for the colours: burnt sienna from the earth, charcoal black which comes directly from the fire; smoke powder; neel/ indigo from plants for the blue of the universe; white from the raw surface of paper, which also comes from nature. These are the basic colours which compose most of my work. Through them my paintings relate to the universe.*

*The body is composed of these Elements. The womb is also a vessel which carries within it human life, the embryo about to be born. My work carries these implications -- of life.*

Floating in the space of the universe, her vessels are possessed of a sensuousness akin to the body. The *Earth* is tilted, pregnant with life; *Water* is upturned to spill over in concentric circles; *Fire* smoulders with embers shooting into the sky; the *Wind* is enveloped by vapours and clouds; the *Sky* alone stands erect like the firmament, impregnated with the planets and shooting stars. Looking upon them we sense within ourselves the rising and falling of waves, the rush of wind, the burning embers of fire. We are composed of these energies.

Mithu Sen titles her works in mixed media as *Territorial Relocations* -- because she takes us elsewhere, to refine the body on her own terms. If Shrambhavi's paintings restore us to a sense of wholeness in the body/universe, Mithu dissects the body into its physical elements of the heart, lungs, kidneys, spine, intestines. The body is torn apart, challenging the limits of our tolerance as she combines cruelty with beauty, pain with laughter. Embedded into these images are bits of whimsy: a bird's heart throbs with a bright sunflower within it. The looping contours of the intestines terminate with a pink butterfly. Somewhere there is a jar, the claws of a hen, a man's foot, a furry ball of cactus, a cup – familiar points of reference added on with deliberate intent to confound us.

It is of relevance that these drawings on paper were done while Mithu sat in the hospital in the past few months when her father was diagnosed with multiple ulcers. Over the past year and a half her own body has been subjected to medical treatment, especially the spine. Her images breathe now with a certain intimacy with the body. She jokes, " You can say that I am very physical".

Yet her work always has been obsessed with the body and its fragmentation. That she had initially considered a career in medicine made her an adept in adapting the human anatomy – to different purpose! For her the body became a

metaphor for transformation. She focused on her hair, on teeth and nails in her installations in ways that become terrifying in their implications.

*My work hinges on the morbid – it is not just fun. I cannot deny its morbidity – so I celebrate it through my work. In 'Unbelonging' I used my own hair, displaying it like a jewel set in a case.. The hair as part of our body is beautiful, a symbol of youth and power. But the moment it falls off it becomes repulsive, dirty, a sign of decay... It creates insecurity, as a sign of growing old. Hair is the sign of both pride and humiliation, of beauty and repulsion, of permanence and fragility.*

The hair, teeth, nails were early experiments of transforming beauty into terror. Mithu tattooed her body and experimented in video presentations. But her fascination now with the heart, the spine and the nervous system are grounded in her own recent experience. They push the limits of our experience into the unknown, combining pain with beauty and joy. They provoke the realization of impermanence and the transient nature of the body.

Installations by Puneet Kaushik are concerned with relocating the territory of the body, investing it with magical properties. By using goatskin as his ground, he invokes the ancient practice of ritual sacrifice. On one side of the splayed skin of the goat he introduces the map of the world – in an original insight which serves as equation with the body. Against the face of this map is a long braided pigtail of hair, black and beautiful, to depict the living present; on the reverse is implanted an assemblage of his discarded nails in red resin, suggesting decay. His explanation has less to do with exploring the world of globalization (though that may also be the cause) and more to do with life and death.

*Every time you relocate yourself, you are sacrificing so much – letting go of the past, your past selves, past memory. These are maps of the mind, of the body... On two sides of the goatskin like two faces of a coin, I have placed signs of the present and past. Hair decomposes very slowly whereas nails disintegrate much faster.*

*Sacrificial Vows II* explores the body with reference to himself, where he traces the psychic state of his alter ego. On one side of the splayed goatskin are two images of himself naked: his dual identity in conflict. Reaching down between the figures are the dark branches of a tree that plunge down, rooting him. On the reverse of the skin are a myriad eyes fanning out like a beehive, creating the mesmerizing gaze of the deity with panoptic vision.

These ceramic blue eyes originate from the iconic Krishna installed in his family shrine in Mathura – returning him to his past, offering redemption. His early images often were implanted with the eyes of the deity. The conflict of

identity is deeply ingrained in *Roots I and Roots II*. The shimmering surface of the outer body belies the inner tension where once more the roots of a tree plunge down the interior body. Fractured surfaces and multiple eyes speak of fragmentation, of sacrifice and redemption. The most electrifying image (literally) is his installation *Take it or Leave it*. His bold comment on an essential part of the female anatomy takes off from his earlier focus on the human anatomy. Worked in cotton and wire mesh, it offers celebration instead of sacrifice.

The body is rich in resources if we can 'see' beyond its surface qualities. The body is sacred as much as it is sensuous, earthy and erotic – that is the paradox! This is endorsed in this exhibition which follows the transformation in values and perception over the past twenty years.

Geeti Sen

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Dr. Geeti Sen is an art historian trained at the universities of Chicago and Kolkata. She was art critic for the Times of India Bombay and India Today, and for twenty years Chief Editor at the India International Centre, Delhi. Her books include *Paintings from the Akbar Nama* (1984), *Image and Imagination*, *Five Contemporary Artists in India* (1996), *Bindu: Space and Time in Raza's Vision* (1997), *Ganesh Pyne: Revelations* (2000) and *Feminine Fables, Imaging the Indian Woman in Painting, Photography and Cinema* (2002). Each of these books interprets art with an interdisciplinary approach, integrating art practice within the wider concerns of social values.

Among major awards she has received the Homi Bhabha Fellowship, Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship, a grant from the Asian Cultural Council New York and the Fulbright Visiting Professorship. She has lectured at six national institutions in the country and been invited to speak in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada, United States, France, Spain, Hungary and Russia.