

## **ECOLOGIES OF THE VISUAL, ECONOMIES OF PROFIT.**

by SHARLENE KHAN

There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter. (Barad, 2003/2008: 120).

Looking is a responsibility; a visceral, ethical and historically conscious practice. (Rose and Tolia-Kelly, 2012: 8).

In her essay 'Landscape as a Provocation: Reflections on Moving Mountains' (2006), social scientist Doreen Massey reflects on the current ecological crisis citing, "...there is loss, as the mobile planet, human and nonhuman, continues on its way." Our highly mediated, increasingly urbanised and industrialised world leaves us feeling anxious, discontent and helpless in light of the eco-dilemma. Delhi-based visual artist Vibha Galhotra's work focuses on such aspects of alienation and disconnect: individuals from each other; cultural traditions from indigenous knowledges; human culture from nature. [ii] But how does one deal with the intangibility of such concepts in material form? That is the challenge Galhotra's exhibition *Absur-City-Pity-Dity* (2015) raises using mixed-media sculptural work, drawings, and digital video. The tone of this show is set by the beauty and tactility on display, so that its sense of materiality draws attention to the fact that matter 'matters.' Galhotra's sense of working with material evidences a mind-set in which her chosen media are intrinsic conductors for concepts blurring boundaries between painting, sculpture, photography, and installation.

This sense of working in 'inter-spaces marks a 'both-and' [iii] philosophy that speaks to the locality and particularity of the artist's life, but also her engagement with global frameworks. This 'both-and' world view is akin to the concept of 'intra-activity' proposed by feminist theorist Karen Barad (2003/2008: 135) in her essay 'Towards an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter': Reality is not composed of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena, but of "things"-in-phenomena. The world is intra-activity in its differential mattering. It is through specific intra-actions that a differential sense of being is enacted in the ongoing ebb and flow of agency.



365 Days, 4 x 4 in (each of 365) Mixed media paper works & river (yamuna) water and glass bottles

In **Absur -City -Pity -Dity**, this intra-connectedness of life and art, of Delhi and the artist herself, of Indian culture with scientific curiosity and concern about human and nonhuman is interwoven in a number of ways. The exhibition begins with tales of 'I' in **365 DAYS**, which narrates personal interactions with Delhi, the vibrant, artistic centre India and home to 18 million residents. The density of the population presents many structural problems for India in terms of providing basic services to the growing urban population, as well as the effects that come with modernisation and capitalisation in the form of toxic air and water pollution, and the decimation of natural resources. It is almost maddening to try to comprehend the scale of these social issues. Material Feminisms editors Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (2008: 9) point out that environmental justice movements have been advocating that: "... the environment [is] not in some distant place, but within homes, schools, workplaces, and neighbourhoods.

These movements reveal that lower-class peoples, indigenous peoples, and people of colour carry a disproportionate toxic load." This manifests daily in Delhiites' lives and dreams, and is the inspiration of the everydayness of 365 DAYS. In these small framed, soiled narratives, Galhotra captures the anguish, confusion and smallness one feels daily bombarded with stories of disease, war, world poverty and natural disasters. Added to these are our own autobiographical baggage, and as the artist bravely makes known, that of participating in a precarious capitalist art field. Tensions pervade Galhotra's work and it is worth drawing on deconstructivist feminist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's invocation of 'imaginative error.' In an interview with Spivak, Jenny Sharpe asks her how she can employ the politically incorrect 'mother-earth' image ("the soil is our mother, your mother and mine") [iv] in her agricultural discussions with local Indian farmers. Spivak notes that such stereotypical metaphors represent an older world philosophy that can still be used to appeal to people for whom they have meaning and, thus, harnessed against capitalistic practices (Sharpe and Spivak, 2003: 615-616).

Spivak proposes using imagination as material practice, as a strategic instrument in fighting abstract concepts which mean little to everyday people: "This is the kind of thing whereby rather than use fear of punishment, you use a certain kind of imaginative terror in terms of the consequences of putting foreign seeds and fertilizers in the

soil" (ibid: 616). We see such 'imaginative terror' in the Sediment and Manthan works. In Sediment, the black sludge of the Yamuna River splashes like India-ink across large canvases. The water of the Yamuna is not simply a medium in this work, but a material visual actor speaking on the contradictions of its image of holiness and its reality as a contaminating, dying body of water. This is further exemplified in the resin-encased organics in Consumed Contamination in which scientific-like museum displays of exotic species are revealed as festering vegetables. How can 'holy' waters produce such unholy objects?



Manthan (, Single channel digital video projection, Duration 10 min. 43sec.

In the video **Manthan**, the Hindu mythology of Samudra Manthan (which means to 'churn the ocean') is performatively used to overcome desire and "mitigate the catastrophe of the river" (Galhotra, 2015). Neoprene-clad bodies dredge the waters with a clean linen cloth, but instead of the water cleansing, the cloth is blackened. Galhotra presents the resin-encased clean and soiled black cloths as material accompaniments to the distancing of the video, raising a compelling visualisation of both white and blackened cloths as colours of mourning. Galhotra's questioning of the gaze is akin to Gillian Rose and Divya Tolia-Kelly's (2012: 4) concept of 'ecologies of the visual,' where looking is not simply about contemporary production and consumption but rather:

The focus is on questions of effect, histories and ethics of engagement, interpretation, practice and process, which often fracture or displace the familiar fields of genre, media, audiencing and production. We can

describe this as a concern with ecologies of the visual; where the co-constitution of visibility and materiality is in constant dynamic process and situated within networks, hierarchies and discourses of power. Ecologies of the visual seek a holistic practice of understanding visual-material intra-actions within much larger frameworks of embodied and embedded socio-historical, political, economic and ecological frameworks. Visuality-materiality in Galhotra's work seduces the viewer into ecological awareness without the usual preachiness of such messaging. Here the "politics of doing things with the visual" are harnessed to political affectivity through the use of pleasing aesthetics to evidence the cost of economies of profit.

For instance, in her latest ghungroo works she interrogates appearances of 'value' and 'progress' in her now familiar trickster methodologies. In **Altering, Majnu Ka Tila and Kachra Chownk**, we see images and reflections of Delhi's cities and seemingly natural landscapes, all composed of the ghungroos which are burnished in different shades and sewn shut (this engages their visual tactility and simultaneously denies their sonic function). The reflections of these scenes hint at something amiss.



Majnu Ka Tila, Nickel coated ghungroos, fabric, wood, PU 52 x 178 x 2 in



Altering, nickel coated ghungroos, fabric, wood, PU | 52 x 178 x 2 in

In Majnu Ka Tila, the mirror-image of the cityscape, of 'development' and 'progress,' shows a decaying that is simultaneously happening, which is further intoned by the silenced ghungroos, the ringers of Indian culture. In the performativity [vi] of these picturesque landscapes, Galhotra deconstructs the illusion of material wealth, and the lies, desire and mythologization of tourism.

She uses 'landscape as provocation to encourage us to rethink the representational language, to feel the anxiety beyond the postcard image.

This is given further visualisation in the works **Flow I** and **II**, in which we see the ghungroos flowing down a wall and pooling into a puddle like an oil spill. Again, the absurdity of the concept is underwritten by the beautiful materiality on view. What is seeping and flowing? Placed



Flow, Nickel Coated Ghungroos, Fabric, PU 129 x 93 x 112 in

in a white cube gallery context, the trickster could be telling us that our high culture – itself an embodiment of Western philosophies and art in the distancing of culture from nature through the culturalization of nature – will not save us, that our disconnect with each other, mind from body and with 'nature' is seeping, festering, coming through the cracks. The writing is on the wall as they say – and will probably be purchased and admired. An absurd[-city-pity] dity which characterises all of Galhotra's practice, where mimetic qualities and almost-but-not-quietness is used to not only call the politics of ecology into question, but also the ethics of the art world as well as ideas of existentialism

In one panel from **365 DAYS**, Galhotra shows us that even the definition of 'absurdity' is, well, absurd: "The quality or state of being ridiculous or wildly unreasonable." She questions whether feelings of absurdity are indeed unreasonable or ridiculous given the contradictions and ambiguities we endure in post-

colonial societies. Recalling English playwright's Michael Esslin's theorisation on the 'theatre of the absurd,' in which absurdity was seen as modern man's feelings of estrangement and alienation when rationality and technology failed him,[viii] and Massey's ideas of loss today, the artist's creative methodologies evince a black humour wrapped in poetic reflection of the not-quite-right. How then to tackle these issues that make one feel utterly negligible?

Ecofeminists Marie Mies and Vandana Shiva (1993: 20) remind us that we are ultimately responsible: "Yet all women and all men have a body which is directly affected by the destructions of the industrial system. Therefore, all women and finally also all men have a 'material base' from which to analyse and change these processes." Galhotra, optimistically still believes that communal effort will turn things around. In her practice she often works collectively with local communities. In her ghungroo works, she constructs digital images which are then deconstructed into tonal patterns by a team of local women, and finally reconstructed into the incredibly heavy ghungroo works which evidences this team effort. In the digital video *Manthan*, we see bodies attempting to 'churn the ocean', an act which is meant to signify that our mortal and immortal selves cannot be divorced from the nonhuman entities whose fate we share. Part of Galhotra's 'politics of doing things with visuals' is a consideration of the geo-politics of "embodied, material encounter and engagement" (Rose and Tolia- Kelly, 2012: 3). Alaimo and Hekman (2008: 8) argue that from such 'situated actions' and a re-focus on material consequences, there is already a necessary shift from abstract concepts like 'ethical principles' to 'ethical practices' within specific contexts that "also allow for an openness to the needs, the significance, and the liveliness of the more-than-human world."

Galhotra's works are not simply about 'final products,' but a rethinking of processes of making and consuming.

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