

2017 by Parul Dave Mukherjee.

A Fauvist Feast: Towards a Tautology of Practice

Whenever we are before the image, We are before time?

The image often has more memory and more future Than the being who contemplates it

Georges Didi-Huberman¹

Tara Sabharwal's recent works show a remarkable transition to abstraction from her abiding interest in story telling — a transition achieved through a period of introspection and experimentation with a mode of practice. But her very title for the show *The Open Window* alludes to the contrary and may sound as an anachronism if read in narrative terms. On the one hand, the theme brings to mind the standard modernist trope of using a window as a frame within a frame (recall Matisse's *The Open Window*, 1905 that earned him and the group the title of a *fauve* or wild beast) and on the other, it speaks of her Baroda connection from the 1980s. Bhupen Khakhar's *You Can't Please All*, 1981, is all about the artist looking out of an open balcony to tell a subversive story. *The Open window* adds another layer to the meaning if it is seen as capturing the new visual imperative of the Baroda artists of the Narrative Group to immerse themselves in the local surroundings- to open the windows of their studios to gaze out.

The question of locale or a space in public continues to be an imperative even for Sabharwal but only as a point of departure. Locale probably works as a tenuous link between her earlier practice with narratives and her current preoccupations with the language of abstraction. Most of her works on this show begin as an outdoor sketch to be completed in the intimacy of her studio in New York. In fact, if the out door sketch is the most spontaneous act of art making that puts Sabharwal in touch with the here and now, the next stage in the studio involves forfeiting the directness of a sketch and embracing the mediation of a mono print. In a search for a new language of abstraction, Sabharwal evolves an art practice poised half way between a painting and a print.

Georges Didi-Huberman, "Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism" in *Compelling Visuality : The Work of Art in and out of History*. Eds. Claire Farago and Robert Zwijnenberg, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press,

2003.

Monoprint as a Mode of Practice:

Given her long association with two most influential sites of narrative art of 20th century- Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda and the Royal College of Art, London, Sabharwal began to feel trapped in the narrative/figurative style after its sway on her for more than 3 decades (from 1980s to 2014).

Therefore, the tension set up by her between abstract works and the figurative title of this show speaks to me of her dual legacy from Baroda. If, on the one hand, her sensibility was shaped by her teacher and friend, Nasreen Mohamedi's bold and anachronistic move towards abstraction², Gulam Mohammed Sheikh filled her mind with intricate web of story telling with built in handles to open not only windows to the world but also to her mind, her memory, so as to have a conversation with herself.

*The Open Window*³, a recurring theme for my entry into Sabharwal's work also aligns her with the tradition of modern European art spawned by Henri Matisse and Juan Gris; each of them has painted their respective "The Open Window" in their oeuvre. When I pointed out this affinity of her title with Matisse and the Fauvists, she looked delighted and reminded me of her training at the Royal College of Art, London. Her teacher, Ken Kiff, not only convinced her that story telling and abstract shapes may go hand in hand but also held up Fauvists like Andre Derain and German Expressionists like Emile Nolde as masters of "mark making", a term in wide circulation in Baroda during the 1980s.

² Her early memory of Nasreen clad in a white sari, with a cigarette in one hand holding intense discussions about painting will remain etched on her mind.

³ Sabharwal's own artist statement on *Open Window* hints at the autobiographical: "My latest non-figurative work, however, marks a return to the open awareness I sometimes felt as a child. I set my brush free, and through a process of spontaneous mark making, observe my thoughts until my mind begins to shut down. As I paint, a moving world of colors and shapes emerge and dissolve at an open window, transcribing the unseen, unknown within."

It is hardly surprising to see the tenacity of story telling in Sabharwal's works, which continues till 2014. Her desperation not to evolve a signature style led her to keep reinventing modes of story telling by experimenting with genres, even to the extent of mixing them up. Crossing the genres of figurative with landscape painting, paved the way for some extraordinarily

striking and hybrid works, as for example (*White Rain, 2013; Flux of Consciousness/Layered World, 2010*) but she could not resist the gravitational pull towards story telling.

Almost pushed against the wall of compulsive story telling, she had experienced a frustration and wondered if this problem was indeed a crisis of representation. Perhaps, she needed to radically reflect on her practice to break out of this rut of illustrating thoughts with figures.⁴ Perhaps, the problem lay with thinking with painting on canvas. Each time she would lay her brush laden with paint on the canvas, her mind would be teeming with images of human figures, trees, clouds and houses. It is here that her experience of print making came to her rescue and suggested a way out: what if she abandoned direct painting and brought in a mediation of layers as practiced in printmaking? What if she thought of the surface of painting as a register of palimpsests? What if her very starting point was not the bare surface of the canvas but a layer of paint on white paper pressed from a plexi-glass as a given? This very imposed condition bought her a new freedom to extend the time of painting such that at any moment, she could either play with depth (i.e. remove paint to display the undercoat) or surface (i.e. add layers of rice paper as in a collage). This way, she could continually explore the surface alternating between opacity and transparency. In place of a naked surface of a canvas, she would clothe it with layers, now adding some, now removing some.

⁴ Discussions around this dilemma with her friend, Yehuda Safran, helped her to rethink her practice just as her exposure to Bissier's works in Dusseldorf instructed her about experimenting with mono-painting.

This technical procedure suggested not only a new way of thinking and imagining but resulted into a new aesthetics of dancing and moving shapes, the drama of edges, a new interplay of figure and ground in which every ground can be a new figure, just as every figure doubles up as a new ground for yet another figure, a process that can carry on ad infinitum. This method of working that allowed her to hold spontaneity as the highest virtue; or, one could say, that with this initial surrender to freedom by turning away from

the bare canvas, Sabharwal earned her right to improvise and even ‘go wild’ like the Fauvists with coloured shapes and moving contours. Perhaps, taking a cue from another teacher in Baroda, K. G. Subramanyan, who had adopted mirror painting after the Tanjore School, she had to train her sensibility to think in reverse. So, each time she needed whites, all she would have to do was work backwards and expose the original surface of the paper, which would reincarnate itself as bright lights, as if emanating from within.

She recalls her fateful encounter with the works by Julius Bissier in Dusseldorf while showing her works in this German city in 2013. It confirmed her own intuition about monotype painting opening up abstract possibilities. While Bissier lets figuration sometimes enter his frame, Sabharwal rarely lets that happen; that some shapes bear accidental resemblance to animals or trees is more linked with post-production interpretation, either by herself or the viewer, than her artistic intention.

Shapes or Objects:

Shapes and objects have a tenuous connection between them. At what stage do lines escape being turned into an object? Sabharwal’s recent works emerge from this ‘inbetweenness’. Far from being a hyper-formal exercise, the perpetually coagulating shapes tug at memories, obsessions and experiences, especially if the ground colour of the plexi-glass impression is black.

The Breathing Whites:

If biomorphic shapes populate her canvases, they tie up with her treatment of mark making as an organic process. As she builds the forms layer by layer, she keeps open the option of adding and subtracting at any stage in her work so as to keep finality at bay. If mediated method of working between painting and printing imposes self-induced restrictions, it paradoxically also releases her from the burden of representation. The best index of this freedom is the ease with which she plays with the orientation of her canvases. At the time of the exhibition, she decides the orientation that best suits her works by rotating them around their axis to work out their interrelationships. Each work must not only be a good neighbor to the other but each must breathe, a lesson she learned as she transited from direct mark making to mono printing. The whites, even if they intersperse as streaks, have to be deployed with great care because they can either make or break a work. In fact, they are like little ‘open windows’ through which the paintings

find breath— too much would overwhelm or blind them and too little, smother them!

But then the question arises- at what stage do you declare such a painting complete? This sounds like a modernist dilemma but the decision to declare artworks complete has been a concern with artists of all ages. Leonardo da Vinci had once famously declared more than 5 centuries ago—“Art is never finished, only abandoned.” But not for Sabharwal, whose answer makes her sound like an anachronistic modernist ! Echoing Matisse, a painting for her reaches a point of completion by a subtle system of balancing between the transparent and opaque strokes, between flat surface and textures, between busy patterns and quiet surfaces. If the artist is attentive, the right moment to end is suggested by the painting itself and if missed, one has to start all over again till a pictorial balance is restored. Artistic agency is not just the sovereign domain of the artist’s selfhood but is distributed across the paint marks and the materiality of the surface.

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Almost resembling organs without bodies, the hypnotically moving shapes set against a tremulous light (*Black Swirls*, 2014; *Night Nets* 2014, *Night Sparkle* 2014 and *Super Woman* 2016) conjure up a dazzling interiority. They are about deep spaces, of the mind, of the subconscious, undersea, night sky or about light itself. They are floating spaces without a horizon. They may resemble a meta-scape but the sheer technical procedure of working through layers, image translation across surfaces and acts of mark making disallow the mystical; instead, they set into motion the poetics of paint and a dialectic between the familiar and the uncanny.

That technique is not just neutral medium is underlined by what she refers to as “Ghost Paintings.” The series of *Ghost of Solid Ground*, 2016; *Swing* (*Ghost of Conjugation*, 2017) is so called on the account of a method of working that used the left over paint on the plexi- glass to engender another round of works. They are like ‘after works’, (quite like Walter Benjamin’s

‘after image’) 5 putting to use the remaining colour on the plexi-glass to create faded colour patches that resemble apparitions through their suggestive shapes and transparent surfaces. So if these works receive titles that turn process itself into evocative names alluding to ghosts and historicity of images, there are many others that set up a contrast between abstract paintings and figurative titles. *Float (Ghost of Submerged)*, 2016) *Listening*, 2015.

⁵ Francoise Meltzer, *Seeing Double: Baudelaire's Modernity*, Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

The Open Window as Post- Identity Politics?

The Open Window invokes a connection between the artist as onlooker and the world outside. This is quite different from the first feminist exhibition in India⁶ that was titled ‘Through the Looking Glass,’ during the late 1980s in which Arpita Singh, Madhvi Parekh, Nalini Malani and Nilima Sheikh (the latter two associated with Baroda) had participated.⁷ The trope of “Looking Glass” in the title of this exhibition demanded a different looking in the context of identity politics of the mid 1980s. When Indian women artists of the feminist exhibition demanded a certain interiority that a looking glass or a mirror could promise as a significant feminist allegory, Sabharwal had left India and was working in the international milieu of New York.

Did she bypass the political moment by her location outside India? Or entered into another kind of struggle that women artists of colour confront in a world art centre like New York?⁸ In this location, the art discourse had moved beyond the frame of identity politics by the time of her transition to abstract mono prints in 2014 happened. Over the years, the nature of struggle had changed in which the demarcation between centre and margins had grown fuzzier.

In Sabharwal’s own words,

Yes, it is a struggle having a hyphenated identity (Asian-American) in the US, but it is a struggle at a time when there are enough of us, when the center is outnumbered by us and knows our strength. Many NYC [New York City] artists are united in forming wonderful supportive communities across

class, color, gender and orientation. It is a band of the ‘others’ moving into the center while the center seriously redefines itself and we too, as ‘others’; are a part of it in different ways. We are not living in a diasporic enclave of nostalgia....⁹

⁶ The exhibitions, titled, ‘Through the Looking Glass,’ were held during 1987-1989 first at Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal and subsequently at Kala Yatra, Bangalore; Shridharani, New Delhi; Jehangir Art Gallery, Bombay and Center for Contemporary Art, New Delhi.

⁷ Deeptha Achar, ‘Invisible Chemistry: The Indian Women’s Movement and the Constitution of the Indian Woman Artist,’ in *Articulating Resistance: Art and Activism in India*. Eds. Deeptha Achar and Shivaji K Panikkar. New Delhi: Tulika, 2012. 219-234.

⁸ Sabharwal has been a part of the Women’s studio workshop including Robert Blackburn Printmaking workshop (for 30 years) Asian American Art Center, South Asian Womens’ Collective, SAWCC and many more.

⁹ Personal communication, 14 th September, 2017.

Sabharwal’s looking apparently invokes none of the angst of a feminist politics associated with a postcolonial cultural politics. Instead, it speaks of a cosmopolitanism, an ease with Euro American modernism that is no longer identified with ‘a few white men’. If a mirror plays a critical role in a feminist politics for asserting subjectivity of women artists in India in 1980s, Sabharwal seeks the transparency of an open window to look on to the world in which abstraction as a style warrants neither apology nor justification.¹⁰ It is a language that is open for all, which can be made one’s own by a tautology of one’s practice- I paint because I paint.

— Parul Dave Mukherji September, 2017

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Indian Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art, ed. Arindam Chakrabarti, London: Bloomsbury, 2016. She is currently co-editing with Partha Mitter and Rakhee Balaram a comprehensive history of modern and contemporary Indian art in a volume titled 20th Century Indian Art.

¹⁰ This apparent freedom was made possible by years of feminist struggle in the US which has today come a long way from the foundational question raised by the American art historian, Linda Nochlin in 1971 in her article- “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” published in *ARTnews* (January, 1971). However, the visibility of women of colour in the discourse around art and literature had to wait until Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s path breaking article in 1984 (“Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”. *Boundary 2*. 12:3-13:1. pp. 333-358), even if Asian-American artists too engaged with this question in their own practice.

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