

JHAVERI CONTEMPORARY

Manisha Parekh: **Line of Light**

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Two forces govern the universe, the French mystic, Simone Weil believed— light and gravity. “The source of man’s moral energy is outside him, like that of his physical energy (food, air etc.). He generally finds it, and that is why he has the illusion—as on the physical plane—that his being carries the principle of its preservation within itself,” she writes in the beginning of her posthumously published treatise, *Gravity & Grace*. “Privation alone makes him feel his need. And in the event of privation, he cannot help turning to *anything whatever* which is edible,” she elaborates. Eating is thus a remedial act, a means by which one sustains one’s existence. However, if the ultimate end is transcendence, the *anything whatever* that is ingested in order to either satisfy hunger or fulfil a bodily demand for nutrition must be qualified.

Weil’s prescription was deliciously simple, one that bridged the relationship between the biology of the human and the sentience of the plant world: “a chlorophyll conferring the faculty of feeding on light”. Where Nietzsche, in *Thus Spake Zarathushtra*, had preached that man’s original sin was that primarily “as long as mankind has existed, man has felt too little joy”, Weil proposes that all sin, even *the* original sin stemmed from a single fault: “incapacity to feed upon light, for where capacity to do this has been lost all faults are possible.”

Manisha Parekh’s show, *Line of Light*, subtly epitomizes the profound fecundity of such a consumptive gesture. Her installation, *Shadow Garden*, composed of 100 units of Japanese cypress wood masquerading as Fuki (butterbur) leaves, quietly embodies the metaphor of feasting upon light. The drilled holes create a trail upon each constituent leaf, rendering the wood pliable and porous, edible even. This staged tableau references the original patch of Fuki leaves Parekh encountered during her residency in 2013 at the Aomori Contemporary Arts Center in the northern part of Honshu Island, near Hokaido, when she lived in a building designed by Tadao Ando in the middle of a forest. “For me the reference was the worm,” she says, speaking of the many instances when she discovered what could have been described as an infestation; worms chomping on the Fuki leaves, thus unintentionally indulging in the habit of mark-making that has been such a central aspect of Parekh’s own abstractionist practice. Interestingly, it is not the leaf but the stem of the Fuki plant that is foraged and prepared as part of Japanese cuisine. Parekh doesn’t intuit the worm’s presence as parasitical, but as absorptive. “I felt, when you go to another culture, how do you consume the food, the alcohol, the people, language, music?” she says. “I felt perhaps I was that worm consuming.”

Though Parekh had initially imagined working with paper, given Japan’s historical inventiveness with the medium, all that existed on site was a wood workshop. She outlined the Fuki leaves on the wooden board, then, by cutting out two each, was able to acquire the form of the drawn image and its mirror equivalent. She decided to use a drill to pierce holes into 100 such cypress sheets that mimicked the worms’ trajectory. “I’d taken some fabric with me, which found a presence in the form of little blobs of red silk,” she says, speaking of her representation of the feasting worms. The definite shadow the work casts projects the synthesis of light and its organismic ingestion.

In another significant body of work, *Gratitude*, a word that semantically and philosophically could be read as an extension of Grace, Parekh draws from her existing practice of automatic or organic drawing that is not premeditated so much as dictated by the impulsive logic of inscription. Site-specific in that its references encompass many complex aspects of the manner in which time gets imprinted on peculiarly Japanese signifiers or objects – like old kimonos whose tears register a chronological passage, or the Kanji script itself, the amalgamation of centuries of appropriation and assimilation – *Gratitude* was impelled by Parekh’s intrinsic articulation of what could be considered calligraphic, even though her drawings were never recognisably producers of definite meaning. Parekh seized the opportunity to incorporate the Kanji script into her work, working with characters that precisely denoted the elements she was experiencing first-hand: rain, mist, tree, sun, and mountains. “I started by filing holes,” she says, expressing the work’s existence in continuity with that of *Shadow Garden*, except, here the trail symbolised a meaning-full void. As part of her decision to work exclusively with local material, Parekh was drawn towards an old indigo factory in the vicinity. Each of the five drawings made on Arches paper was dipped into a tub of indigo, after which it was dipped into Sumi ink. The combination resulted in the blue-black hue that marks each scroll-like work that was then hung out to dry. The dyed blue was also meant as a visual throwback to the indigo-dyed kimonos used in pre-modern Aomori, such as in *kogin-zashi* needlework, curator Kondo Yuki writes. “These responses did not occur simply because she was producing a work during a residency, but through Parekh producing an artwork by consciously assimilating the external factors of the environment in which she frequently finds herself, as well as her impressions and memories of it, or otherwise the elements associated with that place, and then abstracting these through making them into a minimized form.”

With *Tangled Foot*, a series of 12 watercolours on Arches paper, Parekh continues the idiom of organic abstraction where the line assumes the freewheeling, free-willed aura of a protagonist, and where form is constituted by three such differently coloured and textured lines in dialogue with each other, sometimes intersecting, sometimes entangling, sometimes separating. There is the boldness of indigo, the sureness of gold, and a shadow region composed of a scrawl-like peripheral zone. The varying permutations seem almost mathematical or cellular, with these three constituting bodies and their shifting dynamic animating the visual field, so that each watercolour, seen in relation to the accompanying 11, seems to embrace the subtlety of movement alongside a spirit of playfulness.

Finally, with *Invisible Notes*, a series of 100 drawings composed of silver watercolour on customized handmade rag paper, each four by six inches, Parekh plays with the almost alchemical act of drawing with light, collaborating with its vicissitudes and the perpetually shifting contours of its perception and reception. She achieves a startling viscosity with the otherwise liquescent material, and uses this texture to create hieroglyphic abstractions that could be read like palimpsests. These “notes” could be interpreted as diaristic entries testifying to forms she may have either witnessed or imagined, as documents attesting to her particular process, her penchant for reducing essence to its elemental form. Each note conceals luminescence instead of out rightly manifesting it, thus quietly engendering the gospel of light.

Rosalyn D’Mello

Manisha Parekh was born in Gujarat in 1964 and raised in New Delhi, where she lives and works. She holds an MA in painting from both the Royal College of Art, London (1991-93) and the MS University in Baroda. She was one of the founding members of Khoj International Artists Workshop. Numerous solo shows of Parekh’s work have been held across the world, most recently at the Dr. Bhau Daj Lad City Museum, Mumbai, and her works are in public and private art collections in India and internationally, including the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi; Lalit Kala Akademi, Ahmedabad; Jehangir Nicholson Collection, Mumbai; Royal College of Art, London; Peabody Essex Museum, USA; Heinrich-Boll Stiftung, Cologne; and Robert Lodar Collection, London. She has been a part of significant residencies such as transXform at ACAC-Aomori, in Japan, 2013. This is her first exhibition with Jhaveri Contemporary.