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Gyan Panchal

against the threshold

January 31—03 March 2018

“I was surprised to hear the innocent and learned inhabitants of that country communicate their ideas by sounds.” — Helenus Scott, *The Adventures of a Rupee* (1782)

To encounter Gyan Panchal’s sculptures is to contemplate the idea of encounter itself. There is, of course, a *thing* in front of you, whose provenance is not completely decipherable: What was its life before it was so carefully transformed? Where was it found? How was it first made? Now, is it still that same thing? Each label hints at the specifics of material, but to think about the encounter is also to consider oneself as one thing among other things, to accept that we cannot entirely comprehend the valence of our connection with what lies outside of us, only approach it from a certain angle.

Panchal’s making begins with an investigation into the found objects he gathers, working on their surfaces in order to become familiar. The objects are usually taken from the places in which he lives and works, as in *against the threshold*, which comprises materials procured in Bombay. Panchal’s process, then, is a means of getting closer, of attempting to approach things that are around us. By washing them, slicing through them, or sanding them down, Panchal inevitably makes these things unfamiliar in appearance, distant from our understanding of them otherwise. The folds of a vest are frozen in resin; the inner layers of a bucket are exposed; the rawness of a polished aluminium *thali* is drawn out. In these activities, there is a deep concern with looking outward, at making contact and acknowledging the expanded idea of existence, while asking whether the inside of something other than oneself can ever be accessed.

Once put up for display, Panchal neither stresses upon the process of his work, nor effaces the traces of it having taken place, although excavating the history and context of each material was once the principal focus. The sculptures bear fingerprints, at times, although no record is presented of all of the stages before they got there. Some of the smooth and luminous surfaces suggest care, an unusual approach to preservation that leaves little of what was once known. Nevertheless, just as any act of caring has the potential to turn violent, Panchal’s actions seem to exceed mere friction in the transformations that they effect. They pose questions about how we move within the

world: What does the intent of grasping the other do to the self? And, certainly, to the other itself?

In failing to define the space between the thing and the viewing eye, we might have to resort to calling it a threshold. What the threshold is, however, or how one can cross it, remains elusive. If it is the distance between one state and another, then it may already have been traversed during the re-making of the thing—or, not quite at all. For, we return to a variation of the queries thought at the beginning of our encounter: What exactly is the thing-ness of a thing? And, how can we make a connection with it? Panchal pushes the impulse behind this quest further in placing pieces of the same material in proximity with each other. We see a wooden theatre mask of a goat flush with a slab of East Indian Walnut wood in *the leaving*. Even as we imagine a common point of origin, the same-ness of the material comes under scrutiny, and we must account for fragmentation rather than authenticity.

To encounter Panchal's sculptures is to reckon with the vastness of all that is external even as it seems to graze the contours of your finitude. In this series of work, in particular, presence is indicated through items like vests in *the seed* or the boiler suit in *the spark*. These layers are usually in such proximity with the skin that they could be considered extensions of the body. In Panchal's sculptures, however, their separation from the body, and the body's abdication, calls for introspection of our encounter with the outside. Or, to put it another way, in the words of the artist:

Something hits the window, as if it were someone coming up against you. The violence of the impact stifled. A rumour, perhaps an object, or a neighbour who may have come to visit you? You struggle to distinguish the origin of this thing that the wind brings to you, with its agitated outlines, this form constrained by the force of the city and thrown up towards you. Yet, it does not come from nowhere and does not rest anywhere. It clings to the surface and does not intend to let go. It tries to stay on the edge, failing to pass to the other side. It is trapped. You observe this uncertain and trembling thing behind the glass, and you feign to understand that it addresses you.

If the narrative capacity of Panchal's sculptures seems potent—implied even in titles like *the leaving*, *the seed*, or *the beating*—it is because in order to be situated within a world, we tend to narrate it. The threshold might just be the space across which stories can be told, or at least where they are re-imagined.

Zeenat Nagree