

Shreya Pate: House on the Move – Fictions of the Object World

By Gayatri Sinha

Standing at the long table with objects, you have an Alice in Wonderland moment, stepping briefly into the world of the charming and enigmatic ingenue. You realize that you are looking at miniaturized objects that appear plucked out of a domestic space, displaced and somehow disoriented. An oversized jug and container, a miniaturized step well, a narrow, unusable swing, an unevenly structured clothesline – all appear like somewhat eccentric, cement-cast versions of your memory of the original.

Shreya Pate in her first exhibition seems to reverse and reuse her fundamental skills to probe, not without irony, the truth of built structures. The tone of the monochromatic works is modest, but you cannot miss their hard edged intent, or indeed the sweeping excisions she makes to her built spaces. For one, the platform, the most fundamental of architectural forms, appears to have been cleanly spliced away. Similarly, the foundation, which moors structures and renders the use of function, enclosure and protection in architectural forms, is also smoothly dispensed with. We might be inclined to believe that these are models, works in process, preparatory to a larger ambition. What we see however is the inverse: conventionally large structures are rendered small and unstable, and domestic appliances like the water jug confound with their sheer size and weight. Objects that appear to shrink or swell appear disturbed or displaced. We realize that the domestic is only a relational notion, a compulsion to consider the inner and outer modes of experience.

An architect by training, Shreya worked for three years at a Mumbai architectural firm before studying architecture at the RCA in London. It is here that her intense scrutiny of the built object appears to have begun. The outcome is that she posits some fundamental questions to the uses of space: if a built structure is bereft of a ground and is rendered mobile, how does it gain valence as a mobile object? How does relative size inform the idea of an object?

Speculations in Space and Size

“For, in point of fact, a house is first and foremost a geometrical object, one which we are tempted to analyse rationally. It is dominated by straight lines, the plumb line having marked it with its discipline and balance. A geometrical object of this kind ought to resist metaphors that welcome the human body and the human soul.”[1]

Despite the explicit and admirable formal aspect of perfect casting, it is important to realize that the objects in the gallery are not an end in themselves. Rather they hint at representation but also inhabitability, even a somewhat eccentric decoupling of structure and form, that is rich in subversive intent. If the various functions of inhabiting, of haptic care and comfort are evacuated, what meaning can we attach to the domestic? Shreya allows our understanding to teeter on the cusp of speculation: these objects appear within defined categories even as they challenge the Aristotelian dictum that an object is what it is. Unfixed and dispossessed, an object may not be what it is. Can these objects of everyday use, on the lines of Dada, then attain a meaning that is entirely speculative? Can we interpret these forms in their immaculate fabrication as a challenge to the familiar symbols of human aspiration?

Shreya speaks of casting and the making of *A House for a Single Person* as borne of a need “To dwell into a deeper experience out of ordinary acts”. [2] In two videos prepared as an academic exercise, we see the artist as she documents herself in her living space: a square, cast structured table cum seating arrangement is variously used, its smooth surface, hard edged and sparse in its functionality. Using it in different ways to eat her meal, she seems to offer a comprehensive utilitarian philosophy with regard to the object world. Turning away from the structure, however the image that stays with the viewer is of the solitary eater, shrinking into the smallest, most utilitarian space, that is both fixed and contained.

Shreya's contemplations for the house for the single person draw us into two divergent strains of thought. In his rumination on the phenomenological readings of the house and its memory within the realms of the poetic imagination, Bachelard writes, "If I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace." [3] What shifts in perception does Shreya encourage us to make when the bath tub and the clothes line, one heavy and squat, the other delicate and uneven, loom large above structures of expediency such as her miniaturized staircase? Here Bachelard's assertion: "I must now show that the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind" is systemically dismantled, or to use his word "de-socialized", in this body of work. Afloat in the space of the gallery, these objects are denied any associative value in a larger memory field. While artists like Gregor Schneider recreate a "double house", or a house within a house, with all the warmly suggestive simulations of domesticity, Shreya does the reverse by locating all her chosen domestic appurtenances outside the house. Thus architectural elements of everyday use become sculptural objects of aesthetic contemplation.

Here we may come back to the platform or the ground and its excision from her body of work. As the oldest built space for socialization, ritual and exchange in human history, the platform is also a space for performance. Writing in *e-flux* on the history of the platform, Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara describe how it was used in the earliest human settlements, like Catalhoyuk, in southern Anatolia, which existed as a settlement from 6500-5500 BC. Aurelio and Tattara who speak of the philosophy of the platform in structures as wide ranging as Mohenjo-daro and the Jama Masjid in Delhi suggest that in Catalhoyuk: "Activities inside the house were organized not by enclosed rooms, but by platforms of different height — some were used for cooking and some for sleeping. Catalhoyuk shows how in early forms of sedentary inhabitation, the horizontal datum of the ground and not the vertical enclosure of walls defined the structure's use." [4] Denying her sculptural objects a ground, Shreya gives the structures primacy in her metal wall pieces. Etched with geometric drawings of her built structures, the metal plates are corroded with acid and then washed with resin to resemble a raw, earthy surface, in terracotta tones. On them, the structures of a bathtub or kitchen area – fragments of utilities – invoke an intense scrutiny of the objects of everyday life. What Shreya creates is a sense of the "ground" as surface, or even as platform, in keeping with the earliest signs of domestication, with an emphasis on the essential functions of cooking, bathing and sleeping.

How then do we view Shreya Pate's first encounter with the public sphere, of a nascent emerging artistic position? The answer would lie somewhere in the questing spirit; in her first note to the writer, Shreya wrote of the pursuit of *turiya* and *anahat*, not as transcendental states but as those attained in the midst of the most quotidian acts. [5] With cosmic pervasiveness, *turiya* in Hindu thought represents the fourth state of consciousness, the previous three being the state of wakefulness, dreaming and deep sleep. *Turiya* which is pure consciousness or liberation is described as "the state of being one with the Self" [6] Similarly *anahat naad* or pure sound excludes all sense of the immediate or the mundane, leading to a higher state of realization – a state which she identifies as attainable even in the most humble acts. Within this body of work, how are the seeming contradictions of palpable objects of use reconciled with a yearning of the conscience? Perhaps the answer lies in Shreya's Miro drawings — small, notational works, inspired by her visit to Spain, at Cap de Creus, near Barcelona. It was here that in carefully recording her own movements as ergonomic and creating spaces around her basic needs, Shreya set about designing the objects on view. "Architecture does have that capability to move, and this installation is also an effort towards that untold expression." [7]

Afterword

".....there is ground for taking the house as the tool for analysis of the human soul. Our soul is an abode." 8

Tucked into a corner of the gallery, is perhaps the most elusive image in this exhibition: the image of a house, whole but distant, projecting off the face of a cascading rock. The presence of this drawing in the gallery is wonderfully prescient.

Several years ago, on a visit to the Himalayas, the horizon appeared blocked by a near vertical mountain face. On the surface of the stone, that glistened and reflected the evening sun, a solitary figure appeared to be climbing, the ochre of his robes unmistakable in the slow, treacherous ascent. Rising on the steep gradient much above, diminished by the distance was a small hut, a hermit's refuge, perilously perched on the rock face. A House for a Single Person. The recall of that incident through the dialogic understanding that Shreya sets up, between a house and its evacuation of all material content, speaks to the recognition of the persistence of human aspiration. One that is sought with such rigorous endeavour, even as it is circumscribed by our limitations.

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[1] Gaston Bachelard, trans., *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 48.

[2] Note to the writer dated August 16, 2021

[3] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 6.

[4] Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara, “Architecture Platforms: Architecture and the Use of the Ground,” *e-flux.com*, 2019, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/conditions/287876/platforms-architecture-and-the-use-of-the-ground/>, accessed on September 23, 2021.

[5] Letter to the writer dated August 17, 2021.

[6] *Mandukya Upanishad*, 7.

[7] Letter from the artist to the writer, August 17, 2021.

[8] Bachelard (*ibid.*) 36