

Manish Nai – Material Matters

The relationship between painting and textiles has been a long standing if minor conversation in art and Manish Nai's practice frequently situates itself within it. For example, in works where fragments of butter paper are sandwiched between stretched canvas and a top layer of jute, the effect is to bring the woven structure to the surface. As if to suggest that painting's primary material is not actually paint but fabric.



Manish Nai, Untitled VII, 2022, Butter paper collage on natural jute, watercolour, 66 x 72 in / 167.6 x 182.8 cm

An important moment in this conversation comes with the intriguing but under-acknowledged intervention by a group of French artists who gathered around the name Support/Surfaces, and who in the late 1960s, early 70s brought an intense focus to the presence of painting as object in the world. They did this by foregrounding the materiality of painting, and through a literal deconstruction of its component parts. Its support (a wooden stretcher) and its surface (a cloth canvas). Support/Surfaces were theoretically and politically orientated and they advanced an unlikely combination of post-structuralism and Maoism with an interest in American Abstraction which was then the dominant movement in western painting. By taking painting apart, taking it off the wall so to speak, into the gallery and out onto the street as they did, these artists hoped to break the rigid frame which kept painting separate from its social context. And by separating the canvas from its stretcher, they also, inevitably, arrived at a consideration of canvas as a piece of cloth and they explored its textile qualities; by draping it, dyeing it, folding it, and decorating it with geometric patterns.

What appeared as acts of quiet radicalism at a time when the rules of painting were a matter for heated debate, are now procedures that fit more comfortably into an expanded notion of painting which can include sculptural elements as well an overture to the vernacular. Untitled works from 2017 by Nai develop this relationship between fabric and wood that is mentioned above.

A series of 8 strips of timber lean against the gallery wall – as if two stretchers have been taken apart – and are wrapped with bits of cloth. But rather than blank canvas this cloth includes found fabrics with a past life as clothing or as textiles for domestic use. Twisted and compressed, they produce dense knots of colour like blobs of paint, in vivid pinks, yellows, blues, blacks and browns. In an installation version of the work, over a hundred of these sticks are suspended from the ceiling, and the configuration of wrapped cloth becomes a dense field of colour, texture and pattern, like a three-dimensional patchwork quilt – or the sorts of places where textiles can be seen densely packed together, such as a flea market, a laundry, or a crowded commuter train.



Manish Nai, Untitled, 2015, used clothes, wood

More recent works from 2023 involve *objets trouvés*. These are the corrugated metal panels which Nai recovers from the streets of Mumbai. Described in the title as 'found/old' they seem embattled. They are mottled and textured with rust and punctured with holes where the screws, which have held them together in some other configuration – a temporary shelter perhaps – have been removed.

Of interest for the artist in their selection is the gradation of colour that remains when paint is applied to the corrugated sheets and then worn away through ageing as a result of the corrosive environment of the city. Once assembled, these works are punctuated with a primary red and blue, but generally their patinated surfaces are a sombre palette of greys. In the gallery they signify as large abstract paintings, despite being made from metal sheets, and to my mind a relationship with textiles also persists.

Not through the work's materials, but through their construction and through visual associations. The corrugated folds in the steel are like jumbo chord or giant pleats. The process of construction seems like some rough form of applique or patchwork. Not the side-by-side distribution of a neatly sewn patchwork quilt, more the Japanese Boro patchworks which are made from the tattered rags that give this genre its name. Dip dyed with indigo, these rags are salvaged and stitched into a thick padded cloth to provide warmth and are used to make blankets and clothing. Boro patchwork emerged in rural and impoverished parts of Northern Japan during the 19th century in response to a general scarcity of things and in particular a dearth of cotton as well as other types of cloth.

With the arrival of modernity Boro became negatively associated with peasant culture, with poverty, with the discarded, and with things that are made by hand out of necessity, but it has since been recuperated and celebrated for its aesthetic qualities, brought into museum collections and used in avantgarde Japanese fashion.

This reception is justified given that a late 19th Century child's Boro sleeping mat is as beautiful as anything. Rolled out flat it presents its elegant monochrome composition. The scraps of cloth are textured with age and unevenly dyed to give a painterly effect. At the same time they have a uniformity through their immersion in the blue dye which brings them together in a subdued tonal range.



Manish Nai, Untitled, 2023, found/old metal corrugated sheets, wood, 85 x 60 x 5 in / 216 x 152.4 x 12.7 cm

Their different sizes, and the varying dimensions of the stripes and checks contained within these scraps produce a complex and pleasing geometry. The stitching, which is dense, intricate and all-over, creates another micro- geometry, a level of detail that is evenly distributed across the surface of the Boro, like Kantha cloth, although here the stitches seems to follow a gridded arrangement rather than a linear one. Placing one of Nai's metal reliefs side by side with a Boro patchwork you see formal similarities between the two, in terms of their palette and composition, and also the fact that their materials have been salvaged from poverty. Only the scale is dramatically different and the relative hardness and softness of these works.



Manish Nai, *Untitled*, 2023
Found/old metal corrugated sheets, wood
78 x 98 x 5 in / 198 x 249 x 12.7 cm



Child's Sleeping Mat (boro Shikimono), late 19th century

In Nai's reliefs, metal sheets are piled up to create layers which stand out. An abrasive gesture that emphasises the work's presence. They are reminiscent of the sculptural installation *Kagebangara* by the artist Sheela Gowda, one in a series of works made using metal sheets from flattened tar drums. In *Kagebangara* these sheets are distributed across the floor and walls of the gallery, and their rusted, discoloured and corrugated surfaces are contrasted with blocks of yellow and blue tarpaulin, recalling geometric abstraction and the history that goes with this. The installation also conceals small spaces secreted within it, referencing another use for these metal sheets which is to make temporary dwellings for the workers who tar the roads. The work invites you to have an aesthetic experience, and then it shows you the cramped dimensions and flimsy construction of these roadside shelters. While Nai's corrugated metal reliefs thrust the materiality of the city towards you, they also recede into patterns,



Sheela Gowda, *Kagebangara*, 2008
Flattened tar drum sheets, tarpaulin

rhythms and textures of the compositions contained within their uneven parameters. Gowda's sculpture require a consideration of the social worlds from which her materials derive. Nai's works using similar kinds of materials remain open for a social reading to a different degree. While Nai's works are principally formal the choice of material still matters. It makes them susceptible to different visual effects and to alternative readings both serious and absurd.

You look for example at a large untitled drawing from 2021, with its scrawled, compulsive lines which move in repetitive circles and it feels like a Cy Twombly, only punkier. You read the label and see that it's been made using gouache on flyscreen material. And because the paint gets trapped in the flyscreen's mesh, its application is rough and diffused, as if applied with a miniature can of spray-paint. Then the size and shape of the frame appear like a window and the frenzied circling lines the path of a fly that is trying to get in.



Manish Nai, Untitled 6, 2022
Acrylic paint on flyscreen, 48 x 48 in / 121.9 x 121.9 cm

Grant Watson
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References

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Childs Sleeping Mat, Japanese, Late 19th Century.