

NOTICEBOARD

Memory, Materiality, Sediment: Benitha Perciyal

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Amrita Gupta Singh is an art historian, researcher, and writer with an interest in art education and management. Over the past decade, she has contributed essays, reviews and interviews for art books, journals and periodicals. She was a Visiting Lecturer at the J.J. School of Arts, Mumbai (2003), Fellow, ArthinkSouthAsia (2010-11) and Contributing Editor to ArtFair magazine (2010-2012). Her present research focuses on the art practices of North-East India under the Arts, Research and Documentation Program (2013-14) of the India Foundation for the Arts. Currently, she is Program Director at the Mohile Parikh Center, Mumbai, and continues to write on modern and contemporary Indian art.

The French philosopher, Felix Guatarri's proposition of an 'ecosophical praxis' [1] adjoins to Benitha Perciyal's modes of seeing and making that is transversal and interdisciplinary, enfolded in sensory meanings, social flows and human subjectivity. Guatarri speaks of processual paths between three ecologies - *social, mental, environmental* - and how creative approaches can address questions of our habitat and everyday living. Drawing analogies to the way natural material shaped her practice, Perciyal speaks of two key experiences after her formal art education: firstly, in the year of 2000, she spent hours ruminating on a cotton tree with its pods bursting with seeds from the balcony of her aunt's house in Chennai, [2] interlinking the seed to the female self and form. Secondly, her orphaned pet squirrel, Jerry, took her to the wild [3] and that became instrumental in shaping her conceptual and visual parameters, in its cognitive and affective processes. For Perciyal, the seed is the core of her praxis, in both its formal materiality and philosophical dimensions of time, space, memory and birth. And in memory, she finds sediments [4] seeing, smell, emotion, rootedness and also impermanence of the body. She also attributes her early readings of translated Russian literature to Tamil in her understanding of sediment [5]- what you cannot erase, of words that have settled to shape figures of the peasantry and worker in her sculptures.

An alumnus of the Government College of Arts and Crafts, Chennai, Perciyal trained in painting (BFA) and printmaking (MFA) and progressed to self-portraiture, conceptual installations, and found assemblages after she received a junior research grant to work at the Lalit Kala Studios in Chennai. Through printmaking, she discovered the qualities of surface, texture, and positive/negative space, which expanded to three dimensional work employing the corporeality of touch. Her transversal practice comes forth in her solo exhibition, *Aggregate* at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai (August 8-October 15, 2019), firmly embedded in figurative and representational forms, and also exploring minimalist abstraction. Four circular and convex containers hang on the walls of the gallery, transforming it into a sanctum of pristine space and exquisitely crafted texture. In art historical terms, minimalism presented a fundamental challenge to sculpture - whether they were to be placed on the ground or wall, as traditionally the ground was essential to the properties of gravity in sculpture. Perciyal's four containers allude to the womb and to the four classical elements of nature: earth, air, fire and water, while inhabiting the walls. Large in scale, they are tactile and interact with light, and also open out a new formal semantics in the gallery - occupying, disrupting and ordering space, and also embracing

the fourth dimension in sculpture - time. This is most evocative because the material is perishable (raw banana fibre, rice paper, winged seeds from the Indian Elm, Tecoma, Spatodea Campanulata, and Tabebuia Rosea) and subject to decay, recalling the impermanent art of the Arte Povera movement of the mid-20th century in Italy. *What am I looking for?*(2018-19), a raw banana fibre paper-mache sculpture relates to the element of earth and the title itself raises the existential question of the impermanence of life and what we seek for ourselves in the civilizational agenda of modernity.

The genealogy of feminist art practices filters into her work through laborious processes of kneading clay, the pulping process of paper-mache, or making colours with herbs. Her other materials range from Frankincense, myrrh, cinnamon, clove, lemongrass, cedar wood, bark powder, coal, re-used Burma teak, plaster, mineral, tree resin, cedar wood essential oils, gourds, nests and leather, to name a few. Such a processual practice draws critical attention to *'thinking through making'* and the material agency of each medium allow for an intersectional ethics of the human and the environment centred in feminist principles. Guatarri's idea of the 'ethico-aesthetic' [6] comes into play here, connected through the embodiment of form and the cultural lives of material that is generative and restorative. Perciyal refrains from placing her aesthetics onto any kind of schema, with gendered values unobtrusively running as a sub-text in her work (if not in image), a counter-point to our larger cultural condition of capitalist consumerism. She forages in flea markets or old antique shops to find discarded and abandoned objects that become part of her personal archive, adopting them into her life and incorporating them in her work.

A practicing Christian, Perciyal has been particularly engaged with the history and vernacularisation of Christianity in India through architectural forms, traditional arts, mythology and symbolisms. [7] In 2015-2016, she received the Anmol Vadehra Art Grant initiated by the Foundation for Contemporary Indian Art (FICA) which enabled her to conduct research on the sculptural traditions in Tamilnadu, including lime stucco (*suthai*) and wood. [8] She worked with woodcarvers in Thanjavur, Papanasam, Cuddalore and Nagercoil, and also travelled to the Kalvaryan Hills to collect *guggul* (a gum resin) [9] an ancient herb in Ayurveda and ritualistic contexts, to add to her repertoire of incense mixing. Her exploration of smell is also related to ritualistic sacred practices, and reinstating found objects means to spiritually restore faith in life, through the transience of smell. For her, incense as material brings together real fragments of objects and memories, and bookends personal time and personal space[10] She terms her work as her diary, and if the elements permit, diaries exist for centuries [11] - old, worn and open to new interpretations. Perciyal combines all her organic materials in moulds, and casts her figurative sculptures often without armature - the combination of various incenses and resin support upright vertical sculptures, [12] such as her piece *The Fires of Faith* at the Kochi Muziris Biennale (2014).

In the Mumbai exhibition, the second set of works consist of books crafted from old wooden doors from Burma, taking the shape of libraries with busts of men, that are intimate portraits from everyday life. Shaped as libraries, the books are engraved with titles in laser that allude to the history of ancient India and early modern China, imperialism, Indian railways, fasting, cure and disease. Four thick volumes of the *Hortus Malabaricus* (meaning 'Garden of Malabar') a 17th century comprehensive treatise that deals with the properties of flora of the Western Ghats covering the areas of Kerala, Karnataka and Goa also sits inside the restored bookcase, *Xenophoria IV* (2018-19). The bust of a local man from her state becomes part of a bookshelf in *I resist, therefore I exist* (2018) drawing forth the role of books, knowledge production and resistance movements.

The third room has found objects and figurines from her personal archive that are installed in wooden boxes or hang on the walls. *The Flower from Maryam* focuses on a plant that was picked up from a marketplace in Dubai, now dried and browned with age, while the miniature vintage figurines are various mother-child dolls - Mary and Jesus, Yashodha and Krishna and others draped in local attire from South India. Dried gourds and the nest of a weaver bird also find their place in the exhibition that is an enmeshing of the large scale and intimate. Perciyal sees her studio itself to be a found object, chancing on it after she had to leave the Lalit Kala Studios a few years back. Fond of accidental encounters in the practice, she mends and restores with the hand of an alchemist, her art language punctuated by presences and absences that will fade with time, go back to nature.

The Seed Hunter (2008) is a documentary that speaks about the efforts of a team that hunts for seeds and plant genes to save the world from an impending food shortage due to climate change. Perciyal's repository of seeds, the organic materiality of her works, and her philosophy of mending and remembrance of past knowledge, draw out larger questions of how we must respond to our patterns of consumption in this critical moment of history.

End Notes:

[1] Felix Guatarri, "The Three Ecologies" translated by Chris Turner, *New Formations*, Number 8, Summer 1989.

[2] Rosalyn D'Mello, "Benitha Perciyal: Earth Girl", *Open Magazine*, 2016.

[3] Interview, *Art Radar*, <http://artradarjournal.com/2016/11/21/spice-girl-indian-artist-k-benitha-perciyal-in-conversation/>

[4] Rosalyn D'Mello, "Benitha Perciyal: Earth Girl", *Open Magazine*, 2016.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Felix Guatarri, "The Three Ecologies" translated by Chris Turner, *New Formations*, Number 8, Summer 1989.

[7] AVAG 2015-16: Benitha Perciyal, *Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art*,

[8] Rosalyn D'Mello, "Benitha Perciyal: Earth Girl", *Open Magazine*, 2016.

[9] AVAG 2015-16: Benitha Perciyal, *Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art*,

[10] Interview, *Art Radar*, <http://artradarjournal.com/2016/11/21/spice-girl-indian-artist-k-benitha-perciyal-in-conversation/>

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.