

Dhruvi Acharya: "I have come to truly believe that it's all in the mind"

Critical Collective

An interview with the artist on the occasion of her latest solo exhibition at Nature Morte, *Permeated Absence*.



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Critical Collective: You create a spectrum for the female body to occupy different registers, from the young to the older body, in which you emphasize shapelessness, and also a solitary state. It is the aging body which also becomes the bearer of environmental and physical concerns, the polluting city, a ravaged ecology- which add to your figures' apparent state of discombobulation. Do you see this as a generalised failure, or a particularly female predicament?

Dhruvi Acharya: The failure of humans to protect our planet from environmental destruction affects all living things, especially animals and plants, but my work focuses more on the female body and mind because their problems are compounded due to centuries of gender-based discrimination. The young female body is celebrated but at the same time often ravaged without consent, and the ageing female body has to deal with its own internal problems in addition to the society's lack of value for it. Society has no regard for the mind existing in the female body, what with the constant objectification, lack of respect and autonomy women in general experience. So, the female body in my work mutates not only due to ecological disasters, but primarily as a result of societal pressures and expectations, and their emotional effects on the mind.

CC: What freedom has your chosen form, of the graphic comic mode, afforded in terms of mobility of ideas and the space for an issue-based critique? Although there are some similarities, you avoid the continuous narrative: can you speak a little about this form which falls between painting, and the graphic form?

DA: The visual language I employ has organically developed over the years, and now is well suited to what I want to express. When I started painting in 1995 it was only because I was homesick (the writer was based in the US for a time after her marriage, completing her art education there), and it helped me to drawing my memories of home and city. I began using floor plans and maps, and drawing my thoughts and feelings, often using symbols and metaphors. Soon the protagonists in my work came to be situated in a fluid space that was both indoors and outdoors, almost floating between the interior of the mind and exterior of the body, and this was an influence of the non-linear perspective used in Indian miniature plantings. The comic book style thought bubbles and speech bubbles crept in when I began using cutouts from issues of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics in my work. Today, it is second nature for me to alter the human body to express what I think or feel - a body can melt, the head can disappear, or spew clouds or grow flowers.

CC: There is very interesting use of different media in your work. Glitter is present in abundance; canvases are unprimed and encrusted with dense layers of paint. The layering of the paint in fact seems to mirror an idea of time found in the works, as adhering not in neat striations but as palimpsests. In *Dust to Dust*, you use paint encrusted on your palette to create the rainbow border of the work, literally realizing

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the painting's disquisition on the cyclical nature of existence. Is the idiosyncratic choice and use of material meant to unfold a further dimension of the themes explored in your painting?

DA: In *Dust to Dust*, I used strips of paint from my palette because it worked well to represent the earth which had eons of different matter in it, and of course because I felt it would be visually interesting. In my paintings, I use various art materials to convey different emotions or to create different atmospheres. Charcoal, coloured graphite, glitter, dry pigment, thin paint washes, thick paint layers, crackle paint, matt and gloss mediums, ink, collage... all these help in creating a mood. And frankly, I simply enjoy using new and different materials to create varied surfaces and visual depths while keeping the painting surface flat. And I think it is fairly important that the medium used suits the emotion or the idea being expressed. For example, I do not think the soft sculptural installation *what once was, still is, but isn't...* could have worked in any other material.

CC: To again take up the representation of time, there seems to be constant tension between a neat mapping of time and place, and the way in which these are actually experienced, which is more like a shapeless, shifting blur. This is seen in *Fog* where the rigid chronological layers of the timeline are obscured by the swirling mass of the woman's recollections. Or in the autobiographical canvas of the places you've lived, with city grids becoming overrun with wild foliage. Is there a deliberate engagement with such spillage, or has this come about as a coincidence?

DA: I think this blurring of clear time lines and lack of spatial boundaries comes from life - I feel most of us live in fluid spaces in our mind - the subconscious, the present reality, the voices in our heads, memories, our plans, our regrets, our hopes all swirl around in our minds. Or at least in my mind - unlike what learned people suggest we do - which is to live in the present, and not in the past nor the future, I think I am constantly living in the past, present or future - often all at the same time. For example, more often than not, I am aware of my late husband's absence in our home and in this world. And I find myself imagining him in this reality as I remember him, and not as he would actually be (if he were alive) - so this is a sort of distortion of time as well. In *Fog*, the woman with her eyes shut to the world is lost in her hazy mind, oblivious to the world. The glitter stripes in the background are barcodes, representative of the unknown expiry date we all live with.

CC: In the wallpaper containing 498 sketches, several figures and motifs recur. One such image is that of human beings spouting flowers and creepers, which might suggest the shared organicity of man and nature, but also, as in *Dust to Dust*, the return to earth after death. Another image is of figures bearing oxygen tanks. What is the particular resonance of such recurring motifs to you?

DA: One of my major concerns, since 1992 when I researched for a film and campaign for "Save Bombay Committee" as an undergraduate, has been the deteriorating environment.

The wallpaper was made by composing the scans of my drawings, and the images you mention were drawn between 2005 and 2008, when I was thinking about how the world would be with no breathable air, thanks to a bout of breathlessness caused by Mumbai's air pollution, as well as my late father's need for an oxygen tank and my late mother-in-law's debilitating asthma. I began wondering if we would eventually have to buy packaged air in the future and drew the figures with "breathpacks" on their backs (in fact recently I read an article about packaged mountain air being sold in Beijing, and I felt almost sick). I took the effects of pollution further and wondered if in the future some humans would mutate into beings capable of producing their own oxygen (hence the figures sprouting plants from their heads) - then would slavery and wars ensue? These thoughts were thus the basis of my 2008 show *One Life on Earth*. *Dust to Dust* is about the life cycle, and the interconnectedness of all life forms, our connection to earth and our eventual return to the soil.

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CC: Much has been said about the prominence of humour and irony in your work. The humour seems to draw from a constant state of self-examination, an unceasing critique of your unlikely protagonist. You have mentioned in the past that this stems from a need to eschew didacticism. But do you apprehend a larger critical role of humour in art?

DA: I don't know about humour having a larger critical role in art - but I do know Takashi Murakami, Nicole Eisenman, Ellen Gallagher, Barry McGee, Kara Walker and Sarah Lucas among many others use wry humour or a comic style of drawing to bring attention to issues that may be difficult to address, without making the work too "heavy", melodramatic or unpalatable.

CC: Alongside humour, there is also lightness in the works, in the sense of being both light-hearted, and in the case of the soft sculptural installation *what one was, still is but isn't...*, an unbearable, precarious lightness, constantly threatened by the force of gravity. Would you agree that both humour and lightness are actually part of a way to flag, rather than alleviate tension in your work?

DA: I think the paintings address many issues in often visually pleasing and light hearted manner to draw viewers in, but a closer viewing and deeper reading may reveal the subject matter to be far from funny, bringing to the fore the darker thoughts behind the playful facade.

The soft sculptural installation *what once was, still is, but isn't...* is 'light' only because I wanted to create a floating, ghostly, otherworldly space for viewers to experience the dream like space / state that people who are grieving often find themselves in. The real feelings behind this work, in my opinion, are as heavy as can be.

CC: The brain also occupies centre stage as the fount of consciousness and perception. It has become an outgrowth of your famous thought bubbles. In several works, the brain is shown ruptured, oozing brown blood. In other places, the brain is shown to organize vision, bringing together different perspectives in a single image of the world, an original processing unit. The brain is also disembodied, in contrast to the figures visibly sagging under the weight of flesh. Do you see these, the body which is at the level of the earth, material, and the brain, remote and abstract, as representing impossible poles of experience?

DA: I have come to truly believe that it's all in the mind. I know from experience that one's attitude in the face of any incident or event affects one's reality. One can accept and learn to live in a new reality, or reject and try to change a reality that is sometimes impossible to alter. But I have also experienced the tricks the mind can play - I have tried very earnestly to change the past and have involuntarily expected the doorbell to usher in someone who could never actually be back. Then again, it is only in one's own mind that one can learn to accept what one may never truly understand. Thus, I think the body is a beautiful, wonderful tool to experience the world, but the understanding of that world is in the mind, and this is what I believe my work reflects.

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