

Proverbial In(ter)ventions

Ratnadeep Gopal Adivrekar

5 June - 26 July 2009



Co-organisers

NUS MUSEUM *BEAUX ARTZ*



You can see a lot by just looking
Oil on canvas
122 x 173 cm
2007, The Fars Collection

Viewing Ratnadeep's Suite of Works as a Cultural Object (excerpt)

Priya Maholay-Jaradi

As one engages with Ratnadeep Gopal's suite of works currently displayed at the NUS Museum, it becomes increasingly apparent that the artworks are produced and consumed in accordance with the artist and viewer's own cultural context. The artist's technical and stylistic strengths enable him to produce a meaningful interplay of visual codes, which instead of disseminating fixed meanings, encourages multiple or alternative interpretations on the part of the viewer. With reference to this artistic project, having acknowledged how the artwork and its meaning is created and negotiated by the producer and consumer in various stages, the author of this essay suggests that the current suite of paintings may be viewed as a "cultural object". To demonstrate the status of this series as a cultural object, the essay borrows loosely from Stuart Hall's seminal work on *Encoding, Decoding*, which was applied originally to the television broadcasting industry.

Given the above framework of a communications model, it becomes imperative to locate and discuss the key stages of encoding and decoding of the artist's idea as involved in the artistic process of production of this suite and its final consumption.

To approach the sphere of production first, we need to appreciate the central theme of this suite, i.e., eighteen proverbs of the artist's choice, which is translated on canvas. This translation occurs through the employment of two visual frames within a single canvas; each frame illustrates an art historical or socio-cultural episode and helps to illuminate the meaning of the other. While this stage of production may be considered one of "encoding", we can see how the artist is simultaneously "decoding" ideas and images to compose the painting and enable the process of "encoding". At this juncture, the essay supplements and expands the discourse on the "determinate moments" (as discussed by Hall); i.e., the moments of encoding and decoding which are key stages in any communications model. With particular reference to the artist in question here and his works, we see how the determinate moments are not essentially exclusive but often overlap and are also multiplied in the process of art production.

To approach the spheres of production and consumption jointly, we turn to the organization of "visual codes" by the artist and their interpretation on the part of the viewer. As seen earlier, the rendition of historical episodes on canvas requires the conception of a strong visual imagery on the part of the artist. Ratnadeep chooses and arranges a set of visual codes in an artistic sequence. These codes consist of multiple subjects and objects which constitute the narrative. While it is easy to discern a definite meaning in a single visual code, one can arrive at alternative explanations for a visual code which becomes a part of a group of codes and hence shares an expanded context. This second crucial juncture in the essay expands on Hall's discourse by problematizing his claim that visual codes are less arbitrary than linguistic codes.

In closing, it is appropriate to summarize that the author of this essay extends agency to the context of the artist and viewer to determine the meaning of this suite of artworks and appreciate its aesthetic merit. Within these contexts of production and consumption, it appears as though the interpretation of the final meaning of the suite relies on an interdependent process of encoding and decoding due to the dense interplay of ideas and images. This paradigmatic framework which gives agency to present contexts, processes and systems for the determination of meaning of an artwork, successfully demonstrates the status of Ratnadeep Gopal's present suite of artworks as a cultural object.

When the boat gets to either end of the bridge,
it will automatically straighten itself out

Oil on canvas
122 x 173 cm

2007, Private Collection



14 Proverbs (excerpt)

Abhijeet Gondkar

Proverbs embrace the wide sphere of human existence: their philosophical antiquary discovers an event which has escaped from the more solemn monuments of history, and is often the solitary authority of its existence. The allusion to universality and philosophical intricacies contained in these proverbs is what got artist Ratnadeep Gopal Adivrekar interested. The proverbs in this exhibition are accompanied by a string of qualifiers, by the occasional if and but, constantly seeking to create, perhaps even project an ambivalence. The artist, having experimented with a wide range of styles and subject matter, brings together metaphors from contradictory or unpredicted sources, both historical and contemporary, by using diverse materials and techniques. Ratnadeep uses the richness of symbolism nevertheless eluding the mysteries of logically understandable things. He exploits these images - sufficiently simple and abstract ones in order to re-invoke the spectator's cultural and personal memories. These memories, or the process of their construction and interpretation, finally constitute the effect of his work. They have their roots in recognizable elements of our culture - but they are also unspecific enough to be broadly evocative for the spectator. They constitute in themselves an attempt to add something to, or to fill in, the abstract and formal icons which provide their frames or bases. Ratnadeep is joining substantive images of the past and more abstract icons from the present, trying to attribute them to transcendent symbolism. At the same time, he does seem to want to flirt with their nostalgic content, since it is in part through the presentation of a sense of something that is lost that the active tensions of his works can be elaborated.

The artist pulls and pushes us in the proverbial spaces which make us sit and look at his pictures for a long time; it is an enjoyable experience making the viewer activate the proverbs. Depicted images or object-like things as they are included, only to give a sense of scale and understanding. You may not be sure what those little things are, but they give an illusion and a scale so that the eye roams about and mentally makes space for the proverbs. Ratnadeep gets carried away with these ideas, that the viewer roams around in these proverbs and once the eye begins to look and see, it is forced to go on a journey with not one definite route. The forms are drawn from his surroundings and reminiscences of past experiences, it all seem to connect, making the works quite intense and dense.



You cannot step into the same river twice
Oil on canvas
122 x 173 cm
2007, Private Collection

In Dialogue with Ratnadeep Gopal Adivrekar (excerpt)

Shabbir Hussain Mustafa

SHM: Writing across the figurative expressions of grand events and everyday banalities, curatorially, it has been hard to place your work within the now established contours of intellectual and artistic work emerging from non-territorial Mumbai. From your first solo exhibition *Memoirs of the Unreal City* (1997), your writings span a broad “culturalist” perspective, including philosophical work on exposing the constructed nature of postcolonial identities and cultural effects and affects of the unconscious. Do you agree with my metaphor of your paintings as “writings”?

RGA: Well, after passing from Sir J. J. School of Art I had my first solo show *Memoirs of the Unreal City* which was based on the experiences of my immediate surroundings. The city became site and source, presenting concerns around the self and the mass, space and milieu. Mumbai was going through socio-political fragmentation vis-à-vis a revival in commerce, art and glamour. The paintings then exploited the mass media’s disconnection, and explored the politics of urban culture and allegories of reconciliation between man and environment. *Memoirs of the Unreal City* and the paintings in that series later combined historical understandings of the “locale” in my 2002 series *On the Freedom Struggle of India* with Mumbai as its focus.

Thereafter, in *Refraction of ideas* (2004) I was working on the ideas of artists who had inspired me - a kind of art historical dialogue with “origins”, improvisation and sometimes even taken “out-of-context” to provide for metaphorical play. Over this period, my work has carried over some elements alongside.

Reverting back to your question about my paintings as “writings”, I draw, paint everyday. Although only a small point percent gets realized into canvas, paperwork or sculpture, for me, the language of forms and images is primarily a communication of thoughts. Images have saturated our late-modern culture. Processing these images and forms has its origin based on experiences which leads to the relationship between our sense of Self and language. As such, I agree my painting constitutes a thought process and terming it as “writings” creates *that* transition point between the seemingly oppositional: real and unreal existences.

SHM: “Kazimir Malevich is like the format button in history of modern painting.” This was your response in an earlier conversation about what sort of an influence Malevich has had on your work. Seen in such a light, you have preferred to find significance in both Western and non-Western intellectual traditions, most particularly in Soviet (if not, socialist realist) aesthetics and its critiques. But ultimately, my opinion is that such intellectual bases you have developed interact with given languages (for instance, magical realism) to allow entry into the “contemporary”, the

now. This makes your art “subversive”, whereby you are seen to adopt an array of languages or “tongues” without committing to any particular philosophical school. Any thoughts?

RGA: Categorization is only an organizational tool...

My works are evidence of an exploration/commentary of contemporary life, combining images and forms to construct on human reality. The visual experience is universal. Soviet aesthetics worked in a framework of universality and at same time conceptual principles/ideologies is what intrigues me.

When I started painting I did not want visual limitations on my work. So I take these found images like pieces of information and let myself use them in all different ways. Photo images installs an illogical link between the here and the past, “unreal reality”. It was a kind of language in that the bit components were inherited, not invented, and the expression came in the combinations and contexts and manipulations. Merging and permuting abstract passages with juxtapositions of realistic imagery and the use of photography locates the works between the mechanical production of an *image* and of an *art object*. As such, I work with intuition, based on observation and sensitive forms of knowledge which rely merely on the evidence of the senses but I also rely on the empirical knowledge of viewer to create effect.

Thus, regenerating the language and meaning of any artistic experience. By adopting unspecific philosophical foundations I am able to move freely in interdisciplinary fields and thought processes. It broadens my use of images and expresses ideas about both sides of the coin of experience, the duality of the self/other, personal/public, rules/non-rules and the sensible/senseless.

SHM: My interest in your *Proverbs* series comes not just from the fervent paintings which represent intense symbolic interactions that resist sticking to reality in its purely literal terms; but more so from your commitment to the textual, in the form of proverbs, in detailing the works which seek to record the experiential; a fair assessment?

RGA: Houses sometimes look like people and people sometimes seem to be lifeless. The inquiring and evaluations of visual and verbal representation do not always count as philosophical exploration into the theory of signification there is always some idea more to representation. Plain symbolism is boring; but also “de-systemizing” these symbols creates unease. Through my working of incongruities, I pose dilemmas; I make no attempt to solve them.



If you understand, things are just as they are; if you do not understand,
things are just as they are move brings a change
Oil on canvas
122 x 173 cm
2007, The JiveArt Collection

Like in the artwork "*If you understand, things are just as they are; if you do not understand, things are just as they are*", the Necker cube which is an ambiguous, irrational line drawing; as the mind opposes what it sees. Thus when a person stares at the cube image, it will often seem to flip back and forth between valid interpretations like a proverb. The cube itself crosses the borders of real, visual literal and mathematical.

Or the image on the right, which represents two pairs of hands playing the cat's cradle game of strings which is about patterns and knots and can result in surprising outcomes and responses. While one person and one pair of hands can build many different patterns, these can be passed on to other pairs of hands. Thus an embodied analytical skill allows to re-imagine and edge complex exchange. All that said, in the game itself there is not cat and no cradle, only the relation between the "imagined cat and imagined piece of string". It also provides a counter-attack against naïve realism which states that the way we perceive the world is the way the world actually is. The goal is how to achieve a "nodal" point of symbol or image which implicates change.

SHM: If one is to glance back at the entire *Proverbs* series in considering its philosophical macroview, one may encounter an inability to connect these fragments or rather to find a form of attention that is adequate to every object (or historical fragment) weaved into both parts of the canvas. Curatorially, I have struggled in coming to terms with such an intense series; I feel that to even attempt at synthesizing all the works into a neat system would mean erasing not just the singularity of the detail, but the vitality of relations between details. Do you think this a worthwhile (or productive) lack in the exhibition?

RGA: I'm interested in how meaning is created. The works are planned for open ended narration, where the viewer instead of fixed road is given map to improvise his directions. To connect these fragments without the prior knowledge of the images/forms is challenging but the viewer is enticed through the titles to bind or unbind them starting their own journeys. I'm interested in the associational nature of thinking itself and sometimes a deliberate act of misunderstanding that can become poetry, because then you have to imagine its elements.

Systematic-chaos or chaotic-system, either, works for me...



A wise man can see more from the bottom of a well than a fool can
from a mountain top
Oil on canvas
122 x 173 cm
2007, Private Collection

About NUS Museum

NUS Museum is a comprehensive museum for teaching and research. It focuses on Asian regional art and culture, and seeks to create an enriching experience through its collections and exhibitions. The Museum has over 7,000 artefacts and artworks divided across four collections. The *Lee Kong Chian* Collection consists of a wide representation of Chinese materials from ancient to contemporary art; the *South and Southeast Asian Collection* holds a range of works from Indian classical sculptures to modern pieces; and the *Ng Eng Teng Collection* is a donation from the late Singapore sculptor and Cultural Medallion recipient of over 1,000 artworks. A fourth collection, the *Straits Chinese Collection*, is located at NUS' Baba House at 157 Neil Road.

NUS Museum launched the NX Gallery in 2006. It is conceived as a contemporary art venue to showcase emerging artistic trends in Singapore, Southeast Asia and beyond, as well as to encourage critical curatorial and museum practices. For the NUS Centre For the Arts and the NUS Museum, these aims afford an emphasis in partnerships within the University and beyond, underscored by the recognition that art and culture form a powerful nexus that connect different disciplines and institutional interests. Past exhibitions organized at the NX Gallery include *Picturing Relations: Simryn Gill and Tino Djumini* (May 2007), *Strategies Towards the Real: S. Sudjojono and Contemporary Indonesian Art* (May 2008), *Bound For Glory: Wong Hoy Cheong* (September 2008), followed most recently by *Jendela: A Play of the Ordinary* (March 2009).

NUS MUSEUM

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