

‘When we find ourselves in the subject position of two determinate decisions, both right (or both wrong), one of which cancels the other, we are in an aporia which by definition cannot be crossed, a double bind (...) It can only be described as an experience. It discloses itself in being crossed. Every day, even by supposedly not deciding, one of those two right or wrong decisions gets taken, and the aporia or double bind remains.’

Gayatri Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, 2011

‘Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. (...) But on a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.

Arundhati Roy, *War Talk*, 2003

In *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Spivak challenges the experience of the aesthetic positing that first, there will always be a divide on the basis of class within the experience, situated in the context of globalization. Second, she proposes that the condition of globalization itself is experienced differently by ‘other’ femme/female bodies, which if the case, would completely change our concept of globalization. In her earlier essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak*, Spivak points to the reductive understanding of the gendered Other, stating that gender is the “first instrument of abstraction” within socio-cultural systems. How does Spivak allow us to re-evaluate the visual/critical environment of the subaltern, femme/female body in relation to time, labor, and environmental? If we were to explore possible meanings outside the binaries of gender, dis/ability, and the self/other, what can we salvage from homogeneity of what is assigned as the ‘diasporic experience’ ?

Sheba Chhachhi’s early work ‘*Subhadra*’ provides us with a context. As a photographer, artist, and chronicler of the early feminist movement in India, Chhachhi’s work rejects the idea of a homogeneous feminism, proposing instead a self-determined, pluralistic tendency arising from a non-western genealogy. Over the past four decades, Chhachhi has investigated the contingencies between art, activism and environment, critiquing the politics of representation in relation to images of women and their sites of protest. Situating the historic alongside the mythological and documentary, Chhachhi’s large scale, immersive installations read as poetic temporalities imbued with a cross-fertilization of cultural references, pointing to pre-modern and indigenous philosophies across the mainland South East Asia. Her early explorations align with the position of the disavowed female body- be it in culture or nature, Chhachhi’s collaborative portraits capture the middle aged female body in the process of emancipating itself from gender binaries, religious indoctrination and nationalist agenda, questioning the conditions and oppressions that once led to ground-up female/femme solidarity.

In conversation with Sophia Powers at the TATE, Chhachhi describes how she and her peers at Chitrabani Center for Social Communication (Kolkata) sought to develop an 'ethical code' for documentary practice. In the early days of the Indian feminist movement, street photography had come to the fore with figures like Bresson, Satyajit Ray, Raghubir Singh and Friedlander. "Much of the conversation about ethics pivoted around photographing the 'Other'. However, even working ethically, with awareness and sensitivity, the power of representation remains with the photographer. After a decade of documentary work, I questioned this in my own work, and in documentary practice in general, which seemed to unconsciously reproduce something close to the colonial recording of 'natives' ", Chhachhi explains when she began to explore the potential of self-determined portraiture. Working closely with her sister, gender and labor studies scholar, Amrita Chhachhi, who was based in Delhi at the inception of the Indian Feminist Movement, Sheba built her community amongst mothers of victims of dowry-based killings, campaigning on the streets, and documenting the uprisings from within. Establishing an empathetic connection through her camera (which she began as a student at the National Institute of Design (NID)), Chhachhi grew acquainted with women who had no choice but to create the conditions for their own deliverance, allowing her practice to become a vessel of sorts to buoy their collective effort towards justice. Eventually, her photographs informed large scale photographic installations and handmade moving image lightboxes where the figure of the female ascetic and activist began to coalesce.

Intriguingly, Gayatri Sinha denotes Chhachhi's long term engagement with the persona of the ascetic while considering '*Subhadra*', 1979. Paralleling the ascetic with the figure of the *yogini* from the 17th century, Sinha finds "like many ascetics, she suffers worldliness (Welch). Understood as an initiate, often bound to a practice by oaths of secrecy (...) the *yogini* has a multifaceted character varying from protective divine mother to devotee to one with paranormal powers." Art Historian, B.N. Goswamy writes of the figure in the context of Deccani tradition as "women who have left their homes and wander, most often alone (...) There is no suggestion of permanent attachment or belonging to a group. They seem to be free spirits, presumably of religious inclination but in essence, free."

Unambiguously, '*Subhadra*' marks the entrance of the female-ascetic in Chhachhi's oeuvre, but what of Subhadra's awareness of her body as undifferentiated from nature, unbound by conditions that exploit, discriminate, and exploit her? Chhachhi shares Subhadra's chronicle of experiences that are part biographical-part mythological. Drowning in a flood of her own tears, Subhadra describes how she learnt to walk differently, assimilating a thorn that embedded itself at the base of her foot. She draws on the mythology of Krishna, the lover-God, who stole her clothes positioning herself as one of the *gopis*, whose clothes were stolen while they swam in the Yamuna, a consecrated, now poisoned river. Combining the "voluptuous with

the spiritual” as Nancy Adajania posits, Chhachhi and Subdhara drop away from a “body-centered consciousness toward oceanic awareness”. In acknowledging her place as placeless, time as timeless, Chhachhi’s extracts Subhadra from the status of the ‘tribal’ or ‘under-privileged’, by capturing her essence through her appearance- bare chested, loincloth clad- suggesting a refusal of ‘appropriateness’ that keeps her ‘in place’.

‘Where She Comes From’ arises from a congruent consciousness, attempting to situate ever shifting femme/ female figures between two worlds (between India and America, the natural/social, casteist and racist attitudes that tend to ‘Other’) in an undisclosed space-time continuum. Impeded by the accelerationist politics, neoliberal insecurities and extractivist capitalism of the West, ‘She’ resides in many places at once, refusing to be buried in the landslide of long-term colonialism. Committed to the summoning of this collective consciousness- Ashwini Bhat, Neha Puri Dhir, Janhavi Khemka, Falaks Vasa and Kushala Vora, embark on varied explorations, unmaking and remaking the ground from ‘Where’ they take their stand. ‘S/he’ is a direct refusal of patriarchal, imperialist and internationalized feminisms, turning inwards to highlight a self-determined, pluralistic, non-dualist aspiration from a non-western standpoint. Between places and ways of perceiving, ‘Comes’ denotes the coming and going from place and the transformation of consciousness that occurs in the process. ‘From’ connotes a natural habitus she brings with her, to begin to think about the dynamic between nature and the ‘Other’ femme/female body.

As a non-binary, trans femme, **Falaks Vasa** leads multiple lives as an artist, educator, writer, and union worker at Brown University. *‘soft horizons’*, a site specific photographic installation, is prefaced by a text the artist is writing titled *‘shor’*. In the story, Asav, a trans woman, realizes she sees visions of the future in patterns formed in the stains of her ejaculate. Warning the world of a flood of tears in part from the *Men Who Cried* and the *Fish That Spewed*, Asav’s prophecies are only believed by three of her closest friends - Asha, Mohini, and Shor. Part post-anthropocentric chimera and part testament to queer adaptability, *‘shor’* ends when the friends survive the cataclysm, finding themselves (and a handful of other trans survivors) rebuilding the world anew in an epoch of pure ‘noise’.

Born in Kolkata and living in Rhode Island, Falaks considers themselves plural, spread between homelands, engaging with a range of mediums, adapting and shaping their identity based on a range of experiences and environmental factors. In relation to their position within the diaspora, Falaks’ sexuality is their guiding principle. Forming solidarities and alliances with queer individuals and groups familiar with their sense of precarity. As part of the sexual minority in both countries, their grapples with ideas of queer liberation and survival.

In *'soft horizons'*, we witness a deep sea giant float overturned in the sky, suspended alongside a flight carrying Asav and her friend, from New York to Kolkata. As fish rain upwards, Kolkata's *Howrah* bridge transposes itself onto a New York city skyline. The overturned horizon creates a subjective map that speaks of the queer experience not necessarily belonging to a singular sense of place or time. Based in the context of trans, queer camaraderie, *'shor'* builds upon the idea of collective strategies of survival in an epoch of civic and environmental ruin. "It is about ecological adaptability under the conditions of capitalist waste and the adaptability of trans bodies within cis-het systems of power." says Falaks. Identifying four subjective representations of place, fears of isolation, and communality, each character constitutes a fragment of Falaks narrative that feels part mythological- part biographical. For the duration of the exhibition at NEIU, *'shor'* also manifests in a takeaway zine, consisting of scenes where Asav and her comrades reveal their ability to adapt through the concept of 'plasticity', an influential theory in transhumanism that remaps the subaltern, queer body with little adherence to sexual normativity or racialized gender.

Kushala Vora's ceramic sculptures and photographs on reclaimed Red Oak and Pine, defy sculptural convention and cultural dogma. Occupying the central gallery floor, *'Negative Space: man, monkey, mango, queen, quill...'* couples the conditioning of Western society through words from an elementary school cursive writing book, with drawings of flowers from a recent series *'Flowers have no name'*. A selection of images from the latter pave the ground beneath Vora's ceramic 'seed pods', capturing the tenderness of indigenous botanic life-forms the artist encountered while visiting her home in Panchgani, Maharashtra. As one of many transplants forced to choose between a sense of home between India and the West at the wake of the pandemic, Vora embarked on mindfulness walks between studio sessions. Being wholly present in nature, she captured the vitality of her landscape in over 100 photographs of native plants, later referencing them in textural drawings on ceramic.

The artist's hand comes into proximity as we repeatedly experience Vora's subjective cartography. Hands holding, pinching, pointing, hands conditioned to respond and write from an early age, Vora speaks about her study of hierarchies of power and the landscape we inhabit. "So much of how knowledge is constructed, (we are) conditioned from the moment we start to name, to compare, to draw judgment." Returning to the experience of the subaltern, marginalized, third-world figures, we are confronted with the politics of 'Othering' in the initial act of naming. Vora's drawings of native plants on one side of soothing ceramic forms come into conflict when cheek-to-cheek with patterns of colonial conditioning. The forms themselves demand to be held to be looked at, the forms essentially encasing 'negative space' or a void of possibility. Speaking on the complexities of living between two lands, Vora raises the question of ethical implications of our existence as 'Others' in the West, while being 'Othered' by the privilege of education in India. To what extent does ones privilege empower or silence others lived reality? As varied endemic florals indicate an ongoing life-force

that connects the individual to the collective, tensions of a learned language (and its correlated behavioral patterns) place us in a double bind. Like Spivak's awareness of her complicity in the criticism of political and environmental hegemonies, Vora's awareness is palpable in the coexistence of multiple, subjective realities. Listening to the way each floral 'names' itself on the surface of burnt wood, Vora brings barely noticeable ecosystems, transgressed by the colonial and postcolonial act of 'worlding', to light.

Ashwini Bhat's *'The Earth Under Our Feet'* carries similar potency. The artist speaks head-on to the viewer about her foreignness as a space of great complexity in a video projection that captures Bhat performatively foot-wedging a slab of deep red California clay. She audibly ponders the meaning of 'belonging' to a place, abstracting social constructs through her practice in ceramics, video, installation and writing (in collaboration with her collaborator in life and work, Forrest Gander). Frequently, Bhat references the vitality of nature, merging her body literally and metaphorically with landscape. Studying ceramics under the tutelage of Pondicherry based Southern Californian, Ray Meeker, and training in *Bharatnatyam* in her younger days, Ashwini's skills coalesce giving birth to an artistic ecological consciousness that is channeled through her engagement with the material.

In *'The Earth Under Our Feet'*, the artist steps one foot before another onto a moistened slab of clay. Building a projection surface of locally sourced Illinois clay, the deep ecologist imprints herself twice-over in the space of the exhibition. Rhythmically pacing the creation and disruption of signs, she steps on and off the slab at first, exposing a sacred symbol, much like the footprints of the Buddha or *padmalakshmi*, that she then smears with a twist of her left foot. Rupturing any religious referent, Bhar claims the earth she "comes from" is also the earth that constitutes a lineage of powerful women who precede her, viewing herself within a cosmic alignment of flesh and embodied spirit. Paralleling her existence with the essence of a nature-derived order, Bhat's prose uses the poetics of a nature-derived feminism (what later evolved into eco-feminism) that does not force the artist to legitimize her experience of belonging within or without a body, in any way. She is at one-with, linguistically indescribable, and can only be channeled through practice. Subverting gender dualities and caste-class based racialization, Bhat ruptures the nature/culture, rational/emotional, controlled/neurotic condition societally pinned to a woman's body. As the clay tablet is continually imprinted upon, the artists footprints merge with gestural fingerprints on the sculptural screen- a conceptual gesture that remains open ended. Stepping 'off-screen', Bhat's physical presence imprints itself in the gallery, leaving behind stains of the 'brown earth' she is made from.

Janhavi Khemka's *'Sapna'* is a feverish account of the artist's experience of fear and the anxiety, navigating the world as an Indian woman with a hearing-speech impediment. Born to a hearing-speaking family in Benaresm Janhavi developed an ear infection at the tender age of 9 months. Compounded by typhoid, she lost

her hearing which brought her mother to teach her how to lip-read, in order for Janhavi to communicate in a speaking hearing environment. Janhavi recalls sitting beside her mother, watching her lips move in a mirror placed before both of them. By the age of 15, her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, succumbing to the illness by the time the artist was 18. Recalling her mothers 'imprint' on her, she navigates the aural through light, touch, experimental sound and tactile media, something she shares to be comforting while situating herself in an able-bodied world.

Being brought up as 'normal' in a society that to some degree still believes in impairment as 'hereditary', 'handicap' or 'defect', Janhavi defies convention by situating herself in both the hearing and non-hearing worlds. She considers herself 'privileged' for her education, and prides herself in defying socio-cultural stigma. Janhavi's dexterity in woodcut printmaking, animation and experimental vibrational media amalgamates, allowing her to 'imprint' upon the viewer. Placing them directly into a tactile-aural experience, she conjures environmental record through charcoal rubbings and relief prints, imagining what it would be like "to see and feel a storm and not hear it". Her fear of being in danger and not being able to discern its arrival, her exhaustion from her dependence on her 'visual' faculty, and glints of the artists desires for intimacy and affection create an immersive video installation for Janhavi to confide in her viewer.

Janhavi's adeptness with woodcut print points to her schooling at Santiniketan, West Bengal. Home to lithography and printmaking virtuosos Chittaprosad Bhattacharya and Somnath Hore, who paid tribute to the suffering of the Indian common man, specifically during the Bengal famine, Janhavi objectively employs the craft to expose the social and political evils of her time. Disrupting a 'normative' social order, she masterfully shifts the face of the paper beneath each woodcut, disturbing the surface of the print, intentionally employing misplacement as a technique to render visible her day-to-day experience of mistranslation. Indian Disability scholar, Prof. Shilpa Das speaks on the linkages between gender, disability and Indian 'normative' social order, positing the impaired female Indian body as the 'Other of the Other'. Coming from a place where impairment is attributed to fate or '*karma*', Janhavi subverts social assumptions by commanding her *karmic* narrative, continually learning to understand sound through touch, taste, and feeling. '*Sapna*' in this sense is not only a rendering of an interior landscape, it is also a woman-led revolt against a normative system that is ignorant of its own perceptual limitations.

Neha Puri Dhir's series of resist dyed silks connect '*Where She Comes From*' to generations of female tribal artisans who continue to perfect the craft of harvesting and hand-weaving Tussar silks. Working with the government to establish the Tussar Silk Institute of Jharkhand, Neha studied the century old process of harvesting and working with untreated Tussar shortly after graduating from NID. Prior to her research in sericulture, largely based in the districts of Bhagalpur and Bhagaiya now in present day Bihar, Neha was

involved in the expansion of the industry, placing a great emphasis on the secure employment and ethical work conditions for craftswomen on the field. Working directly with silk harvesting communities, she grew attuned to the nature of the *Bombyx Mori* cocoon, developing an affinity for the dull-gold, short haired silk threads they produce. “Untreated Tussar attributes its rigidity to a gum-like protein called sericin that coats fine silk threads” she explains. Introducing ESO acid free dyes to Tussar, she began to experiment through *shibori*, a stitch resist dyeing technique that finds its origins both in India and Japan.

Shibori, known for treating two dimensional textiles as three dimensional form, allowed Neha to challenge the conceptual and formal limits of the circle. The spiritual connotations of the circle as a bindu or dot, allowed Neha to meditate on the form infusing it with energetic color processes. Neha seeks what she calls ‘colored-blacks’ and ‘colored-whites’; folding, stitching, pinching, and clamping the silks before they are dyed shades of indigo-blue-black. Unlike heat-set texture, sericin allows Neha to create organic, rough circular impressions as the material responds to the hand, pressure, and temperature, creating record of time and condition not entirely dissimilar from the detritus of performance, or processes of abstract painting. Creating undulating angles and sliced imperfect vectors, Neha’s hued tonalities tell a story of her environment. Perhaps to some degree pointing to our own misconceptions of what is and isn’t named between the ‘dark’ and ‘light’, she invites the viewer to enter the natural hues of silks that lend their uniqueness to each piece. In ‘*Cipher*’, an unpinched area leads the eye to search for degrees of dimensionality through colored-blacks at the center of the composition. The *bindu* appears to be perfectly halved, with each side sharing a vibrational emanations that differ to a degree. Composed of two halves, constructing a somewhat imperfect whole, Neha’s work is based on the concept of ‘wabi-sabi’, as the artists process is premised on the acceptance of transience and imperfection in the material and its processes. In ‘*Thoughts*’, Neha’s internal landscape articulates itself in energetic gestures. Repeatedly moving across the country as the wife of a pilot in the Indian Air Force, she constantly negotiates being uprooted, creating energetic palimpsests in new environments she settles into. Rather than a complete gestalt, each piece presents itself as a map that constitutes a page in the ongoing life of an artist working with indigenous, community knowledge.

Returning to ‘*Subhadra*’, it becomes clear that there is a metaphysical quality that imbibes itself within the exhibition. Defining themselves outside pre-established categories, the artists touch upon numerous orders within nature, and themselves, towards a more complex idea of femme/feminine efficacy. By considering the double bind of their subjective displacement (from a singular notion of ‘place’) and the collective places and communities they permeate, a kind of tension arises between the vital and institutionalized body. Seeking the potency of a creative force that moves in tandem with environmental dis/order, the exhibition is both map and unidentified terrain, where s/he does not fall into a singular iconographic schema. Turning from Sinha’s idea of the *yogini* to that of the *Devi*, as seen in ‘*Devi Diagram*’ C.1780., Prof. Goswamy describes a loincloth clad,

dark skinned, bare chested female figure “(with a) hypnotic look in the eyes (...) She is an image of sheer power. No inscription identifies her; no one knows her name for she does not fall into any iconographic scheme. But the family of painters (...) knew her power; she was the one who moved them to paint, who nurtured their talent, and kept them utterly focussed. She was the *anima* of their work.” Learning from the *anima* of their works, *Where She Comes From* is an intuitive quest for freedom as the fight for trans, femme and female liberation persists, globally.

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