

# Mountain and Valley

The paradoxes of Sandeep Mukherjee

BY HOLLY MYERS

The paintings of Sandeep Mukherjee rarely involve more than a handful of individual elements, flawlessly executed and held in a state of exquisite tension. Early work, made shortly after he completed his MFA at UCLA in 1999, revolved primarily around his own figure floating through space, sometimes among flurries of small, sharp, leaflike ellipses. In the work that hangs around his spacious Pomona studio on the day of my visit — and at Pitzer College's Nichols Gallery in Claremont in his recent exhibition there — a mountain motif predominates, interspersed with circles and spirals. Within this limited iconographic vocabulary (and limited palette, for that matter: The recent works are primarily black and white), Mukherjee evokes worlds of extraordinary spatial and pictorial complexity. Intricate, sensitive and deeply sensual, it is the sort of work you could live with for years and never get tired of looking at.

One factor, especially in these recent pieces, is a seemingly inexhaustible diversity of texture. Working with acrylic ink on translucent sheets of Duralene — a thin, paperlike plastic — he brushes, drips, daubs, drags, smears, smudges and erases the pigment into a dazzling array of effects, from watery to floral to dry and stonelike. At times, he eschews pigment altogether and creates patterns by making creases in the Duralene itself. When asked about possible influences, he surprises by mentioning the drawings of Van Gogh. At a glance, Van Gogh's rippling fields and ruddy peasants would seem to hail from another world entirely, but as Mukherjee elaborates, the affinity becomes clear. "It's the mark," he replies. "The energy and vitality and the diversity of the mark. Of course, his pictorial space is very much about an understandable receding perspective, but it's just that little *tcht tcht tcht tcht*" — Mukherjee makes a daubing gesture with his hand. "It varies so

much and, oh, it's just so profoundly complex and amazing. Those drawings, those are my favorite things of his. They transport you to a place that feels so real and yet still so abstract and so insane. There's so much intensity and energy there."

The two largest works up in the studio on this afternoon are both 8 feet wide and composed entirely in shades of black and gray. They resemble landscapes, with dark, mountainous horizon lines interspersed with large, free-floating spheres whose many concentric layers suggest the inner rings of tree trunks, or time-lapse photographs of the stars against the barren peaks of the eastern Sierras. Each sphere differs in scale, surface quality and degree of transparency, but they are all light, intricate and buoyant, while the mountains are dense, heavy and flat. The interplay of these contrasting elements keeps each piece in an avid state of tension. As we regard the works, Mukherjee points out a strip of matte black across the foreground of one, which he achieved by mixing gesso into the otherwise glossy ink. He added this a few days before, he says, in order to "see what happens spatially" when the overall sheen of the piece is interrupted. "I'm kind of liking it," he muses. "Sometimes it becomes like nothing space, like it disappears, and sometimes it becomes this thing that's sitting in front. Doesn't it? It really flattens and then it really becomes palpable. It's strange."

This fascination with paradoxes traces through nearly every aspect of Mukherjee's life, it seems, from his work to his background — he spent the first half of his life in India, before moving to California for graduate school in 1986, and the first half of his career as an industrial engineer, decamping for Otis, then UCLA, in the late 1990s — down to his own body language and demeanor: contemplative and composed one minute; eager, ardent and expressive the next.

In one sense, the mountain motif represents an attempt toward reconciling these dualities. It emerged, Mukherjee explains, around the time of his 2004 show

at the Pomona College Museum of Art, when the two axes he's been envisioning to orient his free-floating figures — horizontal and vertical — "sort of collapsed into a clump and became this mountain." As solid and anchored as the resulting image would seem to be, however — what symbolizes stability more than a mountain? — it only raised another crop of questions.

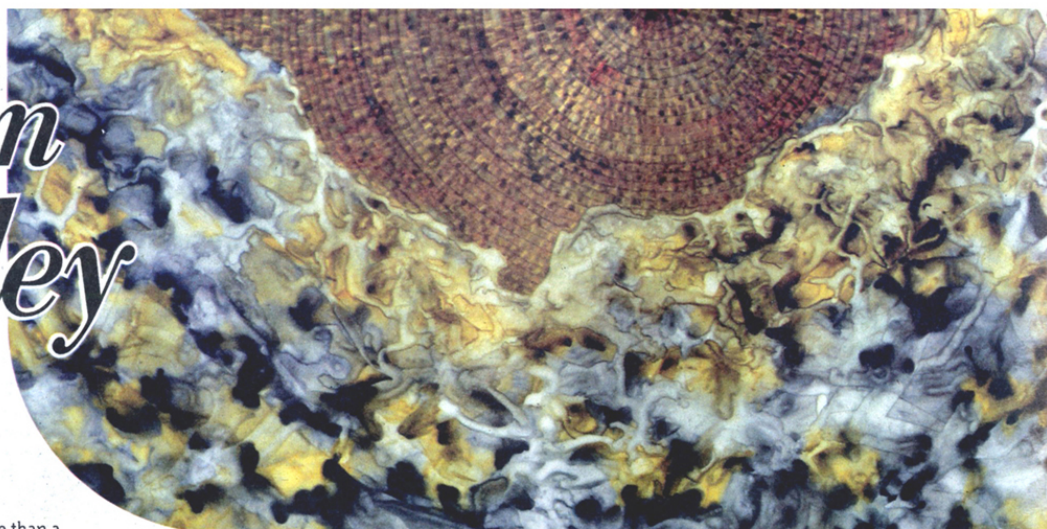
"I've been thinking about the mountain as a mountain," he says, "but then also how it implies a valley. I've been spatially and pictorially playing with that. It is something I was trying to do with the earlier work with the body as well: The body was sort of appearing and disappearing and appearing and disappearing, turning from a presence to an absence in this kind of flickering way. Now it's just more dramatic, or more

contrasty or something."

The spiral is also a reconciliation of axes, growing out of Mukherjee's frustration with the

preeminent motif of the grid. "I was interested in how the grid was used in modernism," he says, "and the idea of figure/ground and those permutations, but to me the grid was too exclusive and aggressive and kept me out in some way. I started thinking about a notion of space and time that was a little more open, a little more amorphous, a little more generous, if you will." Here too the flickering effect enters in. The spiral, he says, "becomes an energy field, but it becomes a thing. It becomes an object, but it also becomes space, but it also becomes a thing, but it also becomes a space. I guess you could think about the grid in the same way, but for some reason, the pulse of the back-and-forth and all the connotations of breath and life and cyclicity — those seem to be, I think, at some level, driving me to keep wanting to use the circle."

Mukherjee's commitment to these sorts of existential questions — the relationship of presence to absence, the archetypal to the ineffable, energy to matter — and perhaps his Indian ethnicity have led many to attribute a spiritual dimension to the work. While he doesn't discount this reading, he is ambivalent about the presumptions on which it's based. "I don't understand what people mean when they say



Untitled (2008)

spiritual," he says. "I'm still struggling with that one. I think for me, spiritual — if there's an idea, I would say that it has to do with space and time and one's place in those two or three areas. It's very much for me about what's in the present, what's in front of you, but it's also about that which you cannot talk about. It's very material, it's very much about physicality, it's about the senses, but it's also about something that's slipping away, that's very mutable, that's very imperceptible — how do those paradoxes co-exist in this way? So I guess for me that would be spiritual: It's about constantly trying to be in that gap."

Over the course of our conversation, Mukherjee speaks as avidly about the principles of physics and cosmology as he does about Hindu mythological paintings and the Buddhist cave temples of India. After mentioning the feverishly gestural Van Gogh, he leaps to the famously cerebral Sol LeWitt, who viewed the physical fabrication of an artwork as "a perfunctory affair." Mukherjee's capacity for straddling such divergent themes can be exhausting, it seems. At one point, after discussing the conflict between his admiration for LeWitt's schematic approach and his dissatisfaction with the results that such an approach produces in his own work — "I'm not interested in having an algorithm on the wall," as he puts it — he collapses back in his chair with a sigh, saying, "I guess it's just the struggle of being the kind of artist I am; I don't know that it's going to go away."

The power of the work itself, however, comes as a reminder that nothing is as far removed from its opposite as it would seem: One loop of the spiral is necessarily bound to every other, the mass of the mountain inextricably entwined with the space of its valley. □