



*Captions for Review 04: Sandeep Mukherjee*

1. Sandeep Mukherjee, "Untitled," 2002. Acrylic, colored pencil and needle on duralene, 25 x 300 inches (detail).
2. Sandeep Mukherjee, installation view, Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles, September 21 - October 19, 2002.

When I went to see Sandeep Mukherjee's latest show at Margo Leavin Gallery to prepare this review, I was already influenced by a series of lighthearted conversations that he and I had had on what it means to be a "subject of art." Admittedly, then, I experienced a serious lack of "critical distance." But it was a productive lack that I'll embrace here by way of meditating on the "subject" that Mukherjee's images give us to ponder. In the past, Mukherjee's work has experimented with the effervescent figure, one that shifts in a field of light and painted color as it is visually caught, lost, and gleaned again by the viewer. While the latest body of work continues this investigation, one piece in particular stands out as a conceptual and aesthetic break. The central work of the show—a continuous narrow strip of painted vellum that wraps around four walls—at first appears to be a brightly colored, monochromatic abstraction, one that pulsates between the vivid hues of deep rose, pink, orange, and yellow as it unfolds. Moving closer to the work, however, the viewer discerns that embedded in this 110' x 25" "monochrome" is a series of figures. Taking the form of undulating heads and tumbling, entangled nudes, the figures' lines are made through intricate folds and pinpricks. The work, then, becomes a visual push-pull between abstraction and figuration, or painting and sculptural relief. On this note, Mukherjee's work raises some provocative aesthetic questions. If we take this formal operation even further, it's an invitation to consider larger philosophical conundrums of the neither/nor, and more specifically the crisis of subjectivity.

Critics have repeatedly described Mukherjee's figures as being self portraits. This is an easy enough conclusion, as the figures derive from photographs of the artist. But are these, in fact, "self portraits?" Or would they more aptly be described as portraits of a dreamed-of self? Lacan spoke eloquently about what is at stake for the subject's own image in the field of his dreams, something that has poetic resonance in Mukherjee's work. In the dream, our subjective footing slides away; our position is that of someone who does not see where he is being led. Simply, we don't have the same ego in our dream state as we do when we are awake. Rather, we are caught in a state described by the Taoist philosopher Choang-tsu who dreamed of being a butterfly. When Choang-tsu awoke he no longer knew if he was a butterfly dreaming he was a man, or a man who had dreamed he was a butterfly. Lacan muses that when Choang-tsu is the butterfly in the dream, it never occurs to him to wonder if later, when he is awake, he is not the butterfly that he is dreaming of being. And yet, in the dream, something of the "self" is nevertheless shown to Choang-tsu, which Lacan describes this way:

*In fact it is when he was the butterfly that he apprehended one of the roots of his identity—that he was, and is, in his essence, that butterfly who paints himself with his own colors—and it is because of this that, in the last resort, he is Choang-tsu.*

*In the dream, then, Choang-tsu paints himself with his own colors, a sovereign act, indeed, but one that results in an endless redoubling of the self. Simply, having dreamed of himself, Choang-tsu is never solely in one place—neither in the place of the butterfly nor in the place of the man.*

In many ways, Mukherjee's installation lyrically enacts the crisis of Choang-tsu's dream. Quite literally, the drawn figure is free-floating and redoubled. However, what's even more interesting to imagine in the site of this 110-foot mural is the image of the artist who, having recalled himself as in a dream, commits to the operation of laying this "self" down through the daily act of pricking and folding a fissured ego into the surface or "skin" of the vellum. Mukherjee's figures do not stop to wonder if they are not the man who is folding and pricking them into this skin. That troublesome wonderment is for the man who daily arises from his sleep, unrolls that section of vellum to be worked upon, and proceeds to prick and fold his own image into the "other" site of his skin. There his figure will appear in its manifold guises, falling and sliding amongst spirals, leaves, and intricately ribbed cones. The dream-like paradox of this image rides upon Mukherjee's indexical means. The pricked surfaces and folded lines, as overt physical traces of the artist's hand, stand as a sovereign act of self-representation—this is the mark of "me." But once they are finished they are also a terminal gesture that severs the artist from his own representation—I am no longer the same as my own image. Hence, in order for the artist to represent himself he must continually move on. He dreams only in order to then prick and fold, day by day; a repetitive act for sure, since once the mark is made, a self is both stated and lost.

The philosophic reflections that the work provokes are compelling alone. However, as for the work's social or cultural connotation, the following quandary is begged of the viewer (and perhaps the artist as well). If we see Mukherjee as that subject-as-butterfly who "paints himself with his own colors," then we must ask: just whose colors are these? Which is to say, the tertiary colors that have characterized the artist's larger project have been associated with Eastern art, connoting the artist's origins (he was born and raised in India). But in the Western context in which this particular installation was shown, these hues also connote this Fall's fashion colors. This double signification needn't be an impasse in the work's integrity, lest one intends to Orientalize both the artist and his image. And yet this tendency persists (perhaps unconsciously) in some of the critical reception of Mukherjee's work when words like "bewitching" are approvingly employed to distinguish his images from the "didactic" work of other artists influenced by post-colonial discourse. I would note that the power in Mukherjee's work is precisely this unsettled cross dialogue between East and West. This is something it would be interesting to see the artist play upon more explicitly in the future, although it is already implicitly present in his work now. The shape of the vellum onto which Mukherjee lays down his colors evokes the decorative panel-relief registers of Eastern temples; but the inter-reflection of these colors onto the gallery's wall and floors also evoke the "resonant tradition of Light and Space art," as Christopher Knight has noted about this work. Again, neither one cultural site nor the other is privileged here because the subject of the work slides as in a dream.

Resisting the Orientalist impulse in viewing Mukherjee's work has heightened political resonance when a "Western" ethnocentricism has tenaciously maintained itself vis-à-vis a distant "Eastern" region. This has remained intact even though, at every turn, the implosion of the cultural distance between West and East has persisted in current events, proving once again that on a global scale sites like "here" and "there" are always already in trouble. If we resist othering Mukherjee, then his work is an aesthetic sanctuary by means of a philosophical neither/nor proposition within a climate of the either/or political ultimatum. This is not to say that Mukherjee's sanctuary is a flight from the world of politics; rather it is a flight from the world of dialectics, towards a sliding of the subject across cultural boundaries. It's an act that is as much political as it is lyrical.

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