

IMAGINARY HAPPENINGS

Mahesh Baliga

in conversastion with

Aveek Sen

IMAGINARY HAPPENINGS

Vadodara
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To me, the mystery of painting today is how can appearance be made. I know it can be illustrated, I know it can be photographed. But how can this thing be made so that you catch the mystery of appearance within the mystery of the making? – Francis Bacon¹

Escaping the imaginary totalizations produced by the eye, the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface, or whose surface is only its upper limit, outlining itself against the visible. – Michel de Certeau²

Mahesh and I had met – properly for the second time in our lives – in Bombay, on the occasion of his exhibition, *It's a Normal Day*. This was in January, 2020. We arrived on the same day, and checked in at the same hotel near the gallery. Over the next few days, with his work already up in the gallery, getting to know the paintings and getting to know the painter became difficult to tell apart for me – even more so now, as I sit down to edit and introduce the transcript of our, more formal, conversation at the gallery. I went on long walks with him through 'his' Bombay – sometimes purposively, more often aimlessly – accompanied by conversation, laughter, and frequent stops to eat simple, delicious food.

My reason for stating this is not sentimental but, in the most vital sense of the word, critical. I have learnt to look at Mahesh's work through letting him open my eyes, and my eye's mind, to the inscrutable at the heart of the ordinary, as we talked, ate and looked during our walks in the city. These were interspersed with my viewing of the paintings, during which he would discreetly stay away, leaving me to work out my own ways of feeling my way through the work. It did not take me long to realize that moving through the terrain of his art was not all that different from our perambulations in the city. Both involved a kind of walking with one's eyes open, in which serial viewing and synchronic connection-making had to be brought into play simultaneously, without easy recourse to biographical information or explanations.

It was like learning to read auto-fiction – neither fully autobiography nor fully fiction – made by a generous but subtle and elusive writer for whom the reinvention of characters and situations, the retelling of dreams and myths, and allusion to other artists and their work were constitutive of the mystery, veracity and labour inherent in the actual making of images. I noticed what appeared to

1. David Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon* (Thames & Hudson: London, 2008), p. 105.

2. Michel De Certeau, "Walking in the City" in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Randall (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1988), p. 93.

be symbols, recurring motifs and hints of stories as I re-traced the path of the painter's imagination and memory manifested in the paintings. But it was as if the Rosetta Stone that would decode this pictorial language had been put just beyond my reach. I had to allow myself to lose and find my way through this private hieroglyphic landscape, like Hansel and Gretel trying to find their way back home through the forest after the birds had eaten up their trail of bread.

Throughout the time that I spent with Mahesh and his work, I found myself taking pictures with my phone camera instead of making notes in my diary – as if my task of verbal response and enquiry, as writer and interlocutor, could fulfil itself only through acts of visual recognition and understanding. I kept photographing what he made me look at as we walked, or what I found myself noticing in his company; and the presence in my vision of his way of looking at the familiar persisted even as I continued photographing after returning to my own city. I would notice which of my Instagram posts Mahesh would 'like', and made up clusters of photographic images 'for' him; and this wordless exchange of images has become part of the mutually intuitive economy of our long-distance friendship, and of my ongoing engagement with his work. He has told me, for instance, that he enjoys looking at some of my screenshots, often with subtitles included, because they made him imagine the larger narratives of the films from which they were made. I realized, again, that this was also how I found myself making sense of many of his paintings – as screenshots from an interior cinema to which I would never presume to have direct access.

When we did sit down, eventually, for our public conversation at the gallery, surrounded by his paintings, I found Mahesh genially resistant to talking at any length about his own work. It was as if he had decided not to be of much help in moving this conversation forward, either for my sake or for the sake of those who had come to listen to us. It occurred to me, then, that it was precisely this playfully stubborn reticence that could be the key, both generously proffered and mischievously withheld, to what he has described as his practice of "looking sideways at the overlooked". This is what we, the viewers of his work, had to teach ourselves to do in order to get to what he refers to as "the real that is in my head".

Aveek Sen



It's a Normal Day

Mahesh Baliga

Aveek Sen The last thing that I would want to ask Mahesh, simply because I have him captive here with his work is, what do these works mean? Or, why have you given this painting this particular title? I don't think that is the kind of ground we plan to cover in this exchange. Rather than asking what these works 'mean', I find it more interesting to start with the question of what do they make us 'do'? When I stepped into the gallery, I realized that there was a very careful putting together of the work, in terms of the sequence of the smaller paintings and the relationship between the larger and the smaller works. Would you like to begin by talking about how you sequenced them, if at all, and why you chose to show this body of work like this?

Mahesh Baliga This whole body of work started with the notion of the daily practice of painting, which I felt like doing religiously, and I wanted to see the best of me. I was the first viewer, so I was getting excited about what I could do, pushing myself in whatever manner I could paint. The subjects I chose were from newspapers and my self-experience of life, sometimes there were images from movies, or something exciting me all over. But the making of the image is more important than how it transforms images from real life, which, for me, are always taken up into the environment created with the pigments and the forms. When I put the paintings on the floor of the gallery, I felt that it should all come together like a movie, where some images, which are connected to one another, are repeated. So, there is a sense of *déjà vu*; you feel, "I've seen this earlier here." And the other part happens during the actual process of putting them up. The other day I was mulling over the fact that different kinds of painting are made on different kinds of scale. This was the first lesson in our painting department: what are the different kinds of painting? There are miniature paintings, there are easel paintings, and there are murals. When I looked at my display, I realized that it was a combination of these three. That is what makes you move closer or go farther away from the work. I always keep the smaller paintings on my lap when I'm working on them, so the paintings develop a kind of intimacy with you.















AS I think this way of making them and putting them together asks for a careful viewer; you can't just rush through them. They are deliberately broken into two sequences that are interlaced as well as discontinuous. There are negative spaces, blank spaces, between the images, yet they are also placed one after another in two parallel lines. You don't quite know what is the relationship between the upper tier of images and the lower one, until you begin to give them time. Then, once you move from the smaller to the larger paintings, you begin to see elements of the former in the latter, which suggests ways of bringing these different sequences and kinds of scale together. The work has its internal memory system where you begin to recognize people, places and other details or motifs, and make connections among them. You were telling me yesterday that this body of work comes out of your concern with our forgetting how to see, how to look at things, particularly when we take a certain kind of everyday normality for granted, and that is what you wanted to jog the viewer out of.

MB Seeing as a process is an important aspect of visualization that is completely getting lost in a welter of interference. So many images are banging against one another for our attention. There is WhatsApp, Facebook, and so many other apps. So, we just ignore these other ways of seeing. We would like to see something that is in the social media, but when something is actually happening in front of our eyes we don't think of seeing it at all. But to be able to bring back this other kind of seeing excites me.



AS What triggers, for you, the transition from seeing something and putting it down in paint, so that each painting is like a happening?

MB Having known the history of painting, and some paintings which I have already seen and admire, there is a kind of connection I find myself making, taking some threads from everywhere. They sometimes gel and sometimes they don't. Sometimes it is the reworking of this recall that makes the connection happen: there is a painting underneath and there is the new work that layers it with another idea. Emotion is the basic starting point of this work, of why I paint. If I don't have the emotion, I am not excited; I don't get charged if there is no pain or some small pleasures. It could even be a simple thing, like a particular colour in a painting that I cannot make happen. Because when I am using casein as a medium, there is this lead-based colour and the oxides, minerals and earth colours. So, if there is some lead-based colour underneath, and if there are the oxides coming out on the top layer, they will change the colour. That is not in my control. Sometimes that helps the work, and sometimes it's a disaster! There is a painting of my mother sleeping that I have done several times. To get the exact emotion that I felt, it took me some time, and involved thinking about how to do it with my brush and what kind of brush to use. Maybe I was doing some other work and got the solution of the problem there in that other work, which I then tried to use in this painting. So, the variation helps you. It's not that I can paint everything like that. Each emotion asks for its own way of doing the work.

AS Many of the paintings actually seduce us into imagining events or stories around them, but then are withheld. Are you comfortable with viewers not having any information at all about how the paintings happened, so that they make that up for themselves?

MB If that is being done, then I think my work has found its way! At least they start seeing what I felt.

AS The paintings have titles, but you haven't even displayed the titles with them.

MB That would mess with the seeing. It will be good to hear the new story that each viewer makes out of them. As a painter, you have no idea what these are going to be. Today, Gieve Patel was telling me about an elephant rolling on a grain of rice. So, when I look at that painting again, that is what I begin to feeling, and a new connection gets made



AS What does colour mean to you: both the making of a colour and the use of a colour once it has been made?

MB Traditionally, the colour is made earlier and these things are arranged before the painting is begun, and then you start to paint. But I don't do that. I mix the colours as I am painting. This different approach helps me to work in a certain way, without limiting myself in the use of colour. It's as if I start with a premonition of how things will go, but the feeling-world of the painting has its own language, which will not listen to my predictions. This means that you have to initiate a dialogue with the colour, because sometimes they work and sometimes the colours are like your enemies. The selection of colour is tricky. Colours can be unpredictable characters, and you have to fight with them.



AS When you say that the painting world has its own language, does that language come for you only from the histories of painting? You were telling me, for instance, about this Bangladeshi film called *Television* (2012), by Mostofa Sarwar Farooki, and how it had gripped you, even if it wasn't a very 'high-art' kind of film at all. It was an interesting film about the banning of images. Can you give us a sense of what nourishes you as a seer, sharpens your sense of having 'seen' something?

MB When I'm reading Orhan Pamuk, I get a range of emotions, or when I'm looking at some works of art that delight me. I want to carry that delight and put that energy into my work. I won't be able to tell you how this is done. We had a painting by Sambhajirao Kadam in our college library. It was a portrait of his wife. That painting seemed almost to be breathing. So, whenever I saw it and came back to the studio, I could work easily.

AS You told me that there is a kind of 'juiciness' to certain things that you see, which provokes you to relive its energy in your painting. Can you tell us something about this juiciness? I think it's a powerful word. What is this juiciness?

MB When I see Prabhakar Barwe's work, or the work of J. Swaminathan's work, Sambhajirao Kadam, or Walter Langhammer, and some of the portraits by K.K. Hebbar, or some still life by Prajakta Potnis. Some still lives she had made earlier, and the other Prajakta [Palav], who had painted a swimming pool: all these works would prod me to go back and paint. This is what I call the quality of juiciness.



AS The other thing that we've been doing during the last couple of days, is going around eating a lot. Somehow – and I'm not saying this frivolously – when you use a word like juiciness, I think about the very particular kind of delight that you take in food, in the savouring of food.

MB I enjoy that which is made with love, whatever it may be; it will affect you when it is made. I have been eating at some places for ten or twelve years, they are the same places, and I enjoy that. It's like eating your mother's food. But once that changes, I won't go there anymore.

AS Could you tell us, perhaps, the difference between making something that is small and something that is large? Because there is the coming together of two very different kinds of scale in your work.

MB Large paintings will haunt me, always. Whenever you go into the studio, they say to me, "See me!" That's what they do to you. The smaller ones, you can stack them away and they are not visible. The large ones are so demanding, no? And you are spending time with them, you are giving them and giving them, as your work and sometimes they don't come out well or so many problems arise with them. Maybe because I work in a small room or studio, once the small works are out in a larger space, they are different. But the large works, they take you for a ride, a big ride.

AS You were talking about condensed milk. Small works are like when you keep churning the milk and you reduce it to something very dense and intense.

MB What happens with the small work is that while I make them, or am making changes in them, then it takes less time. But when it comes to the large work, you have to change the whole thing. When I'm making the large work, I'm working with the entire area at once. I don't work in one area and then another, but I work all at once. And that's the problem: I don't know how to work it all out at once. But when I am doing small works and it's not working out, I just leave it, I go for another one. But the large works will question your abilities, your entire thought process: what have you been studying all these years? All these kinds of questions. Sometimes you can't predict the colour; you feel like it is going to happen like this, but when you put it on it's completely different because of the chemical reactions. Sometimes it works, but sometimes it doesn't. The large works take up a lot of your energy. I work on the small and the large ones simultaneously, and, while working, the large ones keep pushing me.



AS Apart from being a practising artist, you're also a teacher, and a lot of this work, you were saying, has come out of the boredom of teaching. Can you talk about that boredom? What does that boredom produce?

MB I was a good student, in terms of dedication; there was a rigorous, daily engagement with my art practice. But I have some students who do it like office work, after which they will be doing something else. So, you get troubled, as if you are putting your effort and they are not bothered. Somewhere I felt, no I shouldn't lose my energy like this, and I started these small works, which came from that boredom.

AS Can you talk about the teachers who have been with you through your growth as an artist?

MB Among my mentors, I'd like to mention Ullhas Sanzgiri, from Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy School of Art. He never taught us how to paint or how to do anything, he only taught us how to think. He made us think. I remember him almost every day. He makes me think, and he makes me question myself.

AS When you talk about thinking, particularly in relation to making work, what kind of thinking is that? Is it thinking triggered by what you read, or what you listen to, or what you see? Or is it abstract?

MB If I'm listening to one singer daily, like a special favourite – I have one singer, Sahana Bajpaie, who sings Rabindrasangeet – I listen to the same music every morning, I feel that I'm continuing with the same temperament. Maybe the work is not happening, but I try to keep that same tempo.

AS : And when you listen to, say, Rabindrasangeet, do you pay attention to the words or is it a more physical relationship with the music?

MB When I'm listening, it's just the breathing, it slows down all my anxiety. What I have is what I carry with me, and it just slows me down. That's what I feel when I listen to music.



AS There are a number of very precisely evoked human beings in these paintings. One almost recognizes them, but not completely. What is this human connection that keeps recurring in this body of work?

MB The first thing is my admiration for their work. Some are artists, and then there is one ornithologist, and there is my father-in-law. There are artists like K.G. Subramanyan, Nilima Sheikh, K.P. Reji, Shreyas Karle and Sudhir Patwardhan .

AS But these people are not identified, not even in the titles. It's almost as if there is a very specific reference in your head which is, at the same time, not relevant somehow for the viewer's encounter with the work.

MB The reason why I put certain people in my work is that they are the trigger points. I had a long association with K.G. Subramanyan, but I never showed him my work, and once he passed away I had this feeling, why didn't I show him my work? He would always ask me and I would say, I will make something good and then I will show you. I had this fear of showing him my work. But I loved to sit and listen to what he would say. And once he passed away, the memory of going to his place, I want to freeze it that way. With Nilima's work, there is a particular colour that she uses in most of the paintings, because it is the same medium, and there is this colour palette that comes to you and it's like an enemy color for me. I just hate that; it becomes like her work just because of the color. So, I painted that out. One half is about liking her work and the other half is about that other kind of feeling for her colours. And then K.P. Reji, he has made a lot of love paintings. Once I saw him in a camp, sitting and giving bouquets to all the artists, and I painted him like his paintings. I felt that I had to paint him because it was like looking at his paintings. Because he too never painted himself in his own paintings.

AS There are also these small but dramatic accidents in your work, like a burning tyre or, literally, spilt milk: things that have happened suddenly and have spun out of control.

MB All those are from newspaper images. Sometimes, suppose I want to go and buy milk, and there is no milk, and I come home and see the paper, and this image is there, then what is your reaction? Or you have to go very far away to get the milk. The burning tyre is just like the helplessness of what you see. And painting that is the challenge. That's what I was feeling, the smoke, and the air. There is the interest in the selection of the images. Why the burning tyre? I just elongated the tyre further, so it becomes something else. Those kinds of transformation are what I try to bring about when I paint because without them I would feel like it's all dry.



AS How does the political enter your work? Is the idea of normalcy, or unsettling the idea of normalcy, a political gesture for you? In the hare chasing the hound, the hound chasing the hare, for instance, there are specific references that the viewer may or may not get. But you are not particularly anxious to convey that in an explicit way.

MB I kept to myself, in my private world. But after the passing away of my mother I began to see the world outside, the other things beside my personal deliberations on things within and immediately around me. There are certain things I can't do. I can't shout, I can't go and sit anywhere. But that which is unknown, unwanted, unfamiliar, all these things are small undercurrents in my work, like painting a lion in such a scale that it looks like a rat, or a residential neighbourhood where an army tank has been parked. The old tanks are preserved and kept, and the army workers clean them. I thought of painting all those. But not as reportage but as something else, an altered reality or happening.

AS There is also fear, explicitly in the titles of some of the works, but fear that is projected onto animals. So, the animals and the fear are linked in the paintings. How do you, or why do you, do that? In your earlier work, the fear was in a scene set in a school: a boy trying to read or pupils punished in class. But now that experience of fear and trembling moves into a hare or cat.

MB If I show that in a human subject, it would be an explicit way of doing things, and I don't like that kind of making. So, I had only these animals left. I had done some architectural forms exuding fear, in my previous show, but I couldn't manage that. This time, I thought of revisiting that, because I go to the zoo almost every month when my head is empty. When I see those animals in their cages and I stand just as helplessly with my sketchbook and pencils without being able to do anything. But slowly things turn around when I am there for a day or two, and I get something. All these things come from there and from that fear. When I am looking around in the zoo, there is this big cat, and suddenly it was inside the house and now I have this whole cat family next to my studio vandalizing my studio when I went to Delhi. So now I am scared to enter my own space. I can just take them and throw them away, but I feel bad about doing that, so I feel doubly vulnerable. I am scared of losing my space, which has been territorialized, but, in at another level, I don't want to hurt them.





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AS What does the act of painting do to the everyday? If you make the everyday, and the normalcy of the everyday, your primary subject of painting, do you feel that there is a risk, sometime, that you may get trapped and there would arise, therefore, the question of pushing beyond that? Or does painting itself, as a gesture, as an act, help you push through the everyday into some other place?

MB Both are possible. But I would like to go ahead with the painting because I want to know the language more. That's what my inner need is, but there is always a risk of being stuck because I keep criticizing myself so much that sometimes it's very difficult to work, because you are constantly talking to yourself. There is always a weighing of approaches, of how to do things. There is an observer within you, and if that is lost then things will be messed up.

AS Do you think, with the completion of this body of work, you've come through to a place about which you had no idea?

MB Yes, I had no idea apart from the fact that this work was done for the excitement of painting. I never thought the small works would be exhibited, in the way that I hoped that the large paintings would be exhibited some day.

AS What kind of language do you fantasize being generated around this work? Is it a language that you would want to control? Is it critical? Is it poetic? Is it fictional, or literary?

MB It's tough for me to answer this because all of these are there in, whatever I feel.

AS Are you attracted to language?

MB I am attracted to it, but I am not so keen about it.

AS : As a writer, I don't want to decode your work like a series of puzzles, or to explain it. There is a different kind of tangential writing that I can see myself doing around some of the images, or around this body of work. Of course, then there is another kind of very critical, art-historical writing that one can do, which doesn't interest me very much. So, if you were to, say, put it all together as a book, do you think that the images speak for themselves or do they need the supplement of language?

MB No, they don't need a separate language, because they are not made like that. I don't want to explain, but want to let my paintings be open to new readings by their viewers.







कणि संग करां स्नेह?

कबीर

कणि संग करां स्नेह?
पान पड़ते यूँ कह्यो
की सुन तरुवर बनराय
अब के बछिड़े कब मलिन,
दूर पड़ेंगे जाय?

तो आग लगी इस वृक्ष को,
और जलन लगे सब पात
तुम क्यों जलो पंखेरुओं,
पंख तुम्हारे पास?
फल फूल खादे इस वृक्ष के
और बोट पड़ी है पात
उड़ना हमारा धर्म नहीं
और जलना वृक्ष के साथ।

हैलिये, कणि संग करां मैं स्नेह?
संगत कीजो धरमी साध री
संगत कीजो नर्मल साध री

बांस उगो इना बाग मां, थरक रही बन राय
आप जले औरन के जाले, अग्न घणी अंग मांय कणि संग...

चंदन उगो इना बाग मां, हरख रही बन राय
चंदन पास मैं जाऊं, आप चंदन हुई जाऊं
कणि संग...

दवा लागो इना बाग मां, पंछी बैठो आये
हम जले पंख बहरि, तम उड़ी परे को जाए
कणि संग...

फल खादा पान बरिड़ीया, रमिया डालो डाल।
तम जलो मैं उभरूं, जीवनो कतिरकि बार?
कणि संग...

दव बुझयो झाड़ा मेटिया, दूधे बूठा मेह
कहत कबीरा धर्मदास से, नति नति नवलो नेह
कणि संग...

WHOM SHOULD I LOVE?

– KABIR

Whom should I love?
The falling leaf spoke thus
To the forest tree
Parted this moment, when shall we
meet?
We'll be far apart from each other

The tree caught fire
All the leaves began to burn
Why do you burn, O winged one?
You have wings, fly away!

I ate the fruit of this tree
I soiled its leaves
There is no way I can fly away
I must burn with the tree

Whom should I love, my friend?
Keep the company of pure-hearted
ones
Keep the company of clean-hearted
ones
A bamboo plant grew in this forest
The whole forest trembled
It burns itself and everything around it
So much fire in its belly!

A sandalwood tree grew in this forest
The whole forest rejoiced
I go near the sandalwood tree
I become fragrant too!
Fire engulfs the whole forest
A bird comes and sits on the tree
I have no wings, I must burn
But you should save yourself and fly!

I ate your fruit, I soiled your leaves
I played from branch to branch
You burn, and I fly away?
You live and love but once!

The fire was extinguished
The clouds rained milk
Says Kabir to Dharamdas,
Every day my love is new.

Translation: Vipul Rikhi and Shabnam Virmani



I had been working with the idea of the normal, dealing with what it takes to be normal? Is normal the adjective of norm? Does it mean conformity with the norm and does normalisation mean to make/ make to seem normal? Flexible normality in its varied senses exist in my work, in thinking and making art.

Things that happen for a first time if found in continuous regularity becomes normal. When people overlook strangeness it's normal. Sometimes things are just normalised to help suit certain institutions of power. News clippings from the side-lines and the margins may enter the frames. Acknowledged as just normal, these images can be allotted small spaces within the mediatic space. The normality of everyday gets lost in the articulation of larger discourses of politics. The routine practices of reading unreceived images of violence, alienation, conflict and desire through the everyday of myself as an artist-person, enters my practice. I ask how political is normal?

My reading of the normal becomes important rather than conforming to any particular aesthetic of critique, as I think any critique is a reading. Small incidents puncture the idea of the normal, leaving drifts and leaks in meaning. Sometimes these are immersive moments, completely pitched to the instance of the event; to the incident. I am both near and distant, within and at the edge of the contours; with them certainly and also in the uncertainty of ambivalence. The daily practice of painting which is often found redundant in the present context; it is normalised/standardised as something of the commonplace. This is the primary action which I consciously retain.

Mahesh Baliga

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