

EARTH as HAVEN: under the canopy of love  
JAYASHREE CHAKRAVARTY

*“After all, works of art are always the result of one’s having been in danger, of having gone through an experience all the way to the end, to where no one can go any further. The further one goes, the more private, the more personal, the more singular an experience becomes and the thing one is making is, finally, the necessary, irrepressible, and, as nearly as possible, definitive utterance of this singularity...”*

*-Rainer Maria Rilke in 1907*

Over the last three decades or more, Jayashree Chakravarty’s art practice has addressed the exigent situation of shrinking natural habitat and water bodies in ever-expanding Indian cities. Living by herself in a rapidly urbanizing suburb of Kolkata in Eastern India, she has been a witness to the rich marshlands of Salt Lake transform into ‘Salt Lake City’ a sprawling suburban development, exemplary of congestive urbanism and a growing hostility towards the ecology of life. Her work then extrapolates this loss, reacting and reflecting upon a fast disappearing natural world. Nature no longer is a force independent of human impact and control. Jayashree reminds us that the earth is continuously being pushed towards a precarious edge, where the threat of daily damage has taken on precipitous dimensions. Through poetic evocations, she weaves into her personal vision the need for environmental balance and resurrection.

In her recent project at Musee Guimet, one encounters a large, suspended paper structure, its asymmetry accentuated by the perfect symmetry and geometry of the rotunda. This imaginary form inspired by the architectonic quality of the wasp-house/cocoon acquires massive proportions, making it possible for viewers to go in and experience her insect-world. Bare from the outside, the canopy quite like cave-forms and natural shelters, invites one to enter and explore an apparently dark interior that at a closer look unfolds the mysteries hidden within. The delicate ribbed armature of this built form brings to memory the shape of shanties scattered over the city of Kolkata, and also echoes the slender ribbed-vaults of Gothic architecture. The integration of form and function in built architecture finds its best prototypes in nature-forms and for Jayashree, the ant-hill, the beehive and the wasp-cocoon have been consistently inspiring. Tea stains and mud washes bring an earthiness to the structure providing dusty tints that subdue light within. The genesis of the work was a direct response to the specificity of the site, the space and scale of architecture, the circular plan of the rotunda. The artist drew the serpentine line as the spine of the imagined structure, its potential of behaving like a slow crawling form, with only the feet of visitors visible from the outside, conceived as an inherent part of the expressive form. The seventeen large soaring paper scrolls displayed around as a continuous curtain, transform the space of the rotunda, creating an immersive environment for a deeper engagement. They bring remnants of nature into the cultural space of the museum.

Having grown up in Tripura, she frequently visited the lush northeast Indian jungles with her father who was a doctor and an avid naturalist. Jayashree vividly recalls her formative years, when she was exposed to the joys of wonderment at every little discovery in the world around her. She was made aware of cycles of bloom and decay, insects and birds building their homes sharing the same tree and the symbiotic relation of things around her. Most importantly, she was sensitized to the ‘rebirthing’ of nature that brought sustainability and renewed hope to life on earth.

To her, nature ceased to be a ‘view of the landscape’ frozen in time and captured from a fixed vantage point. Her soaring paper installations opt for a mobile vision that takes the viewer’s gaze along to glide over the surface of her scrolls as well as penetrate the layers underneath. These seemingly unframed nature-scapes defy the category as well as the purpose of landscape painting; Jayashree neither records

observed nature-views nor does she use nature-material such as leaves, twigs and roots to embellish a monumentalized leaf or tree shape in contrived formal arrangements. For her, nature is both the subject and substance of her art. It is both context and content for her ruminations on inhabiting and preserving the earth.

In recent years, contemporary forms of art practice have pushed artists to engage with new industrial materials and technology that advance possibilities of artistic and conceptual conquests, but Jayashree gestures the need to be closer to nature, seeking through her art, ways of recuperating the self and the world around her. A *bricoleur* at work, she collects discarded, found or shed material from the everyday- nearby parks, streets, the kitchen or the backyard of her house, and develops a sustained engagement with it. One is fascinated by her intimate process of working, privileging the 'unpredictable' aspect of her informal technique that frees her to proceed without a pre-meditated plan, both in the use of imagery and the material. As she goes along, she embraces an aesthetic of slowness, building the surface bit by bit, layer by layer, following no monotonous/repetitive working but driving it by intuition, through intermittent acts of kneading paper, painting, staining it with tea, molding and layering it with the found material, enriching it with a multi-dimensional visuality. The surface, both gestural and visceral draws the viewer into the painted and woven labyrinth. There is nothing hurried about her work. She says, "even in moments of doing nothing but lazing, I am processing my work." The work evolves through time, through patient laboring, and a simultaneous dialogue between action and reflection.

Her large paintings on canvas from the last decade, signaled an impending catastrophe, drawing as if landscapes of erasure in an abstracted language of lines, dots, speckles and squiggles. In creating a textural script that eroded the thick layer of impasto, she suggested the speed with which things were falling apart. More recently, since 2010, she has moved to working with natural/organic material, often edible and having medicinal value such as tender stems and dry roots of local plants and herbs such as *tulsi*, *bel*, flax seeds, lemon grass that exude their own aroma. Pasting transparent sheets of Nepalese and Chinese paper along with tissue, gauze and discard material, she interlaces these fragments between the layers to relay as if the life-cycle of the vegetal world- seeds, saplings, stems, green leaves, dry leaves, dry pods, delicate roots all assembled to perhaps suggest the passage of time but equally stressing on nature's regenerative potential. Using thin jute ropes or coiled tissue paper as binding elements, she creates dynamic linear patterns that reminiscence calligraphy or an arabesque of veins and nerves under the skin of the body.

I would contend that this shift in her working has been a turning point in the artist's life as well as her art practice. It reveals her lingering preoccupation with death and sense of loss that has become apparent both in her choice of material and her highly evolved personal vocabulary. Perhaps this had something to do with her personal predicament at the time, when she nursed her parents through their illness and slow death. Jayashree encountered closely the vulnerabilities of a withering body, observing the sores and abrasions she nursed. The daily experience of touching her mother's skin, feeling its deteriorating texture, sensing the wound within, made her acutely sensitive towards the tactility of the body and need for repair and recovery. In her loss, she began seeking through her work, ways of restoration and healing.

Quite intuitively, Jayashree started treating paper as the frail skin/cover, working hard on making it resilient and tough like leather. What is most engaging about these scrolls is Jayashree's repeated attempts at salvaging ephemeral/impermanent matter, and making it robust through her prolonged treatment of the surface, readied as if to take the beatings of life. Often memories flashed back when she touched, caressed and shrouded the paper, pressing in between its translucent layers, dry fallen leaves, seeds, stems and even a delicate branch, shielding it with gauze, stroking its sores and abrasions, laboring to transform fragile matter into a resilient form. Her working methodology now demanded

tremendous patience, reserves of high energy and an undying will. To be seen in light from behind, the translucent scrolls carry forward the memories of the x-ray image, and the interior body-view, revealing the concealed truth of the unseen/unknown condition. Jayashree's recent works amplify her preoccupations to 'mend and heal' what is falling apart.

*Earth as Haven* rhymes with and alludes to heaven, and perhaps to a utopian desire, but the artist here is more significantly immersed in retrieving the earth as a place of refuge and shelter for all visible and invisible forms of life that inhabit its soil, air, water and sunlight and enjoy its fecundity. Referring to the interiority of wombs, cocoons and nests, it is unadorned from the outside while the inside unfolds a world inhabited by tiny insect-forms- beetles, flies, ants and glow-worms that sparkle and illuminate the dark core of the earth. A play of camouflage, quite like in nature offers sudden moments of surprise and discovery, often challenging the naked eye, demanding a microscopic investigation. One marvels at Jayashree's dexterous handling of common place substance, bringing in popular tapestry material such as tiny white beads, minute sequins, mirror, glitter clustered with glue, making us pause to enjoy her fantastical, almost surreal creation. She slows us down, wanting us to receive the extra-sensorial experience in the aroma of the earth, the palpable sensuousness of the surface, the radiant colours emanating from insects, painted and with puffed-up bodies, the sense of felt movement in silence, all in the strange beauty of this make-believe haven.

Jayashree's over-riding concern to restore the fragile core of the earth, still beautiful and fertile, but equally frail and vulnerable, continues to stimulate her artistic pursuits. Contemporary and relevant, her concerns go beyond geographical boundaries, cultural differences and political motives.

It is in the depths of her immersive practice, that Jayashree has realized the affirmative power of art to transcend levels of despair and lost hope, in order to heal a fractured world.

Roobina Karode  
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