

“PERHAPS THE PLAINTIVE NUMBERS FLOW”



Shambhavi Singh. *Megh Meyrd.* Acrylic on canvas board. 24" x 30" (each of 14 parts). 2014.
Image courtesy of Talwar Gallery, New York/New Delhi.

Shambhavi Singh explores the romance of nature and the compulsions of labour, reveals Meera Menezes.

Reaper's Melody, the title of Shambhavi Singh's solo show, has a decidedly Wordsworthian ring to it. On from the 6th of September 2014 till the 3rd of January 2015 at Delhi's Talwar Gallery, it immediately calls to mind the song of the young Highland lass in the Romantic poet's *The Solitary Reaper*: "Or is it some more humble lay, /Familiar matter of to-day? / Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain, /That has been, and may be again?" This feeling was further amplified by the iron sickles and the play of their shadows in the installation *Reaper's Melody*. Only here, the rustic farming implements were not evocative of Scottish hills but of women bent over in knee deep water, planting paddy in fields across rural India. Conjoined at the top and shorn of their wooden handles, the scythes were marked by a starkness and simplicity of form echoing the strain of restraint and minimalism that runs through most of Shambhavi's works.

If Wordsworth was termed a 'nature poet' because of his emphasis on the connection between humans and nature, then the same could possibly be said about Shambhavi. While her earlier

work has referenced the river, constellations and celestial bodies, in this show the close connection between farmers and their land plays out on her canvases and in her sculptural works. It is a relationship that she has had ample opportunity to observe and study. During her summer holidays as a child in her ancestral village in Bihar, she spent countless hours watching the farmers, tilling and ploughing their fields. The marks that the toiling farmers left on the earth's surface, the furrows and the snaking paths or *meyrd*, have found their way into her imagination and by extension into her paintings *Meyrd Kha & Meyrd Ca*. In the arresting 14-piece *Megh Meyrd*, grey monsoon clouds in the top half of the panels are united with the grey and earthy colours in the panels below, producing a harmonious whole as the earth dissolves into the sky.

Nostalgia was interwoven into a long garland made of Persian wheel water scoops suspended in the well of the staircase titled *Rehat*. One could imagine the slowly rotating scoops, driven by bullocks, lifting the water from wells before disgorging their contents into the irrigation channels feeding the fields. In an age of pumps spewing diesel fumes, *Rehat* appeared like an anachronism, a relic of a bygone age. Wells were also evoked in the *Kuan* series, where Shambhavi offered viewers a peek into their inky darkness. These were the only paintings in the show where Shambhavi's colour palette seemed to echo her oeuvre from the past. While earlier her canvases were often clothed in darkness, the perspective in both the acrylic on canvas board works here was too flat for the blackness to draw the viewer in.



In her *Ghar Andar Bahar* series, Shambhavi treated paper pulp like clay, creating relief sculpture walls reminiscent of simple rural homes. Replete with niches, which often double up as shrines, these striking abstract creations were rendered in tones of ochre, turmeric, earthy browns and reds. It is a series that has resonances with her *Griha Do* pigmented paper pulp casts done during the stint at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute in 2011. It was in Singapore that she was first exposed to paper pulp and colour cotton pigments. Working with them she felt was akin to "making two fragile souls touch and meet for a valid, lasting fruition. The process itself was quite fragile and 'butter-like' since both pulp and pigment were wet and would only dry through a series of intricate, controlled processes on vacuum tables and temperature controlled driers."

Shambhavi Singh. *Rehat/Water* Garland. Iron and rust. 31" x 6" x 564". 2014. Image courtesy of Talwar Gallery, New York/New Delhi.

I had the opportunity of seeing Rehat and the Ghar *Andar Bahar* series in the artist's studio. Both the works suffered, however, in the constricted confines of the gallery space. Especially in the latter series, the breaking up of works into duos, which were then scattered in the white cube, did not do them justice. They probably would have made a more powerful statement had they been exhibited together.

Shambhavi ventured to move away from an idyllic notion of rural life in her large-scale *Girvee Neela, Peela, Lal* series. Here, the ridged furrows of a gigantic thumb print dominated the canvases and formally appeared to echo the farmer's furrowed fields. A take on Barnett Newman's *Who is afraid of Red, Blue and Yellow*, the works spoke of the struggle for sustenance and survival by farmers, who were often forced into cycles of debt and subsequent despair by having to mortgage their lands.

However, these works clearly need to be resolved further to avoid running the risk of being reduced to trite statements on rural poverty and displacement. Unwittingly, the works also evoked associations of the print of a peasant's hand in Raqs Media Collective's *Untold Intimacy of Digits* (2011).

Seemingly disconnected, at least in content, from the rest of the show was the dramatic 12-part water colour *Red Kali*, executed much earlier in 1998. Shades of crimson red formed the backdrop for a dark conical tongue, which spoke of the strength and destructive force of a goddess on the warpath. But it is in works like these and *Megh Meyrd* that Shambhavi's fine sensibility and her feel for colour and form truly come to the fore. It is these that she needs to harness in her intense yet restrained manner.