



SHEILA MAKHIJANI

Foreword

In the new series of gouaches, Makhijani continues to explore line, color and space through malleable systems that pivot around an interior logic all their own. Expanding on her earlier drawing practices, in the new works the artist has introduced a sculptural approach to the paper itself - punctured, layered and extended through stitching. In these new works, the kinetic nature of the drawings is echoed and strengthened by compositions that are no longer static or centered their energy no longer containable by square white surface. The stitching itself proposes sequential fragments of time and space, creating tangible boundaries that are impishly crossed by delicate yet purposeful lines of color. Now more than ever resembling swirling kites in space, Makhijani's drawings are like moving spirits refusing to be tied down.

Organic and interwoven lines swim frenetically yet purposefully on Makhijani's large and bold canvases. The undulating paintings conjure images of vivid underwater worlds, wherein varying degrees of translucence and depth echo the airy negative spaces of the gouaches. Within these ample, luminous areas the same web-like lines seem to tease gravity and lure the viewer deeper into the work. The artist once commenting about her lines said, "They realize that maybe it is better to be a little tame and a little wild. With that they may reach a harmonious balance... and manage to create their own world. A world which has no boundaries barring them from going on the other side...a world which is full of happiness and joy...so they try, but, that is real hard so they try again, and again...and life goes on...maybe one day they will arrive somewhere..."

Deepak Talwar

Facing page / Detail of "Is'nt it obvious?" / 80"x 48" / Oil on Canvas / 2005

Webs of the mind

Sheila Makhijani weaves her webs in her mind's eye before casting them on the ocean of paper and canvas before her. As they unfurl and break free, they take on a life of their own, exulting in the expanse before them. With untrammelled glee they move across uncharted waters, hungrily dredging it for what it can yield to feed the artist's imagination. In their dance of glee and gluttony they try and stretch the boundaries only to be repelled by the sharp edges of the canvas or paper. Yet they remain undeterred and creep along, trying to sneakily find a loop hole or rush against the sides, hoping they will yield.

But the boundaries remain unrelenting and so the webs recoil and work themselves into a tizzy, snaking feverishly, forming a tangle of lines and intricate forms. Others unravel completely and lose direction, hanging out on a limb in silent contemplation of what course to pursue. They have extricated themselves from the frenzied forms to seek solace and space to meditate. Dormant yet alive, a questioning line they remain. An unfinished thought, an unuttered word, an unlived moment. But the fight to transgress boundaries hasn't been in vain for the webs carry with them the flotsam of their journey. Nuggets of memory and moments lie within the labyrinth of lines. Silent testaments to the churnings of the artist's mind.

For it is the desire to capture these moments that propelled Sheila to weave her webs. She has flung them far hoping to pin them down and savour them for an eternity. Her works are an accretion of moments, testaments to a world of tiny delights. It is the inanimate rather than the animate that triggers these responses. A puddle of rain or a chugging locomotive, the natural or the man made, are perceived by Sheila as a play of positive and negative spaces, as a web of line and colour. They are at first gossamer thin and intangible, but they take on form and force in their encounter with the paper or canvas.

If Sheila does indeed try to steer the course of her wayward lines it is her quirky intervention in the form of the "zebra effect". She knits lines together producing DNA helixes with or without the twist. For her these striations mimic zebra crossings and were indeed black and white in earlier works. Now they make no concessions to their origins and have a mind of their own, either absorbing the colour around them or taking on completely different hues. At times they resemble meticulously applied silken skeins. At others ungainly rubbery creatures, contorting themselves in a myriad ways.

In her latest body of stitched works, Sheila gives her lines the liberty to spill over from one surface to the next. In creating alternative spaces for them, she feeds the illusion that they can sneak past beyond the frame. Conjuring forms within forms she stitches together

irregular pieces of smooth cartridge delighting as much in the lines created by the sharp edges of the paper as those formed by the puncturing needle of her Usha sewing machine. In a ritual of creation and erasure she riddles the surface with her white on white stitches only to rip them out with a controlled precision. The punctured paper bears the scars of this reversal of thoughts, of this forced unlearning. These stitched lines – continuous and contained, unshaken in their intent – are intersected by others, flitting in and out challenging them to a game of peek-a-boo. The darting lines of paint wrap and unwrap themselves around the unwavering axis, hoping it will yield and discard its unwillingness to join in their elaborate game. In an attempt to tempt and tease they stretch and unwind, flexing their elasticity like a bunch of rubber bands reveling in their newfound freedom. But the stitched/unstitched line remains unrelenting. Unwilling to succumb to a moment's pleasure, it is bent instead on hurtling outwards to keep its rendezvous with the edges. For the stitches know they must remain impervious to all enticements, for they carry with them the weight of the artist's intent. Without them the papers would flutter and fall, moments would be lost and experiences come undone.

In her drawings Sheila is content to let swathes of paper lie bleached and bare, aquiver with unseen presences. Not so in her canvases where she leaves no terrain uncharted, no space unexplored. Colour rushes in to fill every void and spills over uninvited. Forms leap up and subside in this frenzied feast of tangled nets where buzz not bare rules the roost. Yet slowly but surely a silent shift is taking place. Confined till now to Sheila's drawings the spare line carrying with it sublimated essences is making its way insidiously into her canvases. She now flips the brush over, using the back of the brush to scratch out her nets. These lines bring with them a sense of quietude as if trying to soothe and slow down the frenetic pace, injecting a sense of restraint into the seething mass. Could it be that the artist is rethinking her strategies of moment/memory capture? Could it be that as Sheila weaves her webs she is wondering "What is the buzz about"?

Meera Menezes

Meera Menezes is a writer based in New Delhi, India

Talwar Gallery
Exhibition Catalog, BLIP!
2005