

On Track

The playful ambiguity in Sheila Makhijani's work has always generated varied responses. There are some who look for meanings and readymade associations in it, while others search for relevance. On encountering one of her paintings, one may ask- Is it an imaginative mapping of a decentered world or an unfinished spatial plan or signs of urban catastrophe? Perhaps it is all three... or not? The artist herself says, "Is it?" Is it not? What is it?" Sheila's paintings are seldom abstracted from anything specific in the material world. As imaginative mindscapes, they border between representation and abstraction. At first instant, her visible and invisible geometries in tangled perspectives draw long winding routes on a wet surface and in their successive layering transform intuitively into a labyrinth. The final painted image carries a life of its own, a subversion that still seems to be questioning what it is. Whether she is drawing her scaled down miniature structures (that she refers to as three dimensional drawings) or painting her large oils on canvas or then her petite water colours, for Sheila, her art practice is essentially contained in the 'act of drawing'. Like arteries, lines become critical to the painted surface/body, breathing life and energy into it. "It is not my intention to create an abstraction of a physical object. The meaning of my paintings is not to be found in whatever recognizable objects the viewer might 'see' in them. In fact, I explore the potential of abstract shapes, brush marks, colours, tones and texture to comprehend urban experiences".

It is important to share with readers that Sheila's relationship with the city is much more grounded than many of the urban artists whose experience of the city is primarily via passive modes, from the comfort of their cars or looking at the city from their windows. Since her childhood, Sheila has experienced the city by walking long stretches or then hopping on buses from one stop to another. Her partaking in the direct experience of mobility and congestion in the city, its random and regular paths and patterns, its assembly of glass and concrete facades and visible formal disparities, are deeply embedded in her consciousness. In the overbearing visibility of homogenous metroplexes of today, the identity

of context is increasingly lost. As a result what emerges is a ubiquitous nomadic space. Yet her sprawling paintings are not about recording the city or the urban setting/milieu. The light hearted titles of her works such as Here There Where, Is it this or is it this, Excuse me Please, Come on Come on Move over make some Space, make connotations optional and open to the individual viewer.

Sheila's art practice reinforces the obsolescence of artistic hierarchies as well as resists the convenient classification of all art that does not represent the outward appearances of reality as "abstract paintings." To her, figurative art is subjected more to abstraction in the process of translating the three dimensional existence of figures/objects into a pictorial reality. For instance, a painted apple and an apple in real life are not the same experience, because the painted apple can be experienced only through sight. While this is an abstraction, Sheila works quite the other way round. Her painting is conceptually premised as a two dimensional play on the surface. All her impressions/sensations from within get realized in her language of painting, hence she moves from the abstract to concrete, while artists working primarily with representation move from the concrete to the abstracted reality. Perhaps Sheila's work easily fits the straight-jacketed definition of "abstract" as it defies interpretative possibilities of language. Her art deals with a closed self-referentiality to seek formal expression that goes beyond representation. Never referencing precise subjects or themes, the painted image accrues superimposed memories that cannot so easily isolate any one single instance. The observations could be of almost anything- from chairs, tables, bed to curtains hanging, drapery falls, to casual compositions happening on the streets such as vehicles with their tied transport goods, fish nets at the riverside or architectural fragments and urban facades.

What is most central to Sheila's art is the movement of paint on the pictorial surface that also records the action of her hand. The canvas or paper becomes an arena, a visual field that is almost always entered with an intuitive leap and never tied to a meditated plan. The rapid speed



of conception and action is visible in the wet-in-wet working, the shuttling gesture of her hand and the alternating points of materializing and dematerializing the painted image. As her hand, sometimes overstretched, runs all over the unstructured terrain, each and every gesture of stroking with paint is registered. Drawing over, she marks unexpected moves and multiple pathways that build up the body of the painting, creating her own lines of flight. Decisions are processed while working with each brushstroke prompting and engaging with the other in a specific way. Line and colour take on a self-acting gesture, moving as if to arrive at unpredictable destinations by making unseen connections. There is a play between measured and indisciplined strokes, the orientation of every stroke playing a critical role in creating formal rhythms and patterns. Sheila does attempt optical illusions but without using tonal layers or illusionist rendering in her paintings. Similarly, the textures she paints are not imitative but invented. Knife, brush, comb, the dead end of the brush all help her express purely through the 'patch of paint'. The medium of oil adds lustre and a flicker to the crisscrossing lines or the shifting patterns created in thick impasto by driving a hair comb through it. From the stark primary colours of her earlier canvases, Sheila's palette is now more muted and nuanced, created by the artist through her own mixtures of typically 'incompatible' pigments. The pink can lay over a darker pink or a violet on a messier violet. In some of these works, visual energy seems to be let loose on the large canvas, moving towards a more advanced state of dissolution between space, object and subject.

A deeper engagement with the work reveals several complexities in her seemingly simple method of painting. For instance, the image is never complete or contained within the pictorial frame-its long winding contours keep extending beyond the frame. The pictorial frame is not so much a framing device that calibrates the



composition within its physical limits but a vulnerable edge, open to multiple entries and exits, tapering off as if to re-enter into the space. The vantage point is never fixed but altered successively with each painted stroke. Sweeping horizons suddenly tilt and change tracks while the criss-crossing skeins of pigment make us see surface and depth on one plane. From the buried layers, tiny pockets of light scooped out depths and underground tracks (of the metro?) are made visible. I would contend that her paintings are not a reduction but a multiplication of empirical sensations, densifying the painted image rather than rarifying it. One can see many contraries at work- ascending and descending forces, thick and thin lines, voids and presences. Sometimes the prominent movement of a very thick-sized brush leaves a broad track, but Sheila varies the sizes of the paintbrush to build her amorphous structures. Against which, our eye is made to focus on secret tunnels, hanging bridges and line forming passages as well as passing through it. Often, pictorial space is fenced, webbed, barbed and blotched from the layers of the same colour. The linear mesh emerges as overlapped mappings on surface that in its balanced chaos reveals Sheila's 'refined unconsciousness'.

In the current exhibition, Sheila has given her work a logical extension, transiting from painting to sculpting, via drawing. The artist's hand and its creative gesture remain vital to her art, in the alternating acts of her drawing, painting and sculpting. These physical constructions can also be seen as 'drawings in space' that bring to mind the Russian Constructivists and their love for the tactility of a tensile line. In their scaled down size, they also remind us of Alexander Calder's Circus with tiny wire performers stimulated to engage in acrobatics. Though incidental, these little constructions evoke the feeling

of a crawling insect, a motorcycle in action and an animal grazing with his neck stuck out. Sheila uses modest materials such as steel wire, opaque and transparent pipe-like glass beads, watch-dials with legs and custom made plain dials to hand-craft her delicate but resilient structures. With her use of restricted colours and materials, Sheila builds her portable, airy-wiry forms by scaffolding and framing spaces to become a permanent part of the structure.

The watch-dials that her father worked with, which are a measure of both time and movement, have entered into Sheila's miniature structures in recent years. But for her, the fascination was with their crisp shapes and standardized colours as well as their minute legs that create little spaces between the two discs for the void to become an illusion of a disc. Also, the juxtaposing of grey, black and white colour dials create deceptive lines within these built forms. Sheila uses them purely as a balancing element that aestheticizes the beaded form. The steel wire that is soft to twist and stiff when woven becomes the backbone of her fluid geometry, where in she ties knots and buckles the beads, webs angular lines, encloses shapes, makes forms that resemble ladders and bridges, that move the viewer's eye up and down, in and out or along a prominent curve. Interestingly, drawings don't cast shadows because of their two-dimensional nature but in these drawn/ assembled structures there is an encounter with light. Unlike the flat layers of her painted constructions, shadows here become an integral part of the work. Installed in the gallery space on inclined pedestals to be seen from an aerial view as well as at an intimate eye-level along with their shadows, they are at times precariously placed but most times in their restive stances they seem to suggest movement.

Line remains the main element of construction to arrive at a light, hold-in-hand structure. She retains some preoccupations of her paintings while working in a tactile form. Sheila follows an internal logic in their making too, her bodily responses and interaction with the surrounding physical space gets framed in these see-through compositions. At times, the structures are pruned a bit, for unlike her opaque paintings where the unnecessary or messy part can be revised and reworked by an over layer, here the edit is an amputating process. From minimal structures that defy gravity, her simple means now accommodate designs of complex making, intensifying the dialogue between the material and the maker.

For Sheila, the euphoria of creation continues to precede every other consideration in the practice of her art.

Roobina Karode
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Dials, wire and beads | 2007 | variable sizes

