The Nature of Things

Grant Watson

I met Aji in the café at MuHKA where we sat and drank coffee while he took me through his most recent drawings for the upcoming exhibition at Nature Morte in New Delhi and Mirchandani + Steinruecke in Mumbai. The images were highly articulated and condensed so that later, even when I printed them out from my computer in black and white to use as reference for this text, they maintained their compositional integrity. Before discussing his work though, I was interested to hear about his background and his experience as an artist from Kerala now based in Rotterdam and how these two distinctly different places – two which I also had some connection with – played into his work. First of all I tried to place his practice in a relationship to several other artists from Kerala of an older generation that I am familiar with, such as Jyothi Basu, N.N. Rimzon, and Alex Mathew, all of whom use drawing in their practice, as well as allude to the landscapes and atmosphere of Kerala. Understandably, Aji ducked these comparisons, although he mentioned N.N. Rimzon as an important early role model, for the way he picked up on several international artistic currents while at the same time relating these to his Kerala background. Then added Valsan Koorma Kolleri, as someone who instilled in him a spirit of artistic freedom and experimentation. During his short career K.P. Krishnakumar was another artist who exerted an important influence on a younger generation and Aji acknowledged his charisma and dynamic use of drawing with respect.

While not wishing to define him specifically in relation to his background, I continued this line of questioning to see if there were qualities contained, or secreted as a layer in his practice (through his choice of medium, subject matter or methodology) that could be traced to it. In response he stressed his desire to detach himself from any particular set of cultural affiliations, or fix his identity in relation to his roots, and rather, described the artist as a ‘lonely person’ seeking a degree of autonomy in his life as
well as in his work. Hand in hand with this rejection of an atavistic relationship to nation or state, was a rejection also of the traditional Western approach to art history; which he described as being linear and inevitably moving through an evolutionary process, school by school, towards a place, which in his experience as a young artist studying at the school in Trivandrum, always seemed to be an elsewhere – the European or American metropolis where the latest artistic developments took place. This was how the story of art was presented to him, through the books in the library in which European masterpieces were meticulously catalogued while a record of work from his own culture was noticeably lacking. To him it seemed like a type of brainwashing, a sort of corollary to the evolutionary theories that justified a Eurocentric hierarchy of developments and achievements. Instead he came to believe in a multi-directional evolution that could take off at any time from any point, a situation in which any moment or any place could be a point of departure. Maybe you could describe this view as a post modern idea of multiplicity as apposed to a modernist one of linear progress.

His education took him from the art school in Trivandrum, to the Delhi College of Art where he enrolled as a student of painting. In the capital, he was able to indulge his enthusiasm for classical music as well as trawl the city’s museums in an attempt to compensate for what he perceived to be an insufficient knowledge of his own cultural heritage. At the National Museum he familiarized himself with temple sculpture, miniature painting and Chola bronzes, while at the Crafts Museum he came into contact with tribal, village and temple artifacts from all over India. For him, this exposure to museum collections constituted his education, and perhaps because of rambling interludes he managed to fail his first year at the college. Perhaps the timeless looking quality of his drawings can be explained by his choice of historical material for study, rather than the displays at the National Gallery of Modern Art or the Lalit Kala Akademi or the other spaces in the city showing modern and contemporary works. Later in New York, it was the Metropolitan Museum of Art with its antiquities that drew his attention rather than MoMA, and in Amsterdam he gravitated towards the works of Rembrandt and Frans Hals at the city’s Rijksmuseum.

Two recent drawings depict the artist’s new surroundings – miniaturized Dutch landscapes, reduced and rendered in exquisite detail reminiscent of the paintings on the side of Delft pottery. Made for an exhibition called ‘Paradise Lost’ the intention
was to depict a paradise present, and while the wintry scene is clearly Northern European, the lines of poplar trees which stand sentinel in the fields, have just the faintest touch of the orient about them. I asked him about the transition to living and working in Europe, and in response he referred to the Indian saying that – wherever you go in the world it is Kailasam (the god Shiva’s abode) and that whatever water you drink it is always the Ganges water that you are drinking. He presented this idea not in a religious or superstitious sense, but more in practical terms, to characterize the way that we carry our own personal references around within us, and to restate his earlier point of the artist being an autonomous person. Despite this, the move to Holland destabilized his practice and he was disorientated and unable to produce for four years. From Delhi he had moved to Baroda to be part of that city’s artist community, then back to Trivandrum for a brief period teaching in the art school, and then finally to Rotterdam to be with his wife who is Dutch. Now he feels settled and part of the artist community in Rotterdam, with a studio and a group of colleagues who provide him with a milieu for discussion and artistic exchange, and these days he is showing his work in both in Europe and in India.

Interestingly it is the geographical and cultural space that lies in between these two that stimulates his interest. I pointed out the similarity between the barren landscapes depicted in his drawings populated with thorny and elaborately contorted plants, and the dead landscapes of Persian miniature painting and he agreed that these had served as a reference. More generally he perceives the Middle East as a space that exists in the contemporary imaginary, somewhere that is imprinted in our consciousness through the distribution of images in the media. And for people from Kerala, the Gulf States are a place where many have friends and relatives. One of his Middle East landscapes shows a city at night, bathed in a phosphorescent haze of lights, while overhead in the black sky a streak of brightness indicates the presence of a shooting star or possibly a missile, suggesting either a Biblical scene or a theater of war. Whether this landscape is menacing or enchanted is to a certain extent irrelevant because as the artist explained, despite being figurative, these drawings are largely hermetic, withdrawn from subject matter, and principally concerned with a series of formal moves. He describes this as a compositional game, in which an investigation into the picture-making possibilities of line, form, tone, dimension, presence, distance, and illusion – carry his interest from one work to the next. So for example the lessons learnt while rendering a bushy shrub, lead to the realization that
he can draw a wave breaking on the beach or a group of human figures. In this way, each individual form contains within it the potential for all of the other possible forms. Together they constitute a basic phenomenology of shapes, so that in the nature of things as well as their representation, one can find an affinity, a basic repertoire that can be observed and drawn out by the artist. He describes this interconnectedness of things using the Dutch term ‘klopt elkaar’ or roughly translated to English, clumped together in a group – and sees this as a philosophical as well as practical insight that art can at times reveal. A clue to this multiplicity contained within, is provided for the viewer by the bushy shrub, which, contorted by drought, mimics the form of a beast. And the artist states that this aspect of his work became clearer to him when looking at the almost comical similarity to a plant, of the hair on the head of a Rembrandt self portrait.

In his portraits of Sadhus and Yoginis, a world of possibilities opens up in the playful and elaborately coiffed and dreadlocked hairdos of the otherwise completely naked figures. There are spiraling cones like rams horns or shells, there are tufted sections that look like wings, on one head there is an arrangement like a birds nest, and on another a writhing pit of snakes, and meanwhile the beards of the men hang down like clumps of damp moss from the sides of a cave. Another series of works that the artist claims derives from his study of plants, contain groups of people – although here it is harder to see this connection. But what you do get (unlike elsewhere in his practice) is something akin to homesickness, in what is clearly a representation of South India. Aji describes how in the early versions, he animated the scenes by bringing live the characters of the people so that the images became ‘loud’ and full of feeling. Consequently, wishing to detach himself from this emotional connectedness, he muted them by taking away detail, stripping them of their specificity, their personality and what he calls their ‘biographical atmosphere’ in order to create a sense of distance – so that like the plants and the stones and the waves, they become study objects, simply elements in a composition. And yet these drawings do retain something of a narrative quality and a sense that something is happening as well as an emotional charge. For me this is not the bitter sweet nostalgia for home, but rather something perilous and fraught with anxiety. Although the narrative is relatively ambiguous (are these people dancing? Playing on the beach? Or organizing themselves in response to an emergency?) the figures are steeped in a toxic haze, a poisoned environment into which they disappear. The
artist agreed that these works reflect a series of concerns about his country, which he feels any artist cannot ignore including – the pace of change, uncertainty about the future, the growing gap between rich and poor and the widespread environmental degradation. When questioned about a political element in his work, he maintained that despite his awareness of these issues, his basic methodology is to downplay the overtly political, and to make his works as ‘normal’ as possible, in order to give the viewer an independent position, as well as the opportunity to interpolate and construct meaning for themselves – because for him the language of politics is a master narrative always ultimately concerned with power. But despite this and despite their miniature – ism and their anti-declamatory nature, his drawings are dense, powerful compositions, in which every corner is charged with presence.

Grant Watson is a writer and curator based at the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen
Natureâ€™s Cleanup Crew. Meet the unsung animal heroes who share our urban spaces and clean up our mess. Saturday, July 4 at 7 PM. Watch Full Episode. Kingdom of the Tide. An astounding underwater world of bizarre creatures, critical to the health of our oceans and locked in a struggle for survival. Saturday, July 11 at 7 PM. Watch Full Episode. Stay entertained and informed with family-friendly docs from the Nature of Things. Staying indoors can be enriching, here are a few fascinating films now streaming on CBC Gem. Bringing up baby: Help for endangered species.