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Rohini Sen, *Befriending Pain* 2014

Ache, unache

by Akhila Seetharaman

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Pain is like an unwelcome guest – artist Rohini Sen knows this first-hand. Pain came visiting in 2011 when she tripped over a loose slab of granite on Brigade Road, while participating in a run organised by Runners for Life. She went on to complete the run, covering 8km more with an injured leg, and participated in four other races in the city after that before accepting that there was indeed something wrong and that it was time to pause. Bone scans did not reveal anything, and doctors were unable to identify the problem. “I was in denial, nothing would stop me. I believed it was in my head,” she recalled.

The injury – a bone and tendon face stress fracture – forced Sen, a dedicated runner, to slow down and listen to her body. “I realised the value of befriending my pain, and accepting it as part of myself,” she said. The journey to recovery has been difficult and humbling, but Sen has used it to explore the frontiers of her self, watching her body and mind shed old habits and form new ones – a metamorphosis that she articulates in a series of drawings in ink and can be seen in *The Efficacy of Exquisite Pain*, an exhibition that opens this fortnight at Gallery 545.

Sen trained under National Award-winning master craftsperson Shashikala Devi while still in school at Rishi Valley in Andhra Pradesh. Her fine line drawings are influenced by her early training in Madhubani art and she uses animals to represent universal characteristics and

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conditions. Rather than tell her story literally, Sen works with metaphors that she believes are universal and will resonate with a wider audience. Sen's works, all on vintage Japanese handmade paper called kozo, feature a wondrous menagerie of animals in metaphors that speak about pain and reconciliation with one's own body. And so, a camel inhabits the shell of a tortoise in her work titled "Befriending Pain". A turtle in a wheelchair finds well-wishers in "The Support System" and "Stillborn Emu-pathy" explores the impossibility of complete empathy from loved ones using the metaphor of flightless birds. "Selfless Symbiosis" explores the amazing manner in which parts of the body automatically make up for the failings of the injured part.

Sen specialised in sculpture while studying at Chitrakala Parishath, and later worked as an arts teacher with Mallya Aditi International School. Her style of drawing received fresh impetus during her masters course in Arts Education at Rhode Island School of Design in the United States in 2012. It was here, that she received affirmation of her style. "I found I didn't have to let go of the Madhubani style, which I am well versed in, even though I didn't want to draw elephants, gods and goddesses – the traditional decorative motifs," she said. Sen learnt to recognise her own strength, an ability to visualise in detail. She also found support in an agent, Cade Tompkins Projects in Rhode Island, that has since promoted her works.

The experience of disability pervaded her sojourn as a student in the United States. Sen arrived in a wheelchair and had to navigate the stresses of student life with her disability. She returned to India with her degree, but several kilo heavier and a foot that still caused pain. It was at the integrated medical hospital, IAIM in Yelahanka where she checked in for Ayurvedic therapy that she had time to reflect on her own mind and body, and see pain and injury through new eyes, as a gift. And she began working on this series of drawings, which she sees as an offering to people in similar situations, those who have been without answers for a long time.

Sen's doctor introduced her to theories of pain, which helped her find metaphors for it. "The most common questions doctors ask patients is how they would rate their pain on a scale of one to ten," said the 26-year-old artist. "But it is all very subjective. My eight may be your two. It's difficult to understand. In the two years that my doctor treated me, he learnt to decipher what my two meant and what my seven meant."

Sen began looking at knotty aspects of herself, including fears and frustrations around her foot injury. "I looked at my association with staircases – something I had begun to fear," she said. "I considered the relationship, the sensory connection between what I desired and what my body told me to do." The idea of running as conquest of the body also came under her scrutiny. "What happens when the body is not ready to give you what you want?" By this time getting back on track didn't seem so important any more. She had changed. "As a person I've become a lot more patient," she observed. Sen is now back to running; she ran the TCS 10K this May. But her zeal for the sport is now tempered by a healthy respect for the body – a gift gained from injury.