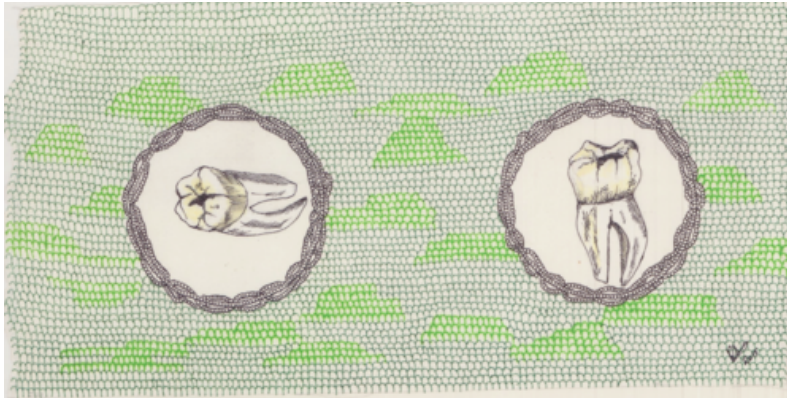


Cade Tompkins Projects

Lata Mani

April 16, 2016

To Draw is to Know



Rohini Sen, *Thoughts that fill a Cavity*, 2015

Artist Rohini Sen in conversation with Lata Mani

Lata Mani: What do you mean when you say to draw is to know?

Rohini Sen: To know something is to experience it with such clarity that it has an intimate relationship with you. When you have that kind of clarity it expresses itself in lines and colors. This is how drawing an image can sometimes do what words cannot. The first way in which a thought usually accesses me is via an image. Before that thought is molded into words and then sentences, it belongs to the ocular world. Drawing the thought before it forms concrete words is a purely sensorial experience – the process involves mind, eye and hand coordination along with a willingness to follow one's intuition. In one of my drawings, *Thoughts that fill a Cavity*, I have recreated a drawing I had made about a toothache I had when I was 12 years old. At the time I was simply trying to follow the path of my pain, to draw what I felt my tooth in pain looked like. I was surprised to find a few years later that what I had drawn was quite close to an orthodontic drawing of a tooth! Mark-making has been a way of knowing, narrating and explaining since time immemorial. However in the fine arts we often tend to deny drawing its space as a process that has the potential to be complete in itself. Drawing is usually treated as the stepping stone to a painting or sculpture.

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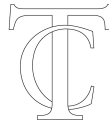
Lata Mani: How did you discover this relationship and how has it shaped your art practice?

Rohini Sen: While I was pursuing my MA in Arts education at the Rhode Island School of Design, I was for the first time in a place where my own way of expressing felt truly validated. For my artist book *The Unvisited Repository: Intuition in Teaching and Learning* my process was to first draw and then extend what I wanted to say in the drawing through my writing. The process of drawing and as well as the images themselves narrated to me the words I could use to describe the images I had drawn. Sometimes an absolutely bizarre image enters my mind just before I go to bed. I make it a point to write down what the image was. The next morning in my studio I sit and try to decode what the thought behind the image was and whether it is something I want to extend on paper and make into a drawing. And then sometimes it is a thought that will enter my mind and I have to sit with a notebook trying to rewind that thought to its image. My visual language is deeply informed by the tenet that drawing is synonymous with actively thinking.

Lata Mani: You first trained in sculpture. Madhubani has also been an important influence. How have each shaped your drawing practice?

Rohini Sen: I trained for six years in Madhubani painting under Sasikali Devi when I was at Rishi Valley School. It was only much later when I began my professional practice as an artist that I realized how so many of my artistic affinities and tendencies are the results of years of practicing to get Madhubani patterns right. When I was pursuing my Bachelors in Fine Art at Chitrakala Parishat we were mostly taught western anatomical drawing that was expected to be realistic. While these styles are absolutely essential to learn in a formal arts training setting, at that time it was completely unfamiliar as well as intimidating for me. My hand would almost automatically begin to produce Madhubani inspired designs! I found it very difficult to convince my pen to move differently.

My taking up sculpture was partly to do with my hesitation to step out of my comfort zone where drawing was concerned and partly to do with my love for different kinds of material. My past experience of having worked with fiberglass, Dhokra casting, clay and other diverse materials often answers questions in my current drawing practice. Sculpture also gave me the gift of keenly observing textures which have become an intrinsic part of my drawings. In retrospect I think both Madhubani and sculpture have helped form my practice today. Sometimes when I am drawing, the 'unseen' side of the picture pops up in my mind and stops me from drawing the image. At these times knowing how to sculpt enables me to make a miniature model or to sculpturally interpret my work and clear my confusion. From a technical point of view, my approach to intricate detailing draws from Madhubani. The intricate lines of Madhubani painting comprise a large part of my artistic identity.



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Lata Mani: How do you integrate these insights into your teaching?

Rohini Sen: As an arts educator I truly believe that arts practice must inform teaching and teaching in turn must inform one's practice. However I consciously try not to allow my practice to weigh forcefully on a learner's process because students must find their own visual language and enjoy the epiphanies during that journey. To recognize and celebrate these epiphanies is what a teacher must do. Often the central questions in a course I might be teaching come from ideas I am working with in my studio. Students find their own answers which are often very different from what my practice has led me to. Last year I conducted a workshop about the notions of disgust and beauty called Vibhatsa Rasa: Of Disgust and Beauty. The idea came to me while I was preparing for my show "Drawing about Drawing" and I was eager to share the thought that drawing might be a way of knowing with younger practitioners of art. We were looking at things that disgust us and trying to find out if these things may also point towards what we find beautiful. In describing these disgusting things through drawing and writing we were able to distinguish between a real object of disgust and a representation of an object of disgust. For some, the process of recreating something they found disgusting meant it ceased to be grotesque. For others the process of extending a recreation with abstractions became a revelatory path. My job was to show them ways of searching and methods of recording but what they found was solely theirs.