

MULTIPLYING THE GLOBAL?

Fractals, glamour and the art of Anita Gopal

Dr Natasha Eaton UCL n.eaton@ucl.ac.uk

Turned inside out to expose its rich 'bloody' inside or underside, half of the word 'Sotheby's' is occluded from our gaze **fig.1**. Folded, wire-like spandrels issue from this distorted signifier of haute art-world affluence, to protrude like knives which sear through a glimmering visage. Strands then stretch out to Sotheby's clients' desire for symbolic capital, as evinced by a golden ribbon branded 'collecting'. In the case of this aptly titled piece *Collecting* the Calcutta-based artist Anita Gopal supplies a nuanced yet wry comment on the somewhat myopic view of international auction houses. 'Old Masters' and 'Modern Art' **are cut carefully in half; there are no visible artworks displayed** for the consumer's coveting eye. What was surely a conventional magazine advertisement for an upcoming exhibition-sale somewhere in a global capital (its citation suggests London), is slashed through and deconstructed. This is not crass iconoclasm but the manifestation of cryptic fractism. Fractism, to which I will return, is a term gleaned from Gopal's manifesto on her ethic, her mode of working. But there are also other themes and issues at stake. At a recent solo show held at the Ganges Art Gallery, Kolkata, Gopal offered tantalizing glimpses of her creative process by way of an installation reminiscent of her studio in South City. Pages, strips, slices of shiny paper scattered awry, nestle (or perhaps occasionally wrestle) with her working tools - small scissors, glue and pins. There is something of the fashion designer but also of the natural scientist in this precise yet poetic mode of artistic production.

On several occasions I have spoken with Anita about the conditions for the suture and assemblage involved in her pieces - which are not quite sculptural and not quite collage - perhaps they most closely approximate the micro-architectural. She explains that this aesthetic of precision, which emerges out of a seeming chaos of used or unused papers, is meditative in quality. At the same time, almost like a surgeon, she cuts incisively through fashion and art glossies, newspapers or whatever else might come to hand. This orchestration of eye and hand transforms the detritus, the abject of our 'shock and awe' capitalist society into sonorous, sometimes almost aqueous pieces which demand slow, watchful viewing. Anita's chosen ground for her art is white paper or canvas: this blank space enables her to experiment as much with the slight shadows reflected, refracted from the coloured papers as with the cut outs themselves. Her piecing, which is intuitive, also entails long and difficult thoughts and feelings: how to test to trust the papers; composition is both fluid and exacting. Anita tells me that she is increasingly using dress-making pins as the means for fixing these fragile paper trails and other quasi-organic forms which is what makes her technique akin to the travails of the faithful botanist (right now she is also trying out photographic representations of butterflies for their resilient fragility). But unlike the unique specimen - the rare blue dragonfly enmeshed, thrashing in the net of an explorer - Gopal is cutting up the glamorous rubbish generated by the globalizing media - which demands its own fascinating engagement with *life force as fractal*. And this is I believe one of the great innovations of her art. As recent anthropologists have shown, at the heart of our desires for the hyper-capitalist consumerism which many, if not all magazines sell, is the fear of scarcity; scarcity is set off against the desire for waste or what Georges Bataille terms *gaspillage*. This has generated a certain 'ontology of trash' which argues that value is created by the unstable and changing nature of objects: this frisson is what generates unstable ideas of value that are by no means fixed. And certainly Gopal's work is context making whilst challenging what we might term after the social theorist Arjun Appadurai, 'an aesthetic of the ephemeral'.

Receiving her art degree from Kingston University, London, Gopal trained as an art teacher before embarking on a highly successful career as a furniture designer and seller - which won her international acclaim and a nomination for a British Design Council Award. As part of her eclectic career she designed fashion for three London companies as well as showing her work at the Royal Academy, the Gagliardi Gallery, the Dover Street Arts Club, StudioArt, the Overseas League and at Harvey Nichols, all in London. This combination of design, fashion and savvy experience of luxury markets, laid the foundation for her rejection of mixed media collage and figurative work (the latter being inspired somewhat by porn magazines) to embrace instead cut paper relief as seen in her recent solo exhibitions held at two of

Calcutta's most prestigious galleries – Ganges and Studio 21. As opposed to many South Asian artists' deliberate referencing of the popular icons of Indian-icity – i.e. black and yellow taxis which appear to be slowly submerging into gallery floors, or crafted piles of gleaming cooking pots and *tiffin* boxes, or cow-pat smattered self-portrait videos, Gopal's recourse to the Indian side of her British and Asian identity is far more subtle, complex and requires, like her curled, twisted paper, to be carefully unraveled. She is intent on not wearing identity on her sleeve. Her work is almost but not quite *bricolage* which lends it a certain ambivalent resonance with leading postcolonial critic Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak's claim on global identity: 'I am a *bricoleur*'. As her critique of Sotheby's demonstrates **fig.1**, Anita Gopal's comments are as much about the relationship between the culture industry and globalization as about her peripatetic lifestyle. A travel magazine from Air Emirates has far more valence in the circulation and creation of her artistic personhood than any overt, formal retelling of her past through personal metaphors or ethnic politics. One critically acclaimed instance which attests to this is her anonymous, ethereal presence as the subject of Adam Chodsko's photographic piece *The God-look-a-like Contest* exhibited at the Royal Academy's 'Sensation' exhibition (now in the Saatchi collection). I myself first spotted Anita when she was swimming, in a 1960s pink bathing hat and dark glasses at the Tollygunj Club, southern Calcutta, disguised from the sun and looking like Jackie Onassis. A third instance is her own work *Bunny Girl* **fig.2** whose foreground glistens with an oversized jewel set off against the figure of a distant girl, which may be has resonance with her own experience as a student employed as a *croupier* at the Playboy Club in London's Park Lane. This is another figure and the reference is for those in the know such is the oblique self portraiture of her work. There is also however by Anita's own admittance, an intensity and perhaps an underlying sadness to her work that possibly can be traced to illness and the tragic, early death of her father in Delhi – an event which triggered relocation to 1970s Britain. This personal aspect aside, her artworks invite an intimate viewing which engages with but which perhaps ultimately rejects the agenda of what Nicholas Bourriaud has famously termed 'Relational Aesthetics'. Viewer participation is not about the much-discussed idea of the 'Emancipated Observer' (French thinker Jacques Rancière) in its overt recourse to the participation of viewers as agents (i.e. as a restless, willing collective) but much more to do with establishing a sentient knowing, possibly, or at least sometimes on your own. This sentient knowing can be achieved by feeling your way through the lyrical, but sometimes labyrinthine structures of her fractals.

In spite of or because of this labyrinthine quality, the fractals stop you in your tracks; their tricky intricacy, their seeming defiance of gravity is riveting and sometimes vertiginous as in the case of *Swirling*, 2008, shown at Studio 21, whose vortices pull you in to a sort of watery depth **fig.3**. Aside from smaller pieces which draw you in up close and personal, Gopal can also perform on an epic scale as seen in the mesmerizing *Lakswadeep Dreaming* **fig.4** – a swathe of blues and green which like a wave or spray of tropical foliage courses across a gigantic canvas. For Gopal, who has not yet visited Lakswadeep, this island becomes the stuff of fantasy; such heterotopic vision-making helps to produce an intensely private and stunning image – one of the most talked about at her Ganges show and which was recently sold to a prominent cultural ambassador.

Unlike Kara Walker's racially-charged puppet paper silhouettes, the political message of Gopal's paper work is ludic, uncanny and/or sometimes self-reflexive. There is at one level, her critique of London hyper-gloss as conveyed by her piece *Harrods* **fig.5** –largely fashioned from ribbon and tissue paper which on the one hand suggests the left over traces of her own purchase of a Thierry Mugler item at Harrods, whilst on the other hand its dark, riven, misshapen realignment for me at least evokes the burn-out, collapsing structure of a building – possibly a department store: here then is the 'phantasmagoria of the aesthetic' posted to a *Blade Runner* world. The smaller version of the work *Fashion* **fig.6** interlinks empty photographic slide casings like bracelets to invoke a post-couture world, where the frame supplements to replace snapshots of the catwalk; this is a futures-past *Weltanschauung* which is substantiated by the Apocalyptic drama of *Three Crosses*. The crosses become the half-obfuscated fractals in a darkening vortex which battles with their jagged, white, 'messianic' auras **fig.7**.

In her own words, Anita's understanding of fractals as movement, as fractism, is that of a 'geometric pattern which is repeated at every scale and so cannot be represented by classical geometry ... All things are connected and everything in nature repeats and reflects itself' to produce forms that are organic and

abstract: 'The floating bits and pieces of paper of one whole have a pseudo-random element but here within a seeming chaos there is pure harmony with new forms emerging'. Floating is, I think, a cogent means for engaging with Gopal's artistic becoming. Lightly attached to canvas or paper, these beautiful scraps, sometimes enhanced with watercolour, do appear to be strangely suspended in air or resting on water – but with a kind of vitalizing aspect which the artist's intriguing concept 'fractism' can help to illuminate. Fractals, the mathematical discovery of Benoît Mandelbrot, denote the broken and fragmented. For Mandelbrot these often rough and fragmented shapes can be split into parts which involve a certain self similarity – perhaps best attested to in nature by lightning bolts or the structure of mountains, coastlines and snowflakes. These fractals may be random and perhaps most intriguingly, they can act as the *strange attractors* in chaos theory. Their varying forms of self-similarity – whether exact, quasi or statistical, position them within an algorithmic universe of deterministic chaos. This chaos is the consequence of sensitivity to initial conditions about which we have only a finite amount of information. It is here that the singular intersects with the fractal. Gopal's notion of fractism can be taken to be in the spirit of the philosophers Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's terms 'rhizomatic' and 'chaosmosis'. And the rhythms that run through Gopal's work do produce a kind of 'rhizomatic plateau', a logic and a ground for comprehending the underlying messages implied. Guattari pushes this further with his definition of chaosmosis as the process through which the singular creativity gives its own order to the chaotic constellations that circumscribe the conscious organism. This unfolding of what he dubs the 'telematic web' produces through inflection a new aesthetic paradigm 'an 'umbilical chaotic zone' which partially loses its extrinsic references only to reemerge charged with complexities.

This inflected irruption allows art in relation to the fractal to become thoroughly deterritorialized. In the work of Anita Gopal chaosmosis and the fractal permeate in exciting, unpredictable play as seen in the formally repeating spirals of *Swirling* and *Lilac Organic* **figs.8,9**. If the fractal is self-replicating and yet simultaneously singular, this is due to an important innovation. Gopal draws on the self-similarity at play in the structure of the fractal but this is in relation to the *virtual fractal in multiple* – the fractal which she herself could (or not) replicate by repeating the act of cutting across numerous copies of the same, actual magazine. The geometry and ontological ground of nature and the universe becomes that of the global media and its recourse to the ephemeral global village. If art has emerged as a global institution (The Global Art-World Inc.) with its increasingly self-referential circulation, then perhaps the fractal offers us ironic comment and one way out of this self-replicating circuit of artistic production and consumption. After all as Mandelbrot reminds us, fractals are singular, irregular, determined by chance and disturbances – like Anita Gopal's meditative method of cutting and pinning. Fractals' effective dimensions are chafed by intermittency and shaped by a geometry of turbulence. In Calcutta's art scene, Anita Gopal's fractals have generated some intense media comments. One of her most ardent supporters, critic Soumitra Das compares the artist's *modus operandi* to the sensibility of a jeweler who nonetheless is able to produce ribbons of paper like 'streamers of DNA'. Whilst perhaps not quite capturing the spirit of the fractal, Das's comment does hint at the profound hybridity present in the not quite bricolage, not quite collage, not quite sculptural but certainly critical fractals of Anita Gopal.