



Malavika Rajnarayan

Building Beginnings

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Self-image,
Photograph of the studio
& Catalog Design: Malavika Rajnarayan

BUILDING BEGINNINGS

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PREFACE

It is said that the first step towards getting somewhere is to decide that you are not going to stay where you are. And so, I left my hometown, Bangalore, for an indefinite period in August 2003 and came to Baroda, with the desire to become a painter.

Having not procured an admission at the Fine Arts college for that academic year, I still chose to come to Baroda and paint in a rented studio, and reapply for the M.A painting programme the following year. However within two months of this self defined regime, I understood that I needed an interactive stimulus of structured learning, and approached Rekha Rodwittiya who accepted me as her student. I dedicate this show to her; for the belief that she invested in me in helping me pursue my dream. Five years have passed in a whirl wind of sensory awakenings and my studio has grown to become my sanctuary. With the commencement of my first solo exhibition I am reminded of a telephonic conversation I had with my teacher Rekha in 2003, when she said to me: “You cannot hope to write a novel when you are still learning the alphabet; five years from now, you may write your first book.”

Every young artist stands at the threshold of their careers with the excitement of a novice who dreams about a future with an idealism that is transparently naive. I know that I am no different and in the celebration of embarking on this new journey, cliched as it maybe to others, I hope to begin a dialogue with my audience today that continues over many years.

I wanted to find a way of introducing myself to you in a more personalized manner. The text that intersperses with the paintings are extracts from my writings done whilst traveling; and from class-notes and other jottings. Since writing becomes another space to hear myself, where I can edit and reconstruct my conceptual world of ideas into the physicality of existence through paint, I thought it useful to place these writings into the space of this exhibition, so that the process of my perception is also suggested. The paintings however are not illuminations to these texts. My ideas develop from a multitude of things which become impacted upon by circumstances around me, and it is my writings that are diaristic in nature which articulate my responses in a more immediate manner, which I can then reflect upon in my studio. The relationship between my art and my writing is not overt, though each feeds the other in subtle ways, remaining independent of one another at the same time.

Building Beginnings is conceived through the mediation of refining the seminal inceptions of both learning from the discipline of an art school training, as well as making departures from these very precincts of established modules of learning. Ideas and personal language conjoin, and philosophies are introduced through mentored worlds from which I attempt to create new meanings. I view these past two and a half years as a crucial period where I have grown up to become a woman. In celebration of my own coming of age as an artist, the ritual of this exhibition becomes a rite of passage that heralds this beginning.



Shadows of Solace, Acrylic on Canvas, 2007, 60" X 48"

5th September, 2003
Baroda

Finally, I found myself a place — my own place. One room, a toilet, a bathroom, a small passage leading to a medium-sized kitchen. Pretty neat. The room looks airy with four of all the six windows open. Some stuff of the previous occupant lies in a clutter in the corner and on one shelf.

Not too bad... going as per schedule — have settled in about a week after my arrival. It's nice to do things by myself. I feel nervous at times, to move around alone — afraid that I might be taken for a ride by anybody. But it is exciting and thrilling at the same time. A feeling of accomplishment occurs even in carrying out small chores like cleaning the house thoroughly, cooking a simple meal or buying a 3-way electrical plug for the only socket in the house.

I realise that procrastination is something I just cannot afford to do. Tomorrow's going to be a good day. Hope to start with a jog and some general chores. Of course, work must start.



Untitled (detail), Ink on Paper, 2006,
26" X 20"



Untitled, Ink on Paper, 2006, 26" X 20"



June 2nd, 2004
Madurai

The talk on music that I attended yesterday taught me more than I had expected to learn in two hours despite my engagement with the subject during all these many years. More importantly I was able to draw parallels with my painting process, about not following prescribed methods. I learnt the same about using a medium the way I want to and not necessarily the way it's traditionally supposed to be used. He spoke of singing *raagas* in a manner that can evoke different *rasas* and not by confining oneself to only what it is thought to be associated with. Therefore it would in fact be interesting to break down and rip open a composition, understand its meaning and to then sing it without giving complete importance to the rendition that is normally adhered to. The results are magical. It is like opening a treasure!

Untitled (detail), Ink on Paper, 2006, 26" X 20"



Building Beginnings, Acrylic on Canvas, 2006, 36" X 36"

Baroda

1st August 2004

I tried executing the idea that my mind has been dwelling on for quite some time now — of the little moment I experienced while reading on the train. It didn't work. What I drew had not the slightest hint of the core feeling I had meant to express. I must persist since I cannot express it verbally. Perhaps it demands a deeper understanding and a review of the idea, where I focus on recalling the feeling and not necessarily the visual from memory. I usually start with just an idea that has a connection with my life and improvise on it by inventing imagery. The difficulty that arises in this case is perhaps because I have not started with an idea, but an experience — something very specific that I want to be translated.

What makes me go back to reading Wodehouse again and again? I seem to like satire. I wish that I could inject my paintings with that hint of humour. I think it is not just the slapstick images, or the witty jokes that make Wodehouse or even Gerald Durrell the legends that they are, but the way they arrive at 'funniness'. They elaborate. I've begun to take notice of descriptions and the details of characters. For instance, the manner in which Durrell describes Ursula's nose - the slicing off of the tip that makes it so perfect — it is both imaginative and funny! I should learn to pay more attention to this kind of detail.



Voodoo Night, Acrylic on Canvas Board, 2006, 12" X 10"



Medicines that Mend, Acrylic on Canvas, 2006, 48" X 30"



Untitled, Mixed Media on Paper, 2006, 26" X 20"

12th August, 2004

Baroda

While discussing Structuralism in parallel with Modernism, I was introduced to the work of Levi Strauss, who discovered that the apparently varied myths and stories of different cultures and communities (Mexican and Native American in this case) were actually similar. The diversity existed only in the details. Why this interested me was because I noticed a similarity between one of the many stories of the Buddha and a common traditional Blues song. The story is about a soothsayer telling the Buddha's mother, before he was born, that the child she was bearing would become a great soul with many followers. The Blues, which has its roots in Africa, is based on simple stories of everyday struggle and daily life, which have been carried down through many generations. The narration of this Blues song is similar to the story of the Buddha but differs slightly in its subject. The lines go : "You have a boy child coming, He's gonna be a son of a gun. He's gonna make pretty women jump and shout; and the world would want to know what's this all about..." and the prophecy hints at him becoming a "Rollin' Stone" or a "Hoochie-Coochie Man". It is not the consequence of the prophecy that's important but how different cultures of the world share similar stories, which percolate via oral traditions through time, and they all seem to relate to everyday life of common people.



Rebirth, Acrylic on Canvas Board, 2006, 12" X 10"

4th May 2006

Reflecting on Kutch...

Travel has always fascinated me not just for the break that it provides from normal routines but also the keenness of observation that a change of place induces. Coming from Bangalore, a city that is famous for its beautiful weather and its plateau-like terrain, I have always longed to explore flatter terrains like that of a desert.

Kutch is the largest district in Gujarat, with villages and settlements scattered at varying distances and therefore demands a lot of time to explore all its regions. There was almost no public transportation between the villages that was of convenience to a wandering tourist. This made me decide to hire a motorbike at Bhuj for a couple of days to visit the surrounding villages and to go to two villages that were a little away from Bhuj. My travel in Kutch began in Gandhidham, from where I headed to Bhuj. The craft traditions of Kutch include weaving, textile printing, embroidery, wood carving, mud wall reliefs, leather-work and metal casting. The practice of these crafts varies according to the locality and the tribe of the craftspeople. Leather and metal work is seen more prominently in northern Kutch in places like Nirona and Nakhatrana. However, Bhuj being one of the larger towns in this region has become a centre where one can see artisans specializing in all these different crafts traditions.

Design and pattern were the key aspects that caught my interest while looking at these crafts. It was not only the manner in which they used geometry and repetition, but also the way in which their own lives and stories were abstracted into their embroidery patterns or leather-work designs, that fascinated me.



Return to Exile, Acrylic on Canvas Board, 2006, 24" X 20"

17th June 2006
Paro
Day 2 in Bhutan

Long trek to the Tatshang Monastery, considered to be a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage for Buddhists.

Heard an interesting story about a divine madman, which explained the representation of penises on the exterior walls of the local houses. According to the story, women were the symbols of lust and embodied evil in the form of beauty, thereby having the capacity to seduce and ensnare. On the other hand, the men and monks were the symbols of power, heroes who rid the world of evil by conquering women, and the penis, apart from being a symbol of fertility is also the symbol of power.

5th August, 2006
Bangalore

My paternal grandmother's house had a distinct 'Marquezian' feel to it. This is something that I have slowly come to realise, particularly after reading that Marquez himself based a lot of his novels in the setting of his grandmother's house and village, where he grew up. 'One Hundred Years of Solitude' is the first book of his that I read, unaware that my imagination of the house in the story fitted perfectly into the memory of my own grandmother's house — even the little details of the locations of rooms within the general layout of the house.

20th December, 2006

Goa

She likes to be photographed against a bare white wall – I couldn't resist including the arches on either side, in symmetry, only to be broken by her stance in the centre – she stood relaxed, contrapposto. I also got the brown door in the frame – or maybe that was another photo. She photographed the man at the bell tower; I looked at him keenly memorizing that image of him. She photographed a Cross leaning against a stained wall in the cemetery, I observed the little holes, like perforations all over the ground of the cemetery. She said it was made by a burrowing insect – it spoke to me of vents for the buried souls to breathe. She photographed the bell; I included its ropes in my frame.

K insisted that I brought her back shells; delicate, special, fragile... I picked up an assortment of little pebbles- black, white, transparent, yellow, red, brown – they looked like spices. I threw in a couple of tiny shells. Just when I thought I'd something that resembled a decent compilation, I chanced upon a green shell; sturdy, conical, not too big. It had red and white wavy stripes. That had to be the one!



Untitled, Watercolour on Paper, 2006, 12" X 9"



Hours of Alarm, Acrylic on Canvas, 2007, 48" X 30"

21st December, 2006

Train from Goa to Baroda

When I feel as happy as I am feeling now, I wish that everyone I know , everyone I like, feels happiness the way I do... more like a sense of completeness. I wonder if this wish is the same when I am feeling down and out — do I still wish for everyone to feel a sense of contentment then?

I woke up at six twenty-eight this morning; opened my eyes to a darkened room. A familiar tune of Bach; lively, robust, so near... filled the air, my auditory passages, my brains and poured out of my half-open eyes. Aunt J later mentioned that she too didn't hear the birds this morning... maybe the deep turquoise kingfisher wanted me to see it, personally, way by the riverside.

T took me around her little hamlet, past tall bushes with wild flowers, past little houses, old, some abandoned; past barking dogs, uncomfortable with the intrusion of two strangers. She led, I followed. Our foot steps sounding on the dry rocks and pebbles of the narrow red paths that appeared and vanished. I told her that I loved that refreshing smell... the smell of morning, of the leaves and plants, of the mud.

Her father, a pianist, had played a composition for me this morning — very powerful; disturbing. He explained that it was a composition by a German composer who wrote it during Hitler's time. The composition was an expression of anger, frustration and deep sorrow, for the atrocities against the Jews.



Untitled, Mixed Media on Paper, 2006, 26" X 20"

21st December, 2006

Train from Goa to Baroda

...did you put coffee powder on your wounds, Thatha?... like you did to stop the bleeding when you fell off the swing with my brother safe in your arms? How many days did the bruises they caused last? I must tell you that a lovely cup of coffee healed my sore throat the other morning.



Untitled, Watercolour on Paper, 2007, 12" X 9"

27th December, 2006

Baroda

I call it my daily bird. It is prompt everyday; I am not. What if it doesn't come by one day... I mustn't let it pass without noticing.

Repeatedly, I have seen that 'X' sign disappear into the distance — one more train missed. Most of them dreams... many dreams passed by — did each train carry a dream? Or did each carriage on every train carry a dream? What did I miss?...

They call it anxiety, happens to many, so they say...

I cannot remember what I was thinking of while I brushed my teeth this morning, or the morning yesterday, or the mornings before that; till that morning when I thought toothpaste tasted bad and wished that I could learn not to let the taste touch my tongue. Maybe that was the morning after I'd dreamt that a snake came to attack me. The person in the other dream too, who came to kidnap me, while I played cards outside the garage with my friends, looked like the snake.

I yelled both times...

.... but for anxiety, they say...

..... I'd lost my voice...

I must have been around six.

Does it suffer from the same — my daily bird? There's tension and panic when it hoots, often after dark. Night after night, yellow moon rising, full moon, no moon... Around midnight I'd hear it call. Its company was reassuring. I knew that another day had gone by and one more was yet to come.



Untitled, Watercolour on Paper, 2006, 12" X 9"



Untitled, Watercolour on Paper, 2006, 12" X 9"

28th May 2007

Baroda

I am in a sandpit. It is like the sandpit I used to step into in kindergarten. The sand is my memory. My palm is etched by granules and pebbles every time I pick up some sand, and the impressions last for a little while after I have let it fall back to the ground. The prickly sensation I feel and the texture that I see on my palm are the same as the ones in my mind. I continue to pick up and release handfuls of sand.

I was reading short stories by Italo Calvino recently, that triggered off a chain of recollections from my childhood; of the day I learnt to tie my own shoe-laces.



Untitled, Ink on Paper, 2007, 12" X 9"

I have memories of the days I used to gaze into the mirror and transport myself into the reflected world, live there for a while and come back.

I remember visiting my aunt in Bombay in summer and watching the view of the sea from there. It was bright. I'd never seen daylight at seven in the evening.

I remember... writing letters to my grandparents with multiple coloured markers, where every alphabet was a different colour.

I remember... drawing a flower and deciding to colour it only with dots.

I remember... learning to draw *kolam* patterns from my grandmother... one for each day of the week, that comprised of only lines and dots.

I remember... imitating my mother's act of writing, even before I'd learnt to read and write.. to me, it was just an extension of drawing.



Untitled, Ink on Paper, 2007, 12" X 9"

5th August 2007

Baroda

She coughed violently. She had bad congestion in the chest. The fever had made her quite weak, barely able to get up from her bed and eat her meals. Ayurveda was what she was most comfortable with. Home remedies — every ailment could be healed with simple ingredients found at home — turmeric, ginger, warm water, *tulsi* leaves, honey... the same honey that she fed me spoonfuls of... from that ribbed bottle that was kept on a white shelf, hand-made by my grandfather; the same honey which must have seeped into my eyes when I ate it, to give them the colour that she noticed.

The antibiotics and the cough syrup must have helped but I hope she felt good by drinking the warm water from the flask, the half glass of milk with a tinge of turmeric in it, the ginger soup, and by inhaling the steam from *Coleus* leaves boiled in water. All this to fight the toxins in the body... those toxins — I see smoke and fire-tipped chimneys on the horizon every evening as the light fades — the proud chemical industries of this small town. But then, there's always the jasmine creeper for hope, for fresh fragrance, straight from the garden.. and she has her lavender perfumed eye pillow to give her some restful sleep.



Vigilante, Acrylic on Canvas, 2007, 60" X 48"

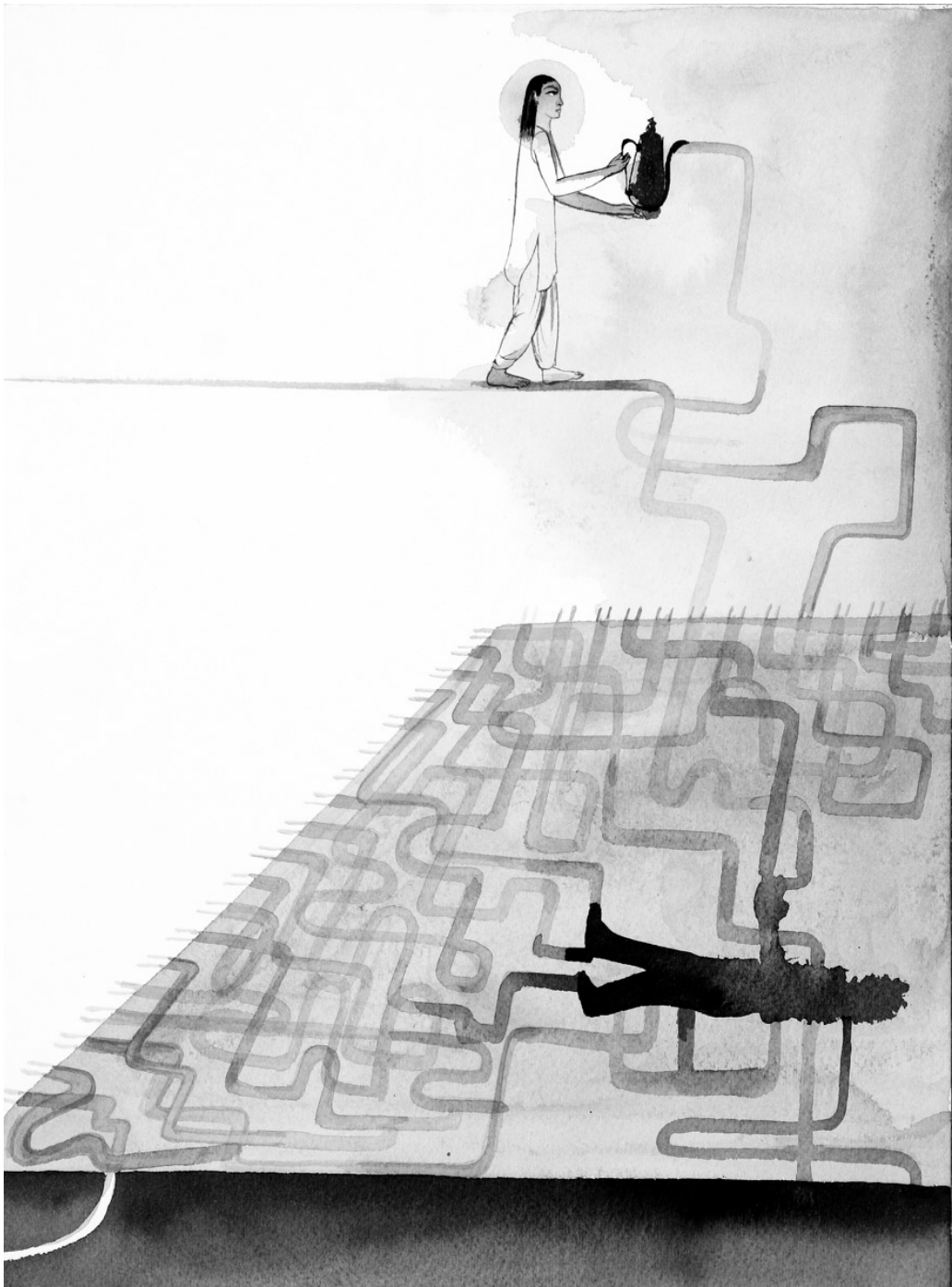


Untitled, Watercolour on Paper, 2006, 12" X 9"

November 11th, 2007

Baroda

I saw a documentary titled “Tough Guise: Violence, Media and The Crisis in Masculinity”. It dealt with the problems of masculinity, and the posturing that arises from machoism. Starting with footage from several incidents of high-school shootings in the USA, the documentary discussed the impact of popular culture, the role of the media and cinema in portraying violence, and how toys for children have changed in their appearance over the past four to five decades. The focus was on the issue of violence, not just against women but even against men and the mindset that has been propagated that masculinity is about power, toughness, muscles, lack of emotion, and so on. This got me thinking about "Talk to Her" by Pedro Almodovar, a movie that has left a deep imprint in my head - it taught me a few things: that it's OK to cry; not because of sorrow but because of happiness and beauty as well.



Untitled, Ink on Paper, 2007, 12" X 9"

22nd November 2007

Train from Jodhpur to Ajmer

I'm sitting in this slowly swaying train; heading to Ajmer, the last leg of our trip to Rajasthan. A little draft of cold air is making its way through the thin gap under the closed window, while my face and hands get warmed by the morning sun that has risen above the vast endless flat land, extending as far as the eye can see. The ground is brown, yellow and hazy... leading into the sun. Slender trees with delicate foliage decorate this expanse, creating mild patterns and pathways, inviting one to walk through, explore and head towards the horizon.

A characteristic feature in the architecture of Jaisalmer is the facility to dismantle every stone and every part, without any breakage. It's built like a Lego toy, where stones fit into one another and are fastened by iron rods like staples, without the use of any cement or mortar.

The tourists disappear into the shelters of hotels and restaurants by eight in the evening and Jaisalmer gets back to being a simple village-town in the desert. It sheds all its guise of a tourist-friendly place; all the gullies and narrow streets are quiet, without the textile and handicraft sellers yelling out hellos and other niceties to foreign tourists.

CURRICULUM VITAE

1982: Born in Hyderabad in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India.

1998- 2003: B. F. A. in Painting from the Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath, Bangalore.

2003- 2004: Painted under the tutelage of Rekha Rodwittiya, in Baroda, Gujarat.

2004- 2006: M. V. A. in Painting from the Faculty of Fine Arts, M. S. University of Baroda.

Group Exhibitions

2006: *Summer Salon*, Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai.

2007: *Sites of Engagement*, Anant Art Gallery, New Delhi.

1st Anniversary Exhibition, Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai.

Mapping Baroda, Art Room, New Delhi.

Come September, Hacienda gallery, Mumbai.

2007 Sosabeol International Art Expo, Pyeoung Taek City, South Korea.

Solo Exhibition

2008: *Building Beginnings*, Anant Art Gallery, New Delhi.

Currently lives and works in Baroda.



I remain indebted to

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