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A Tactile Enfoldment: Reflections on the Practice and Process of Dyeing

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Abstract

In the art historical scholarship, a prime challenge remains in establishing a connection between objects of research and the authors' lived experiences. This essay is posed as an attempt to address this concern and present ways to further this discussion. In this essay, I will draw upon the practice of natural dyeing and painting from my fieldwork and individual practice to elaborate on the significance of sensory knowledge. Furthermore, I will refer to the process of arriving at certain visuals, featured on two of my recent works. This essay will emphasise the two prime aspects of tactility, practice, and process, stressing the interconnectedness of observation, perception, analysis, memories, and lived experiences. Through this, fresh perspectives on the entanglement of history, memory, past, present and lived experiences are presented.

As art historians continually examine and analyse images from shared repositories, how do we embrace historical material as part of our lives? Simultaneously, does our hands-on involvement with material practice serve as a way of envisioning their historicity? Can our anecdotes be included in bridging critical analysis of artworks and our sensory memories? While penning down sensory engagement with historical imagery as well as hands-on art making, a major challenge emerges about contextualising our own experiences concerning our observations

and explorations. While observing artworks and objects—even the ones protected within glass vitrines or out of our immediate reach—we cannot undermine how our sensory memory constitutes our perception and analysis of them. While the tactile experience of historical art objects is often not possible or permissible, engaging in hands-on processes of making similar objects infuses life vitality into history. In other words, a focus on tactility enables feeling, sensing and subsequently enfolding objects of our study into our lives.

In this essay, I will draw upon the practice of natural dyeing and painting from my fieldwork and individual practice to elaborate on the significance of sensory knowledge. Furthermore, I will refer to the process of arriving at certain visuals, featured on two of my recent works. This essay will emphasise the two prime aspects of tactility, practice, and process, stressing the interconnectedness of observation, perception, analysis, memories, and lived experiences.

On Practice

What comes first? In the endless cycle of making, unmaking, and re-making narratives, it is always hard to determine what constitutes the beginning. Perhaps there is not one. For some of us, an utterance starts a story; others might argue the story prompts the utterance. Some might say drawing a line initiates a narrative but others might disagree; doesn't the drive to depict a narrative translate into the depth of the line? In our imagination of a hill, what came first? A hill from memory? Or a hillock that is an intrinsic part of our lived experience? Hillock formations of the Deccan plateau of southern India have frequently appeared in the famed kalamkari textiles, at least since the early modern era. In *Janamaz* or Islamic prayer mats, the hillock formations support

the growth of a tall cypress tree, revered in Islam for its unmatched verticality. The tear-drop formation of the tree seems to reflect the triangular hillock formation (Image 1). Smaller diamond-shaped rocks that constitute the hillock are carefully drawn individually with utmost care. The vibrant and prominent borders of the rocks encapsulate a space filled with patterns. The alteration of blood red and dark soothing blue of the borders provides a protective space in-between where delicate tonality of red and blue thrive. The rock formations are then connected with the flora and fauna around. A prominent woodblock-printed border running beneath the hillock formation marks an end to this rocky terrain. This triangular hill structure often emerges prominently not only in prayer mats but in hangings and bedspreads as well. This hybrid hill becomes a platform for the towering cypress tree to stand; the hill form becomes the base to hold our stories. Did the hill come first, or did the mountain of stories turn into the hill?

Image 1: Kalamkari, 19th century, Attributed to India, cotton, 201.9 x 129.5 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Acc. no. 08.108.3, Rogers Fund 1908. Image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The cycle of making and remaking narratives from the textile informed my experience of visiting the Golconda fort in late 2020. After a prolonged monsoon, I made my long overdue trip to the fort. Visiting certain places when in the Deccan is an unspoken ritual for me. I step into my old shoes and old self. After reaching the fort, I encountered a long queue of visitors. The entrance to the fort was a confluence of traffic from all directions without a single traffic controller. After crossing the ticket counter, I suddenly found myself in a vast, open yard leading to the fort complex. The contrast between the narrow roads outside the complex and the open space within the walls was striking. While climbing the granite stairs of the fort, I usually stop at a few locations to look above the walls. The silence and vastness of the ruined fort complex were complemented by the sea of houses on the other side of the wall. Houses were set against a wavy landscape. As if there was a sea and one fine morning, the sea froze, and the waves too. Slowly people gathered and started making their homes there. The sea was replaced by a sea of houses, mosques, occasional trees, and the Qutb Shahi tombs. Where the land/sea met the horizon, I saw a number of monumental housing projects under construction. Later, while going through the photos of that afternoon, I saw that the sea of houses seemed like a plateau constructed of houses. A mountain of houses or houses forming a mountain? Which came first? In my memory, the houses replaced the triangular rock formations of the kalamkari textile.

Study of the textile and my visit to the fort complex were parallel to the development of *Catalogue Mountain* (Image 2). Rock formations with narrative fragments, eventually turning into a mountain of inconclusive stories, stayed at the heart of this textile. Some of the stories came from the historical kalamkaris I

have studied over the years, such as an image of a man aiming at a bird. There are images of movement: a firing canon, running legs, a gracefully moving elephant and a staircase. Some images show an entrance or a threshold, inviting the viewers to participate in the narrative making. Alongside, there are images of working hands with drawing tools—indicating the continuation of a narrative that is yet to be concluded. The in-between mountain forms in this textile remained on the fabric after repeated wash. I was assured that the images were there to stay. In early 2021, I folded it, threw it into my luggage and set off for a trip. After almost ten months, I got back to Hyderabad, and the mountain made its safe return. By that time, the hand-drawn narratives on the textile surface were overlapped with silent stories of travels. The textile travelled along with me; it grew along with me. Swift strokes of mordant in selected areas created dark patches or recessed areas. They dissolved in the background while the pronounced lines pertained to their distinctive identity. Through this process, the mountain is manifested as a catalogue or repository of observations, patterns, experiences and imagination. The patchwork-like mountain form also resulted from my interactions with the Fine Arts students at the University of Hyderabad. All of a sudden, I found myself surrounded by conversations, ideas, expressions, images, words and stories of the students who were not part of my world. What do we do at a time like this? How do we respond to that? How do we speak about that in your visuals? I wondered if the textile makers of Coromandel encountered situations similar to this when surrounded by traders, merchants, sailors, and travellers from places distant to them. Did they find a way to speak about their experiences through the scopes of textile making? Through this exercise, *Catalogue Mountain* became part of a lived experience: a habitual practice that enables us to make sense of the world.

Image 2: Rajarshi Sengupta, Catalogue Mountain, 49x66.5 inches approx, fermented black dye, catechu and pomegranate skin on treated handwoven cotton, 2020-21.

On Process

The way in which history, memory and practice intertwine with our lived experiences is essentially through a repetitive set of actions. Through the repeated actions of throwing shuttles in the loom, the repeated beating of iron tools over wooden blocks, through the repeated pressing of yarns in the dark and cold indigo vats, the knowledge of the Deccani textile makers are generated and sustained over time. These actions, often considered as mechanical and generational, are the results of long-standing trial-and-error processes carried out in the workshops of the craftspeople. Even though repetition might seem quite the opposite of innovation, in the workshops of the textile makers, these two ideas come together. The sequence of craft making thrives through the rhyming of a certain set of actions. When a set of actions are repeated, the past breathes into the present. Repetition and innovation are also brought together by this

rhythm. Unlike proud proclamations of innovating technologies for our phones or gadgets, unlike recognised faces making speeches before the media announcing revolutionary claims, these innovations are knotted with daily practices and mostly unrecognised.

In recent years, dyeing has emerged as a habitual process through which I make sense of the world. Dyeing is addictive and it does not let us stop where we intend to. I thoroughly wash and boil the fabric to get started. After the fabric was dried, it was dipped into a myrobalan solution. To make a solution of myrobalan, I boil a pot full of water and then add the myrobalan powder. The solution must be kept on the stove for a while before the fabric is dipped. After the initial treatment, I look for available resources for tinting the fabrics. It was finally time to open my bag of dye material collected from the bazaars of Kolkata and Delhi. Burra Bazar, with its chaotic gallies and a never-ending supply of materials, is always fascinating. Earlier in 2019, I dragged Ajit, a long-time friend now based in Amritsar, to the bazaars of Chandni Chowk and Sadar Bazar in Delhi on his birthday to hunt for dyestuff. He was not fond of crowd and chaos, and now I think I owe him a trip to a serene place. I was excited to find pomegranate flowers, manjistha, and myrobalan. Prior to dyeing, dyestuff needs to be soaked. After soaking them overnight, the solution of madder or *Manjistha* turns blood red. A solution of pomegranate flower or *Anarkali* also obtains a bright shade of red. These two solutions were boiled in low heat on the stove and slowly, the fabrics and yarns were added. Even though the pomegranate flower solution looks red in colour, it turns the fabrics into rich yellow. The yellow is calm and bright at the same time. Lately, I found myself to be amazed by the shades of yellow. When I see textiles and ceramics, the colours that draw my attention are reds and blues; I did not

plan to appreciate yellow. Myrobalan and turmeric produce two different kinds of yellow, and the yellow of Anarkali is markedly distinctive. It is a prolonged set of actions that asks us to be patient. It is a reminder that everything is on the verge of transformation.

One might wonder why I left the measurements out of the dye experiments. We can easily find these measurements from the dye recipes, however, the measurements are not universal. They might vary for the weather, for water, for sunlight, or even for the people who are handling them. Dyeing and cooking, in many contexts, run side by side. They are not distinct. Planning in cooking also does not quite work. After years of eating at canteens and eataries during my studies, when I finally started cooking by myself, I felt the need for a recipe book. I imagined this situation in advance and kept pestering *Ma* for recipes and measuring ingredients for cooking. Ma always ignored the measurement part in my queries and said, "you will figure it." I felt anxious. How was I supposed to figure this? It took me a while to understand what she meant by that. The measurement of ingredients that work for her might not suit me. The only way to figure this out is to repeat the exercise. One can only start to comprehend this by repeating a technique over time.

During the visit to my parents' home in 2020, I did my customary cleaning, which involved unloading cupboards and shelves. Out of nowhere, a piece of khadi cotton fabric appeared from the heap. *Baba* said he intended to make a *dohar* with this which was not actualised. I immediately claimed it and imagined the next several weeks working on it. At home, a small amount of *kasim* or fermented iron solution was kept in a safe corner. That week, I collected marigold flowers and sun-dried them. To begin the work, myrobalan was essential and its reserve at home was almost over.

I decided to make a trip to the nearby bazaar and buy the myrobalan fruits. While gathering the materials, I was simultaneously thinking about what to draw. Once the materials were collected, the myrobalan fruits were pounded in my grandfather's *hamam dasta* or mortar and pestle, I felt peaceful. I spread the piece of fabric on the floor and gazed at it. It was as if the rectangular piece demanded to be transformed into a spread or cover (Image 3). The unique nature of these utilitarian fabrics is their refusal to be displayed as a hanging. I immediately thought of the floor spreads I encountered over the years which can be approached from at least two sides. Viewers have to walk around them to make sense of all the components; seeing them from one vantage point is not possible. I planned to make mirroring rows of imagery lengthwise, something that I learned from the spreads I have studied. Initially, I took impressions of a woodblock in multiple places on the fabric so that I don't start from a void. Images from books, postcards, web sources, and textiles started appearing in clusters.

Image 3: Rajarshi Sengupta, World at the Table-posh, 44x65 inches approx (with mounting), fermented black dye, pomegranate skin and embroidery on treated handwoven cotton, 2020-21.

The cluster of figures or elements against a background filled with floating foliage, birds, and animals appears in some of my favourite kalamkari *rumals*. There can be a cluster of musicians and dancers; there can be a cluster of royal spectators; there can be an absent-minded hunter lost in the jungle of motifs and patterns; there can a distracted *pankha*-bearer—most of them disjointed from each other yet brought together by the perimeters of the fabric.

Of the stillness and restlessness, my attention kept looming over an image of a running grey rabbit facing backwards from the cloth. It started with my interest in the prevalence of hunting scenes in the kalamkari floor spreads and hangings. Set against a forest of arabesque or pleasurable Deccani gardens, the hunting scenes seem slightly odd to me; it was certainly not odd for the patrons of these lustrous fabrics. I was particularly referring to a floorspread from the Calico Museum collections (Ahmedabad), which celebrated hunting scenes by showing a hunter aiming with his gun at groups of animals (A/c no. 403). The running long-eared rabbits always caught my attention. The figure of the hunter, with plump cheeks and a protruding belly, is quite intriguing, too. I wonder if the painters of the textiles also infused their humour while constructing the figure of this man. The textiles also show the running animals in clusters confined to a certain section of the textile surface. I wanted to utilise the running figures for two reasons. First, I wanted the running rabbits to confuse the hunter rather than submit to him. I drew a small group of rabbits running away from the hunter, and one of them was hiding behind a shrub inscribed with Thai *flame* patterns. The figure of the grey running rabbit appears in a different direction and far from the hunting scene. The rabbit is almost self-motivated. Its distance and orientation point to my

second motive for this compositional decision. It moves out of a cluster and plays a part in setting up a conversation between various sectors of this textile. In other words, the rabbit manifests as a connecting thread. Even though the image stays truthful to its sources, it acquires a different life with a new narrator.

Can narratives survive without narrating content? Or perhaps a coherent story? The windows of the evenings, which became a familiar sight to me over the months of the lockdown in 2020 in Hyderabad, tempt viewers to weave stories out of them. Different homes inhabited by people from diverse social and linguistic backgrounds, people of different age groups, and people with varied dressing habits dare us to build narratives around them. Even though they are visible, their accounts are never conclusive. During the Deepavali weekend, many of them seemed to have been doing similar activities, such as decorating their balconies with hanging lights, attending guests, and bursting crackers. The firecrackers' continuous sounds echoed as if it were a dramatic monsoon night with thunderstorms and no rain. However, beyond the festivities, I could not trace a common thread that could hold the narratives of the windows together. Yet, the narratives are connected. All the events of the evening unfold within rectangular window frames. Also, they have a common spectator; in other words, the spectator is the connecting link between the frames. The windows of the evenings are not meant to make sense together until a viewer registers them. The lure of the seemingly disjointed narratives never fails to draw my attention. Before I realised it, the evening windows were absorbed into the textile I was working on (Image 3).

The repetitive exercise of dyeing in the kitchen and studio and the experiences of observing the live around came together in the layers of visuals periodically imprinted on the textile. In a strict

iconographical analysis, the visuals would refuse to yield anything concerning the immediate physical environment around us; however, the emphasis on the tactile involvement with the dyeing and drawing present renewed ways of interpreting and enfolding these visuals into our lives.