

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/3

Pam Rosenblatt

Somerville artist Aparna Agrawal: "Everyday inspirations for artwork"

On one warm, sunny Tuesday, July 10, 2012 morning, WHLR's arts editor Pam Rosenblatt waits indoors, near the threshold of Vernon Street Studios' front door, for artist Aparna Agrawal to greet and direct her upstairs, through the huge metal door, down the corridor, and into her studio.

As planned, Aparna walks down the wooden staircase at 10 a.m. and guides Pam upstairs, into her exciting world of artistic creations and insights. It has been about six years since the two women had last met. It has been about six years since Pam had published an arts article about Aparna's artwork in a local Somerville newspaper. It has been almost six years since the 12 ¼ page abstracted abstract poem called "without leaves: the story of aparna" is created from Aparna's spoken words as told to and arranged by Pam and then published in WHLR 2/2.

The two women have corresponded via e-mails and cell phones for several weeks to arrange this follow-up interview. Pam is eager to listen to Aparna's spoken thoughts, to hear about and see the transitions and developments in Aparna's artwork since published in the Summer of 2007. And Aparna doesn't disappoint her!

Please read on to discover how and why this highly specialized artist has transitioned from a visual art sculptor/painter using Nature as a main theme in her work to a visual media artist making works using sculpture, sound, video, drawing and installation.

Rice paper tricycle sculptures. Drawings on pieces of paper with a popular 1960's Hindi love song's words cut into the top layer and altered tricycle drawings on the second layer. A 16" x 43" black wooden frame with twenty-five interlocking puzzle

pieces. And terracotta vessels, or sculptures, abstractly designed after dancers movements. What do all of these movement and motion-based artworks have in common? Each one is located in the clean, comfortable-sized studio on the top floor of a renovated Somerville warehouse where artist Aparna Agrawal sits on a stool with her hands resting on the open scribbled pages of a large sketchbook that balances on her lap.

"Did you by any chance print what I sent to you yesterday?" asks Aparna. "And do you have it with you?"

"Yes," I reply.

"Good!"



Wilderness House Literary Review 7/3

I hand over the copy of the previous night's e-mailed document, say, "One of the things you wrote about in your e-mailed interview was your artwork and how you once focused on Nature, especially in the wilds of Venezuela and the eastern parts of the United States. And you mentioned how this focus changed over the last six years. Now you deal with everyday situations and moments. Would you please expand upon this comment?"

Aparna looks at the document and replies, "When I wrote about using everyday situations and moments in my life as the inspirations for artwork, I was talking about liminal moments (those gestures, reflections, thoughts in between the action) in various aspects of my life and these moments often give me the original idea for an artwork. For example, if I see a tricycle race at the park or a child struggling with his parent, I am struck by something which I decide to make art about. I start there, begin making and then usually the idea changes as the art making process evolves.

"I had two antique tricycles in my studio – a blue one and red one. I decided to cast them in rice paper. In rice paper, they were so light, fragile, ephemeral and ghostly. They brought me back in my memory. I was reminded of my nieces and nephews racing tricycles on my street that summer. And of my red tricycle with a bumper backseat, riding on our terrace in Delhi when I was a child myself."

Aparna was ten years old when she and her family immigrated to the United States from India. She has fond memories of her native country, including her mother singing Hindi songs on the radio and then at home. More recently Aparna has made an artwork called "a blank piece of paper was this heart of mine". The top layer of paper is a cutout of the words of a popular 1960's South Asian love song and underneath it are altered tricycle drawings made by children. Aparna has made this white framed artwork even more intriguing by adding a sound recording of her mother's voice translating this lyrical Hindi song. You can hear the sound piece on [this link](#)



Wilderness House Literary Review 7/3

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=038iSLnQBxs&feature=channel&list=UL>

The tricycle account with Aparna's nieces and nephews also generates another inspirational artwork called "First Flight". "I made a group of [rice paper] tricycles and hung them up [in a corner of the studio's ceiling]. At Open Studios, people walked in and saw the installation piece 'First



Flight'. Studio visitors started talking about their first tricycle memory: what color it was; who gave it to them; how it made them feel; where they rode it. No matter whether it was a bad or a good memory, people had a specific tricycle memory they wanted to share with me," she recalls.

Aparna decides to make a sound recording based on studio visitors' actual memories of their

first tricycle experience. So Aparna creates 'First Flight', an installation piece with a 30 minute sound recording of people from ten years old to eighty years old. It's is 7' x 7' x 9'. This artwork is a sample of an artwork for which the idea originated from an interaction in Aparna's studio. There are eighty odd conversations on the sound piece, and a 4 minute trailer can be heard on this link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnpdG-6npU>.

This piece is so different from "Noctilucent", a painting created from her experiences in the rainforest. Before working with movement, motion and sound, Aparna made paintings of natural objects—cocoon, cyclamen, and insects, as well as human body sculptures that looked like armor – all layered works. A couple of years ago, she decided to take some video courses at the Museum School to bring her ideas using time-based media into her practice.



Aparna usually works on a number of different projects at the same time. She develops various parts of one project then starts the next one. So often many projects are completed within approximately the same time-frame. Aparna says, "It's like cooking: you start a number of dishes one after another, work on all of them simultaneously, and they are all ready at the same time at the end."

Also on display in her studio is an interactive, mixed media art piece named "Trike Puzzle", a collaborative and participative work. "It's a puzzle," she says. "It is actually a large drawing that I mounted and cut into 25 interlocking puzzle pieces. I'm asking the viewer to come up to this [16" x 43" black frame], play with the pieces and assemble the puzzle. It is quite difficult to put together. I made it and I still find it challenging. The 'Trike Puzzle' has a few of my students' drawings," says Aparna. She

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/3

added charcoal, paint, wax, and more drawings to make the end result of the drawing an abstract image, mainly of tricycles and wheel parts.

Aparna suggests the puzzle is about the process of figuring out an image and thinking about what information you need to complete a puzzle, and to make sense of an image. She says, "Sometimes you need help to figure out where pieces fit. You look at the image on the box top. Or look at the colors on the pieces. Or look for interlocking lines, drawings, and patterns. These are guiding tools. I want people who do this puzzle to think about what information they need to complete the puzzle. There is a video of viewers completing the puzzle as well."



There is a triangular collaboration here. First the students created tricycle images, then Aparna layered art materials and made additional images, and then the viewers have the opportunity to complete the puzzle to make it whole. It's playful, fun.

Aparna's work has moved away from the tangible, sensual, natural world to the fun, humorousness and play of the man-made world. "It might be because I'm spending a lot of my time teaching young folks these years, that my work has become lighter, more playful" she says.

Her serious and humorous side can also be seen in the terracotta vessels, or sculptures, that she forms looking at images of dancers in various magazines and in her gym classes.

"They are also about movement and motion. I've been drawing from the images of dancers in *The New York Times* that accompany the dance reviews. I draw them over and over again and reduce the movement and gesture into simple and reductive shapes. I mold and shape terracotta clay into these shapes, store them separately and then I can put them together in different compositions.

"By putting these clay shapes together, they suggest a certain gesture or narrative to me. I don't have an idea of what





it is I want it to look like ahead of time. I work with all these different components that I put together in varying ways. And then I look at my drawings. I might add this sphere shape on the bottom or layer it more in the middle. It tells a different story depending on where I put it. They speak back to me, and the story emerges from the work”.

Aparna says the terracotta pieces can be “functional” as vessels. But she made them to be sculptures. Some of the vessels have names, such as “Sip from my cup”, a title given due to the way the edge of the sculpture leans into the edge of another part. Another vessel is called “I’m listening to you” because the sculpture seems have an abstract character bent down appearing to listen to another abstract character that is placed at a different perspective.

“So for me, they are very ‘anthropomorphic’. They all have a gesture. They tell me a story – sometimes it’s funny or sometimes it’s sad. And it’s coming from a movement in dance which I’m breaking down into shapes.

“Picasso did something very similar when he worked in clay. He looked and drew figures from Renaissance paintings, reducing the figure into simple shapes. When I first saw these drawings I was thrilled. He simplified the figure and then abstracted it and it still had a powerful story. Others made the clay vessels for Picasso and he painted them,” explains Aparna.

Aparna does not think she will paint many of her terracotta vessels, maybe just one or two. She has created a patina and surface treatment for the clay, which once kiln fired, is coated with polish, pigments, or wax. “In many countries, they use these ancient simple techniques of burnishing with stones for shine or wrapping natural materials around the pot and putting it into the fire – literally letting fire be the paintbrush.”

Aparna still uses many of the same techniques as she did when making nature inspired mixed media works. She explains, “There is a strong labored, handworked element to my constructions. Rice paper and beeswax lend the feeling of transparent, ephemerality, ghost, lightness and spirit that is still resonant in my works. Situations from my everyday life and family interactions inspire the sound and video pieces elements to my work.”

And Aparna’s artistic future seems awe-inspiring. “I am most excited by the phenomena of reinventing oneself. I feel a creative life really contributes to that,” she says. “There seems to be no choice but to keep evolving. It is natural and preordained it seems, as it is in the Natural World of which we are part. There is a book called *The Natural History of Innovation* by Steven Johnson. And in this he talks about the idea of the shadow future, a future that is hovering on the edge of the present. It is a map of

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/3

all the ways we can reinvent ourselves. My artistic life does feel like what Johnson says 'like a house that magically expands as you open each door'. I've changed in the last 10 years. I've been fortunate to have many doors to open, and I've had faith in my artistic process that opening them will be interesting and productive."

Her advice for aspiring artists: "Be interested in everything you can be. It all flows through you and coalesces in your work. Put your artistic practice into place right away. Work hard and develop a discipline. It will let you understand yourself and that's how you will develop and process ideas. Take a long zoom lens approach to your artwork. You will continue to change. And your work will change and evolve to reflect that. It's all still you."

As mentioned earlier, Aparna is an arts educator who has taught children for about 20 years. She currently teaches grades 4 through 8 at the Shady Hill School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

