

## **Firoz Mahmud: 'Ninki: Legacies run over the Yamuna'**

*It is very difficult to stay in one place meditating on the issue of travel. To talk about travel is inevitably to engage in it, to mime through the movement of one's words that which one is trying to designate with those words... (The voyage) has a powerful ability to dislodge the framework in which it is placed or understood, to subject it to critical displacement – although that displacement is not always to where one expects, nor is its criticism necessarily what one expects to find. The voyage, in other words, always takes us somewhere. – Georges Van Den Abbeele, *Travel as Metaphor*.*

The paradigms of the 'Global Contemporary' present a dominant narrative that has looked to the post cold war era of artistic production situated in the framework of a 'flat' world. In this context dramatic geo-political transformations have taken place which changed the very basis and meanings of cultural and artistic production. Thereby the new global contemporary artist is almost taken for granted these days as one who speaks to the 'Universal' while still being situated socio-politically and culturally within the 'Local'. The problem this poses however, is that the movement from very singular identities to the idea of 'oneness' has often led to the inevitable erasure of already invisible histories. The weight of that in itself is tremendous. The argument, we find, then falls into the rhetoric of a binary that the very essence of the 'Global Contemporary' seeks to counter: a binary that is fatigued, be it west and east, east and east, colonial and the other, colonial and the postcolonial, capital and labor, war and peace.

We are at a point in contemporary cultural practice where the 'Global Contemporary' needs to be re-imagined. And one would argue that this starts with rethinking artistic practice and the artist as an individual. The framework to begin this lies in a singular and ubiquitous idea – travel and more importantly, 'travel as metaphor', to borrow the title of a book by Georges Van Den Abbeele. Abbeele presents a series of readings that examines the figure of travel in the writings of Montaigne, Descartes, Montesquieu, and Rousseau. He argues that "each writer's discourse allows for the elaboration of a metadiscourse opening onto the deconstruction of the writers claims to a certain property (of his home, of his body, of his text, of his name)" (Abbeele 38)<sup>1</sup>. Now, travel as metaphor exists within two very distinct art histories – one being stagnant, visible, dominant, gender-defined and white, as embodied for example in Gauguin's 'Primitivism'. The second strain is invisible, in exile, transient, genderless and the 'Other', seen through artistic practices like that of Ana Mendieta.

It is within the latter that one would situate the work of Firoz Mahmud. From that point on his practice, along with an increasing number of artists and cultural producers who are not weary of geographic privilege or the lack thereof, moves in an entirely new direction. They use their transitory states of being as the only constant. In Mahmud's case there is a particular use of material, colour and scale to de-construct and re-construct what Van Den Abbeele refers to as 'property' – of home, body, text, nation and name.

As is often seen with a transitory practice the metaphors also lie in the medium and Firoz uses many – from installation, Layapa Art (a Bangladeshi stencil technique), text, video and photographs. His subject matter is based on Bangladeshi socio-political scenarios, myth, tradition and pop culture. In his debut exhibition in India '**Ninki: Legacies run over the Yamuna**', Firoz presents mixed media work on paper from the series '**Drawings from the**

---

<sup>1</sup> Georges Van Den Abbeele, *Travel as Metaphor*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p.38.

**Past'**, wood carvings from the series **'Drawing History'** and the artist's more popular series **'Urgency of Proximate Drawing (Ninki:Pop)'**, first shown at the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art.

In Firoz's work he moves effortlessly within a very layered practice. His roles shift and conspire between artist as activist engaging within the politics of a nation in flux, to bringing his ideologies to the forefront through a distinct voice that is somewhere within the spectrum of 'learned humor'. In Firoz's work there is no urgent need to differentiate between an art conceived as plain propaganda and an art that avoids any such instrumentalization.

In order to begin understanding the works in **'Ninki : Legacies run over the Yamuna'**, an interesting place to start would be Firoz's large-scale project **'Sucker-wfp21'**, exhibited at the Aichi Triennale in 2010. It consists of an aircraft-shaped sculpture, modelled after the F/A-18 Super Hornet, a fifth-generation fighter jet typically used by the US Navy. The surface of this sculpture was made using fiberglass-reinforced plastic, cloth jackets, metal and was covered entirely in grains, cereals and beans that make up the typical Bangladeshi diet. This monumental 26 foot fighter aircraft considered the interplay of militarism and war produced through public tax and revenue. The work involved the use of pasting the 'Deshi' bean to the surface of the craft. Volunteers helped fix these beans onto the aircraft, over the course of 12 months. The craft in itself, resembled something that was less intimidating because of the material and the process – almost as if offering a space of meditation to think through these socio-political inequalities for all involved. Movement here was embedded in this interactive ritual between body, history and time.

Firoz mixes the intangible narrative of history and contemporary issues with the tangible materiality of traditional techniques, materials and colour - green in particular - to construct a lexicon for the 'aesthetics of the political.' As he explains, "I think both strategies of art-making and the technical aspect are important for making art. I believe that technique and skill are necessary for creation. Primarily personal touches and intellectual nuances should be relevant to create work and it is dependent on content that influences the work." Firoz therefore builds through a deliberate process of de-construction and re-construction.

In **'The Urgency of Proximate Drawing (Ninki:UoPD) Art Project'**, Firoz focuses on celebrities in excited, playful, sporty and happy moments. The series has had multiple iterations including the Sharjah Biennale 2009 (UAE), Hiroshima Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA Hiroshima), Asbestos Art Space & City Billboards, Bandung (Indonesia), Yuga Gallery by B.A.D. Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (Japan). 'Ninki' is a Japanese word which means popular. The works are a set of drawings on photographs that consist of numerous archetypal images of popular celebrities including Michael Jackson, Mike Tyson, Zinedine Zidane, Diego Maradona, Shoaib Akhtar and Asashoryu Akinori. They are all popular icons in the fields of entertainment and sports, who have been plagued by controversy for one reason or another. He draws remarkable lines on their images captured in a fall or a clichéd gesture. Their idolized appearances are highlighted by protective line drawings that display an awareness of the performative ethos of iconic expression. The lines depending on the content implies that these stardoms can't fall down from the positions that they are held in. He's literally creating building blocks of the imperceptible kind for these figures. Here movement is literal. In a way Firoz is thinking through both, the architecture of the Body, as well as the architecture of the Self in relation to constructed spaces. Architecture at a fundamental level creates a space for formulating meaning for what is otherwise just 'empty' or 'nothing'. The literal act of making four walls enclose this nothingness and in it we create 'meaning'. These spaces that were otherwise voids become familiar to our own physicality: the intimacy of a bedroom,

the solitude of a study or the communal vibe of a landscaped backyard. These hold value and give our otherwise wandering souls a sense of belonging. It also reinforces the relationship between one human body and another. Within these constructed spaces the relationships between one person and another are constantly (re)defined, and most importantly they are remembered by the trace of memories in the making or by nostalgia.

In Firoz's hands these spaces and relationships offer a further narrative that is post sentimentality. There is a sense of an unending cycle – the invisible that was made visible is being made invisible again. What we 'see' in Firoz's Ninkipop images is essentially the unseen. He is constructing a trace or a memory through the absurdity of the physical movement, all of which is essentially nothing but the void. Mahmud gives us a visual iconography rooted in humor and satire.

Moving slightly away from these in terms of the visual aesthetic, is the series of wood print works that Firoz has recently been focusing on. While immediate relationships cannot be conjured up, the process, the materiality of wood and ink, and the narratives employed tie the series '**Wood Curving (drawing Bengal history series)**' to the other body of work presented in this exhibition. Together with the mixed media drawings '**Distance of the Past**', this seemingly disparate use of forms and materials is perhaps the most interesting aspect of Firoz's practice. What it does is relate his ideologies to that of deeply political artists like Naeem Mohaiemen where remaining less 'repetitive', or not adhering too strictly to a 'series', allows for a certain autonomy of practice that cannot be co-opted into dominant narratives of art history. For artists such as Firoz, being geographically situated within a very complex network of social, cultural and political contexts that are in a tenacious state of flux, it becomes imperative to not be part of any one history. Travel is not just metaphor but a literal state of being as well. Born in Bangladesh, living and working in Japan and freely moving between countries, cities, borders and nations allows for the artist to be a 'producer' of many histories and not just someone speaking to, or reflecting a particular story. As he articulates, "Art is a media to explore, to traverse with mind and material and compassion for everyday life. Aside from these, I make work that involves a time frame for longer sessions to make large scale installations and sculpture which involves society, locals and ardent supporters." Mami Kataoka in her essay *Strata of Conflict*, writes about the artist stating, "The practices of these artists, who are forced to confront the uncertainty and fluidity of both the political and natural environment that lies before them, can perhaps also be seen as a series of instinctive actions that question the very nature of what it means to exist."<sup>2</sup> While Kataoka, speaks to "a singular and distinct outlook on the world [that] emerges"<sup>3</sup> from this, I would argue, that Mahmud's practice is representative of a shift in contemporary practice by many that find power and autonomy by remaining in a state of mutability, both in the physical and philosophical embodiment of the artist and within artistic practice.

*By Meenakshi Thirukode, Writer/Researcher, Exhibit 320*

---

<sup>2</sup> Mami Kataoka, "Strata of Conflict", *Firoz Mahmud, Artworks 2003-2011*, ed. Barbara, James Jack, Aryan Snowball (USA: Fact Publishing, 2011), p. 10-11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.