

If paintings could talk: examining Rajinder Singh's *The ceiling floats away with a sigh*

I think the history of art is simply a history of getting rid of the ugly by entering into it, and using it. After all, the notion of something outside of us being ugly is not outside of us but inside of us. And that's why I keep reiterating that we're working with our minds. What we're trying to do is to get them open so that we don't see things as being ugly, or beautiful, but as we see them just as they are.

–John Cage

I read this article about sound artist John Cage recently – about the essence of his work, its heart. “The core of what Cage has come to be known for, that expansive negative space, isn't nihilistic, isn't an absence, but, rather, it's life-affirming, a presence,” wrote Maria Popova, lead essayist behind the website Brain Pickings. I pick this quote as a preamble even though there's no immediately discernable link between sound and painting; with the first, the experience is often deemed transitory and fleeting, whereas paintings – tangible objects that they are – offer us plausible experiences, afforded to us as long as we are in its vicinity. Still, and very loosely I might add, the quote on Cage reminded me of Rajinder's latest works. Their ominous darkness and their expansive parameters draw you in, yet they have enough room– via the voids caused by the layers of paint – for stirrings of the synapses and limitless possibilities that go beyond the confines of the works themselves.

The ceiling floats away with a sigh is part of a series that Rajinder has been working on since 2010/11 in London, and today, we are treated to 11 new works that represent the pinnacle of the artist's cumulative studio practice in the last few years. “*After four years of working on various permutations of what I am doing now, I have pared the process down to its simplest form,*” says the artist, likening today's body of work as the extraction of an essence.

Rajinder also spoke of the process guiding this series, expanding on the complexity behind the technique and the continuous use of specific materials and themes from earlier in his career: “*I have built myself a large spray booth. I use it with my massive compressor to carefully prep my acetate and to build up my paint layers of days weeks to get the surface I need to work with. Once I have prepared it, I start adding paint and taking off paint*”. He dubs this process “sculpting the plastic”, an apt term considering the dominant presence of acetate in his works.

Indeed, manmade materials have always had a place in Rajinder's practice. Early on, the traditional canvas was already eschewed for vinyl, and in the last decade, polyester fabric has played a starring role. Yet, above the choice of materials, the one persistent element in Rajinder's oeuvre has been his love of mathematics. This harks back to two things: one, a childhood passion that was spurred by his father, and two, academic training on the subject. Naturally, Rajinder used numbers extensively in his earliest works, proffering them in a more literal form. These early numbers functioned as artistic symbols that stretched across the canvas like unruly binary codes, but that symbolism of yore has been replaced by a different mathematical language, one that is very much hidden from our eyes, but which occupies the artist's mind.

"I am still defined by my background and interest in mathematics," Rajinder argues. "This is manifested today in the questions that I respond to through my art. I am interested in that which is the opposite of the study and the mores of mathematics which defines the field. I am interested in the gap we presume to exist between the study of numbers and the making of art... Mathematics, though, scares people. It gives them a headache. It makes them turn away. But it is also a fertile field for investigating that which is without. And this is what interests me just now."

These concerns have been married with more recent investigations, particularly in the fields of philosophy and critical thinking. Born from stints at Singapore's ICA (with the latest being FOLD of 2012), Rajinder began working on the subject of the 'traumatized body', and the artist informed his works and research with the cerebral examinations of Giles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida. The 'traumatized body', notes the artist, is a "site for new, highly volatile and very personal epistemologies". You may not make an instant intellectual index of this, but the trajectory is there. And, the artist's life events of late also make for a compelling link to his works today; it has been a matter of life and death in recent times for Rajinder, vis-à-vis the birth of the artist's second child, as well as the passing of a close friend at the age of 48. With the knowledge of these facts, the title of today's body of work, *The ceiling floats away with a sigh*, does suddenly carry a more personal and weighted type of significance.

And yet, it also illustrates the more visual aspects of Rajinder's latest works. Parallels have been drawn to the notion of spaces beyond aperture openings or architectural voids; a shrine, a prayer mat, or a temple located in the real world that holds the metaphysical promise of an otherworldly life. This quasi-transcendental view is brought to life with images of Chinese-inspired landscapes, waterfalls, and depths of infinity, all meant to stroke the sublime and lull you into considering "what we know and how we know". Indeed, it's this polarity that interests the artist. Knowledge lies at the forefront of Rajinder's mind and his works, and the gallery's preamble to *The ceiling floats away with a sigh* perhaps describes this pursuit and ambition best: "Rajinder sets out to traumatize the body through disrupted, dislocated architectural spaces forcing the viewer to pause and question certitudes, abandoning for a short moment the subjectivity and significance of built space."

The artist reinforces this point in our communication, saying that the works function as "interrupted see-through canvases with seductive imagery painted and carved to violate you while cajoling you into a peaceful reverie", and that it's a sense of tranquility that he hopes to evoke via this exhibition. "Peace. An acceptance that what our world view and thus our entire conception of things is based on a highly volatile systems of knowing that are already absent and always under erasure. And there is peace to be found there."

It seems apt, at this juncture, to revisit John Cage:

My composition arises out of asking questions. I am reminded of a story early on about a class with Schoenberg. He had us go to the blackboard to solve a particular problem in counterpoint (though it was a class in harmony). He said, 'When you have a solution, turn around and let me see it.' I did that.

He then said: 'Now another solution, please.' I gave another and another until finally, having made seven or eight, I reflected a moment and then said with some certainty: 'There aren't any more solutions.' He said: 'OK. What is the principle underlying all of these solutions?' I couldn't answer his question; but I had always worshipped the man, and at that point I did even more. He ascended, so to speak. I spent the rest of my life, until recently, hearing him ask that question over and over. And then it occurred to me through the direction that my work has taken, which is renunciation of choices and the substitution of asking questions, that the principle underlying all of the solutions that I had given him was the question that he had asked, because they certainly didn't come from any other point. He would have accepted the answer, I think. The answers have the questions in common. Therefore the question underlies the answers.

A similar form of inquisition and questioning appears to have been Rajinder's modus operandi in his production of *The cloud floats away with a sigh*, and the monochromatic paintings are all testament to the workings of his mind along with an adept painterly process. If paintings could speak, his would tell tales of mathematics, the questioning of built spaces and of a physical painting process, and the transience of life itself. And without a doubt, these are conversations worth having.

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*All quotes from the artist are excerpts from e-mail conversations to the writer dated June 16-24, 2014.

**All references to John Cage and Maria Popova's writing found here

<http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2012/07/05/where-the-heart-beats-john-cage-kay-larson/>