

Catalogue essay by Roobina Karode for solo exhibition *Fragments of a fading memory* at Art Heritage Gallery, New Delhi India 2007

Chambers for a Fading Memory

It is tempting to ruminate on meanings in an artist's work as they are rarely clear and precise they remain submerged in layers that are difficult to penetrate. Always fuzzy, Sabrina's recent works continue to be autobiographical and address personal memories, often memories beyond recall... She plays the dual role of the participant and the witness as she traverses another ephemeral passage of time, irreversible and inflexible.

Entitled *Recollected Fragments of a Fading Memory: from a Distant Place*, Sabrina's work engages with the loneliness, trauma and loss that define her experiences as a woman. She is caught peeping into her closeted self, or staring out at the world, witnessing the transient nature of things. A dead lotus leaf drifting in the waters of Dal Lake evokes memories and associations of floating aimlessly, without anchor or destination. Abandoned feathers, cardboard spindles, pieces of fabric, broken dried twigs, rusted tools, remnants of zinc alloy while casting – all found and gathered objects are assembled to create a maze of images.

Movingly beautiful and painfully shocking, Sabrina's 'opaque ensembles' can hardly be separated from the cultures of everyday life. Through intensive laboring and layering, diverse materials conjoin in the making of private chambers for a fading memory. The first encounter is indeed baffling and intriguing, for her work instantly conveys the inscrutability of seeing and reading the imagery created primarily by the use of recycled materials and discards. As she goes through a particularly reflective phase in her life caught in the dualities of diagnosis and prognosis, her works reveal the vulnerability of the mind and the inner contradictions and riddles that she keeps asking herself. If she desires to seek her place, identity and purpose, is it going to have to be amidst the confining structures of patriarchy?

In 2005, Sabrina, in search of another world, went to Leh on a motorbike, photographing the journey, for more than twenty-five days. Perhaps a route of escape – of desired detachment from worldliness, of leaving behind temptations in order to cleanse her cluttered mind. The vast snowy expanse of pristine landscapes and pure blowing breezes situated her in another kind of empty space that was also without sound. She was told that 300 monks lived in the Leh monastery and yet it symbolized eternal silence and anonymity of life. Playing with the pictures in Photoshop, she started building upon them with local found objects and fragments of other collected material. The struggle for survival in hostile conditions vis-a-vis the calm existence of Buddhist monks left an indelible memory. The structural details of the Leh monastery, its colours, the tankhas, Buddha's eye and related imagery from the Leh paintings, all have creatively reconfigured in these works. Sabrina's private chamber is readied, but it is quite contrary to the Buddhist monastery. In an attempt to heal, the wounds are scratched deeper.

The act of remembering reinforces the human tendency to forget. Driven by her longing to hold on to memories that are evanescent and slippery, she has been creating repositories in the form of miniature storehouses that now resemble compact jewellery boxes with their red chenille covering, symbolizing the preciousness of what is safe-vaulted within. Sabrina is an alchemist at work, desiring magical transformations. For a decade or more, she has been working with found objects, discards, memorabilia that she accumulates and assembles together, to perhaps touch upon lost meanings and associations. She has always been receptive to the use of humble materials, often picked up from streets, old trunks, or abandoned by nature. Their very dysfunctionality, even physical abuse, qualifies them for their resurrection as she negotiates the possibility of restorative strategies. Whether natural or culturally manufactured, these fragments are put to scrutiny by this acutely sensitive mind seeking metaphors from the little nothings of daily life. It seems inevitable that she broke away from traditional realism to incorporate actual objects and fragments in her art making.

There is also an extensive use of found colored photographs; incomplete details zoomed from the complete image, sometimes digitally manipulated, to act as the base of these repositories/containers. The choice of printed images is of significance here. A hand underwater tries to touch the dangerous jelly-fish; in another, the body of a fish falls prey to an attractive bait and is slit into two; in yet another, we see an amplified image of the separation and multiplication of body cells. There are also birds flying across geographies printed on golden wrapping paper. The propensity to knowingly or unknowingly gravitate towards danger, towards illusions and unbounded desires, is perhaps inferred by Sabrina in these images.

Certain metaphors are repeatedly invoked through bits of urban detritus – the empty spindle without yarn, a cardboard toilet-roll spindle, barren and broken twigs and branches, torn bits of fabric, a shredded stocking piece, abandoned feathers, all help her critique the ‘use and throw’ society with a disposable mentality, that creeps into all relationships. It is only a prolonged engagement with collected materials that brings to the fore the emotional intensity invested in the practice of a ‘fragmented aesthetic’. After all, the collage itself is an image of a break up – of a fragmented world, of partial existence and broken lives.

Sabrina’s performative acts of building and destroying, cutting and slicing, baring and protecting, are philosophically ingrained in the working process. For instance, there is a compulsive preoccupation with making things work: connecting the incompatibles through fragile links, precarious relationships, invariably wedged in delicate/messy entanglement. The desperation to anchor things is noted through stitching pockets, making canopies, m-sealing frail objects and pieces (for permanence), and drilling holes to fasten loose ends. In contradiction, the ephemerality of her chosen materials highlights the impossibility of permanence.

Her series *Burning Skies* carries literal metaphor for death, the imagined catastrophe that would end the freedom and flight of the bird. The suspended image of the bird and the flutter of many wings caught amidst the hot and melting colors is a compelling image. The girl-child in north India is also nicknamed a bird as she is supposed to leave her family and build a nest for herself. The hour of darkness and hopelessness refuses to get camouflaged even under her use of a bright palette.

Now, even the making of each individual work reiterates some obsessive tendencies that translate into recurrent motifs: threads pulled across the surface to connect distant borders /shores / lands: sliced and slit spaces, wet acrylic and chalk-paste combed through to leave tracks that behave as textures, fluttering flags carrying prayers with the blowing wind to different destinations, cheap plastic tubes as blood veins, the delicate heart cast in solid brass, spindles covered with gift-wrapping paper suggestive of open and half-shut doors. As she builds upon the base, certain parts of the imagery get embedded and buried within the surface. The duality of transparency and opacity is invoked by her use of gauze, see-through shimmering fabric, freckled mirror against the heavily soaked painted surface (blood red), raw plywood strips, hand-rolled papier-mâché beads or then a piece of faux leather or rexine. The preference for a revisionist process that allows moulding, attaching, cutting and covering endlessly, makes the work susceptible to interruptions, even contamination.

If the Dada and surreal methods of combination, accumulation and chance-relations inspired Sabrina, she also has predecessors in Nalini Malani and Rumanna Husain in particular, who explored as well as employed varied media and formats in expressing their subjectivity. Sabrina also embraced Frida Kahlo and her autobiographical imagery while on a one-year scholarship in Mexico. Most importantly, she was struck by the ‘act of courage’ that triggered the works of these artists.

Though self-referential in her use of personal relics, casts from parts of her body, and old faded pictures from family albums, Sabrina negotiates her position to blur the distinction between autobiographical narrative and social commentary. Her chosen objects and motifs act as mediating agencies – they arbitrate ‘the unsaid’, or the silenced emotion...for instance, the vulture (taken from the paintings at Leh) is a bird that devours others but itself faces extinction. The file, a tool that refines and polishes rough edges and makes things perfect, is covered with rust; the mushroom symbolizes parasitic tendencies, the sparrow harmlessness and flight, the plastic transparent tube an intimate connectedness, pearls preciousness and futility, and many such discards acquire semiotic versions when re-used.

Interestingly, when fragments overlap layer-by-layer and piece-by-piece, the memory itself becomes a memorial, where the painful desire for closure takes over the form.

Memories too seek liberation... and Sabrina perhaps works hard to organize aesthetically the loss, as it were, of meaning.