

Found Lessons: The Art of Alpana Vij by Michael Lee

“Michael!” I turned around and knew at once that something was off: a sharp pain hit my lower back, rendering me immobile except for my feet. A misaligned back was not quite what I was looking forward to as a participating artist in an overseas biennale in 2010. I paused my work for a trip to the hospital. Painkillers and a waistband helped me through the rest of my setup. Back in Singapore, a month passed before I healed—though not before regular stretching exercises and visits to the physiotherapist.

This overseas misadventure showed me my limits, and now I wonder if I could have avoided the pain if I had learnt what I needed to from Alpana Vij’s art. Understated in material and palette, Vij’s paintings, found objects, installations and videos quietly endorse the close study, understanding and acceptance of nature’s ways. Instead of championing extraordinary feats, her work reveals the beauty of ordinary things: a fallen leaf, a chipped brick from a wall, a warped sheet of wood. We learn that nature is interesting on its own terms with little human intervention.

Healthy Realism

When asked about her childhood, Vij vividly recalls Delhi, the city she grew up in, for the scattered ruins of old buildings and forts. “I got a strong sense of my being there as a tiny segment in the unending flow of time,” she recounts. “Yet, as insignificant as I am, I too am woven into this weft and my actions matter and are interconnected with lives seemingly unconnected to mine.”

Vij’s ability to see the destruction in her environs not as tragedies but as little truths is due, in part, to her worldview that includes Eastern philosophy. For example, *dukkha* in Buddhism understands life as suffering. Although it sounds bleak, this mantra is aimed at moderating our expectations. It is a form of healthy realism: a call to foresee—even embrace—problems with open arms, so as not to be shocked to paralysis when they arise.

Among Vij’s works embodying such realism is *the sound of one hand clapping* (2017), a square installation of 520 withered leaves hovering slightly above the gallery floor. You are forgiven for feeling repulsed as you look up-close at each of these individually suspended, variedly mishappen leaves. This is not a study of nature’s afterlife but a snapshot of life cycles. As the artist shares in her statement: “The leaves... speak of the eternal cycle of life. I see within their being... all of the natural phenomena that came together and created the conditions for the leaves’ birth and eventual decay.” The work suggests that life is not a bed of roses but a quandary over ups and downs.

Reparative Rituals

When not suspending dried leaves off the floor, Vij spends time repairing them into “what do I see when I see a fallen leaf?” (2017). This is an ongoing series of



manipulated found objects created by sewing dried leaves with gold threads. The reference to *kintsugi*, a form of Japanese aesthetics, is apparent here. *Kintsugi* is an ancient method of repairing broken ceramics with lacquer containing gold powder, where the fault lines are shown proudly, like a veteran badge. Through Vij's hands, the gold thread is transformed into a web stitched to the leaf where a void once existed. In some pieces, such as *What the leaves whispered* (2018), the repair is so perfectly rendered that the dried leaves are more beautiful than ever.

This begs a question about *kintsugi*: How much does one mend before re-fetishising perfection? When is repair damaging?

Fortunately, Vij has variations in her leaf repair series. Numerous pieces consist of two leaves, seemingly from two different species, stitched as one, effectively demonstrating the interconnectedness of apparently unrelated entities. *TR-0618* (2018), my favourite piece from the series, has multiple holes and broken edges too tattered for the thread to complete the repair work and have thus been left half-done. It best captures, for me, the spirit of *wabi sabi*.

Art of Letting Go

Classical Western aesthetics is defined in terms of symmetry, which is in line with idealising universal laws, mathematical precision, youth and eternity. Japanese aesthetics, however, is a stark contrast—as encapsulated in *wabi sabi*. *Wabi* originally meant loneliness, but later took on the positive connotation of being on one's own with bittersweet melancholy and the spiritual richness without excess. *Sabi*, which earlier meant withered, now suggests nature's ways, which include irregularity and the unfinished—these can enhance the beauty and truth of an object. *Wabi sabi* could well be called the art of letting go.

In her painting series titled “imperfect, impermanent, incomplete”, Vij uses earthy tones—the colours of unadorned nature. The surfaces allude to *wabi sabi* with their unpolished and rough texture that is accented with gold crack lines. Vij plays Mother Nature—enacting a sense of the crude with layering and scratching, building and breaking, repairing and letting be.

One of these, *Echoes* (2019), consists of rectangular concrete and wood panels that have been loosely stacked and coated with layers of oil, wax and bitumen until they are all merged as a single object. I enjoy thinking about this piece as a variant to traditional *kintsugi*. Here, the panels are being enveloped with mixed media, where traces of their once-separate existence are still visible.

In another subseries of paintings such as *I heard the echo of a distant time* (2018), curved wooden sheets are wall-mounted using concave spacers so that the paintings are presented in their bent form. The unforgiving humidity in Singapore hastens materials to absorb moisture, leading to warping and peeling. Vij's curved paintings are a nod to flux: the impossibility of staying the same. “Rocks are some of the strongest things we know,”

Vij explains, “but even the hardest rock ultimately erodes.” She goes with the flow and lets the sheets curve however they want to.

Theatre Anywhere

The painterliness of Vij's work is most pronounced in her videos. In *one fish to another... do you believe in this ocean they talk about?* (2016), a koi swims in a pond that appears increasingly murky. *This is surely not a place to thrive in*, we think. Then we realise the cloudiness of the water is our misperception—it's mainly from the reflection of cloud movements in the sky. A while later, another koi enters the frame, offering companionship. How can we claim to know what's really going on? Vij's video acknowledges possibilities in withholding judgement: if we stick around long enough, profound lessons reveal themselves.

Imperfect, impermanent, incomplete (2017) has the video camera pointed to a concrete floor outdoors just after the rain has stopped. Puddles of water now reflect part of a tree canopy above the camera. As the camera tracks left and right, it seems as if we, the viewers, are looking through a crack in the wall into a world far beyond. In her statement to this piece, Vij cited John Cage's words: “Theatre takes place all the time, wherever one is.” This could well sum up Vij's mission as an artist: to recognise the beauty of ordinary things wherever she is and record it.

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In bearing witness to nature's ways, Vij emphasises the intrinsic value of things: as they are, not for what they should or can be. The theatre is already there for us if we are patient and curious enough, if we let go of the need for quick answers.

Vij's work is ultimately about learning, about encountering deep lessons from simple things in our everyday environment. Such found lessons entail requisite realism: the belief that no one is limitless. The paradox is that we can go beyond our own limits simply by observing vast nature, a small part each time, slowly and closely, and by letting go of imposed knowledge and habits. The world is our classroom if we let it.

To create new works for shows, I used to go sleepless for nights. I thought that anything less than perfect spelt laziness and disrespect. Look where my punishing perfectionism has led me to! A broken body. Eventually, I don't think encountering Vij's work back then would have saved me from injury. I needed the accident to stop me in my tracks, not so much to break my spirit but to awaken me to the unsustainability of my practice as an artist and a person. Today, I make work not to impress but to consider the nature of things. Indeed, I am not limitless and have never been so. This self-knowledge is reassuring and empowering. I am glad to have found a comforting spirit in Vij through her work.

Michael Lee is a Singapore-based artist and curator interested in urban memory and fiction. When not injuring himself, he takes breaks frequently by walking and stretching. He is currently thinking about the mood of the Singapore art scene.