

A Feminist Consciousness

By Christine Han



Three independent, multi-cultural female artists lend their unique creative visions to Singapore's vibrant art identity. Their individual expressions highlight their different social and personal struggles. But their innovative endeavor also gives voice to those who have none.



Mithra Jeevanantham, Alpana Vij, and Kiwha Lee Blocman are among a new wave of emerging female artists in Singapore who are attracting the attention of galleries and collectors. Their art engages with the self, referencing everyday world experience directly. One studies the aesthetics and eroticism of younger women's bodies, with its roots in her own experience as a brown, Indian, millennial woman in Singapore. Another is attracted to the dark tones of an old tree, the roughness of stone, or even the scruffy look of a book whose pages have been handled by many people. The third finds faith in forms and colors in a search for freedom and fresh possibilities in her art.

These three women take their art seriously, introducing perceptions, ideas, and experiences that have come about through their common sexual identity and distinctive feminist thoughts. Even so, they would rather do away with the label "women artists": they believe women's art should be integrated with men's rather than constitute a separate identity.

Born in Singapore, Mithra Jeevanantham grew up surrounded by Indian and Chinese culture, constantly exposed to a set of rules defining appropriate feminine behavior or "gender

norm." She received her BFA, with first class honors, at Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore. She has come to value an art grounded in personal experience.

"Over the years, I've become aware of the inequalities I experienced as representative of a minority culture. Racism and discrimination still persist in Singapore and that has led me to think deeply about my cultural identity," Jeevanantham says. "My brown skin is like the status of black people in the West."

Over the past few years, Jeevanantham has transcended essentialist influences, to develop a rhetoric

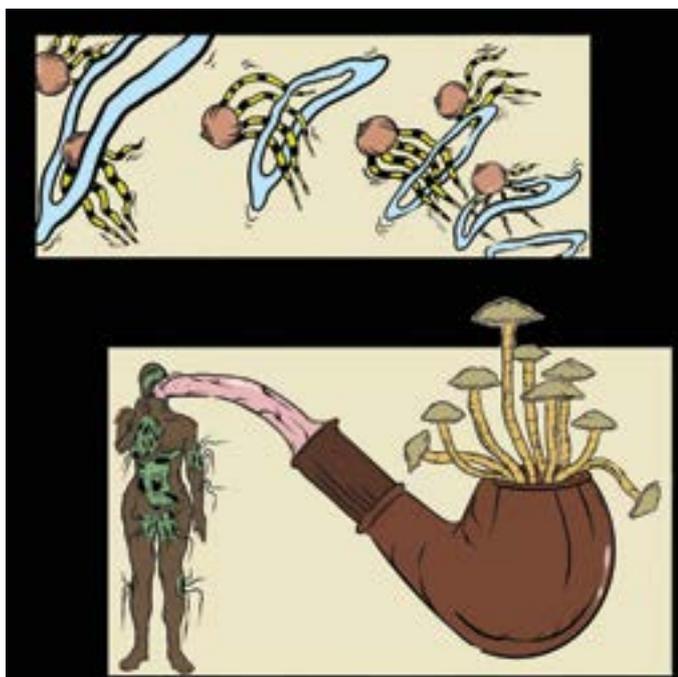
of printmaking appropriate to women, and, not least, to promote the strength and dignity of the female body and female sexuality. Her work tends to embrace women of color, lesbians, and others in her society who might have felt marginalized by predominantly white, heterosexual, and middle class Chinese females who are presumed to speak for all Singaporean women's interests. And, in response to cultural beliefs that body hair is shameful, Jeevanantham invented the brown-skinned Lotus Chimera in her work, which pictures the female body as a fleeting presence, often with holes and bountiful body hair, mimicking lotus pods/seed heads within numerous little circular chambers, sending shivers down one's spine.

When I met Mithra Jeevanantham in December 2019, she had just returned from a month-long printmaking residency in Shanghai. She showed me a set of colorful works produced there, entitled *Positive Thots* (2019), in which one work has a bonsai tree in a surreal hilly landscape: lying among the roots is a wriggling octopus and an alien-looking creature. The scene, she told me, signified her recent trip there, her experiences and feelings, and in her own self-searching in a foreign context and environment.

Another picture in *Positive Thots*



Above: Mithra Jeevanantham, *Swimmingly*, 2018, silkscreen print, 56 x 73 cm. Previous pages: An installation view of Alpana Vij's solo show, *Wood Metal Stone*, 2019. All images: Courtesy of each Artist.



Mithra Jeevanantham, *Positive thots*, 2019, digital illustration, 53 x 53 cm.



Mithra Jeevanantham, *Positive thots*, 2019, digital illustration, 53 x 53 cm.

shows a leaking female body and body parts, exteriorized body fluids and organs, joined to a gigantic pipe sprouting a bunch of lotuses. Burnt umber, chestnut, chocolate, dessert sand, these colors and other shades of brown tend to dominate in Jeevanantham's work and her preoccupation with fragmented, grotesque, and non-idealized female bodies. A silkscreen print, *Undercovers, in an Almond* (2017), in dark, moody colors, features disconcerting symbolic transformations of organic forms, figures, and natural things into other kinds of beings that raises questions of suppressed emotions and "fundamental darkness" within.

From the outset, Jeevanantham worked mostly with silkscreen and understood how physically demanding the whole process of printmaking can be. She does not think of it as a masculine task, though she lets on that the printmaking studio would sometimes involve more than one person because of the physical labor of pulling the screens. Her latest work shows she's not afraid to move in new directions; in December, she debuted a new work at Coda Culture, an independent art space in Singapore.

Displaying her new penchant for silliness, Jeevanantham's *Precious Thots* references the "culture of everyday life" including "jokes and idioms" and "gossip" that one finds in Housing Development Board (HDB) living in Singapore. Her alter ego, the naked Lotus Chimera, replete with holes and hair, is prominent in a few places; she appears at the window, on the clothes-drying rack in the HDB block, and among thick leaves and branches winding elegantly along the architectural facade of the building. Decked out on digital print, a girl's head, like a jack in the box, pops up out of a fishing pond; a toilet bowl sits on top of the block; a swing, an eye, stars, flowers, comets, circles, spheres, and angels appear.

Whereas the fantastical or imaginative landscapes by Jeevanantham delve into the figurative, fellow Singaporean artist Alpana Vij's work is largely abstract, as the latter derives her own sensual and emotional response to her environment, layering time and history, painting and drawing, and various meanings and associations. When I visited Vij's studio in Singapore recently, she showed me a series of paintings resembling stones on the road, wood on the beach, or pieces of machinery in a scrapyard. Some of them have rough and fissured surfaces that are eroded or weathering slowly, like pieces of raw wood exposed to wind and rain. There are also metal paintings, which appear like rusty



Mithra Jeevanantham, *Undercovers, in an almond*, 2017, silkscreen print, 80 x 75 cm.

sheets of iron and tin, in a waffle finish and with a heavier texture. "I want the grey of the steel to come through; the brown of the corrugated metal to come through, the wood to come through, the stone—all of those things are considered," says Vij. Indeed, each work's emphasis is on the material and physical processes, and therefore the question, for the artist, has always been "how to paint."

Alpana Vij's body of work includes large portraits and abstract landscapes. In her painting she does not limit herself to canvas, but experiments also with wood and paper, with aluminum and ceramics as support materials. Apart from oil and acrylic, she uses concrete, gold paint, bitumen, and wax. Fascinated by the various landforms made by erosion, deposition, wind, and rain, she evokes these effects in her most recent paintings, sometimes breaking and scratching the surfaces, which have a tactile presence. There are no brushes involved in these paintings: a squeegee, rollers, and sharp mark-making tools are used to apply the colors. From a middle distance, the rise and fall of the surface in Vij's paintings suggests sculptural relief, and yet close inspection reveals none. "Rust can be so beautiful on metal, and when painting these surfaces, I could see that it was beginning to make

little nuances and other colors more visible. It evolved," says Vij. "There is crimson red, cerulean, ultramarine blue, deep yellow, ochre, and sap green, [each of which] is masked out but still visible."

Alpana Vij, who lives in Singapore, was born and brought up in New Delhi. In the late 2000s, leaving the comfortable world of advertising and commercial design behind, Vij made the radical move to become a painter. She moved to Singapore, where received her MFA at LASALLE College of the Arts in 2017. Since then, she has gravitated toward minimalism, as seen in her most recent solo exhibition *Wood Metal Stone* at Ultra Super New Gallery, in October 2019. The title *I Heard the Echo of a Distant Time* (2018) (see the central pieces of pages 50-51) highlights the weathered feel of the surface of this painting, with its signs of disintegration—seemingly flecked-off paint, gouges, and stains. The diptych, on curved wooden sheets, looked as if it had succumbed to the local humid weather.

Her abstracts, Vij told me, were often mistaken to be by men, due to their large size and subject matter. But it really comes down to a feminist consciousness for her, in that the whole journey of art has functioned as aesthetic experience. Alpana Vij gets her inspiration

from eroded rock faces and the intricate structures of leaves, petals, and branches; forms, patterns, and textures of nature are a clear influence on her paintings, found objects, photography, and video. Her art practice is also informed by the Buddhist concept of *sunyata* or emptiness that focuses on the transitory and ephemeral nature and interconnectedness of all phenomena. Vij's recent exhibition presents works such as *What Do I See When I See a Fallen Leaf* (2018), made by sewing dried leaves with gold thread, which express a metaphysical intelligence and poetic beauty.

Maintaining a positive outlook in life, Vij believes that art helps people discover who they are, where their power lies, and how they can make their own exchanges between art and life. Another fellow artist eager to extend 'art into life' and to exercise her own control over forms encountered in our everyday life is Kiwha Lee Blocman, who had lived in Singapore during the past twelve years and is now pursuing her MFA at Hunter College in New York City. Blocman wants art to make people think differently, to explore new ideas, and to challenge all forms of authority. A multidisciplinary artist, her painting has an attachment to a largely modernist tradition of abstract painting but it rejects a viewing (such as that proposed



Alpana Vij, *Echoes - 2*, 2018, oil, wax and bitumen on concrete and wood panels, 98 x 85 cm.



Alpana Vij, *The earth has stories to tell*, 2018, oil, wax and graphite on wood, 152 x 152 cm.



Above from left: Alpana Vij, *What do I see when I see a fallen leaf, HCR - 0518*, 2018, dried leaf and 24k gold thread on concrete, 30 x 27 cm. Alpana Vij, *What do I see when I see a fallen leaf, TA-0618*, 2018, dried leaf and 24k gold thread on concrete, 30 x 30 cm. Alpana Vij, *What do I see when I see a fallen leaf, LP-1119*, 2019, dried leaf and 24k gold thread on concrete, 40 x 30 cm.

by Clement Greenberg's modernism) that is closed off from its surroundings. Born in Seoul, Korea, she was raised in New York, Sydney, Seoul, Boston, and London. Her abstraction takes notions of migration and racial otherness as well as the interrogation of identity and cultural experience as a means of questioning power. Her art also crosses boundaries between Asia and the West as well as self and other.

On the island city-state, which she calls home, "Singapore gave me the time, space, and freedom to pursue my art practice daily and vigorously," Blocman says. "It is a very plugged-in city with a lot of support for local artists." While keeping her Singapore art studio for painting and printmaking, she is excited about the prospect of working between New York and Singapore and the dynamic art scenes and the cross-cultural exchange they offer. Prior to her MFA, she studied painting, design, animation, and new media at UNSW College of Fine Arts in Sydney, and later at University of Technology Sydney.

Blocman has developed a resolutely graphic style of abstract painting in which the notion of shape is investigated. Since 2015, she has filled her canvases with fields of color and abstract forms. One might think there is the danger that sometimes large and colorful pictures add decorative areas to the gallery walls. But Blocman's plays of form point to her diasporic experiences and



Kiwha Lee Blocman, *Doppelganger*, 2018, oil and acrylic on canvas, 66" x 52".



Kiwha Lee Blocman, *Shifter*, 2019, oil on canvas, 54" x 40".

her search for practical solutions to the problems of race, class, gender, and other. "My work looks at facets of identity overall but more personal to me is the feminine inquiry in a patriarchal society, particularly as it relates to the historical weight of painting," says Blocman. "In this way, I do consider myself to be making feminist artworks."

On reflection, Blocman's paintings and prints are always object-like and idea-based. These characteristics are seen clearly in *Identity Formation No.1* (2016), and *Kinship* (2017), and *Doppelganger* (2018). In *Misfit No.4* (2016), yellow and brown are juxtaposed with the sculptural outline of a door handle: it is as if she was trying to achieve Pop art and abstract expressionism on the same canvas. At various times, by creating contrasts of color, form, and texture,

there is the suggestion of depth and movement in some of the pictures. Like Alpana Vij, much of Blocman's interest is on abstraction and the latter's belief that painting, especially abstract painting, has the means to achieve a more interesting relationship with contemporary realities.

In Blocman's recent work, shown

in *MirrorEye*, a group exhibition (for early career and emerging artists) at Ortega y Gasset Projects, in Brooklyn, New York, January 2020, she explores new forms and color relationships, to establish new sensibilities. The large oil, entitled *Shifter* (2019), is vibrant work showing a geometric clarity and fine color relations.

In different styles and individual expression, the art by Jeevanantham, Vij, and Blocman emphasizes women's "struggles" in their chosen career paths. They have persevered in exploring their own social realities, continuing to make art that gives voice to those who have none. For these three artists the space where art accrues meaning and its value is always a site of struggle, and should remain so. Δ



Left: Kiwha Lee Blocman, *Misfit No.4*, 2016, oil on canvas, 24" x 24". Right: Kiwha Lee Blocman, *Misfit No.5*, 2017, oil, acrylic and coconut shavings on canvas, 66" x 52".

Christine Han is the Singapore contributing editor for Asian Art News and World Sculpture News.