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PRESS

Manish Nai

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The abstract, formally spare and physically compacted work of Manish Nai marks him out as an exception in the current context of Indian art, given the representational bias so salient in diverse ways in the work of many of his contemporaries. In a culture of iconophilia where the symbolic as such continues to hold the collective imagination in thrall, the work of a young artist concentrated almost exclusively on the material qualities of the different substances that he has elected to deploy must appear as an anomaly. But in the circumstances, this seeming incongruity is precisely a gauge of his independence, a token of the faith he keeps in the dictates of his own sensibility and tastes. His abiding interest has been in discovering the abstract dimensions of form through the physical manipulation of matter (jute or burlap, newspapers, old clothes, used cardboard), in exploring how process is intimately and visibly part and parcel of the making and the end result, how control in the handling is continually countered by the vagaries of chance. It is this element of surprise that must account for the categorical open-endedness that he sometimes evokes when deciding for himself if the object that has been wrought is painting or sculpture, although, of course, conventionally, a work hung on a wall belongs to a pictorial regime whereas a free-standing, three-dimensional entity is in the domain of the sculptural. His initial forays were certainly pictorial, marked by a heightened attentiveness to, and affirmation of, the surface qualities of the particular technical support he chose to explore. The substance of that support is jute, ubiquitous in India and a staple of the economy from colonial times, a natural fibre whose cultural use is primarily utilitarian (the making of twine and rope or woven into sacking and matting). The artist's father had once professionally traded in this organic matter and Nai's close familiarity with it as he was growing up spurred him to explore its plastic potential as the basis of a pictorial proposition, unconcerned with its status as a 'lowly' or poor material for making art.

FONDATION FERNET BRANCA

2, rue du Ballon - 68300 SAINT-LOUIS - 03 89 69 10 77 www.fondationfernet-branca.org - info@fondationfernet-branca.org

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The fastidious preparatory ‘cuisine’ of Nai’s work in its inaugural phase (between 2001 and 2004) involved the successive layering of rectangular formats of canvas with jute (or its more fine-spun version, burlap), butter paper and grainy hand-made paper. This ‘millefeuille’ was then delicately probed and partially undone by the scratches made on its surface, and the resulting incisions, affording tantalizing glimpses of the underlying layers, painted over with watercolor. In a further twist to this exploration of the archaeology of surface, Nai experimented with a coarser variety of jute laid on canvas and covered over by tracing paper of the kind used by architects. This integument was then lightly brushed over with transparent washes of color and covered with a more finely meshed textile in jute. But as if this process was not laborious enough, Nai went on to unravel, thread by thread, sections of the flatly stratified surface to reveal patterns in the woof and warp of the fibrous underside. Surface, then, is the overriding preoccupation, and in being beholden to it, Nai’s practice was discovering for itself an aspect of the self-reflexivity of modernist painting (from Impressionism to abstraction) about means and materials, and, by extension, about the nature of the medium itself, that is its defining condition. Nai’s recourse to non-art materials as an artistic resource, however, locates his procedural protocols in the vicinity of some of the practices that emerged in the post-war period intent on critically revisiting the pictorial and sculptural legacies of modernist art. And whatever the medium deployed, a crucial focus of such a reevaluation is precisely the surface, exemplarily in the work of Robert Rauschenberg from its very inception in the early 1950s.

The art historical precedent set by Rauschenberg is admittedly an intimidating benchmark for all the artists who have followed in his wake. Its evocation here is simply to signal the challenging perspective in which the developing ambitions of Nai’s practice in a pictorial register over the last decade can be situated. His use of burlap might bring to mind some of Alberto Burri’s works from the late 1940s onwards but the association is ultimately superficial, given the de-idealizing impulse motivating Burri’s deployment of this and other poor substances like burnt plastic in his pictorial surface, the physically distressed condition a token of their ‘baseness’ and his disillusionment with any idea of transcendence. Piero Manzoni’s *Achromes* (the earliest date from 1958) that constitute a cunning *colourless* riposte, in a variety of natural and synthetic materials, to the pictorial (and verbal) hyperbole of Yves Klein’s chromatically suffused monochromes might appear as an art historical reference for the textile basis and textured surfaces of Nai’s work, although the intentions underlying the use of their respective materials are, of course, finally very different. Nor can Nai’s formal preoccupations be said to have any sustained affinities with Arte Povera as is sometimes adduced, apart from a broadly shared concern with process-based practices and certainly not with a misleading notion of a supposed impoverishment on the level of artistic means suggested by the intriguingly ambivalent name of this movement.

The freshness and candour of Nai’s approach to his elected materials stems from the considerable distance that separates him from these historical precedents, and where he comes closest to something like a dialogue with certain emblematic examples of late Western Modernist art is when his preoccupation with the materiality of jute pushes his practice towards the making of simple, unitary forms such as the cube and the column that are salient in Minimalism. But concomitant with the embrace of three-dimensionality is the mutation of the pictorial entity into the intermediary state of the relief, a development that would seem to be dictated by his decision to desist from stretching jute or burlap on canvas but rather exploit

its malleability by twisting and wringing and folding it and then shaping and compressing the tactile voluptuousness of the heavy textile carapace into fairly monumental rectangular or square slabs or tondos designed to be displayed on a wall. The incitation to touch these abstract works is irresistible and this appeal to the eroticism of the haptic as part of the viewing experience – its cheeky figurative precursor is, of course, Duchamp's *Prière de toucher* – is surely one of the more unexpected effects of an endeavor ostensibly focussed on exploring the pictorial and proto-sculptural dimensions of a given raw matter. In its natural, chromatically untreated state, the foregrounding of the jute material assertively betokens the organic and vernacular provenance of the relief's medium; when the jute is uniformly dyed in indigo blue the mnemonic associations of the color inevitably recall the legacy of the monochrome even as Nai's version lends itself to be seen as an artisanal riposte, respectively, to Yves Klein's mystagogic and Anish Kapoor's high-tech appropriation of this modernist paradigm.

The columnar or cubic configurations that evince Nai's exploration of three-dimensional form can be seen as a left-handed take on the comparably simplified shapes favored by the Minimalists, or perhaps more accurately as sharing a working affinity with certain post-Minimalist procedures aimed at unsettling the metallic obduracy and industrial complexion of Minimalist sculpture but given a vernacular twist by Nai's use of jute in its brute state, the objecthood of these forms visibly the result of the compression of the tactile fibrous material into a geometric module. The impetus to move into three-dimensions came from Nai's intuition that the fibres of jute that had been discarded in the course of elaborating his wall-based works might serve some purpose, and these eventually turned out to be the 'fodder' for making the geometrical volumes. When presented as an individual unit, Nai chose to leave the upper face of the cubic module as a flattened tangle of threads, in contrast to the compression to which all the other faces of the modular entity have been subjected. Confronting the 'bale', one has the impression or fantasy that all one needs to do to undo it is to begin pulling at the strings for the form to collapse and the jute to become an amorphous mass, returning thereby to its original condition as *materia prima* with which Nai began.

Such unraveling, even if only in the viewer's mind, is not given to the rather more solidified vertical slabs and columns (supported by an inner wooden armature) that Nai has been making over the last few years, for the process of compressing the materials that individually compose them – jute, corrugated cardboard, newspapers, old clothes – hardens their initial malleability, desiccates their ductility, transforming them into flattened, fossilized versions of themselves. Once released from the mold in which it was compressed, the material presents itself as a petrified square or rectangular module, ready to serve as a building block, as it were, compacted as it is of the flattened shapes into which the folds of the used clothing have been frozen or of hundreds of summary, roughly surfaced, ball or stone-like pellets (in the case of the newspapers), their size corresponding to the quantity of material in the hand of the assistant who crumpled it. This module is Nai's compositional unit and with it he makes walls, columns, pillars, slabs, things one has to be careful not to bump into when backing away from the wall pieces or reliefs he also makes with the same elements as those used in the three-dimensional works. What unites the two bodies of work is their shared outcome of a process of compression but the compacted object is not laden with the pathos of obsolescence, as in, say, the debris scavenged in the graveyards of industrial waste in César's *Compressions*. Nai seems interested rather in the new life assumed by his particular repertory of cast-offs as a result of their metamorphosis, the change in their condition from objects of use (jute,

cardboard, newspapers, clothes) to objects divested of any function or utility, that is to say, objects in their condition as art.

Contemplating one of Nai's compressions, the first question that comes to mind is: What is it made of? For it is the work's surface, its texture, its exterior aspect that arrests the eye. But however abstracted from their context his works might appear to be, Nai's gaze is hardly indifferent to the myriad solicitations of the spectacle of contemporary life in a megalopolis like Bombay where he lives. Significantly, it is the façade of urban space, the scrofulous, time worn, weather-beaten walls that are its eloquent template, to which his attention is drawn. 'When I travel in the city, I look out for moments of blankness and flatness. To me, empty billboards and concrete walls are like works of art. ...I have often observed construction workers throwing cement into concrete slabs as they make walls, as if they were making a gestural painting'. Often painted over in white or summarily camouflaged with paper or plastic in anticipation of the advertisements and publicity images that are their *raison d'être*, the empty billboards that are the object of Nai's discerning eye offer a surprising range of inadvertent pictorial tropes and painterly incident – monochrome, grid, collage, scumbled brushwork, traces of lettering or numerals. His photographs of these 'found abstractions' are as visually intriguing as his work with more vernacular materials even as they function as a canny counterpart to it.

For at first sight the surfaces of whatever medium he has deployed are never what they appear to be, and this ambiguity is nowhere more salient than in his practice of drawing, an activity that is second nature to him. Nai makes scores of abstract drawings, almost on a daily basis, and rejects an equal number. Those that find his favour are scanned and then played around with on Photoshop, notably with an emboss tool that imparts an illusion of relief to the template thus obtained. The process had already been used in his earlier 'jute paintings' (notably in a series made in 2007) where the patterns resulted from the projection of the digitized version of a drawing on the jute surface. Initially this involved the arduous task of tweezing out the threads according to the lines of the projected pattern and then the application of paint in the interstitial network. The resulting play of surface and depth, that hallowed trope of modernist painting, was thus obtained by a combination of artisanal and high tech means, even as the recourse to digital technology triangulated the old polarity between 'high' and 'low' in a distinctively novel way. The more recent drawings in dry pastel on paper are further refinements of this crossing of manual and digital methods but the procedures employed have been much simplified. The pixellated areas of relief and recession on the digitally derived working template projected on archival paper are picked out and manually shaded or highlighted in dry pastel in a tonally modulated *grisaille* of great subtlety. The pointillism to which Nai resorts, moreover, also lends itself to be seen as a mnemonic recapitulation of such diverse instances of pictorial handling hinged on the deployment of a diminutive or micro unit as Seurat's *petits points* and Roy Lichtenstein's stenciled ben-day dots, not to mention the hand-painted white particles that constellate Vija Celmins' nocturnal skies. In Nai's drawings the minute rendering of the graphic incidents results in an overall configuration that is literally flat but appears to illusionistically harbour strangely protruding shapes under its surface, rather like the blisters that form under the plaster of a humid wall.

The analogy, however impressionistic it might seem, acquires a certain pertinence not only in the light of his professed attraction to the accidental 'abstract' designs he discerns in the

stained and peeling surfaces so typical of the visible face of built space in his native Bombay but also when one remembers that Nai has made mural drawings (based on digitally projected patterns) that, for all their abstraction, recall scratched, graffiti-like versions of starburst, or (in a more anamorphic register) aerial or topographic views of a cityscape. A cluster of disparate, faintly delineated markings from a 'normal' viewing distance is revealed at close range as the micro-structure of a more complex network and this perceptual instability, resulting from Nai's consummate technical prowess, is the crux of his more abiding fascination for what he holds to be the essentially mutable nature of the relation between two dimensions and three in general, and between pictorial flatness and relief in particular. This mutability translates as a form of optical illusionism that is a hallmark of all his graphic work, whatever the nature of the support, and is nowhere more suggestive than in the drawings in dry pastel on paper. For in contrast to the public dimension that is the *raison d'être* of the mural format, the drawings belong to a more intimate regime of beholding and the closer form of scrutiny they solicit can reward the gaze with the illusion of shapes with rather more intimate associations, too, notably in a series of works from 2014 where the abstract configurations resulting from the formal exploration of recession and protrusion in delicately modulated *pointillé* carry inescapable associations with body parts, and not least because of their sheerly haptic aspect.

The erotics of the tactile, whether incited literally (in the case of the jute deployed pictorially or sculpturally) or virtually (in the case of the drawings) returns us to the surface qualities of the matter in question, that is to say, to the medium itself. Manish Nai's work, whatever its scale and the nature of the materials, opens up new ways of negotiating certain artistic paradigms that are part of the legacy of late-modernist abstraction by single-mindedly pursuing the particular logic of formal processes that are of his own ingenious devising. And he is the first one to be surprised and beguiled by the results this pursuit might yield. 'This is not a naked wall, it is a very sweet life that one has compressed to make a wall, grape by grape', exclaims an unnamed voice in an enigmatic fragment by Kafka. 'I don't believe it. Taste it. I cannot raise my hand so incredulous I am.'

-Deepak Ananth

Excerpted from 'Matter as Medium', essay by Deepak Ananth in the catalogue of the exhibition *Manish Nai, Matter as Medium*, Galerie Karsten Greve, Paris, 2016.

MANISH NAI

Born 1980 in Gujarat, India

Diploma in Drawing and Painting, L S Raheja School of Art, Mumbai, India

Lives and works in Mumbai, India

Solo Exhibitions

- 2017 'Manish Nai', Fondation Fernet-Branca, St. Louis, France
- 2016 'Matter as Medium', Galerie Karsten Greve, Paris, France
- 2015 'Manish Nai', Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago, USA
- 2014 'Manish Nai', Galerie Karsten Greve, St. Moritz, Switzerland
- 2013 'Sculpting in Time', presented by Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke at Art Basel, Hong Kong
- 2012 'COMPACT', Galerie Gebr. Lehmann, Berlin, Germany
- 2010 'Extramural', Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai, India
- 2009 'Manish Nai – New Works', Galerie Karsten Greve, Cologne, Germany,
- 2007 'Minimal Structures', Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai, India
- 2005 'Threading A Coded Path', Apparao Galleries, Delhi and Chennai, India
- 2004 'The Museum Gallery' Curated by Pinakin Patel

Group Exhibitions (a selection)

- 2017 'DWELLING – 10th Anniversary Show (Part II)', curated by Ranjit Hoskote, Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai, India
- 2016 'Gallerists as Interventionists: Collaboration as Strategy', Lakeeren Gallery, Mumbai, India
- 2016 'Abstract Chronicles', curated by Girish Shahane, Gallery OED, Kochi, India
- 2015 'Prudential Eye Award Exhibition', Art Science Museum, Singapore
- 2014 2nd Kochi-Muziris Biennale / 'Whorled Explorations' curated by Jitish Kallat, Kochi, India
- 2014 'Ethereal', curated by Dr. Amin Jaffer, Leila Heller Gallery, New York, USA
- 2014 'Midnight's Grandchildren', curated by Girish Shahane, Studio X, Mumbai, India
- 2014 'The Material Point: Reconsidering the Medium in the (Post)modern Moment', curated by Kathleen Wyma, Gallery OED, Kochi, India
- 2012 'The Indian Parallax or the Doubling of Happiness', curated by Shaheen Merali, Birla Academy of Art & Culture, Kolkata, India

- 2012 9th Shanghai Biennale – Mumbai Pavilion, curated by Diana Campbell Betancourt and Susan Hapgood, Shanghai, China
- 2012 'news', with Eberhard Havekost, Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai, India
- 2012 Art HK12, Hong Kong International Art Fair, Hong Kong
Presented by Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke
- 2012 The Skoda Prize Show, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi
- 2012 'examples to follow!', curated by Adrienne Goehler, Prince of Wales Museum, Mumbai, India
- 2011 'Abstract Articulations', Gallery Espace, New Delhi, India
- 2011 'Home Spun', curated by Girish Shahane, Devi Art Foundation, Gurgaon, India
- 2011 'India Inclusive: Contemporary Art from India', World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland Curated by Tasneem Zakaria Mehta
- 2009 'PANORAMA: INDIA', ARCO_Madrid, Madrid
Presented by Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke
- 2009 'Relative Visa', curated by Bose Krishnamachari, Bodhi Art Gallery, Mumbai, India
- 2008 Gallery Weekend, presented by Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke at the Baumwollspinnerei, Leipzig, Germany
- 2007 1st Anniversary Exhibition, Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai, India
- 2005 'Present-Future', curated by Dr. Saryu Doshi, National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai, India

Books

'MANISH NAI', published by Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai, 2015

Featured in:

'Künstler: Kritisches Lexikon der Gegenwartskunst', Kunsthandel Verlag GMBH, Frankfurt, 2016

'Vitamin D2 – New Perspectives in Drawing', PHAIDON, 2013