Inscapes of unrequited belonging

Debangana Banerjee

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INSCAPES OF UNREQUITED BELONGING

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

In

The School of Art

By

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B.F.A., Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan, West Bengal, India, 2003
M.F.A., Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan, West Bengal, India, 2005
August 2010
DEDICATION

To the one, who sat by my side on the river bank,
And swept me into the river flames
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION..................................................................</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS..........................................................</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES..........................................................</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT......................................................................</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INSCAPES OF UNREQUITED BELONGING...............................</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED.............................................................</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA..........................................................................</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

1. *discovering you*, woodcut, 44 x 24 in., 2009.........................................................6

2. *come back river*, woodcut, 44 x 24 in. (each print), 2009........................................6

3. *devastate the days*, woodcut, 44 x 24 in. (each print), 2009.......................................6

4. *distance, how far you are*, woodcut, 44 x 24 in. (each print), 2009.................................7

5. *today you will be no one*, woodcut, 44 x 24 in., 2010..................................................7

6. *an attempt, to exclude*, woodcut, 44 x 24 in., 2010.....................................................7
ABSTRACT

This thesis is about my journey through life—memories of the past, experiences of the present and premonitions of the future—and how that journey, through its changing landscapes and human characters, generates images that I call inscapes. My subjects arise from very personal experiences and get fermented in my imagination to project an inner vision. I create deep intimate spaces, transitional moments of conscious and unconscious thoughts using both natural and personal imageries. In this endeavor, dark, solid and earthly colors and robust textures play a big role. I employ printmaking (woodcut), painting (oil on canvas) and poetry to express my mental state. Growing up in India, I feel like an outsider in this country; at the same time, being a part of the university community, I also feel like an insider. The landscape of Baton Rouge offers me plenty of similarities with my home town, Santiniketan, but it also provides profound contrasts in culture, language and people. From the very beginning my relationship with this place has been marked with a tension and contradictory emotions—a push of alienation and a pull of deep intimacy. In my inscapes I articulate all these different emotional tensions for the viewers.
INSCAPES OF UNREQUITED BELONGING

The spirit of my art resides in the union of real and unreal images. I work with a very personal subject: the harmony of empirical and abstract realms in my own imagination. The empirical realm is the world outside, the objects I observe; it is the sphere of reality. The abstract world is the universe that is beyond observable reality and resides within the human mind, manifesting itself through feelings and emotions. Together they compose a visual statement that more fully expresses the human experience. In my art this composition leads to the creation of “inscapes” that express my emotional responses to my human and natural surroundings. Thus, the theme of my thesis show is the projection of such inscapes that tell the story of my journey through life—memories of the past, experiences of the present and premonitions of the future. This is a journey of self-exploration through the examination of my real and imagined relationships with space, time and people. I create deep intimate spaces and transitional moments of conscious and unconscious thoughts by using images from natural and personal worlds. In this endeavor dark, solid and earthly colors play a big role. I employ printmaking, painting and poetry to express my deep emotions. The robust textures of woodcut, the soft intricacies of linocut, the vibrant oil colors on canvas and the nuanced language of poetry all vent my built-up feelings.

In most of my artistic creations the external landscape supplies the resources that ultimately form inscapes in my mind, which I pour out in both my art and poetry. The term “inscape” has similar but slightly different connotations in poetry and art. Glenn Everett connects the concept of inscape in poetry to the British poet G. M. Hopkins: “By ‘inscape’ he means the unified complex of characteristics that give each thing its uniqueness and that differentiate it from other things . . .” (Everett). He also mentions that Hopkins assigns a spiritual aspect to this concept. Again in visual art, this concept is mostly connected to Surrealist artists such as
Salvador Dali and, especially, Roberto Matta. In an online catalogue, Claude Cernuschi mentions that this concept of inscape evokes “the human psyche in visual form . . . filtered through the writings of Freud and the psychoanalytic view of the mind as a three-dimensional space . . .” (Matta). In other words, inscape is an effort to project the invisible and abstract interior world onto the visible and solid exterior medium. My concept of inscape differs slightly from both these interpretations. For me, inscape is born out of the marriage of the external world and internal emotions. I take the elements of the outside world and ferment them in my imagination to pour out a combined vision of internal landscape.

Throughout my thesis project, I have been creating such inscapes that correspond to my mental journey in its various manifestations. My works are based on three major themes: my existence as a stranger in the USA, my relationship with this new land and the place where I came from, and various struggles of life. I have been working on the subject of my journey through life for the last three years. In this country I feel like an outsider—my home is half a globe away; at the same time, I also feel I am an insider, as I have become a part of the university and the local community. From the very beginning my relationship with this place has been marked with the tension of contradictory emotions: a push of alienation and a pull of deep intimacy. This tension creates chance and unpredictability, which enhance my dual status as an insider and an outsider. Yes, I am an outsider and an insider in this new land. But whenever I go back home to India, I realize that I have lost the connection to my homeland in its day-to-day life, with the place and the people, and I feel like an interloper. The landscape of Baton Rouge offers me plenty of similarities with my home town, Santiniketan, India, but it also provides profound contrasts in culture, language and inhabitants. Baton Rouge smells similar to Santiniketan after rain; trees, flowers and the weather are all very much alike. This makes a homesick Bengali girl like me, who was deeply in love with her home town, very comfortable.
Thus, southern Louisiana life and nature built an intimate, affectionate relationship with me slowly, and I started realizing that I am neither a part of life here, nor an outsider anymore. This state of being charges me to do more energetic woodcuts and paintings and to write more poetry.

I was born and raised in Santiniketan, West Bengal, India—a small university town where life was green and easy. There, people used to believe in simple living and high thinking. This is one of the reasons for my interest in insignificant and simple incidents in mundane life. I lived there until I came to Baton Rouge in 2006. Santiniketan is a place known for its natural beauty and cultural heritage. I studied there from kindergarten to my Master’s at Visva-Bharati University, which was founded by Rabindranath Tagore, poet and the first Nobel laureate from Asia. Being a poet’s school, Visva-Bharati offered me a different dimension of life, a space for imagination and an opportunity to become a complete human being (not only to engage in bookish study but to observe and appreciate our natural and human environments). The school operates in a natural setting: all activities and classes are held under trees. This way of interacting with nature influenced me profoundly (even before I realized what influence means), to know about seasonal changes, to feel at one with the clouds and the rain and to become a part of nature. Shapes of various trees, rural landscape, color and mood of different seasons—deep dark clouds in monsoon, bright colorful spring, dry and hot summer—are significant characteristics of the place that influenced me. There are several festivals celebrating nature at various times of the year. Thus, from the very beginning of my creative activities I got in touch with nature. Nature’s influences were and are very prominent in my art and poetry. I feel nature profoundly affects the domain of human actions. Thus in my work all my quotidian experiences get connected to my natural environment, and my emotions find release in elemental images. The surroundings of Santiniketan highly influenced the concepts of my work and I started my journey
from there. Wherever I live, I get in touch with my environs. I try to find my connection with the natural world and the people of that place, and seek out subjects that suit my art.

All such emotional tensions are generated by influences and reminiscences of land, nature and people that have been building within me from my childhood. Thus, my education and growing up in India have as much influence on my project as does my life in Baton Rouge. My interactions and fascinations with the people and the places of Louisiana have helped to shape my artistic productions since coming to this country. When Baton Rouge became my second home, it also started having a similar impact on my art. The shapes of oak trees, how they touch the ground, connect the sky and spread their arms over other trees and plants continue to impress me. The Mississippi river also became a source of inspiration in my poems and art. I read about the river in my childhood and I was overwhelmed when I realized that the river flows ten minutes away from my place in Baton Rouge. The quiet flow of the dark and deep river generates spontaneous lines in my work. Life is a journey like the flow of a river. The Mississippi river comes into my work every now and then, often suggestively to convey a deep spiritual meditation. Sudden rain, moist, quiet summers and puddles here and there are special characteristics that the LSU campus and Baton Rouge offered to me. Stately magnolias and spreading arms of oak trees all took on a living character. I even identify people through these natural elements. Words, brush strokes, woodcuts all speak poetically about the experiences I gather every day from places, times and people.

Certain characteristics of Baton Rouge especially affect my creative vision. When I see—ships sailing higher in the river than the top of my apartment and chances of rain every day—I enjoy. Jumping squirrels here and there, never-ending construction around the campus, the LSU football craze, saving newspaper for a crawfish boil party, ordering alligator in a restaurant, taste of Tabasco, Cajun food, king cake and what not—all these local elements are enjoyable to me. I
realize that I am a part of this place. I try to feel the enthusiasm looking at my friends’ closets overflowing with colorful Mardi Gras beads, and listening to them say that gold, green and purple look great together. I enjoy when an unknown person starts talking with me about his or her entire family tree. All these small incidents convey new ideas for my work. In this new land, I look for the place where I belong. I enjoy the transitional period of my life from India to Baton Rouge. I am in love with the environment of this place. I believe as a creative person I fall in love every day with places, times and people. It is not a love forever, but to love and leave—a bond of acceptance and rejection. It has an impact on my spirit and gives me energy to work. However, this deep bond with nature is only the starting point of my creative process; it is not the object of depiction. All the abstract shapes and imagined spaces of my works come from this real world. But, my works do not directly capture the moods of nature. Neither does it have any statement about nature. I use natural elements—trees, branches, river, sky, rain et cetera—to portray my interior world or inscape. My works articulate a pure mental state. They are about my journey in this new land and through my life.

In my art I negotiate control and chance. In all these works (figs.1-6 are few examples) I express a constant flux in the environment. Along with the interaction with people and places of this unfamiliar land, I have seen struggle between life and death very closely for the last three years. I have seen how people fight to get their life back and how people accept the alternative way when they come out from turmoil. I have felt how one feels when unfortunate incidents happen to people dear or distant. All these feelings made me think about life from various dimensions. Again Rabindranath Tagore’s songs and poems offered me a new philosophical awareness of existence and the hereafter. His vast philosophical vision creates a balance between life and death and between the human soul and the universe; it is a vision where death is not a negation of life, but rather a part of an eternal cycle that expresses the oneness of nature, humans
Fig. 1 *discovering you*, woodcut, 44 x 24 in., 2009

Fig. 2 *come back river*, woodcut, 44 x 24 in. (each print), 2009

Fig. 3 *devastate the days*, woodcut, 44 x 24 in. (each print), 2009
Fig. 4 distance, how far you are, woodcut, 44 x 24 in. (each print), 2009

Fig. 5 today you will be no one, woodcut, 44 x 24 in., 2010

Fig. 6 an attempt, to exclude, woodcut, 44 x 24 in., 2010
and the divine. This constantly changing face of the eternal struggle in human life is also reflected in my art and poetry.

My thesis works consists of relief prints and paintings on canvas. These mediums serve different purposes for me. There are several reasons for doing woodcuts, especially large woodcuts. Woodcut is a slow process, especially so if done with multiple colors and various lines and textures. It gives me time to articulate my imaginations. For me, wood is like a dynamic language through which I can express my deep emotions. Canvas usually absorbs what I paint on it; but when I chisel my mental conflicts, love, struggle and spiritual thoughts on a wood block, it reacts. It screams, its sharp chips jump, the big block struggles. Wood is like a three-dimensional character to me that changes shape, weight and color as I pour my emotions into it. It is a physical struggle for me to shift a big wood block from my studio to the inking bed and to the printing press over and over again. At the end of the printing process the physical exhaustion and the consequent mental satisfaction help me to release the tension between myself and my expression. Each stage of printing, when the paper must wait to get dry, also allows me time for introspection.

After cutting the wood in several layers, its surface looks totally different. It changes along with the time and according to my expression—as the wood reacts, I too react. At the end of every wood printing, the anxiety between the medium and me reaches a point of understanding. In my woodcuts, textures and myriad lines represent my inner urges. The flow of lines marks different manifestations in the prints—of peace, of trouble, of turmoil etc. My last two woodcuts (figs. 5 & 6) reached a high point of line variations. In fig. 6, I used fine lines for the image of burning fire and strong, bold lines for the background, which represents river and mud. Some of my works (figs.1-4) are in triptych and diptych form. I used this format to reference different emotions at the same time, or to show similar emotions in various time
frames. In addition, I liken the flow of life to the current of the river, so I use horizontal wood prints repetitively to echo the stream of my thoughts.

Color plays a big role in representing my mental state in the woodcuts. I used to work with very bright colors. However, as complexities of experience cast a shadow over the bright horizon of youth and created ambiguities in my mind, my palette became darker and deeper. At present, it seems that colors are becoming deeper, losing light and transparency. All the baggage of emotion I carry as an insider and as an outsider in this country is expressed through color temperature and color pigmentations. In my woodcuts I work with multiple layers until the print gets a thick leathery texture. Because my works arise from my own experiences, it becomes a psychological journey. Thus, I think of the technique of printing in layers as a representation of the connections between my experiences—past, present and future. At times I use my old prints as the base paper. In this way of building an image, I use a texture of a particular previous thought as a background. Using semi-transparent and opaque colors, enables me to make visible earlier layers, revealing parts of the print while suppressing the rest.

I believe one experience puts another into proper perspective. In my mind old and new experiences combine to create a third experience, which leads to the creation of my artistic worlds. Parts of this world stand out prominently, and parts stay hidden in the layers of my prints. Most of my works are horizontal and large in scale. As I talk about the flow of rivers as the flow of life, and about the spreading branches of the oak trees, I feel comfortable about stretching my works horizontally. This horizontality helps visual turmoil and claustrophobia. I move my hand freely on a big space when I am overloaded with my passions. Big wood blocks allow me to stamp space and secondly, challenge me to seek new compositions. Thus, in my art I always try to connect the medium, content and technique together.
All of my thesis paintings are oil on canvas. This medium allows me to create a powerful intimate space with rough and smooth textures and pigmentation. My paintings are sometimes brief and quick renderings of my elaborate woodcuts. I believe painting has fewer limitations and is less time consuming than printmaking. Painting is a medium which brings an instant response to my subject, which is directly generated from my inscapes. Each addition of a layer allows me to change the drying time by adding solvents. I can even remove an entire layer in different ways. I create the translucence, sheen or density with paint brushes and palette knives to convey my feelings and imagination. Various lines and textures cover the surface of my paintings to create an abstract image. My paintings are mostly small, because I can jot down my thoughts quickly in a small space. I also feel that in paintings I express my interests in detailing and designing with warm colors which create a vibrant mood with their color arrangements and textures. My paintings are also about an imagined space, where I roam around. These are not direct reflections of my emotions but a space where I want to escape after any sensitive incident.

For me the processes are conveyors of profound expressions. Works such as those illustrated below are bold and poetic interpretations of sorrow, happiness and a thousand other complex feelings. My writing is another medium that connects deeply with my visual art. I write poems in my native language, Bengali. Poems in my own language speak about my personal experiences with nature, people and places. It is another way of rendering my thoughts. Rhythm and sounds of words convey the messages of my poems. I discover visions in poetry and stories in visual art; I transfer my ideas from one form to the other. It is a challenge for me to see the words visually or to read and write from an image on a canvas. In my inscapes words swirl, cluster and finally find release visually. Observing nature or talking with a friend, I find that many abstract images crowd my inner vision. They look for words to transform themselves into an art of rhythm and sound. Poetry liberates these images trapped within me. In my thesis show I
presented a few images along with the translations of my poetry to illustrate how my writing and art go hand in hand in the expression of my unrequited belonging. Although I believe that any translation, especially of poetry, loses the original flavor, theses reiteration in English are very close to my Bengali versions.

In addition to my immediate surroundings, I am also greatly motivated by various artists who display an intense relationship with their environment and nature. Among such artists, Vincent Van Gough influenced me the most from the beginning of my artistic life. I see a direct influence of his emotional brush treatment in my works. Indian painters Gaganendranath and Rabindranath Tagore’s mysterious compositions and the vibrant colors of Manjit Bawa influenced me as well. Nandalal Bose, Benode Behari Mukherjee and Ramkinkar Baij (all pioneers of modern Indian art) affected me very much for their spontaneous artistic flow and involvement with their surroundings. I am also inspired by the content, form and style of ancient Chinese landscape painting. In Chinese paintings I find poetry, philosophy, abstraction and spirituality in a holistic way through their detailing and space division, their ambiguity and uncertainty. Since my roots are in the traditions and cultures of India, Indian artists influence me more than artists of any other tradition. Another reason for these influences is the curriculum of art history in India. During my studies at Visva-Bharati University, I studied Indian, far Eastern and European artists and developed my art practice looking at works by them. Only in the last three years I have become aware of and influenced by some contemporary American artists. Leo Meissner’s intricacy of woodcut and linocut and Constance Forsyth’s motion, movement and organic shapes influenced me. The intricate detailing of Leslie Koptcho and Brian Kelly’s works, as well as the techniques and styles of reusing prints of Kimberly Arp, also affected my works. Also, the spontaneous lines of landscapes in woodcuts by May Ann Babcock, my studio mate, influenced me in the development of my work. But I still do not know where I belong in the
contemporary art world in this country. I do not think three years is time enough to understand my place among other artists here. I look at contemporary works and every day try to figure out my niche, as it is also a major part of my concept—search for my significance in this new land.

My works are suggestive in nature. I create an artistic space which viewers can interpret in their own ways. There is no one right way to interpret my work. Viewers have to choose their own trail and commence their journey through this space. I expect them to feel the tension and turmoil that I portray in my prints, paintings and poems, but I do not want to make the source of this upheaval obvious. My works are like river streams and like streams of life. These are transitional moments affected by various stages of day and night, winter and summer, green and red, dilemma and certainty. Even if I stand in the place of a local soul, I recognize that we are all insiders and all equally outsiders in this great country of immigrants. Thus, I recognize that everybody goes through this dilemma of estrangement in one way or another. Viewers have to become absorbed into my works to connect their emotions with mine. They are not outsiders; neither are they insiders. They are interlopers like me who toil on the trails of the deep dark layers of my prints to discern glimpses of meaning and familiarity.

I consider my thesis work as a point to rest and to look around; the journey will start again. This is the best time for me to take stock of my present and map routes for my new voyage, to prepare to leave this place, this time and these people. I feel that in my art four elements—earth, water, fire and space (from Indian philosophy)—are strongly present; but the existence of air is very faint. I will explore all five elements in my future works in conjunction with my future artistic visions. In my last few woodcuts (figs. 5 and 6) I have already started experimenting with empty white spaces, which create room for breathing, representing air. I also hope that different analysis in medium, technique and concept will enrich my future works. From
my unrequited belonging here I will again start my journey searching for my place in the world—a place that will embrace me as its own, or maybe not.
WORKS CITED


VITA

Debangana Banerjee was born and raised in Santiniketan, West Bengal, India. Santiniketan being one of the artistic and cultural hubs of the country, Debangana received exposure to different art forms from her childhood. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts and Master of Fine Arts in printmaking degree from Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan, in 2005. She worked as a national scholar before joining her beloved husband Suparno Banerjee, a doctorate student at Louisiana State University, in 2006. Debangana has participated in many national and international exhibitions including exhibitions in Japan, Australia, England and the United States. She has also exhibited her works in several solo shows in India and the United States. She has published several articles in leading Indian dailies and two of her artist’s books were published in art fairs in 1998 and 1999 in India. Debangana taught art classes to disabled and disadvantaged children and youths in India and was an active volunteer in social services in various organizations in India and the United States, including Loan Closet (under IHF at LSU). She will receive her second Master of Fine Arts in printmaking from Louisiana State University in August 2010.