DWELLING | Part One

How to Belong

The problems of shelter and belonging claim our attention insistently today, at a time when more people than ever before in history have been forced into the precariousness of exile; and when those who feel threatened by the Other’s presence in their midst appease their insecurities by rallying around xenophobic banners of identity.

In such a predicament, we ask ourselves: What does it mean to form habitations and communities; to craft accommodation both in a spiritual and a pragmatic manner; to develop an ethic of neighbourhood in an age of uncertainty and violence? What is home to the citizen, and to the refugee? How might the hospitable space of a liberal society turn, under pressure, into a hostile space dominated by illiberal narratives?

With these thoughts in mind while preparing for Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke’s 10th anniversary exhibition, I have returned to an enigmatic and perennially important text of 20th-century philosophy: Martin Heidegger’s ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’ (1951). Drawing its title from this essay, DWELLING convenes the works and celebrates the practices of 24 artists who the gallery represents; or who have been its long-term friends, or have collaborated periodically in its major projects. Taken together, these artists incarnate the life of the gallery, the web of relationships and conversations that sustains its activity.

Heidegger’s essay suggested itself to me as being organic to the enterprise: the connection was made in dynamic interplay with the oeuvres of the participating artists, many of whom have long been deeply concerned with themes germane to its inquiry, such as those of ‘building’, ‘neighbourhood’, ‘community’, ‘locale’, and ‘accommodation’, and who locate, in relation to these themes, the human subjectivity in all its bewilderment, vulnerability, resilience and capacity for imaginative quest and action. I have invited our artists to consider Heidegger’s essay, not as a unifying template, but as a thread to be tested out, a possible way of linking their diverse explorations together with our shared historical moment.

In ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’, Heidegger meditates on the act of accommodating the self’s needs and desires to the environment through the medium of architecture. One of his propositions is that of the locale – the bringing together of the known and the unexpected, in the “founding and joining of spaces” that is the act of building.
Heidegger emphasises that it is by dwelling “in things”, through nursing, nurturing, cultivating and constructing, that we most fully articulate life.

A seminal yet controversial thinker, Heidegger (1889-1976) joined the Nazi Party during its ascendance; he never publicly expressed contrition for this allegiance after the fall of the Third Reich. The post-World War II German authorities forbade him to teach or publish for six years. ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’ was his first publication following his intellectual rehabilitation. It is informed by his preoccupation with Germany’s post-war housing crisis and the homelessness wrought by the wartime destruction of its infrastructure.

Doubtless Heidegger had also had time to reflect, during his six-year exile from public life, on the challenges of inhabiting a new society that intended to embrace difference instead of annihilating it. This society founded itself on an uncompromising belief in human freedom and dignity. Its Grundgesetz or Basic Law (1949) was inspired by the conviction, voiced by the anti-Nazi politician Karl Arnold, that “what we construct will someday be a good house for all Germans.” Whether in Germany, India, the USA, Turkey, the UK, or France, Heidegger’s ‘locale’ and Arnold’s ‘good house’ remain intensely relevant to our turbulent present. These tropes recur, subliminally and without laboured deliberation, throughout the extraordinary works that have been gathered together to form DWELLING.

Ranjit Hoskote

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The Artists

1. Aji V. N., Untitled (charcoal on coloured paper, 2014)

Aji V N locates his image of home both in a specific sense of locality, that of Kerala or the south-west coast of India, and in an understanding of the landscape that embraces the mystery of Poussin’s vistas, the delicacy of Safavid perspectives, and the fecundity of Rajput miniatures, especially of the Kishangarh school. He evokes a dense grove of tropical vegetation, dominated by coconut palms, which obscures the horizon; the house, set like a jewel into this setting, is decisively a modern construction grove, yet remains embedded in its natural ethos, and is not a confrontational insertion. The assembly of clouds, the birds starting out from their nests, and the two figures, the woman sweeping the grounds and the man approaching the house, all suggest the undisturbed everyday cycles of activity. Yet this large drawing, deceptively painterly in its appearance, encodes a restless vitality that courses through the trees.

Anita Dube’s ‘I-32 Tara Apartments’ is a distributed portraiture of the self through the intimate photographic portrayal of objects in her home. The artist moved into this house, located in New Delhi’s Tara Apartments complex, designed by the renowned architect Charles Correa, in 1991. Only in 2000, after a decade-long struggle to define her artistic trajectory, did she feel stable enough to “pay homage to the house”. The artist’s gaze, aimed through the viewfinder of her Minolta X700, reveals the secret life of objects, invested as they are with their owner’s secret and manifest impulses. The telephone, the steam iron, the bottle, the bookshelves, the mirror: these speak of love, absence, work, leisure, dream. In 2016, on the verge of moving out, Dube restaged the project. Using an expired roll of Kodak film, she developed another inventory of I-32 Tara Apartments: a time exposure of shifts in life and habitation.

3. Atul Dodiya, ‘Koodal’ (oil, crackle paste and marble dust on canvas, triptych, 2016)

In his triptych, ‘Koodal’, Atul Dodiya pays homage to the distinguished artist Tyeb Mehta (1925-2009), quoting key details from Mehta’s 1969 experimental film of the same name. Mehta, who had been traumatised by the 1946 communal riots that shook Bombay in the run-up to British India’s Partition, retained a lifelong horror of violence. His ‘Koodal’ reverberates with images of the abattoir, invokes the relationship between crowds and power (in Elias Canetti’s powerful phrase), and offers an elegy to the assassinated Mahatma Gandhi. Dodiya relays crucial moments from Mehta’s film: the abattoir hook, the eunuch’s made-up eye, and the bullet marks left by Gandhi’s assassin. The abattoir bulks large in India’s public discourse today, with the debate over the beef ban; forces inimical to the Mahatma’s legacy of inclusiveness and mutuality are in the ascendant. Is ‘Koodal’, which means confluence, the union of opposites, a Utopian hope in a polarised society?


Gieve Patel’s compelling evocation of the hunter-prince Eklavya, from the Mahabharata, speaks to the continuing marginalisation of India’s tribal communities. Despite his excellence as an archer, Eklavya is despised as a forest-dweller by the warrior elite and cannot approach Drona, the warrior-priest who is guru to the Hastinapura princes. Eklavya’s veneration bridges social distance imaginatively: he sculpts a clay statue of the preceptor in the forest, honing his skills before it. One day, the Hastinapura princes enter the forest, and in a competition, Eklavya defeats Arjuna, their leading archer. Arjuna complains to Drona, who confronts Eklavya and asks, as his guru-dakshina or tutorial fee, for his thumb, destroying his future as an
archer. This story from the *Mahabharata* has, ever after, served as a template for the oppression of the weaker by the dominant castes. Patel’s interpretation responds vigorously to the promptings of his material and to the historical juncture.

5. N S Harsha, ‘Missing Cook beyond the Cosmic Twigs’ (acrylic and gold foil on canvas, 2016)

N S Harsha’s 'Missing Cook beyond the Cosmic Twigs' is the fabular account of a miracle: a feast has been arranged for an entire village, as though on a floating continent; resplendent birds, perhaps ancestral spirits, fly across the frame; the food is being cooked, but by no visible agency. The theme of the painting is the unseen efficacy that animates the universe through cycles of activity, nourishment, work and rest. We are carried into an enchanted space intermediate between the cosmic and the terrestrial. The artist’s long-standing preoccupation with the commensal ‘village feast’ or ‘temple meal’ – one of the rituals by which communities map their spaces of belonging – is evident. The structure of this painting is reminiscent of the Mahayana art of the Silk Road and Ajanta: the Cave of a Thousand Buddhas at Dunhuang comes to mind, with Harsha’s citizens taking the place of Bodhisattvas glowing with illumination.


Nicola Durvasula takes the threshold and the horizon as natural and enabling conditions, connected as she is by ancestry and choice of location to the Channel Islands, England’s southeastern coast, and to France. In the watercolour and gouache works exhibited here, she offers luminous testimony to the liminal vista, to water and sky as borders that divide yet bridge. In her sculptural oeuvre, Durvasula often blurs the distinction between the found and the made: stones and bricks picked up in flaneuse mode may find adjacency with meticulously created ceramic objects. The artist’s distributed self-location garners energy, also, from her mediation between the visual and musical arts, and her long-term association with southern India, through family ties, artistic choices and philosophical commitments. Her ongoing series, ‘Notations’, records the precipitates of epiphanies, fugitive states of mind, studies for figures, chromatic scales, and geographical features, often the mountain as a symbol of enlightenment.


C K Rajan’s ‘Diary of a Householder’ belongs in a vibrant genealogy of collagiste or decollagiste artists who have incorporated the ephemera of popular culture into their productions; among them, such early 20th-century avant-garde groupings as the
Dadaists, Cubists and Surrealists, and the mid-century neo-avant-gardes who played with the visualities of the poster, the billboard and the commercial image. While its organising principle might appear to be that of the scrapbook or commonplace book, Rajan’s work in fact assumes the form of a journal or memoir. Poignant rather than festive, his entries seem ventriloquist, as when he addresses the moment through an advertisement or newspaper headline he has culled. Periodically, he annotates such images in his own hand, voicing a contestatory rhetoric of elliptical claim or half-ironic rebuttal. It expresses the private anguish of that intriguing persona, the ‘householder’, an unacknowledged Atlas who bears the crushing burdens of ordinary life.


Casting her paintings in subtle earth tonalities of sienna, ochre, umber, tan and ecru, Siji Krishnan only partially reveals the mysterious inner lives of her rural protagonists. Drawn from diverse places and periods, Krishnan’s delicately stylised figures would not be out of place in a mediaeval European peasant calendar, a late-Mughal miniature or a Santiniketan panel. In the unequivocally titled ‘Portrait of a Hut’, the viewer is entranced by the imposing conical-roofed thatch structure that dominates the vertical pictorial space. The family that leads its life in the shelter of this hut, whose labour has gone into its construction, would ordinarily have been overwhelmed by it. Surprisingly, this does not happen. The human figures retain their specificity and dignity. The architecture, partaking of the natural world as its materials do, seems to breathe. The presence of animals native to farm and heath suggest the symbiotic interrelationships that sustain an ecosystem.


Sosa Joseph invites us into an oneiric, Brueghelesque reality inhabited by a varied cast of characters. Often arranged into a procession or a choral formation, they act as witnesses to an unearthly experience; sometimes, they seem to wait, as though in anticipation of an action about to take place; and at other times, they appear to be responding to a moment that has just passed. ‘What Must Be Said’ interweaves multiple temporalities: performance, expectation, reaction and indifference all jostle for attention in the same frame. Consider the figure, perhaps an out-of-work actor, costumed as a bewigged judge; the figure in the high black hat; the old man posing as a crucifix; and the women with arms raised in protest. An entire village or small town has congregated here; but, while some of the figures appear native to such a locale, others are immigrants from the kingdoms of dream and fiction.

10. Sudarshan Shetty, ‘Waiting for Others to Arrive’ (single-channel video, 2013)
Sudarshan Shetty’s deeply elegiac, sumptuously beautiful video work, ‘Waiting for Others to Arrive’ engages the viewer across a spectrum of senses. Its visual imagery draws us into a half-ruined building whose neo-classical architecture speaks of its elegant beginnings as a private home in early 20th-century Bombay. We hear, before we see her, a musician playing the sarangi, one of the most expressive instruments in the repertoire of Indian classical music. Having descended the social scale and turned into a chawl, the building has been marked for demolition, to be replaced by an undistinguished commercial complex or apartment block. In Shetty’s relay of images, a teacup wobbles across a table until it falls. The plangent ebb and flow of the sarangi, the small-scale yet unsettling catastrophe of the cup, and the imminent fate awaiting the building, weave into an everyday Bombay story that is, nevertheless, possessed of an inexpressibly captivating melancholia.

11. Tanya Goel, ‘field data (in dots per inch)’ (ground glass, ground ceramics, diverse pigments, 2016)

With their combination of scientific precision and kaleidoscopic chromatic richness, Tanya Goel’s works often suggest street grids, chromatographic records, or an industrial chemist’s chart of dyes. Flagging their sources in construction material and industrial pigments, in the detritus of the hyperactive building trades, Goel proposes a creative engagement with, and an implied critique of, the impatience of capital and the accelerated urbanisation of India. Her ‘field data (in dots per inch)’ seems to carry the spectral presence of a Plattenbau seen in section view, a building constructed using large-scale, prefabricated concrete slabs in various parts of post-World War II Europe, but associated especially with the Soviet-era architecture of East Germany. The artist’s detailed notes on her working process – for instance, her use of glass dust, crushed blue ceramic tiles, and inorganic pigments here – remind us of the methods of alchemists and mediaeval painters, every element acknowledged for its particular magic.

12. Varunika Saraf, ‘The cries, too, fall like rain in summer’ (charcoal and watercolour on paper pasted on cloth, 2016)

Varunika Saraf’s work takes its title from the closing line of Bertolt Brecht’s poem, ‘When Evil Doing Comes Like Falling Rain’, which speaks of the horrors that a tyranny enacts. Every fresh horror imposes silence: the tyranny mounts, “the blood goes on flowing”. The portrait of an archetypal city, ‘The cries, too, fall like rain in summer’ comprises an ensemble of individually rendered elements: heads; the occasional skull; figures pictured in variegated stances; an array of buildings embodying varied locations and styles. Structurally, it is modelled on representations of the later Mughal imperial hierarchy, with courtiers organised like a solar system in relation to the central, legitimising authority of the emperor. Saraf translates this model for the present: her chart is occupied by flashpoints of political crisis, social
atrocity, outrage or demonstration. At the centre, instead of the emperor, is a miniature rendition of Munch’s hallucinatory, still-terrifying painting, ‘The Scream’.

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Notes to the Artists by Ranjit Hoskote