

Jaya Ganguly: Recent Work

The phrase that Jaya Ganguly came up with, almost unthinkingly, to describe to me the feeling unifying her recent work was “painless pain”. Talking about pain immediately puts us back in our bodies. And it is from within our experience of a shared mortality that the challenge of this complicatedly grotesque, yet inward body of work is most meaningfully confronted. Ganguly has dedicated this exhibition to her mother, whose recent death has brought to an end a long and intimate history of cohabitation and mutual care. It was in her studio that Ganguly had nursed her mother through her last illness, during which the canvases of 2008 were completed. So, these paintings are *memento mori* – reminders of death – in a deeply lived sense. In them, the pain of loss is transformed into a strange and unconsoling loss of pain through its assimilation into the creative process itself. Art’s unstoppable grief-work turns the close contemplation of another’s mortality into a journey within. For Ganguly, this is quite literally a movement into the inner spaces of the body, at the end of which awaits the self’s innermost and ever-present visage, the smiling death’s head – a new motif in her work that she is yet to explore fully.

From the very beginning of her career, the human figure – solitary, grouped or in portrait – has been overwhelmingly the subject of her art, even when she has transformed the body’s fleshliness into the contours of a landscape. For Ganguly, the vividness of human flesh and form has always been expressed through a certain violence of colour and of mass. She recalls, with an enduring bitterness, the institutional prejudice that stopped her from becoming a student of sculpture a few years after she had graduated as a painter from the Indian College of Arts, Calcutta, in 1982. Even now, her suppressed desire to sculpt human forms takes the shape of small wax figures lying around among the paintings in her flat.

A number of personal and cultural forces converge in Ganguly’s compulsive exploration of the human, especially the female, body in her art. Born in 1958, she grew up in a large and fairly orthodox Brahmin family in the heart of Bhawanipur, one of the oldest residential neighbourhoods in south Calcutta. Bhawanipur’s traditionally Bengali middle-class respectability has always been richly complicated by the Kali temple, the brothels and the cremation *ghat* located in the area, all three of venerable pedigree and situated close to one another and to the crumbling homes of the oldest families settled in Bhawanipur. This is the Calcutta of the early-19th-century Kalighat *pats*, with their dandy *babus* and lascivious *bibis*, a part of the city in which sex, death, art and divinity, often in their darker and wilder forms, are never far from one another or from the everyday lives of ordinary people. In Ganguly’s early work, Kali and the prostitute are central presences, the mythic forms assumed by the female body – mythic, but still incarnated in a world of inky, nocturnal blues and the lurid red of blood, lipstick and vermilion. (When Ganguly spent a few years in Amsterdam, later in life, she found it difficult to tear herself away from observing, for hours at a stretch, the city’s famously open-to-view brothels, a visual experience she recalls more vividly than visiting the art galleries and museums.) It was in this ambience of iconic, yet mundane corporeality that Ganguly grew up in Calcutta, close to her family and pets (cats figure memorably in her earlier work, and she often compares herself to them). Yet, it was the life of the eye, of looking keenly at everything around her, especially the human elements in her immediate environment, that compelled her to choose a vocation that was radically different from what her family expected her to do. (Even now, in the middle of a conversation with a friend, she finds herself staring intently at the fine, blue veins on her friend’s delicate feet, quickly capturing them with the camera in her phone.) Living and working on her own in the city where she feels rooted, yet intimately involved, physically and emotionally, in the last illnesses of both parents, Ganguly has allowed her mature work to grow out of a relationship with bodies, her own and of others. In this work, profound empathy coexists with detachment, impersonality and an unflinching clarity of vision that detachment brings.

The painter's relationship with the stuff of human bodies is also mediated by her memories of art. When I asked Ganguly about the most important influences in her work, she immediately mentioned Rabindranath Tagore and his nephew, Gaganendranath Tagore. But she also added that this lineage must have been complicated almost beyond recognition by the evolution of her own vision and practice. The drama of human innards is central to Ganguly's mature work. This is a theatre of the face, limbs, guts and organs, each with a life of its own, making up the complex totality of the body's life, and depicted in all its bizarrely beautiful minutiae. But this theatre also affords a spectacle of the artist playing allusively with her own creative inheritance, Indian as well as Western. Everywhere in her mature paintings, and more sharply and singularly in this recent work, one notices the presence of other artists who have opened up, or imagined themselves into, the human body according to their own sense of how the mind lives in it. The perceptible presences are the Cubist Picasso of the shattered faces and fragmented bodies, middle-period Jogen Chowdhury, the Tagores (not so much Abanindranath though), and less directly, Francis Bacon's torn limbs and perhaps some of Egon Schiele's tortured and tortuous people with staring eyes. (Van Gogh was an early influence, but seems to have disappeared from the later work.) The posture and arrangement of Ganguly's bodies are often unmistakably Jogen, as are the long, narrow eyes, shaped like electric eels, with their covert, sidelong glances. Ganguly must also be familiar with the grotesque caricatures in Gaganendranath's lithographs and with the shimmering *chiaroscuro* of his "Cubist" cities and scenes of the Twenties. Rabindranath is in the layering of darkness upon darkness, with luminous blues and reds glimmering between the layers. He is also there in Ganguly's dim-eyed, long-necked creatures, who could have been among those in Tagore's *Shey*, illustrated by the poet himself and situated somewhere between childhood nightmare and adult whimsy. Many of her subjects are kin to those other strange creatures, half-human and half-animal, who emerge from the calligraphic erasures in some of Rabindranath's manuscripts. It is from the poet's late paintings, doodles and writings that her ability, as a painter, to imbue the body's grotesquerie with an obscure, yet luminous inwardness draws its long and hidden sustenance.

But Ganguly subjects her Indian and Western masters to an entirely original process of evisceration. Standing in front of the large, 80x59 inch acrylic-on-canvas of three intertwined creatures – ancient hags who could even be the three witches from *Macbeth* – one begins to see how the figures and faces from Rabindranath and Jogen are elaborately disembowelled or taken apart, and how the faces, fingers and follicles, the flaps and folds of tissue and skin are then allowed to reach out for one another in a kind of surreal slow-motion to create larger, more complicated entanglements. These reconstituted bodies blur the boundaries between male and female, human and animal, savage and civilized, tragic and comic. Held in the stillness of a mysterious twilight, like the clusters of dark bodies in Gauguin's *Day-Dreaming*, they look unillusioned about the flesh they are burdened with, and their inner lives remain inscrutable even when they look directly at the viewer. They seem reconciled to the necessary humiliation of having their intimate physiology exposed to the gaze of the world. The bodies that these larger-than-life creatures inhabit are palpably mortal. But "deathwards progressing to no death", they seem to have escaped time and history, immortalized in the silent knowledge of their own bodies. This painting of 2007 – together with another threesome, seen in profile, done in the same year – embodies a possible, and relatively early, outcome of Ganguly's exploration of what it is like to live in and with the body. In them, we find the mortal transformed into the mythic. Their subjects are timeless creatures of Time – knowing, powerful and entirely unerotic – whose human faces begin to take on the look of hags, witches or Norns from myths, folktales and fairytales, and sometimes that of ageing greyhounds, withered but sinewy, or those huge tortoises with long, wrinkled necks that live forever and become part of the natural world they live in.

Occasionally, the work of 2007 achieves another kind of transformation too. In each of two small, 16x18 inch paintings, the grotesquely stylized female body turns into something rich and strange, an object of the most intricate beauty arranged into a still life. In one, a tautly distended belly and breasts emerge from the darkness, the veins and stretch-marks catching the light, and each breast shaped exquisitely like a lidded oriental bowl. In the other, a vase and two drooping, long-stemmed tulips – like a close-up of the floral decorations on the wallpaper in Matisse’s painting, *La Desserte* – take on the mystery of the body’s interior because of the blood-red background in which are suspended worm-like shapes that could be scattered entrails or, in another scale, cellular, viral and organic matter circulating inside the body. (These shapes are found again and again in Ganguly’s more explicitly physiological paintings.) As in the recent work of Anish Kapoor and in Mona Hatoum’s endoscopic installations of the Nineties, Ganguly’s red becomes the colour of the insides of our bodies. For Kapoor, writing in his notebooks, “Red is at the center.... As blood it is the ritual liquid which gives life.” “Red has a very powerful blackness,” he elaborates in a conversation with Nicholas Baume, “This overt color, this open and visually beckoning color, also associates itself with a dark interior world.” [Catalogue of *Anish Kapoor: Past, Present and Future*, edited by Nicholas Baume, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (MIT Press, 2008), page 31.]

Apart from its transformation into the mythic and the beautiful, Ganguly’s depiction of this “interior world” takes yet another direction in the work of 2007, a more directly mortal, macabre journey that leads to the most recent paintings of 2008. Along this path are a number of portraits and single figures in which the degree of physical and formal disintegration is so acute that looking at them closely or from a distance, one is not sure of whether each is a unified subject or a set of bodies or faces precariously held together by a symbiotic or parasitic stake in remaining alive. Sometimes, Cubist fragmentation and formal unity coexist in such a manner that we cannot decide whether we are looking at whole bodies or at body-parts that have so taken on a life and organization of their own that each exists as an individual subject, informed with its own subjectivity. Arms and hands clasp masses of tissue to themselves with such ardour, one half of a body or face clings to the other half with such desperation, that the notion of a single consciousness inhabiting a single body begins to fall apart. Ganguly compels us to look at these paintings in different ways, playing with scale and with conventional visual distinctions between inside and outside, private and public, body and mind, whole and fragment. From a distance, we see a huge face or body with its recognizable features and formal characteristics, and we feel that we are looking at ‘somebody’ from outside, as we normally look at other people in our everyday lives. But as we look on, the painting calls us closer to itself, and more intimate viewing reveals another dimension of life and movement within the larger structure, intricate and beautiful details painted with the precision of a miniaturist. The face or body then begins to look like a menagerie of small, fantastical creatures. The eyes, ears, nose, lips, teeth, fingers, breasts and nipples look like a living world of strange rodents, snakes, fish, worms and tadpoles, together with other diversely shaped, coloured and textured particles moving around the body. This body is both opaque and transparent, allowing us to see or imagine what is going on inside without giving up its disturbing mysteriousness. What might cause revulsion from a distance turns out to be alluring and oddly pleasurable when studied closely. So we are left with a range of conflicting, unresolved responses – gut-level, emotional as well as cerebral – that forces us to confront and reflect on what it means to ‘have’ a body, to be ‘in’ a body, to ‘be’ a body, to be ‘a’ body, and therefore to be mortal. And what does it mean, when one is being made to look at and think about the body like this, to have a mind, to have thoughts and feelings?

Gradually, in these paintings of 2007, especially when they invoke a ‘subjective’ genre like portraiture, the only form of inwardness that is allowed is, quite literally, a look ‘into’ the body. That seems to be the only possible ‘inner life’. So a portrait becomes a cross-section, rather than

presenting the profile, of a face, opening it up to public view. From such anatomies of the face, done in 2007, there is a clear path to the five large portraits of 2008. Standing close to physical suffering and absolute loss, they seem to have worked their way through to a stark and humourless balance between jagged complexity and simplicity of form. All obvious feeling, hope and consolation, all stakes in human dignity, seem to have drained out of them. The only glimmerings of red are on the lips and tongue. In one, the mouth opens wide in what could be a scream or yawn to reveal two roses nestling inside that look like two florets of the brain. This is a cold, grey-and-white body-world in which the warmest colours suggest terminal fluids and dead blood, the grinning skull oblivious of the coffee-coloured liquid dripping finely down its chin. The eyes remain unseeing, indrawn, their dark slits surrounded by white, wrinkled skin – as if in the solitary struggle against the last dissolution, there can be no consciousness of being looked at, no will or desire to look back. Yet, these are images meant to be viewed and contemplated, painstakingly created in the face of an inconsolable personal loss. The death of the body and the life of the eye: for the artist and her viewers, these two processes must remain intricately and painfully interlaced, producing labyrinths of sensation, feeling, thought and memory through which the fragile, yet mysteriously tensile thread of art could sometimes show the way.

**Aveek Sen,
Calcutta, 2008**