

Creatures Great and Small: Recent Paintings by Rahul Vajale

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Rahul Vajale's paintings calibrate those occasions when the waking consciousness has let its guard down, allowing more intuitive and oneiric processes of cognition free play. The 16 paintings assembled to form 'Creatures Great and Small' capture those strange thresholds of transition where dream, memory, half-heard allusion and half-named ambiguity cross, to generate personae, chimeras and masked interlopers in the unfolding narrative of the self-imagining self. Vajale acts in the spirit of the *monteur*, the adroit re-arranger of reality's scattered fragments into critical fantasy: he works through unsettling superimpositions, trick fades and shock blurs, unexpected couplings.

As a young beneficiary of the post-historical condition, he ranges at will through the psychic, formal and contextual resources of global art. And yet, unlike some of his contemporaries, whose citational obsessions are a burden rather than an endowment, he reaches deep into the archive of the modern to retrieve a single set of devices that serve him well. Principally, as I read his work, he deploys the principle of enigmatic illumination delivered through the withdrawal of detail—a principle resonant with the melancholia, the bursting vacancy and the plangent alarm of the *pittura metafisica* of Carlo Carra and Giorgio di Chirico.

Six large paintings, rendered in acrylic on canvas, form the core of 'Creatures Great and Small'. In one, a homage to the austere surreal dream scenographies of Prabhakar Barwe, a fish hatches from an egg, attended by sea foam and hints of seaweed, as though a fish-shaped ocean were bursting from a shell. Which came first: the fish or the egg? That wisp of cloud about to sail across a sky melded from cerulean and cobalt: does it threaten the fine balance of this cosmogony mounted on a pedestal? In another, a car wrapped in dark placental folds arrives at a standstill just before its wheels can crush a snail. A third canvas, in muted blue and muddy ochre, presents the

portrait of a man performing the score of apocalypse, blowing at an elaborate device that is part trumpet and part industrial flue; what might be said of him in elegy is that he inhaled all the smog in the world and his laced iron lungs caught fire.

In the fourth of these six large paintings, Vajale offers us a head in meltdown, brain, ear, vestigial eye and forehead all losing shape and resolution, balanced on the handle of a knife whose business end points earthward: an axis of crumbling order hovering above a horse-headed man curled in sleep, dreaming furiously in a multi-tonal field that quivers between emerald, cyan and turquoise. A solitary figure approaches the sleeper, but cannot overcome the curse of distance. Or so matters stand at the moment of viewing.

It seems evident that Vajale is intrigued by the complex histories that all creatures carry within them: the memory of the amoeba, the nautilus, the fern, the sabre-tooth, the ibex, and the primate dwell within the human mind—which, in some moods, is transformed into the oldest cinema house of them all, the torch-lit, shadow-haunted wall of the Stone Age cave, with its procession of stags and hunters, dying bulls and leaping ritual acrobats. In two paintings whose subdued violence adds to, rather than detracting from their drama, he confronts the human animal. Against an ochre field, a verdigris lion balances, paws to hands and feet, on its mirror image, who happens to be a man. Who is the victim and who the reflection; does the painting disclose the true self or offer us a snapshot from the millennial record of evolutionary struggle?

In another, somewhat palimpsestual painting, Vajale ventures an imaginary but persuasive zoology, recording the portrait of a five-legged animal: its head and upper body are stylised metal from the future; its legs, skeletal under X-ray scrutiny, appear spiked through with Palaeolithic bones or dead trees. A chalky splash animates the beast: are these vestigial innards found in a fossil; or perhaps the elusive vector we sometimes call the spirit, frozen in mid-flight from the belly of the beast?

Atavistic presences also surface in Vajale's sequence of smaller acrylic paintings on canvas: ten portraits in which places, periods and styles collide and coalesce. The mode of the 18th-century salon meets the

mode of the high-security penitentiary; the fairytale segues into noir. In this rogues' gallery, we meet a moon-face sporting black tongue and bitten-off tie; a lady with an exuberant cloud of hair; a forma portrait defaced by night and fog. Vajale orchestrates the melt of the well-bred features of civilisation into naked primality, the revelation of the ancestral vampire of instinct beneath the flesh of the present. Here is a portraiture of transitory states, as though Vajale were recording the subject, not as figure or person, but as a locus of attention in constant flux between thoughts, feelings, dilemmas and decisions.

I would like to regard Rahul Vajale's paintings as releases, in several senses of this mercurial word. First: as acts of letting out, from the germinal circuits of the subconscious mind, as it were in instalments, a critique of the deceptive coherence of selfhood and reality. Second: as publications, in succinct or abbreviated form, of what the artist hopes to present in more substantial measure in the years to come. And third: as spasmodic bursts of energy, affirming a will to articulate, more explicitly, the deep reserves of insight into the inherently unstable and unravelling contemporary self and its productions, which the artist has built up.

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