

Remains to be Seen

By Rahee Punyashloka



Kadr, 2019, Watercolour, pen and black ink on paper
Set of 13, variable work sizes, each approx: 9 x 12 in - 6 x 9 in

I found a fly lurking keenly beside Mohit Shelare’s series *Kadr*, during his solo show *Drawing Near* at Chemould Prescott Road. Taken by itself, this might seem to be an aberration, a chance accident. The pristine, purportedly sanitised interiors of a white cube gallery are not populated by critters of the scavenging variety, after all. But contextualised through the series itself, as well as the ambit of Shelare’s practice, this becomes one of the most profound moments of artistic intervention, albeit not entirely intentional, that I have encountered in the recent past.

Phrased as an ‘investigation,’ *Kadr* pairs drawings of ecosystems where ‘waste’ garners centrality, with papers used to wrap local bread dishes Shelare consumed during his time in Beirut. The residue of oil on these ‘waste’ papers trace a material history that is crucial to the exhibition as a whole. The exhibition, which is an exhaustive thesis on the same—spread across drawings, large paintings, video, and text—attempts to put us face-to-face with the myriad ways in which waste and abjection accumulate and entangle as an underside to our being. The exhibition speaks of the unraveling of boundaries, separations, and habits put between our civilizational praxis, and that which resides *beneath* as a necessary, yet

quickly discarded, protocol —waste, residue, toxins, and the unorganisable other. The dialectic through which we orient ourselves in our everyday life, with waste as the excluded refuge, and the opposite, i.e. the “useful” and the utilizable as our vital components, is deconstructed here. The titular “drawing near” is a philosophical demand. It is an attempt to bring the contemporary into a dialogue with everything it refuses to sense. The fly which finds its way into the exhibit, is ‘drawn near’ it, becomes a symptom for the alternate vitalities that *reside nearby*, gently lurking under the veneer of sanitisation we enforce in our everyday lives. It is this tiny gallery visitor who actualises the demand made by Shelare in its own way. Through this almost imperceptible collusion of the purportedly abject and the artistic process, the residual becomes an active site for radical thinking within the arts today. More generally speaking, this economy of a broadly egalitarian praxis abounds within the works of most contemporary artists in some or the other form. This is based on invocations of a ‘flat ontology,’ a system where all being is attuned to each other equally, without any hierarchies. Such a way of thinking emerging as an urgent and dominant way of thinking within contemporary artists makes clear sense given the numerous apocalyptic crises that are unfolding in real time around us—be it the climate crises, the violence perpetrated in the name of hypercapitalist modes of production, or multiple live

streamed genocides in Palestine and Sudan among others. Artistic interventions committed to the advocacy of a flat ontology take numerous forms, including speculative and utopian thinking, archival unearthings of past events and histories of thought, and studies such as Shelare’s which seek to tweak the always already assumed inherent relation between things and beings, to expand our consciousness. Reconciling with waste, in the truest, philosophically authentic sense, will be a radical, ‘egalitarian’ act. In a caste society such as ours, invocations of such egalitarian praxis through art automatically hold not just cultural mores, but active socio-politics. The deconstruction of this history of segregation, separation, and stratification is a vital

concern for numerous contemporary art practitioners. “How does the residual and the remnant reconfigure one’s networked being with the zeitgeist?” becomes a crucial critical enquiry today for each of the artists I have selected to speak about here. Each of them, through their urgent, unique approach to the question of the residual, seeks to attune us to a more complex way of being in the here and the now. The two artists whose work is explicated upon here (along with Shelare) are Ashis Palei, who hails from Odisha, and Hyderabad-based artist Tabitha Percy. While their practice illuminates the concerns presented here in numerous ways, I have chosen, for the sake of brevity, to focus on one representative work by each artist which *gathers* around residues and traces.

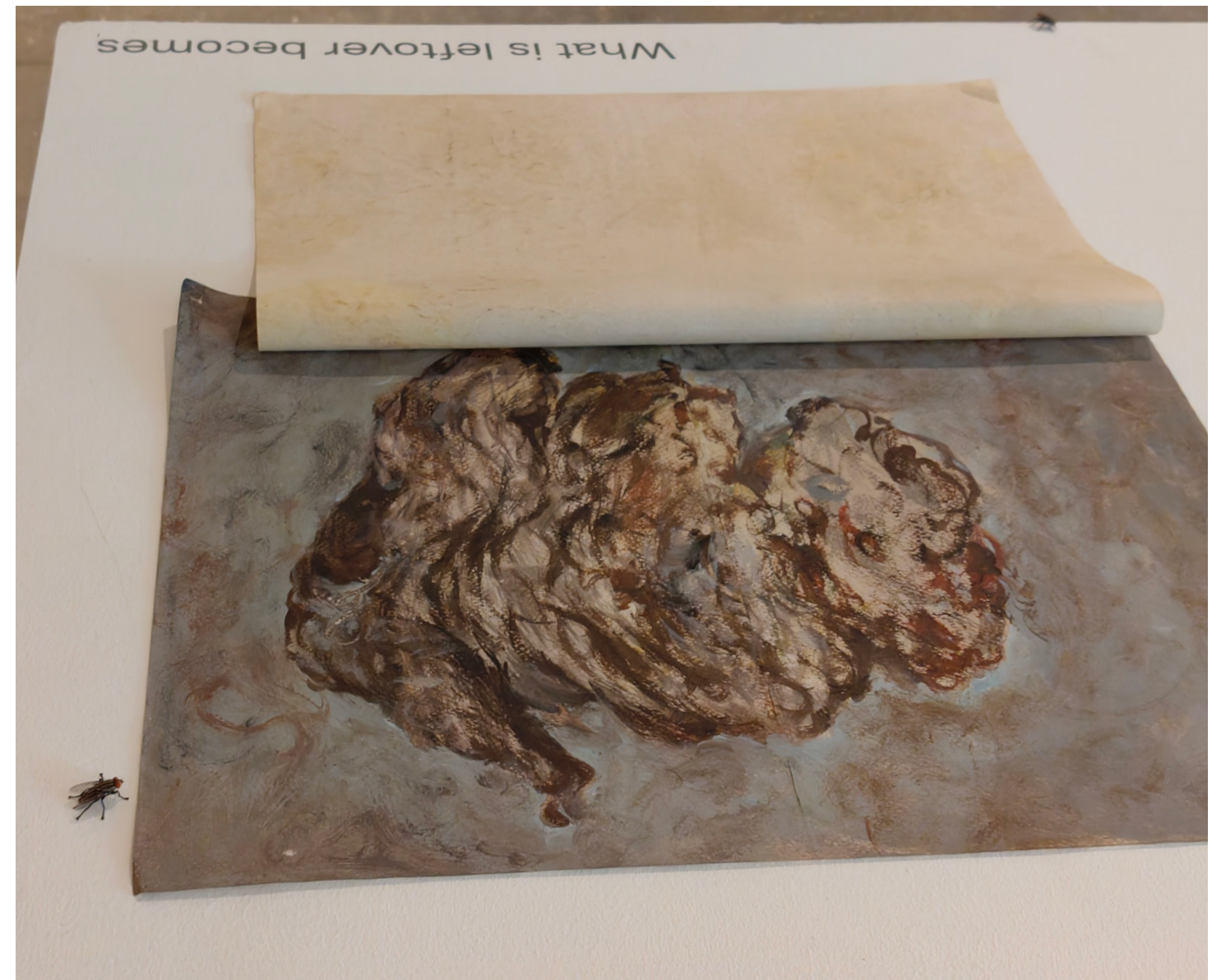


Image with the Fly taken by Rahee Punyashloka

For Ashis Palei, the echoes of the remnant appear within material relations with soil. Soil *uncovers* manifold profound artistic strategies for him. He puts it thus, “I like very much to use soil as a medium for my works. Because I believe that soil is the identity of the most marginalized. According to the tenets of Brahmanism, soil has been conceptualized as the symbol of pollution, thus dominant castes avoid working with mud. It is largely people of downtrodden groups that work with mud; thus, I believe it has a very symbolic meaning...Our invisible past is preserved in soil; therefore I use clay as the medium of my works.”

Thus, for Palei, soil is a tremendous actant site: an interface where we are met with the traces and murmurs of the unarchivable past that can’t be found within dominant archives, whether they be institutional archives, or living, embodied ones. It is not merely medium and material, but also metaphysics. His insistence makes me wonder, what could a metaphysics of soil look like? Prima facie, it suggests an inversion of the Platonic proclamation that “philosophy is an act of looking upwards.”

The topology of most philosophical schema since Plato suggest a contiguity between the ‘higher’ and the ‘upward.’ Palei’s intervention is a deliberate deconstruction of metaphysics as we are commonly accustomed to understanding it. It insists upon the ontological within the ontic, and that too, one which is built on residual matter, built on looking ‘downward.’ More crucial to Palei’s immediate artistic context, there is a very lucid anti-caste push in such a practice: it topples the Brahmanical diagram, where the head of Brahma is capable of philosophising, and the legs that rest on the soil are relegated only to labour. The toppling of this diagram holds very immediate relevance for him, as Palei confesses, given that he is from Puri, the coastal town from Odisha, famous for the Jagannath temple, as well as some of the most rigid religious-cultural orthodoxy and definition of Brahmanism. The performance that I discuss here alludes directly to the temple-oriented cultural-artistic economy which Palei ‘s local context immersed him in.



To Understand and Negotiate History through Pedagogy
Performance, Site-Specific Sculptural Installation, and Text
Images courtesy of the artist and Rahee Punyashloka



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Titled ‘To Understand and Negotiate History through Pedagogy,’ the performance activates numerous ways in which residual tendencies are hidden underneath the veneer of dominant Brahmanical traditions. Central to the performance are a site-specific sculptural object and a speculative conceit. The sculptural object is an in-situ creation using soil or its variants to depict an ‘asura’ like figure that is found frequently in temple architecture, more specifically, the architecture of the temple’s outside, with raised hands that appear to lend support to the temple above. The speculative conceit: what would happen if this figure were to lower its hands?

This *demonic* figure holding the weight of the temple at its base is often reflected in Brahmanical narratives and myth-making as a symptom of the triumph of good over evil. Through Palei’s act of looking down at the base of the temple instead of the higher order of divinity associated with temple culture, and conjuring a *putting down* of the weight, numerous cultural expectations and ritual codes are defied. It punctures the way in which we think of visual affects presented by religious iconography by forcing us to confront the architectural precipice of the same. What emerges thereafter is an abyss, where dominant visual signifiers are inoperative, and the residual substrate emerges fully.

The performance itself alludes to instances of subjugation and exclusion spanning millennia through a rhythmic syncopation between the spoken word text, the choreographed steps that Palei performs-almost

as if to invoke a sense of religious trance-and the ritual drum playing in the background, taken from archival recordings of the Rath Yatra processions of the Jagannath temple in Puri. This juxtaposition is intentionally jarring and atypical. The spoken word text that Palei performs makes very distinctive allusions to anti-caste praxis, to the unmitigated histories of labor, the caste dynamics that go into the construction of temples, as well as the history of the figure central to the performance, the demon which Palei carries on his shoulders throughout the endurance-testing performance. A notable line that is part of the performance text, which is in Odia, implicates the entirety of material and cultural production when it comes to such a Brahmanical site, not just in the spatial but also in the temporal sense. The line goes- *aame janichu, ki ghanta re bi kanta achhi* which can either be translated as “we know that the clock too has hands” or “we know that the clock too has thrones,” playing on the ambiguity of the word *kanta* in Odia. This line corresponds with the sentiment that Palei continues to garner throughout the performance, culminating in him breaking the sculpture’s arms downward. This opens space to meditate what this could do to the metaphorology of the demonic sculpture, to ritualised memory, to cultural practices steeped in Brahmanical codes, and, ultimately, to the material residue that disperses from the act of breaking the limbs out of their millennia old stupor.

Can the demonic body lower its hands, refusing to carry the weight of history? Can the Dalit body retain itself intact when it stretches itself fully?

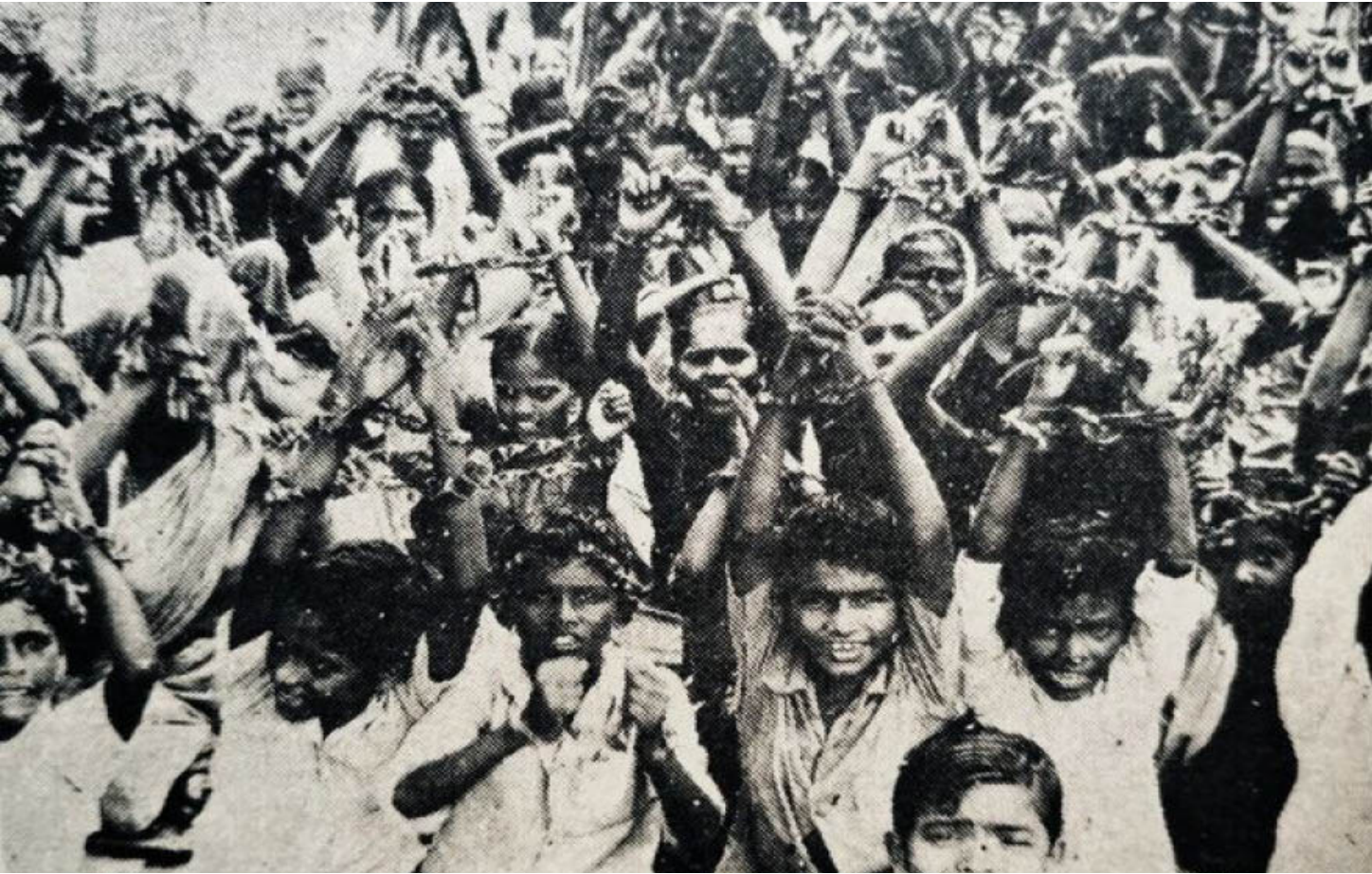
The residual exegesis of outstretched limbs is also an indexical moment in Tabitha Percy’s work. This makes logical sense, given how an enormous amount of governance of the Dalit body has been in regard to contorting and delimiting it. Even now, caste deeply governs the politics of skin and movement, of spatial awareness, and geographic segregation. This plays itself out not just on the macro scale but also in everyday regimentation of behaviour, and in interactions between upper and lower caste communities. “Offense” from lower caste communities are often dictated along the lines of over-reaching the Brahmanical prosthetic limits set upon them. Be it the act of riding a horse, or walking through lanes one is “not supposed to,” the Dalit body unwittingly becomes a map of residual recidivism enabled by Brahmanism. In *This is a Protest*, Percy’s photobook and research project, the outstretched body collides with an intricate web of meaning-making through the employment of hauntings, traces, and residues. Manifold erasures, be it archival, historical, cultural, or narrative, stand against the artist’s attempt at activating her life as a protest. Percy tries to re-member the past but also re-inaugurate a sense of everyday vitality forged at the protest site, which we, integrated into the quagmire of the techno-capitalist regime, are finding increasingly irreconcilable. Can the artist, as a Dalit Christian woman, even make sense of the deeply fragmented shards that history provides her with? Can the protest, as was the case with Palei, activate the residue into something akin to liberatory architecture?

At the centre of the project is the Tsundururu massacre of 1991, and the protests that erupted in its aftermath. The massacre, carried out by Reddy landowners of the village, followed an altercation between the newly upwardly mobile Dalit community and them, and led to death and destruction for the latter. The subsequent protests by the Dalit communities of the area was cited in the Parliament as one of the reasons why the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989 was needed, and eventually put into place. The artist’s mother is a key figure through the narrative, being a survivor of the massacre, who refuses to talk about the torment of *those days* fully. One of the fragments the artist is able to smuggle out of her reluctant storyteller of a mother is about how the outstretched limb was a catalyst in the caste-based conflicts that eventually cascaded into the massacre. She recounts a testimony that finds no mention in official reports of the massacre: it happened in a cinema hall. An upwardly mobile Dalit youth was sitting on the higher rows of the hall, and his feet accidentally grazed the body of a higher-caste person. This led to a fight breaking out, which eventually led to the death of the Dalit man, and the subsequent acceleration of violence and deaths.

The outstretched corpus of Dalit origins finds itself within the project not just in a literal sense, but also through manifold metaphorical ones. As Percy’s photobook illustrates, the documentation of the events and the aftermath are scarce and in disarray.



This is a Protest, 2021-Ongoing, Mixed Media Photobook, 5.83in X 8.27in, 120 Pages
All images courtesy of the artist



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The Dalit body must find its place within the Brahmanical archives only residually, after all. Historical footage and newspaper coverings often diminish the extent of the violence. Video documentation mysteriously gets lost and destroyed, leaving only glitchy, corrupt images. Through her research, Percy can only find minute gestural condensations that link the past and the present of the Dalit body arrested within the photographic image.

Her resolution, her artistic intervention, in the face of the mountain of incomplete fragments and residues, is to proclaim the totality of her being itself as a protest site. Juxtaposing photographs from her family archive with the very few photographs from protest sites that are available within the archive, Percy forces us to reckon with the everlasting continuity of protest that resides within the Dalit body. The words of revolutionary poet Kalekuri Prasad inform her artistic praxis-

I am someone raising his head for a fistful of self-respect

In this nation of casteist bigots blinded by wealth

I am someone who lives to register life itself as a protest

I am someone who dies repeatedly to live

“Registering life itself as a protest” holds a simultaneously delicate yet radical reconstitution of one’s material relations with the zeitgeist. It demands a metaphysics of care far beyond what the ethical boundaries we have hitherto established within our Brahmanical society allow. That which has been an externalized other- be it the outstretched limb, the body that sits *outside* at a protest site, the almost illegible photographic evidence, the neglected fragments within the archive, the everyday existence of a Dalit Christian woman carrying the wounds of an almost forgotten massacre- all of them must become ontological equals for the rest of us. That, and only that could be a valid ‘drawing near,’ of life as protest, and the art that follows *as* liberation.