
SMRITI DIXIT
SAVAGE FLOWERS

Longing

Seed

Declaration

ART MUSINGS

SAVAGE FLOWERS

curated by

Nancy Adajania

a solo exhibition by

SMRITI DIXIT

2022

Residue

> "Ordered, yet not ordered. Chaos structured as non-chaos."
> — Eva Hesse, 'Fling, Dribble and Dip' (1970) **[1]**

Savage Flowers presents Smriti Dixit's work at a point when the artist has come powerfully into her own. Dixit's sculptures are woven, variously, from plastic tags and strings of fabric: everyday materials found, made, recycled and upcycled. Fecund creatures, these works might startlingly throw out a green shoot if you lavish them with focused attention. These are infinite projects, constructed patiently and recursively over a period of time and invested with endless labour. While the artist's archetypal and biomorphic forms evoke mandalas, screens, *yonis* or cocoons, they are an extension of her body: they translate its stresses and strains, channelling its dreams and disquiets through moments of stillness, growth and even – or especially – overgrowth.

The cotton uterus, the colour of dried menstrual blood, is huge. It insists on defying patriarchal taboos and making its presence felt. The mandala is made of plastic tags, its industrial blue faintly reminiscent of the brilliant lapis lazuli of *rudraksha* berries that the artist had in mind. Dixit's work points to the complicated slippage between the spiritual and the commercial, the organic and the industrial, the sustainable and the unsustainable. It gestures towards the struggle for survival in which the human and non-human species are engaged, on a fragile planet that they must share.

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The exhibition begins on a reflective yet stirring note. 'Reverie', a fuchsia and green triptych painted in the manner of a Dutch still life, displays leaves with black craters and crawling lavender worms. The surface is covered with flowers and creepers fashioned from glass tissue, georgette and organza. In the background, almost concealed by this textile cornucopia, we catch sight of a painted *lota* bearing sweet potatoes.

Indeed, for many years now, the artist has treated the canvas more as a backdrop than a direct picture surface, building over it to generate a post-painterly space – one that displaces the planarity of painting with sculptural volume. **[2]** In her previous work, Dixit has layered and tapestried her canvases with stitched textile cones, pennants, roundels and tiny bundles. With 'Reverie', she returns to painting, transforming the backdrop into an active surface that competes with her textile interventions. Even as we mull over the optical illusion produced by this friction between painted surface and sculptural relief, a pair of sweet potatoes displayed prominently on a wall in the adjacent room seize our attention.

'The Garden of Guilt and Pleasure' is an ensemble of wall hangings densely woven out of plastic tags or loops normally used by retailers. In the artist's hands, these tags are divested of their original commercial function and become mulch, creepers and dirt-covered root vegetables amidst a myriad shades of green. Under the artificial sunlight of the white-cube space, the sweet potatoes reveal an underlayer of pink flesh suggestive of fresh wounds. At other times, they project a nocturnal blue radiance. The vines with their heart-shaped leaves and the water quivering in the grass – or is it a reflection of the sky? – exude a strange haptic quality despite announcing their artifice.

As we light the installation, a twisted sweet potato casts a surprising shadow, one that looks like a furry tail. Plastic, an industrial material that began to be mass-produced after World War II, has revolutionised our everyday life with its vast range of utility; and yet we know it to be highly polluting, posing a long-term risk to the health of human and non-human species, and to the environment. Here, it morphs into skin, fur and leaf venation, leading the artist to exclaim: "Look how the material is shining like glass or saliva!" What do we make of the ambiguity produced by a deliberate misalliance between synthetic material and organic preoccupation? The dilemmas and experiments involved in this artistic decision are, to some extent, clarified by the process photographs that illuminate the pre-history of this work.

The story begins in a modest request. One day, Dixit's father asked her to roast the delicious sweet potatoes that were in season. Forgotten in the midst of life's distractions, two sweet potatoes placed in a *lota* on the kitchen platform threw out shoots. Dixit planted them in a public garden in her neighbourhood.

The survival of the sweet potato plants depended on the goodwill of neighbours – a daunting expectation in a civil society that is beleaguered by agonism rather than nurtured by reciprocity. Somebody burned leaves next to her plant and threw the ashes onto it. Somebody else stole the stones that were meant to protect her plant. Yet another person planted a coconut in her patch of soil. And a tractor nearly drove over her spot. Then there was the natural world to contend with. A rat took a large bite out of one of the sweet potatoes. A snake slithered past the artist's feet, filling her with dread and excitement. Once she found herself staring at an entire ecosystem of worms that was thriving in the moisture under the stones.

Dixit could not save her plants, but what she did save from this wreckage of contrary motivations was the visceral experience of a society predominantly focused on a propertarian worldview – one that legitimises the grabbing, stealing and colonising of resources rather than the practices of nourishing, caring, healing and sharing. And the artist's choices, too, are informed by a negotiation with this worldview: the guilt of using a potentially toxic material is imbricated with the pleasure of producing an allegory of growth, decay and resurgence. Dixit's sweet potato plants did not die. Paradoxically enough, they have been immortalised in plastic, traces of which can be found in the human body. Plastic on occasion may look like saliva and our saliva may contain plastic residue.

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In Dixit's handling, her materials exhibit an excessive and unruly energy – regardless of whether she uses cotton, synthetic fabric or plastic. Like Eva Hesse's idiosyncratic latex and polymer sculptures, Dixit's work too portrays a disordered order, a chaotic non-chaos. She tells me, mischievously: "If a certain *janglipan* doesn't show in my work, I feel uncomfortable."

In this instance, we could annotate '*janglipan*' as a specific valency of 'wildness': the unfettered, transgressive energy of women who defy domestication in both private and public realms (in our minds, do we not immediately see the Devi as Dakshina Kali, trampling over a prone Shiva?). However, we cannot ignore the fact that in our class- and caste-ridden society, the pejorative term '*janglipan*' is reserved for the unlettered, the non-urban and especially the adivasi communities, who are officially regarded as savages who need to be civilised by State intervention.

Dixit grew up in Bhopal during the heyday of Bharat Bhavan, a crucible of transdisciplinary artistic experiments during the 1980s. The institution's visionary catalyst, J Swaminathan, introduced the

adivasi-origin painters Jangarh Singh Shyam and Bhuribai as contemporary artists in their own right, defying the dogmas of an art world that saw adivasi artists as subscribers to an unchanging tradition. Moreover, Dixit's father worked in the domain of tribal welfare, which gave him the opportunity to understand the adivasi world in an intimate manner. Dixit casts her eye towards the ceiling and conjures up a forest where the crowns of trees meet each other. “What looks like a pleasing pattern to us is their mode of survival.” Similarly, while adivasi art may seem decorative to the untrained eye, it is a contemplation of both the continuities and disruptions within the *Lebenswelt* of these imperilled communities.

Inspired by this conversation, I came up with the exhibition title 'Savage Flowers', as a tribute to the indomitable and untameable spirit of Dixit's work.

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We climb the staircase to enter what could only be described as a red grove – here, perforated screens, woven from maroon and reddish-orange cotton strings, touch the rafters. Are these trees or totem poles? We cannot say with certainty. 'Longing' might remind some viewers of Rothko's paintings strung out to dry in a forest. Or it might prompt others to transport themselves to the deserts of Rajasthan, to imagine a group of women in maroon, burning with grief and rage.

The act of repetition involved in the making of these screens – weaving, dyeing, adding fabric extensions in the form of blue flowers or butterflies and fungi – had induced in Dixit a *japa*-like intensity. She tells me that she was listening to Vaghambrini's *Devi Suktam* while making 'Longing'. This hymn, which occurs in one of India's earliest religious texts, the Rig Veda (*mandala* X *sukta* 125), was composed by a female visionary seeker. Until relatively recently, such is the power of the patriarchy, the authorship of the Rig Veda was routinely assigned to male sages; it was not widely recognised that a number of the Rig Vedic hymns were composed by women, although their signature lines have always been present in the record.

This ancient background is profoundly relevant to Dixit's art, not as ideological baggage or theological reassurance, but as an exemplar of *bodied practice*. In the Rig Veda, the *mantra* or *sukta* dedicated to a deity is not merely a garland of words. Rather, it is a force field in which the visionary seeker is granted the revelation of the deity-as-utterance, which is seen to be always already present in the cosmos. In the moment of composition, the seeker and the deity achieve communion – they speak as a composite, and sign the composition together. Thus Vaghambrini, to whom authorship of the *Devi Suktam* is ascribed, is an entity compounded from *Vak*, the Goddess of Speech, and the human *rishika* Ambrini. It is this entity who speaks the eight verses of the hymn, culminating in the proclamation:

My breath is the wind and the tempest
from which the worlds and their denizens are born.
I hold all life together, beyond earth and heaven.
I have emerged resplendent in my majesty. (X. 125. 8) **[3]**

Dixit's chanting of the *Devi Suktam* while at work on 'Longing' has multiple resonances. For one, it gives her a sense of agency and power, as she identifies both with a female seeker as well as with the extraordinary conception of a female deity who articulates herself through all the forms and manifestations of the universe. I would contend that, in Dixit's practice, this chanting is efficacious both as a gendered *japa* as well as a generative *japa*. Like Vaghambrini, Dixit becomes so invested in her work that she and it come to form one continuum.

Some artists work from principles that are explicitly formulated as propositions, from a sharply

Reverie

Installation view: The Garden of Guilt and Pleasure

defined aesthetic or political philosophy. Other artists work from principles that are intuitively rather than explicitly formulated, from aesthetic or political convictions that are implied rather than stated. Dixit is one of the latter. We must seek the fundamental and formative emphases of her art in stray phrases, divine them from recurrent terms, stitch them together from the half-said and the unsaid. The pattern does not reveal itself instantly, camouflaged as it is by the details and detours of the artist's performance of her speech-acts. And then suddenly, when we least expect it, the act of interpretation becomes a moment of epiphany.

I found the telling clue in the Sanskrit word *dvaita* – a second principle, apart from, engaging with, and sometimes in opposition to a first – which Dixit used once during our conversation. The word has particular significance in discussions of Hindu philosophy, which have come to be dominated by the *Advaita* (first, without a second) school of monism, which holds that the relationship between the individual self and the Divine is one of identity. Self and God are of the same substance, and the world is a system of delusion that prevents us from realising this, and thus, the world must be rejected. The *Advaita* account has become so pervasive as to preclude any alternative *Dvaita* or dualist account of the self-God relationship in which these are fundamentally different and bound together by a rich spectrum of communion effected by prayer, grace, submission or loving opposition. In the *Advaita* worldview, all differences are subsumed in a universal identity; in the *Dvaita* worldviews, differences remain and are bridged through communion.

The *Advaita* fashion is to subsume the entire Hindu corpus of teachings into itself, including the ancient Vedas and the mediaeval and early-modern Bhakti poets. By sharp contrast, Dixit described the Bhakti saint-poets Kabir and Meerabai to me as *dvaita*. This piqued my curiosity, and in a moment, I realised that Dixit responded strongly to every creative intelligence that took up the position of playing an assertive and transgressive second or Other to a singularity claiming precedence. Vaghambrini, female seeker twinning herself but not drowning herself in a divinity; Kabir and Meerabai, singing of their love for the Divine yet retaining the right to criticise or tease It, never lose sight of their prickly or playful selves.

In the neighbouring room, a blue mandala with embedded black seeds and multiple folds and runnels holds its mystical secrets in reserve. As its shadow spreads like an ink-black stain on the wall, it simultaneously exerts sculptural volume while becoming evanescent, a drawing in space. As compared to the contemplative nature of the blue mandala (‘Seed’), the densely woven black '*Yoni*' on the opposite wall absorbs all energies into itself and becomes a source of fecundity. But equally, it presents as a dark and subversive symbol, as in the Tantric tradition, where the libidinal energies are made generative through occult rituals. To translate the word '*yoni*' as vagina or womb is inadequate because, to the Indian mind, it comes wrapped up in the accretions of myth and ritual, icon and taboo. In the Kamakhya temple in Guwahati, for instance, the *yoni* in its aniconic form continues to be worshipped today. The temple is believed to be the site where Sati's vagina fell after Shiva performed his *tandava* or cosmic dance, bearing her corpse, and Vishnu kept cutting off parts of the corpse to diminish Shiva's burden of anguish.

The Kamakhya temple hosts a festival dedicated to its menstruating goddess and yet women in their periods are prohibited temple entry. Mulling over these patriarchal contradictions, we stop at a textile sculpture fashioned into a giant uterus, transitioning from the space of archetype and myth to everyday reality. 'Declaration' is the female body in its unadorned truth, taken to its absurd extreme. Endlessly wrapped in strings of red cloth, it acknowledges the value of untiring domestic labour.

As the artist observes: “The thing that you are not saying is the one that you are saying most loudly.”

- Nancy Adajania

Residue (detail)

Notes

1. Eva Hesse, 'Fling, Dribble and Dip', Life Vol. 68 No. 7 (27 February 1970), p. 66.

2. Nancy Adajania, 'Exile from Symmetry' (catalogue essay for Smriti Dixit solo exhibition; Bombay: Art Musings, 2007).

3. This verse from the Devi Suktam has been translated by Ranjit Hoskote. For the original Sanskrit text of RV X.125, see https://anaadifoundation.org/blog/bhakti/devi-suktam-powerful-outpouring-of-a-rishikas-divine-realization (accessed 1 January 2022).

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Nancy Adajania is a Bombay-based cultural theorist and curator. She has curated a number of major research-based exhibitions including the Nelly Sethna retrospective, ‘The Unpaved, Crusty, Earthy Road’ (Chatterjee & Lal with Cymroza Art Gallery, Bombay, 2021); 'Zigzag Afterlives: Film Experiments from the 1960s and 1970s in India' (Camden Art Centre, London, 2020); the Mehlli Gobhai retrospective, ‘Don’t Ask Me about Colour’ (National Gallery of Modern Art/ NGMA, Bombay with Chemould Prescott Road, 2020); the Sudhir Patwardhan retrospective, 'Walking Through Soul City' (NGMA, Bombay with The Guild Art Gallery, 2019) and 'Counter-Canon, Counter-Culture: Alternative Histories of Indian Art' (Serendipity Arts Festival, Goa, 2019). Adajania has proposed several new theoretical models through her extensive writings on subaltern art, media art, public art, collaborative art, transcultural art and the biennale culture in the Global South. She recently conceptualised and led an online curatorial workshop, ‘Once Upon a Cultural Famine: A Curatorial Thought Experiment’, for the Kochi Biennale Foundation (2021).

Installation view: Longing

Declaration (detail)

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