

[Because] the stories were held here in fluid form, they retained the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, [Unlike] a library of books the Ocean of the Stream of Stories ... was alive.

Salman Rushdie, 1990¹

A Versatile Mind, Proficient over Boundaries of Place and Time

The drawings of Aji V.N.

Wilma Sütö

Various worlds shimmer in the drawings of Aji V.N. Landscapes of distant continents converge here, with an enchanting mixture of cultural-historical singularities. A versatile mind reigns over this domain, transporting us beyond boundaries of place and time. He is subtle, this guide; how could we ever move so lightly without him?

In his most recent work, the flexible mind of Aji V.N. is embodied by three male and three female figures. They pose in the style of classical sculptures, naked, with the self-consciousness of Greek gods: the women reminiscent of the three Graces, while the men form a holy trinity. But they use the mystical sign language of Indian dance and Buddhist art. Their gesticulation confirms their naked presence - the bareness of our existence. Only their exuberant hairstyles appear alien to this slightly detached manifestation. The hair has been artistically styled: braided and twisted, heavy but solidly stacked. It seems that this load contains more than merely external display. Perhaps magical powers lurk there, as is the case with the naked Indian ascetics, sadhus and sadhvis.

The artist offers no definite answer. He wishes to work free of imputation and judgement. Not only does he allow his public its own interpretation, he also allocates a decisive degree of autonomy to the figures he draws. 'They are free people,' he says. 'They can do whatever they want.'² Strangely enough, it costs little difficulty to believe him. The three men and three women merge into a sacred circle, unmoved by the autumnal light that inundates, palely and coolly, the artist's Rotterdam studio. They have been drawn in charcoal on coloured paper. The men loom up out of a warm brown background, the women from a deep, luminescent blue. As in a dream, they seal a pact with one another and their imaginary surroundings, returning our gaze from a distance. They are united; we are strangers.

In itself, the fusion of worlds in the work of Aji V.N. is not so surprising. The artist is equally at home in Europe and in India; in India and in Europe. He was born in Kerala in 1968, but has been living and working in Rotterdam for ten years. The extraordinary feature is, however, that his drawings open up domains that are impossible to explore in real life, domains in which antediluvian atmospheres converge with those of the afterlife. Nature acquires an internal dimension. The

¹ Salman Rushdie, *Harun and the Sea of Stories*, 1990, p.

² Quote taken from a conversation between the author and the artist in his studio in Rotterdam on Friday 3 October 2008

landscape changes into a fairy-tale vision, a twilight zone that can be dominated by ghastly spectres at the same time.

An element of doom creeps closer; something wicked comes our way. The ambiguity is inevitable: the landscapes may exhibit beautiful vegetation, but between the scrub that has spread across the paper in a decorative pattern, lies a human skeleton. It is easy to miss it at first. The gaze moves with the rhythmic structure of the vegetation, blind to what is being swallowed up by the earth underneath. Meanwhile, it is staring consistently at us. Where at first we expected only pebbles, there are the hollow eyes of a skull. Recognition arrives all at once - as if a shrieking crow were breaking the silence. The sensuality of Vincent van Gogh imbues these landscapes, but whereas Van Gogh also painted the sky above the ground, with the soaring crows as an omen of death, the horizon in the work of Aji V.N. is so high that the earth fills the entire scene. From dust to dust - there is no exit.

Although the artist veils the symbolism in his work, the sense of transience is difficult to banish. Sometimes it lingers in an almost decadent ornamentation. There are, for example, plants that evolve into enigmatic signs. Their tangle of branches proliferates wildly within an elegant contour. These emblematic close-ups call to mind the shots of plant photographer Karl Blossfeldt from the beginning of the twentieth century. But, besides being elegant and detailed, the plants of Aji V.N. are also indomitable. Their twigs revel in their twists and turns. They are strangled in their own hold, and form labyrinthine hedges, just as treacherous as they are tempting. This discord is also exploited optically. Bright yellow paper gives the landscape a radiant glow, shimmering as if it were gilded. In this, the plants light up like carefully cultivated hallucinogens: narcotics for the eye. Although we can indulge freely in these sights, it does no harm to realize - keeping Stendhal's syndrome in mind³ - that visual art occasionally is capable of transporting the viewer across that narrow border between self-discipline and loss of control...

In a drawing that the artist made on blue paper in 2007, there is nothing particular to see except loose earth and some meagre vegetation: there is no trace of humans or animals, or even a horizon. There is just the land, which consists of crumbly earth, some vague crops drawn in charcoal that reach out across the paper. Thanks to the blue background, it looks like the landscape is basking in moonlight. It is a strange field: a close-up with a strikingly elongated format. *Promised Land* was the working title of this drawing, after a story by Tolstoy. The story is about a poor man who turns to God for help. In the vision he subsequently receives, God promises to give him land. The man only needs to run and, as far as he runs, the ground will belong to him. At the break of dawn, the man starts running at top speed. And he continues to run until night falls. Ultimately he has exhausted himself so much that he collapses and dies. He is buried at the spot where he died, the length of his grave measuring six feet. And it is this size that has determined the format of the drawing.

³ The syndrome of Stendhal is psychic disorder that takes place after the perception of an overdose of beauty in the visual arts. The viewer feels overwhelmed to the extent that he cannot suppress his physical reactions: accelerated heartbeat, dizziness and fainting occur. The syndrome is called after the 19th-century French writer Stendhal, who gave a comprehensive report of his visit to Florence in 1817, and his own emotional reactions to the artistic character of the city.

In one stilled moment, the drawings capture the distressing side of our existence: our fragility as well as the fallibility of our ambition. Even the most intoxicating beauty, such as that of plants in full flower, will fade. When art offers an escape route from this dilemma (*ars longa, vita brevis!*)⁴, Aji V.N. knows how to make use of it. From the old worlds that he has combined in his work he digs out images that he adds again as new ones. Images and narratives from the history of art and literature radiate in his drawings; as if the memory, with its entire mixture of longings and recollections, is again opened up, aroused and revived.

This applies to the work described above, and also to his earlier drawings, including several compelling representations of swimming elephants. These images are just as exotic as they are dreamlike to Dutch eyes, more than in India where, of course, since the dawn of mankind, elephants have populated not only nature and everyday life but also the realm of ideas, the pantheon, and the world of art in a plethora of manifestations. Those majestic creatures surge up from the water in a charcoal drawing and a watercolour by Aji V.N., both dating back to 2005. In the charcoal drawing, they rise up head and shoulders above a water surface that glistens with spatters of light. The watercolour, elongated as a river, only displays their foreheads above the surface, sometimes with an eye, or ear, a part of the trunk. The elephants dissolve into the stream: the ponderous beasts as light as a ripple of water, moving along with the river that glides onward, like time.

These are evocative images that greet the viewer to the rhythm of nature in a dream world, a zone that can expand infinitely in the hands of the artist. In this connection, the panoramas that unfold in his most recent landscapes are significant. In these, the ocean can roll in with imposing waves that explode at our feet. But while the water sprays into our faces, we can also see how the ocean retreats to a distant horizon, under the dome of night, a deep, black firmament filled with pin-pricks of light.

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Notes

¹ Salman Rushdie, *Harun and the Sea of Stories*, 1990.

² Quote taken from a conversation between the author and the artist in his studio in Rotterdam, October 2008.

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⁴ Latin translation of a saying by the Greek physician Hippocrates: Life is short but art is long.

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