The Porcelain Rose

Paula Sengupta

Sep 24 - Oct 24, 2021

gallery "espace"

16, Community Centre
New Friends Colony, New Delhi 110025
T - +91 11 26326267, 26922947
www.galleryespace.com | art@galleryespace.com

The Porcelain Rose

Rooted in dried flora-embedded pictorial surfaces, characterized by sinuous lines that transform intelligible forms into promiscuity, and enlivened by movement that brings research and memories into a stimulating synthesis, Sengupta's project The Porcelain Rose conceals more than it reveals. This deeply engaging body of work displays fragments from a forest of reasoning and illogic that thrives on consonance, languid eroticism, desire and latent danger, within the "seamless order of things", as Sengupta puts it.

The porcelain rose or Etlingera elatior, a succulent plant indigenous to regions with tropical climate, does indeed encapsulate the essence of Sengupta's most recent project in many ways. A native of the Southeast Asian humid rainforests, it is also found in the equatorial regions of Africa, Sengupta observes. The genus is named after eighteenth-century German botanist Andreas Ernst Etlinger, reflecting a well-established strategy of colonial nomenclature. The interregional associations of the plant are further enhanced by the evocation of porcelain—specialized pottery integral to Chinese art history. Furthermore, this flower embodies a duality: its awe-inspiring appearance combines with the fragility of porcelain. This contradiction enmeshed with interregional travels and colonial histories constitutes the core of Sengupta's venture, offering a middle ground between organization and chaos, visuality and abstraction, unravelling and camouflage.

Rather than seeking a rational conclusion, Sengupta builds a complex narrative of "making" by playfully leaving traces of various stages of the project's developments, as well as by activating the visuals through movement. The movement and halting of fluid brush lines on the paper surface and the plastic images enlivened through animation bear evidence of the various stages in which this project was constructed and their order. *The Forest of Folly*, executed as an ink drawing, elucidates how the process of making the visuals aids the conceptual rigour. Upon settling their gaze on the picture, viewers are confronted with a majestic tiger with two tails lurking in a forest of flora-embedded rice paper. The pressed herbarium functions as the tangible residue of plants sheltering the predator as well as the wandering zebras and wildebeest. At places, the ink lines intersect with the plant specimens, pushing them to the background; in other instances, the pressed leaves are connected with brush lines to constitute branches of trees, denying a division between the figure and the ground. The boundary between background and forms is further questioned in the depiction of the zebras, as their bodies remain partially hidden behind the pressed flora. Similar pressed flora, however, is utilized to emphasize the ochre complexion of the tiger's face. Sengupta's witty use of materials and playful yet attentive employment of hand-drawn lines, seen here and throughout the project, visualize a folly that is markedly intelligible.

Reclaiming Chintz, nurturing The Porcelain Rose

An avid artist, archivist and ethnographer, Sengupta arrives at this juncture through her persistent efforts to reclaim chintz—the masterfully dyed, painted and printed cotton of Coromandel, celebrated for its hybrid and transgressive visuals. The prolonged and labour-intensive process of making these textiles is attributed to the sophistication of their visuals and thematic richness.[1] Sengupta's training in printmaking and her keen interest in textiles and design principles from an early stage of her career directed her to chintz; her preoccupation with it subsequently flourished in her intensive research on the historic Coromandel textile and her artistic experimentation. Whereas her previous projects, such as Rivers of Blood (2009) and Lv, Pony (2011), involved woodblock printed chintz imagery on paper and fabric, as a metaphor of entangled indigenous and colonial histories in South Asia, her recent commitment marks a methodological shift from them. In her artist's statement for Of herbariums, hortoriums and home (2018), Sengupta announced her rather persistent and phased intervention to reconstruct chintz by systematically unravelling its key structural components and ambiguity.[2]

Chintz fabrics display astonishing amalgamations of faithful studies of living beings and visions that surpass reasoning. This striking co-existence of seemingly contentious elements is a prime characteristic of Sengupta's layered practice too. Her dedication to archival studies—especially colonial accounts—foregrounds her unfailing approach involving detailed documentation. However, as an ever-alert artist, Sengupta is acutely aware of the limitations of institutional archives, which she has therefore complemented by turning to oral histories, collective narratives and bodily actions. The role of the artist "as ethnographer" has remained contingent in the last three decades or so, as debates around creative freedom and artists' self-projection appear unresolved. Nevertheless, it is this very interdisciplinarity that enables the unearthing of lesser-known facets of the past and human experiences. This spirit of border-crossing observed in Sengupta's method helps study, interpret and execute a theme from multiple perspectives, which materializes in her art practice as layers. The juxtaposition of the pressed herbarium and mindful strokes of her brush, of colonial science and indigenous magic realism, and of sustainment and transformations posit layering as sedimentation of knowledge. Many strands of knowledge are woven together and thus coexist in Sengupta's forest of entanglement.

In her recent project, Sengupta thus finds herself simultaneously to be a gardener, traveller and chronicler, nurturing plants at her residence in Kolkata while documenting multifaceted travel narratives. Her meticulous study of the plants and archival research of their scientific and cultural significance lay the foundation

---

[1] See Sarah Fee, "Cotton, Colour, Desire," in Cloth That Changed the World: The Art and Fashion of Indian Chintz, ed. Sarah Fee (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 2020), 2–24.
[2] Paula Sengupta's Statement, Of herbariums, hortoriums and home, by Nandini Bagla Chirimar and Paula Sengupta (New Delhi: Gallery Espace, 2018).
[3] Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," in The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century, (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1996), 204.
[4] See Baptiste Brun, "Contemporary Art and Anthropology: Shared Experiences," Critique d'art 49 (2017): 35–45.

for the depiction of the wide range of vegetal forms in her work. On one hand, this process of drawing on-site plays out as a simulation of colonial documenting in a city that is adjacent to the oldest botanical garden in India; on the other hand, it is an enduring legacy of her role as an art educator, since drawing from nature is considered key to the art school training. The precise, measuredly coloured vegetal drawings from Of herbariums, hortoriums and home bloom into a full-fledged forest in The Porcelain Rose; the identifiable plants transform into hybrid forms when apposed to Sengupta's memories, drawings, scribbles and photographs of tropical and sub-Saharan forests. The physical hands-on engagement in her studio informs her immersive engagement in gardening, and she rightly describes herself as "temperamentally a maker steeped in studio process". Her observation of the minutest growth in her plants finds resonance with changing landscapes, and the shifting contours of scientific and artistic investigations.

Camouflaged and Manifested

Camouflaging, or seamlessly blending into the background while disrupting the outlines, is a key feature of Sengupta's visuals and narratives; it derives from two trajectories of historical research: Western European science and chintz. Western botanical studies around camouflage in nature boosted military science, during the early twentieth century, where shrouding of identities and merging into landscapes were prioritized.[5] Thus concealment or mimicry was, curiously, an interest shared by naturalists, military strategists, historians and artists. It was a tendency masterfully explored in Surrealist artworks, turning several of these artists, such as Max Ernst and René Magritte, into naturalists. Through Surrealist artworks, the "indeterminable biological identity" is investigated as a parallel process with that of natural and military sciences.[6]

In the historical chintz textile, rich intercultural socio-religious themes such as Kalpavriksha or the wish-fulfilling tree emerge as a repository of ambiguity—the meticulously drawn vegetal forms gradually evolving into elegant birds or ferocious predators. Sengupta's exploration of this intrinsic characteristic of chintz is complemented by her extensive research on camouflaging, a theme embedded in her previous projects such as Rivers of Blood, Lv, Pony and Of herbariums. Camouflage or the act of concealment emerges in her recent work on display as a visual strategy to destabilize the frail boundary between serenity and uncertainty; it is also a reminder of the human condition, and of human folly in the guise of refinement.

[5] Ann Elias, "Camouflage and Surrealism," WLA (War, Literature and the Arts): An International Journal of the Humanities 24 no. 1 (2012): 3–6.
[6] Ibid., 9.

Whereas shrouding a truth, after anthropologist Michael Taussig, is primarily regarded as the function of camouflage, its potential to subvert legitimacy and transform it into illegitimacy is exemplified in Sengupta's most recent project.[7] *The Tree of Thorns*, an epigrammatic take on the tree of life motif from chintz, elucidates this. The compositional arrangement of this ink drawing diligently follows the established scheme of chintz—a lush, flowing tree springs out of a Deccani hillock formation. The life-bestowing tree is replaced here with a flowing, thorny cactus plant or Candelabra tree; the "tree" in the title of the drawing evokes its chintz connection and confuses the plant's botanical identification. The embedded culm nodes scattered over the rice paper appear as floating thorns—an extension of the captivating plant at the centre. Almost dissolving into the stem of the thorny plant, a crocodile silently climbs vertically. Its armoured body, which Sengupta constructs with intricate repetitive units, mimics the protruding spikes of the cactus. From this mighty "tree" blossom vibrant passionflowers, breaking the monochromatic dominance. These erotically charged flowers and buds can be traced back to Sengupta's on-site drawing of a purple passionflower she had planted and raised at her residence. The intriguing juxtaposition of botanical accuracy and poetic manoeuvre infuses the image with an alchemical quality, offering multiple ways to perceive it. Through making and re-constructing the motifs from nature, she establishes mimetic subversion as a continuous process, perhaps a parallel one to her studio practice.

Movement: On Image, Text and Spaces

The notion of movement manifests as a connecting thread between the diverse components that strengthened the flourishing of Sengupta's thoughtful projects over the last decade: movement of texts as narratives and broken phrases; swift brush lines on paper or etched lines on metallic plates; expansion of two-dimensional images into interactive installations; and her journeys across South Asia, Southeast Asia and Africa, which contributed to her visual vocabulary and ethnographic research. The presence of text in Sengupta's practice has been almost as relevant as images; the words, phrases and expressions that she has collected from a range of languages during her travels resist linear approaches to comprehending her association with text. Subsequently, text paves the way for her recent ventures with sound. Her sustained association with movement—as actualized in audiovisual projections, motorized installations and animation earlier—is further enhanced in *The Porcelain Rose* as a response to having had to migrate to a virtual platform.

[7] See Michael Taussig, "Mimetic Worlds: Invisible Counterparts," in Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 100–11.

Sengupta's continued exploration of movement allows us to reconsider our perception of geographical places and experiential spaces around us. Her travelogues as well as her intermedial experimentations possess an ingrained inclination towards border-crossing that calls for multisensory reception. The depiction of landscapes in her most recent project thrives on the constriction between survival and control in nature. However, drawing on geographer David Harvey—as he argues, "ecological arguments are not socially neutral"—the forest of Sundari Jaal cannot be considered distant from our immediate surroundings.[8] The longstanding tradition of animal fables in South Asia such as Anwar-e-Suhaili also attests to the exchanges and politics around nature and societies. Sengupta's depiction of the forest of reasoning and illogic on the one hand is constructed from nature, and on the other addresses the continued human actions through which the idea of "nature" is constructed.[9] To accentuate its constructed character, Sengupta maintains a graphical accuracy of the pictorial elements.

The drawing titled The Porcelain Rose depicts the distinct attributes of its motifs, inviting fresh discussions on "place" and pictorial space by revealing their linear details complemented by fresh patches of coloured ink. The blossoming porcelain rose is brought to life through the visual language of colonial botanists, raising its head from a cloud of stylized foliage. A careful distinction between the flower and the leaves resists the motifs' assimilation into a whole yet shares the same visual space. Through the figure of Gulbagh (a spotted leopard) caught a moment before bursting into action, an impression of veiled danger, which is absent in the porcelain rose or foliage, is infused into this drawing. Altogether, they inhabit the "place" marked by the kalpavriksha form as fragments of experiences.

Rather than being fixed, a place is relational and exists as an intersection of objects, ideas, people.[10] With the shifting and shuffling of motifs across the pictorial plane, the meanings, functions and values are reconfigured. For instance, the migration of animals at the Serengeti National Park, in Sengupta's observation, serves as a metaphor of movement, unfolding as the incremental process of developing an idea, an image, a soundscape, or a body of works.

This gradual unfolding perhaps prompts her latest animated works, letting the leaves rustle, trees sway and animals move. Created from drawings, textual narration, soundscapes and voiceover, the animations featured in this exhibition heighten the malleability and vulnerability of the protagonists as well as the landscapes. *Sunehra's Folly* breathes life into the inhabitants of the constructed forest landscape and further dismantles the binary between natural and built atmosphere.

[8] David Harvey, "Constructed landscapes and social memory: Tales of St. Samson in early medieval Cornwall," Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 20 (2002): 240.
[9] Ibid., 240–2.
[10] Deborah S. Hutton and Rebecca M. Brown, "Introduction: In and out of place—Engagements in South Asian and Islamic art history," in Rethinking Place in South Asian and Islamic Art, 1500–Present, eds. Deborah S. Hutton and Rebecca M. Brown (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 2–3.

A closer look reveals that the varied movements of the protagonists—from the passing of the unexcitable cloud to Sunehra's hysterical run across the picture plane—are implemented to bringing the narratives close to our lived experience despite the premeditated irregularities embedded in them. The unavoidable finality informs the rendering of *Death on the Sea of Acorns*, without adhering to the constraints of a linear narrative. Animation successfully contributes to Sengupta's enduring experimentation with assimilation by harmoniously blending audio-visual fragments that emerged from her multilateral experiences.

The sophisticated delineation of flora and fauna wittily posed against paper with pressed plant specimens in this project compels us to see the tension between found and constructed visuals, and seemingly definite and preposterous narratives. Meandering through Sengupta's layered wanderings, viewers are left wondering whether it is Sunehra's folly that brings about the cataclysmic end of the Sundari Jaal forest or the consonance between logic and incoherence.

As our sense of belonging to both virtual and physical spaces is being reconfigured, given to the ongoing pandemic, Sengupta's heterotopic explorations invite viewers to introspect on the overlap between place and space, histories and memories, tangibility and ephemerality.

Rajarshi Sengupta

Rajarshi Sengupta, a practitioner and art historian, holds a PhD in art history from the University of British Columbia, Vancouver (2019), and has been the first recipient of the IARTS Textiles of India grant, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto (2017-18). Presently, he is an assistant professor at the Dept. of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Kanpur.

The Porcelain Rose

Ink on flora-embedded rice paper
30.25 x 20 inches
2021

The Tree of Thorns

Ink on flora-embedded rice paper
30 x 20 inches
2021

The Tree of Desire

Ink on flora-embedded rice paper
30 x 20 inches
2021

The Tree of Folly

Ink on flora-embedded rice paper
31 x 22 inches
2021

The Last Plain

Ink on flora-embedded rice paper
20 x 20 inches
2021

The Forest of Folly

Ink on flora-embedded rice paper
30.5 x 20.25 inches
2021

The Poisoned Crater

Ink on papyrus
13.5 x 8.75 inches
2020

The Poisoned Crater

Ink on papyrus
13.5 x 9.25 inches
2020

Untitled

Digital print
23 x 17 inches
2020
Artist's Proof

Untitled

Digital print
17 x 23 inches
2020
Artist's Proof

About the artist

Dr. Paula Sengupta is an artist, academic, art writer and curator resident in Kolkata. She graduated in Painting from the College of Art, New Delhi, followed by an MFA and PhD in Printmaking from Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan. She is currently Professor at the Department of Printmaking at Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata. She taught as Guest Faculty at the National Institute of Fashion Technology, Kolkata from 1999-2003. She is Member of the Board of Governors at the Indian Institute of Management, Shillong and Secretary of the artists' initiative, Khoj Kolkata.

Paula has been the recipient of the UGC Research Fellowship for doctoral studies (1993-98), the Artist-In-Residence Fellowship at Kala Art Institute, Berkeley, California (1997-98), Guest Artist at the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Kunste, Stuttgart under the INDART Artist Exchange Programme (2000), CWIT Research Grant & British Council, Kolkata Grant for independent research in the UK (2007), and Artist-in-Residence at the Britto Arts Trust, Dhaka (2008).

Trained as a printmaker, Paula's repertoire as an artist includes broadsheets, artist's books, objects, installation, and community art projects. She works across mediums that include printmaking, textiles and embroidery, papermaking, and much else. She is widely exhibited in India and abroad.

Paula Sengupta is author of The Printed Picture: Four Centuries of Indian Printmaking published by DAG, New Delhi and Foreign & Indigenous Influences in Indian Printmaking with LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, Saarbrucken, Germany.

Her curatorial projects include a soul (un)gendered: Anupam Sud- A Retrospective for DAG MODERN & KNMA, Delhi in 2019-20; Ghare Baire at the Old Currency Building, Kolkata for DAG MODERN and the Archaeological Survey of India in 2019; Popular Prints and the Freedom Struggle at the Drishyakala Museum, Red Fort, Delhi for DAG MODERN and the Archaeological Survey of India in 2019; the landmark exhibition Trajectories: 19 th-21 st Century Printmaking from India and Pakistan for the Sharjah Art Museum, Sharjah, UAE in 2014; and six editions of The Printed Picture: Four Centuries of Indian Printmaking for DAG MODERN, India from 2012-18.