A conversation with Neha Choksi

Transcending the Tragic Limit

Deepika Sorabjee
The leitmotif in a number of Neha Choksi’s works is something that most hold sacred – life – the negation, suspension or erasure of it. The discomfiture involved in the artist’s performance firmly establishes life’s presence, though. Through a time-laboured process, we watch her set up the premise: in Minds to Lose (2008), she enacts time lost during anaesthesia; in Leaf Fall (2007-2008), a single tree is plucked bare over a day, save for one new shoot.

In her newest video, Iceboat (2013), Choksi goes a step further, towards a complete negation. A rower rows a boat of ice on a lake that glistens with shimmering light. Ultimately the boat melts and the protagonist is submerged with it. Yet the mesmeric lead-up to the end and the subsequent fall into the depths is sublime. We watch it with wonder and horror. This experience accords perfectly with Edmund Burke’s definition of the sublime as inhering in that which is “fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger… or operates in a manner analogous to terror”. Meanwhile, the observer, in a position of safety, experiences such painful terror mixed with distanced “delight”. [1]

A sculptor, Choksi carries this leitmotif of renunciation into her objects as well. In her 2011 work, Echo of the Inside (Column Cube 1), a stack of cubes stands obelisk-like, the hollow space enclosed by the moulds diminishing until the smallest mould at the tapering top can no longer hold any. In the abrogation of space, the artist accounts for its presence.

Deepika Sorabjee (DS): Let’s start with Iceboat. It’s a work that, while mesmerising us with its seemingly serene beauty, is really a scene of something terrible that is happening. Iceboat reminds me of Burke’s account of the aesthetic experience of the sublime…

Neha Choksi (NC): I am interested in mortality, in the process of loss, in emptiness. This sometimes leads to unsettling and troubling work, full of risks. Even if one views the work from a position of safety, the work poses some uncomfortable thoughts about life being full of continual losses and final mortality.

I am also concerned with making work that is poetic – pleasurable, perplexing, beautiful, vital and strange. The beautiful and terrible thing that is happening in Iceboat is the slow loss of the buoyant mass of ice, and the eventual and inevitable slipping of the rower into the water. More than the aesthetic experience of the sublime, I am interested in the irrational fear of and wonderment in the uncontrolled aspects of the event. Jean-François Lyotard talks about the ‘event’, the experience of the immediate moment, which is always conceivably to be open and undetermined. I like that.

DS: You position the protagonist on the banks of the lake as well, watching the boat being rowed. What was the idea behind that?

NC: Ah, that middle section is the dream sequence. For me Iceboat is not a straightforward performance piece. I wanted to overlay some sense of my involuted desires and anticipation of release, to introduce a sense of my own subjectivity that is both watching and being watched.

DS: There are moments in the video when the protagonist stops, throws back her head in a moment of rapture. When the final negation comes, it’s swift, there one moment, gone the next. You catch the ephemeral. What are these moments about? What is the protagonist seeking?

NC: Deepika, before I answer, I would like to hear what you think the rower is seeking.

DS: Well, I thought the seeker was looking for some form of self-realisation. There’s despondency initially, then a eureka moment of sudden clarity – the rapture, that seems like a moment of resolve, like a revelation; then the play-out follows from that. It doesn’t matter if the self is present or not, any more. An acceptance of inevitability, ... the viewer knows what will happen and waits with bated breath. Yet, the fall through the water is so beautiful that one suspends what’s really happening – the horror – as we are caught up in the beauty… It’s the success of the work, this rough ride of emotions one goes through, both artist and viewer.

NC: Deepika, that is strik-
ingly put. The self-realisation for the rower, and for me, is embedded in seeking a union with self through a loss of self. When the rower slips into the water, the circle is closed. This is a world where ephemeral loss is part of a cycle, where control is lacking, and where conscious esses are allowed to fall apart.

**DS:** How did the sound for Iceboat come about? It melds beautifully, heightens the viewing experience. Do you commission sound pieces for most of your works?

**NC:** I don’t usually commission music, since I score the music or create the sounds myself, as in Sweetheart (2010-2011) and Minds to Lose (2008-2011). However, for Iceboat, I wanted to include a layer of composed and polished music to push the video further from the realm of the documentary. This is because I wanted the music in service of the meaning of the event, rather than using video simply to record the event. In Iceboat, I emphasise psychic effects and expression over representation, and allow the formal possibilities of the medium to help shape the work’s expressive energies. The audience’s task, and in this I agree with Arthur C Danto, is in understanding the emotion expressed, not simply in having it. I thought the music would support that.

I worked with the music composer, Mangesh Dhakde, to capture the experience of watching the rower, me, the protagonist, and for it to suggest aching and longing and expansive views of joy. I was terrifically excited when we were able to create sounds that matched the mood I sought. I rowed under a spell, to use a word that Louise Bourgeois uses to talk about how she makes work, and in Iceboat, I hope, the sounds create a spell.

**DS:** Similarly, in Leaf Fall (2007-2008) and Minds to Lose, one watches with this mix of slight horror at the obliteration of an entity as the invitation to enter the work. Could you tell us what is the common thread, if any, in your works? What do you seek through them?

**NC:** I like to think of my work as mildly and absurdly fearless in pursuing the negation of a bodily identity. For me art is a way to examine, tease, test reality. I set up absurd situations that are not regular or mundane, situations that allow me to peep into and participate in an alternate reality. Leaf Fall, Minds to Lose or Iceboat, all reveal a world that is on edge, where loss is central, and where matter is both revered and lost. I use material means to talk about the immaterial, about psychological and existential matters. My desire to disappear through the work is still a desire to be present in the work. I am a sculptor above all, and even in Leaf Fall and in Minds to Lose, I am sculpting in time, and the process of a sculpture appearing or disappearing is where the void, the metaphor of space arises. There is something of the self-portrait in the vulnerability, withdrawal and exposure to erasure implied in all three works.

**DS:** You deal with the phenomenon of life, which most hold sacred. In Minds to Lose you suspend it, in Leaf Fall you strip a peepal tree to a skeletal outline – yet there’s always this hope of regeneration...

**NC:** Earlier we were talking about the sublime. The sublime is a limit to the comprehensible in that it tests the ability to present the unpresentable, to control the uncontrollable, and yet the work conveys some sense of a future as open and hopeful, despite the tragic limit. So yes, there is something absurdly heartbreaking and dreadful about the actions in Leaf Fall, Minds to Lose and Iceboat, and yet there’s something uncommonly uplifting about the final work, just the same. The solitary leaf, the sole aesthetised body, the single lost boat, these are fleeting, ephemeral, immaterial, fragile; and yet solitude is freeing. All of these transcend the tragic limit and give ballast to the existential processes of transformation.