REVIEW

A STRANGE AND SUBLIME JOURNEY

Neha Choksi’s *Iceboat* performance addresses the experiences of floating and drowning in allegorical ways, claims Zeenat Nagree.

Neha Choksi’s recent solo at Project 88, Mumbai, mounted from the 3rd of October to the 16th of November, took its title from two works that comprised the show – *Iceboat* and *Sky Fold*. Choksi explored transience through narrative in one work and abstraction in another. The pivot of the exhibition was the former work, a 13-minute video featuring documentation of a 2012 performance during which the artist navigated a lake on a boat made of ice. The latter work, *Sky Fold*, looked like grid-driven studies of the sky, made using the cyanotype process that produces blue-and-white prints through exposure to light.

*Iceboat* interspersed footage of Choksi’s performance with shots presumably filmed later on, of the artist swimming underwater and standing on the shore of the lake. The video began with one such dreamy series of images of Choksi immersed in the blue water, bubbles of exhaled air floating to the surface. Choksi’s austere attire contributed to the languid, almost spiritual, tone of the work. Her flowing gossamer robe and shaved head recalled the figure of the renunciate. However, the rapturous pose she struck on land, her head thrown back and eyes closed, nearly teetered into the comical.

The nature of the journey itself – doomed in its outcome yet revelatory in its process – was the performance’s most defining aspect. When Choksi was first shown rowing the boat made
of ice, she seemed to be getting along ably. Neither the temperature of the ice nor the fact that the boat was rapidly melting interfered with the serene concentration with which she paddled along. But, as time progressed, and the boat threatened to tip over, Choksi seemed to be losing control. She began rowing in circles, making her struggle to keep going forward plain to the viewer. At the journey's end, Choksi was far away from the shore, surrounded by an expanse of shimmering water. Her clothes seemed to be melting with the boat, too.

In a 2013 interview published on the *Frieze* blog, Choksi brought up her "anti-materialist Jain inheritance" while discussing her practice. The reference is relevant to this work as well, particularly if one thinks of Choksi as a monk-like character performing an esoteric ritual. The Digambara sect of Jainism believes in the shedding of all worldly desire in order to attain enlightenment. Once initiated into the order, Digambara monks stop wearing clothes. This practice explains the meaning of the name of the sect – "sky-clad" in Sanskrit.

Choksi's older works are also useful in understanding *Iceboat*. The video *Leaf Fall* (2007–08), set in rural India, showed a group of people plucking a tree until all its branches were bare save for a single leaf. The interpretation of this act of erasure can be approached through another practice among Jain monks, of pulling out the hair from one's head one by one. However, Choksi's most significant preoccupation is the idea of absence and how it can be presented through a work of art. The theme propels *Iceboat* and other works, including *Minds to Lose* (2008–11), the third in Choksi's video trilogy, in which she anesthetized herself along with two goats, a sheep and a donkey, presenting their temporary loss of consciousness.

Like *Minds to Lose*, *Iceboat* was an act of surrender. Choksi began the performance not knowing how it would progress even if the end was certain. The artist seemed to have no definite course as she steered the boat across the lake. But, could the eight folded blue sheets of paper, collectively titled *Sky Fold*, be imagined as maps that guided the artist, its shades of blue and white representing the changing sky and the shifting sunlight? Despite their diverse formal qualities *Sky Fold* and *Iceboat* were coherent halves of a whole.