



Art Review:

Prajakta Potnis' show

A Body Without Organs

K. Sridhar

Tata Institute of Fundamental Research,
sridhar@theory.tifr.res.in

A Body Without Organs is an ongoing show by Prajakta Potnis at the Project 88 Gallery in Mumbai. Prajakta Potnis, a Mumbai-based visual artist, has through a consistent and conscious exploration of her craft emerged as one of the most important of a generation of mid-career artists in India. Eschewing the crass and the commercial, Potnis' style is instead a deeply meditative one and her works use a surface of deceptively passive calm to reveal disturbing, and often apocalyptic, worlds underneath. In her current show, Potnis displays a prescience of the impending COVID pandemic – indeed, her show opened just days before the world shut down – bringing us to countenance disease, both as personal dread and as collective dystopia. The artistic provocation for the show itself comes from Potnis' recent encounter with disease when her uncle was found afflicted by serious and recurrent lung infections. Her uncle had worked in a factory manufacturing detergents nearly forty years ago but his history had come back to haunt him when they found his illness was due to traces of detergent in his lungs, which had apparently remained dormant all these years and had now started frothing in his pulmonary tract. There are many registers here: there is a story of disease and personal trauma, a story about respiratory infections at a time when just about the whole world is literally gasping for breath, a historical detail about the uncle's workplace which brings to the fore questions about safety in the workplace ignored by capitalist greed, on the one hand, and questions about human-environment interaction, on the other.

A Body Without Organs is an evocative title for the show as it immediately brings to mind the two-volume work of Deleuze and Guattari, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* which develop the concept of the body without organs already proposed by Antonin Artaud in 1947. In these works, Deleuze and Guattari assail one of the most enduring binaries of all: the machine-organism binary, by turning it on its head and transforming the concept of both the machine and the organism in the process. Urging us to understand machines through their functions and not forms – a vitalism of the inorganic, as it were – and organisms through their forms and not functions, they valorise machines by arguing that machines are universal whereas organisms are limited. Their conception of machines allows them to view desire as a machine: desire is a process of production that gives rise to reality and desiring-machines are atomistic elements of social machines. This vantage point allows Deleuze and Guattari to reconceptualise Marxism from the position of Freudian psychoanalysis. In developing their ideas about the machine and the organism, Deleuze and Guattari arrive at the concept of *A Body Without Organs*. *A Body Without Organs* is a body not limited by the hierarchical organization of the organism and is, therefore, a site of limitless possibilities, of endless potentials. To make oneself *A Body Without Organs*, then, is to draw out and activate these virtual potentials. *A Body Without Organs* is the potential machine manifest in the organism and belongs to a fluid realm beyond differentiation and hierarchy. While the completely de-organized body without organs is empty and simply allows all flows to pass through it, and the one equipped with a healthy organization can be productive, there is also the abject, cancerous body without organs – this abject body without organs can overcome its condition and determine its own fate by exercising its desire.

When philosophical or theoretical ideas enter a cultural production, the translation is never intended to be a rigorous one. Even when it simply makes a reference or establishes one point of contact it allows the viewer to bring in their own understanding to bear upon the viewing experience. It is my understanding that the concept of *A Body Without Organs* was, in fact, realized way back in 1970 in the production by the rock group The Who called *Tommy* which was the first ever rock opera. A traumatic experience in his childhood causes the protagonist to lose all his sense perception making him *A Body Without Organs* and his exercise of will

to discover his potential is through his accidental discovery of a pinball machine (the connection with machines) which he starts playing with and eventually becomes celebrated as a youth icon – the Pinball Wizard. The resonance of the ideas in *Tommy* with Deleuze and Guattari's work is both striking and serendipitous because the works are contemporaneous – the production of *Tommy* may have predated the publication of even the first volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* – but it is possible, nonetheless, to read this connection. By choosing to name her show as *A Body Without Organs*, Potnis is establishing a definite link with the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari and allows for her understanding of her art works from that perspective.

The show brings together a set of paintings, a video, a sculptural installation, a projection of a set of images on slides and a set of X-ray prints all displayed in a manner to provide the viewer an immersive experience.

In the set of five X-prints collectively called *He woke up with seeds in his lungs*, Potnis displays X-ray images of assemblages of everyday objects. The X-ray reveals more of the assemblage than what is perceptible to the naked eye and yet the image is both unrecognizable and disturbing. The theme that dominates this set of works is that of a body playing host to an alien object but it is not the object or the body itself that is in view but its X-ray image which obscures even as it reveals more of the object. The reference to the lungs in these works also, in a Deleuzian manner, reminds one of the life-long lung illness and attendant respiratory issues that Deleuze himself suffered from having to eventually have one lung removed in later life.

Also, on display are a set of seven transfixing paintings – or more correctly, these works are hybrid drawing-paintings. Again the artist's engagement with the everyday object comes through in these works and the objects are presented in crepuscular shades and yet the works leave the viewer with a deep sense of disquiet. The images are inhabited by ordinary objects – there is a mattress in one, a whirring fan in another, a shirt and a towel hanging from a stand or a ring of smoke in yet others. The background is bare, the works are minimal and the execution is such that these images start speaking tales of dread and desolation. Potnis talks of these as memory sketches – these are oral narratives that she has

given artistic expression to – and, especially, when they are viewed in conjunction with the X-ray prints the grim experience of a hospital room is brought to the fore.

Floating Island is a series of more than eighty images that run on a slide projector which show foam building up and receding recurrently. Even though these are images from the domestic space of a kitchen sink, the images traverse global proportions and gesture towards growing toxicity in the environments we inhabit. Simultaneously, the domestic space is shown to become a site of toxicity.

A video installation called *Night Vision* shows images of two incandescent rings which could be eyes or, to use a Nabokov phrase, two holes in the mask of life.

Chronometry takes several forms but one measure of time is dissipation. A sculptural installation, *Attrition*, where a soap is slowly disintegrating with the drops of water falling on it speaks, in the context of the show, of time running out and the gradual but inexorable movement towards greater entropy.

Potnis' body without organs is not one that is miserable and defeated; it is not an object body. Even as it details narratives of disease and its dread, it signals to a world of possibilities because it is a body with a will to desire and a will to survive.

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Obituaries

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