

KIYOMI TALAULICAR'S ARCHAEOLOGY OF TRANSIENCE

DR. LISE McKEAN

A mysterious quality of our human minds and hearts is the capacity to experience at the same time perceptions, thoughts, and feelings that seem to oppose each other. Among the fruits of this peculiar capacity is aesthetic sensibility: our ability to make and be moved by art. In this regard, Kiyomi Talaulicar is at once a people's artist and artist's artist. In *Unlocking Stillness* she continues on an artistic trajectory that is inimitably her own.

Her wide-eyed exploration of inner and outer worlds gives rise to the oppositions her art embodies. The tension resulting from simultaneous apprehension of oppositions makes material and metaphorical appearances throughout her work. The human figure and personified objects infused her visual language in the past. *Unlocking Stillness* brings to the foreground an eloquent vocabulary of load-bearing walls.

As objects of contemplation, walls are not recent arrivals in Talaulicar's field of vision. During childhood she discovered a fascination for monsoon processions of moss and snails across neighborhood walls. Her archive of photographs and sketches—itsself evidence of disciplined looking and seeing with the mind's eye—testifies to intensive investigation of walls in myriad forms and personalities.

Unlocking Stillness discloses the artist's reverence for walls as lifelong companions. As guardians, walls shield us from the elements, yet time weathers them as much as us. Talaulicar's paintings evoke the seen and unseen action of time on surface and interior. Taking the walls and other objects she so closely observes as her starting point, she builds her works up layer by layer, and then scrapes and sands them to amplify the surface with subtleties of volume, texture, and tone. The largest paintings envelop viewers with the scope of her vision.

Fissure and slippage in *A Tribute In Stone & Shadow* act as counterweights to mass and heft. Above a pitch black space that commands attention hovers a floral medallion. The artist brings to her canvases the vital tactility achieved in classical Indian sculpture by imbuing stone with pneumatic form. Talaulicar walks the tightrope of balancing artistic and humanistic concerns. Happily for us, she reaches beyond the other side.

Like other works in the show, *Luminance* presents itself as at once readily decipherable and enigmatic. Its tonal variation and texture radiate an ethereal glow. More than a horizon, the painting's dominant horizontal element bestows equanimity. The seeming cracks and dark patches of *Luminance* and other works echo the secret of *Unlocking Stillness*: nothing is set in stone.

CONVERSATION WITH KIYOMI TALAULICAR

DR. LISE McKEAN

LM: This is a continuation of conversations that began when we first met in Chicago a few years ago. You told me that Morandi and Rothko as well as Nilima Sheikh and Zarina Hashmi are important artists for you. Could you elaborate on this?

KT: It's been interesting to think about these artists and some others as to why I feel I can identify with them. I believe it is due to their concerns and how they individually chose to express them. Morandi, for example, worked in still life with great tonal subtlety and sensitivity. He painted the same objects over and over. I am drawn to the simplicity of his choice of objects.

LM: And his objects were humble, everyday objects with simple forms.



PRELUDE | Acrylic, Ink, Pencil & Image Transfer on Arches Paper | 20.75 x 28.5 inches | 2016

KT: This focus creates a kind of beauty. It's about sensitivity, and approaching the same kind of object over and over is like meditation.

LM: And what about Zarina Hashmi?

KT: In her work, it's about exile and the search for home.

LM: How does that come across to you?

KT: It's through the minimalistic quality and the feel of essence in her work. Even her titles convey this. An example of this is *Home Is a Foreign Place*, a set of 36 woodblock prints that's at the Museum of Modern Art, in which she explores longing and memory.

LM: Nilima Sheikh works in quite a different idiom from Morandi or Zarina. I'm thinking of the large works in her show *Each Night Put Kashmir in Your Dreams*, which was exhibited in Mumbai, Delhi, and at the Art Institute of Chicago.

KT: I'm drawn to her for different reasons. She explores social issues—women, violence, Kashmir—it's about human issues and humanity. She draws on the miniature style of painting. Her use of color is quite unlike Morandi or Zarina. There is also a gentleness about her work.

LM: And where does Rothko fit into your visual vocabulary or practice?

KT: With Rothko, it's about how he wanted the viewer to feel enveloped by the work. Again it's related to intimacy and human warmth. He also was interested in giving the viewer a spiritual experience. I read about how he even wanted the viewers to position themselves at a certain distance to feel the work envelop them. It was about giving the viewers a spiritual feel.

LM: The Rothko Chapel in Houston is the culmination of these ideas. Especially the way the building itself and the paintings inside surround the viewer and create the feeling of a sacred space.

KT: It's been important to really think about these artists beyond their work and to understand what their concerns are and what they're trying to say. Bay Area Figurative Art, and particularly Richard Diebenkorn and Nathan Oliveira are also artists whose works I have been drawn to.

I remember years ago when I was initially living in the US, I visited a Diebenkorn show at the Whitney. I loved the elegance of his abstractions and the cigar box lids were just mesmerizing. What a feeling! Then I read more about it and happened to see *Man Walking* and more of Nathan Oliveira's paintings. There was something about yearning and nostalgia in his depiction of isolated figures. I used to have human figures in my work before objects took over as the personifications of the figure. Though I can't generalize this to all of his work, I found such an ethereal quality about Oliveira's figures. Yet they also were very familiar and had an openness about them. They were not overly specified. You were able to feel the human experience.

LM: Some artists prefer to leave their work untitled. As a writer, I find that the poetics of your titles open the work up to aesthetic possibilities beyond the visual. Yet at the same time your own distinctive visual language is apparent in your rendering of surfaces, colors, and forms. What's your process for finding and deciding on a title? That is, how does verbal language figure into your visual thinking and expression?

KT: The intention with my titles is for them to encompass the essence of the idea behind the work in relation to the feeling behind

the subject. I prefer to title the work instead of leaving it as untitled, as I feel the title is a part of the work. It's something more to give the viewer. It also brings me back to what was behind the journey of making the image. You're following your instincts, you're choosing to work with a particular image, but what was it that led you there? In the end, of course, it's the work and the viewer's own experience of the image. However, the title is also something that can be shared with the viewer.

LM: Do you come up with the title after the work is completed?

KT: Usually it comes after the completion of the work. Occasionally some lines from a poem or a drifting thought might give me something to work with too. It takes time and I take my time with it.

LM: It seems that it takes time because you're reflecting on your experience of making it, the feeling evoked by looking at it, and then you translate the visual language and experience into a verbal image. It's an intuitive process.

KT: Yes. There are times when you can't specify it completely, but you get a feel of the overall experience. Like in the recent work, it's about the walls as beings in themselves. That specific thought helped me title the work.

LM: Before we talk about the works in *Unlocking Stillness*, let's discuss the body of work that preceded it and was shown in Singapore and Chicago. I am especially interested in the objects the paintings depict and what you were exploring through them.

KT: The objects were about memory and nostalgia. They signified a special moment at a given time and how life changes with time. The significance of those objects, which evoke a feeling—whether it is a quiet joy, or loss, or how they touch you today in times that are constantly changing. For example, *Ode to My Father, 1&2*, are in reverence to his memory. *Missing* had a single sailboat on paper with striations like dry land. The fragility of the wooden boat contrasts in my mind with the huge container ships of today.

LM: Your past work discloses an ambiguity between figure and ground. The figures have the feel of being suspended in mid-air. In some of the works such as *Shrine* and *Window 2*, the ground or background seems to come to the fore. I'd like to hear about your transition to walls as the subject of the painting.

KT: These paintings treat walls as beings in themselves. I've been interested and photographing walls for years. I think the question about the trajectory is very intriguing, as though I have moved even further away from the figure. The placement of walls is what they become. For example, *Shrine*, reflects the studio as my sanctuary and the reverence I have for my tools. The wall helps carry them. *Window 2*, is significant in that a window is an open point of communication between both sides of the wall. The main body is the wall that's holding it. How would we have a window without a wall? It needs the support of the wall to be what it is.

LM: Do you think another part of what draws you to walls is that they're visually interesting? That is, the surface and texture of walls have visual forms and stories, just like we see shapes in clouds and make constellations of stars.

KT: Yes, and the ways that we decorate walls to make a pleasant experience out of this strong supporting structure also reflects our lives. Walls have stories, which I've always been drawn to. It's as though I could work on them indefinitely. As a child I loved looking at the snails and moss on garden walls after the monsoons and the trails that the snails left behind. People decorate their walls, but there's neglect too, which adds to the beauty of what they have withheld.

The culture of any place gets reflected in its walls. They differ place to place in their solidity and strength, colors and charm. For example, in Mexico, traditional decoration and rich colour are vividly at play. It's part of what makes up the feel of a place.



LM: Yes, the wall's material itself as much as what may be affixed or eroded from the surface contributes to its local character. I'm thinking of pink sandstone in Rajasthan, laterite in Goa, mud and woven palm walls throughout so much of India.

Many of your past works refer to everyday objects large and small. In these new works with walls, you take an object that surrounds us whether we are inside our homes or outside in the world. Indeed, as literal and metaphorical objects, walls have many different purposes. What are some of the ideas you're exploring by painting walls?

KT: Walls have always been around whether to protect, support, or divide us. They're constant companions. They withstand all that is happening around them, and what we do to them. They take in so much, and live through whatever we live through and their smooth polished surfaces or deep markings reflect this. They reflect our lives.

LM: Your works have been described as poetic and meditative. To me these qualities are related to the ways your paintings evoke facets of time—fast and slow, impermanence, change, and loss. Digital or print images don't convey the prominence of texture and layering in both your work on canvas and paper.

You use a range of techniques and materials to build surfaces. You have spoken elsewhere about this in terms of collage. Your process of layering and erasure through rubbing and sanding conveys an archeology of transience. Walk me through your one of your canvases, describing your technique and the thinking that underpins it.

KT: It's about life and the acceptance of its cycle of constant change and yet its beauty, which is eternal despite life's complexities. It's also about wanting to see this beauty in any given situation. *Luminance*, for example, is about the wall as a simple structure, but also about the strength and radiance in which it stands.

In *Luminance*, I wanted to build the feel of a wall, which I did by initially using acrylic molding paste like a layer of cement. I applied a layer of the paste in a way that felt I was applying cement to the structure, like a mason, trying to build this field. This made the process even more intriguing.

Next I began with a detailed drawing, which was then followed by painting. Then of course came the question of how I would paint it, as it wasn't like I was painting a regular wall of even colour. I wanted to add light for which I first needed the shadows.

LM: Is it unusual to paint shadows before light?

KT: It was kind of simultaneous. I went back and forth. It was like a breathing structure from light to dark and then light again. Each mark and application impacted the rest.

LM: It sounds like a dance of part and whole, of light and shadow. I'm thinking about how prehistoric paintings were often on cave walls. As if there is a human urge to mark the walls around us. Think too of graffiti. In fact, painting walls is a way of interacting more generally with space. Walls are integral to the history of painting. Without walls, where would we hang paintings?

Your paintings of walls may be as much a way for you to interact with the history of painting as it is with walls as object and idea. Here, I'm thinking about contemporary painting practices that dwell in their own materiality, as a riposte to seemingly dematerialized and fleeting forms of digital media.

KT: Yes, walls are indeed integral to the history of painting in both their narrative and structural role. I like to slowly build the wall as I paint it. I usually have detailed sketches of my concept or thoughts about where I would like an image to possibly go. Again, the visual that I would like to bring about may exist, but when the actual process begins, it takes me beyond that visual. What would it really take for me to build that?

LM: By building the wall, the dimensionality of it, you're also getting at the substance of the wall. By that, I mean the tension between the vulnerability of the surface and the solidity of the substance of the wall. The use of molding paste and other techniques of building up the surface also convey a sense of the substance.

KT: Yes, and the possible feel of its dimensionality, which for me also becomes part of the challenge and joy of painting. The work is of course is two dimensional, but the joy and pleasure of the painting process in this particular series also lies in the feel of working three dimensionally when I'm actually not. It adds a wonderful challenge.

ABOUT DR. LISE MCKEAN

Dr. Lise Mckean is a social anthropologist, writer, and editor based in Chicago. She writes about art, with a focus on artists in and from South Asia, and has published articles about the Kochi Biennale as well as about work by the Sahmat Collective, Sheba Chhachhi, Mahwish Chisty, Fatima Haider, Indira Johnson, Jitish Kallat, Amar Kanwar, Nilima Sheikh, and Vivan Sundaram. In 2013 she curated StreamLines, an exhibition of contemporary art in Vaishali, India. She is a consultant with Apne Aap Women Worldwide, an organization in India working to end the trafficking of girls and women into prostitution. She is the translator of Mridula Behari's literary novel *Something Unspoken* from Hindi to English.

LUMINANCE (Detail) | Acrylic on Carvas | 48 x 72 inches | 2016

