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Sanjukta Sunderason

‘SCULPTURE OF UNDULATING LIVES’
MEERA MUKHERJEE’S ARTS OF MOTION

Meera Mukherjee (1923-1998) is a unique, rarely-explored Indian artist whose distinct, yet profoundly personal presence in the trajectories of twentieth-century Indian art embraces not only her exquisite cire perdue bronze sculptures, but also her work as an artist-anthropologist travelling across the sub-continent documenting art and craft practices among artisanal communities. Meera’s itineraries, reflected in her substantial body of writings – surveys, reports, essays, books, stories and diaries – show the central place motion occupies in her work, whether in her journeys, her identifications and negotiations with her subjects, or her penchant for capturing the undulations of quotidian life, of labour and leisure, of anticipation and struggle. In this brief essay, I draw from her writings what I call her unique ‘arts of motion’: her journeys, her quests – formal and social – her identification with labour and material, and the stance she adopted in movements of postcolonial modernity.

Journeys

Sculptor Meera Mukherjee was born in Calcutta (Kolkata) in 1923. In 1937, she joined the Indian Society of Oriental Art – a centre for ‘Indian-style’ painting formed in 1907 – where she trained in a strictly non-realist idiom. Between 1947 and 1951, she studied for a diploma in painting, graphics and sculpture at Delhi Polytechnic in a very different idiom of academic realism. Following a brief encounter with iconic Indonesian artist Affandi (1907-1990), who was visiting India in 1951, and her first solo exhibition in February 1952, Meera left for the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Munich on an Indo-German fellowship in 1953, staying until 1956. Soon after her return to India, she was commissioned by the Anthropological Survey of India to document craft practices of metal-craftsmen in central India – a seminal project that established her name and would continue to shape her own artistic trajectory.

In 1961-1964, Meera became a Senior Research Fellow at the Anthropological Survey of India, while continuing to conduct surveys on metal-craftsmen across India and Nepal throughout the 1960s and 70s and incorporating techniques drawn from folk art into her work. The President’s Award she received in 1968 as Master Craftsman in metalwork testifies to an ambiguous attitude towards her artistic identity in the 1960s, before a commercial appreciation of her work emerged in the late-1970s.

As she journeyed, Meera developed her own cire perdue or lost-wax technique, inspired by the craftsmen she studied. By the late-1960s, her sculpture began to acquire a signature element of folk metal-craft...
technique with distinctly personal depictions of labour and leisure, myths and urban vignettes. She exhibited in Calcutta and Delhi, travelled to Germany, the United Kingdom and Japan in the 1970s and 80s, and left a substantial body of writing that reflects her journeys: field reports, research papers, essays and books from surveys, newspaper features, children’s books, and diaries.

**Quests**

Meera Mukherjee’s desire to return to the folk artisans of India was famously triggered by an admonition from her Munich mentor, Tony Staedler, who told her to search for her art in the local traditions of her own country, not in Europe. As her diary reveals, Meera set about looking for her ‘own way to myself, rooted in the great Indian tradition.’ Visiting the British Museum, she found striking formal similarities between Etruscan and Greek sculptures and Indian folk art and living traditions back in India. Upon returning to Calcutta in 1956, she worked as a teacher for a while but soon collected her meagre savings and left for the tribal heartland of Dandakaranya – inspired by the figure of a horse made in the region which she had seen at the residence of anthropologist Surajit Sinha. Her subsequent journeys across the tribal heartland of central India – around the state of Madhya Pradesh (separated into Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh in 2000), the south, the east and Nepal – were quests in pursuit of ways to create form interwoven with the lived everyday of the artisans she encountered. Her writings reveal what she learned from their work process, trades, myths and leisure.

As Senior Fellow of the Anthropological Society of India, closely associated with patrons and connoisseurs of ‘living traditions’ such as Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and sculptor Prabash Sen, Meera became what may be called an artist-anthropologist. Her documentary works of the period have the immersive ethos of documentary art: ‘Gharuas: A Metal Artisan Group and Their Art,’ *Man in India* (vol. 54, 4, 1974); *Folk Metal Craft of Eastern India* (New Delhi: All India Handicrafts Board, Ministry of Commerce, Government of India and Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1977); *Metalcraftsmen of India* (Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, Government of India, 1978); *In Search of Viswakarma* (Calcutta: Meera Mukherjee, 1994) (fig. 1).

While Meera’s documentation of craft practices in the 1950s and 60s echoed the state’s cultural mission to document folk crafts, her personal quests deconstruct the myths about these artisans. Writing on the community known as Gharuas, she noted that despite the common perception advanced by cultural or government patrons and academics, Gharuas were not tribes at all, neither were they itinerant gypsies. While they are not tribal, Meera wrote, their customers are. Similarly, she noted, Dhokra artisans refer to themselves as ‘Marals’, not by the name given by the urban craft enthusiasts who ‘discovered’ them. This is reflected in Meera’s critical work, exploring and documenting artisan communities as a representative of government initiatives, and the critical distance she took from this nation-building project by insisting on the socio-economic nuances within these communities.

Nonetheless, Meera’s anthropological quest was also deeply subjective and modernist: ‘Information about these groups was collected,’ she noted, ‘while learning their crafts as a professional sculptor.’ Her diaries reveal time and again how these twin impulses interwove: an anthropological documentary maker taking notes about tribal and folk craftsmen in her travels across the country, and a deeply subjective aesthete, battling through her own negotiations with the obstacles of tribal forms, as she became part of the cultural economy of Bastar where she resided for extensive periods.

As her own work developed amid this dynamic interplay of journeys and quests, Meera was conscious of the contradictions inherent in the postcolonial government’s patronage of artisans and their market integration. She noted, for instance, how their exposure to urban markets and state patronage – her initial focus – might paradoxically affect the scale and quality of the works of these artisans. To support artisans, she believed the government had to acknowledge their lives and livelihood, otherwise the pressure of patronage and commercial demand would stunt the creative process. She also wrote of her displeasure at the condescending, pedagogical posture ‘artists’ adopted towards craftsmen. Among her diary entries, we read: ‘Why cannot artists become craftsmen? In any manners, completely?’

**Identifications**

Those who have loved and written about Meera’s art, have noted her meditative absorption in metal-casting, music, stillness, labour and the quotidian, her withdrawn, private world, and her sympathetic and
syncretic eye. Meera’s early monumental works of the late 1960s and early 70s – the almost six feet tall He Who Saw (1968), and the 11 feet tall Ashoka at Kalinga (fig. 2) – both early attempts at using the cire perdue technique – gave way to smaller cire perdue compositions addressing labour in its multiple incarnations. Labour and movement lie at the heart of her oeuvre: whether in works that represent the motion of work, quotidian life, or those that capture struggle (figs. 3 and 4).


Fig. 1
Meera Mukherjee,
Ashoka at Kalinga
(author’s personal photograph)

Fig. 3
Meera Mukherjee,
Untitled (Smiths working under a tree).
Copyright: Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

Fig. 4
Meera Mukherjee,
Untitled (The Storm).
Copyright: Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi
It was while studying in Germany, Meera’s diary recalls, that she resolved to abandon painting in favour of a more labour-intensive art form. That was when she began attending Tony Staedler’s classes. It was Staedler who taught her that an artist should ‘become one’ with their material. This contemplative assimilation runs through Meera’s work – in her treatment of material (in her case, metal), and her treatment of subjects. Her work also bears a striking conceptual similarity with that of Henry Moore, whom she met on a visit to London in the early 1950s. Moore’s dictum that asymmetry is connected with ‘the desire to be organic rather than geometric,’ invokes an organic quality palpable in Meera’s work, whether monumental or miniature. As she noted: ‘When man is totally identified with the object or the idea – when the idea is not conscious anymore, but is totally merged with oneself – there lies the magic; that is total creation, with all its beauty.’

She also wrote enthusiastically about her affinity to the Indonesian artist, Affandi, with whom she worked during his stay at Santiniketan in the early 1950s, before going to Germany. It was Affandi, Meera explained, who taught her how to capture the prana – the life force: ‘sky, earth, trees, leaves, grass, man, pigs, hens – it is their life force that he unpacked and showed me.’ She wrote in her diaries time and again, about the life force of the metal, its character, and its undulation, with which she as the artist had to identify, and move. This identification with matter in motion, was what she saw as her sayyanista – her pursuit of truth.

Meera’s identification with labourers echoes her keen observation that their labour becomes invisible in the finished project; commenting on her work The Cablemen, she noted: ‘I have seen them struggle in huge projects. They remain anonymous, and are given no credit when the work is done [...] So this work is born partly out of guilt, and out of my own sense of identification with them.’ A similar identification pervades her work Andolan (protest, movement, resistance). Based on her personal experience of students protesting against the crumbling infrastructure of an art school, Meera created a labyrinthine sculpture layered with protesting bodies spilling out of floors and stairs, and trees growing out of peeling walls. The whole piece became an organic double movement – of politics as well as form: ‘I was so moved that I spoke out,’ Meera wrote later of her experience among the protestors: ‘As I spoke, I shook to the roots. Everyone was amazed at me, the boys and the teachers and the authorities.’ This tremulous human response is repeated in another work.
where Meera captures an earthquake in the city with a similar figuration of concrete and mass coming together, embracing humans and urban structures at a moment of disintegration (fig. 7).

Movements

When a Manchester Guardian journalist asked Meera Mukherjee ‘What in Calcutta inspires you most?’, she replied, as her diary entry on 7 April 1970 notes, that it is the city’s common people; those who toil each day, struggling to pull their lives forward, yet who persevere: ‘it is my inspiration that human beings survive despite such toil. This life force inspires me.’ Elsewhere she noted: ‘I work on two basic principles, one is celebration of humanism and two, a yearning for reaching beyond the quotidian and rejoicing in freedom and liberation.’ In a way, Meera’s humanism was rooted both in the domain of social labour, leisure and struggle, and simultaneously liberated in a more universalized domain of contemplation, myth and ecstasy. As critic Geeti Sen noted, it is the ‘human figure’, the ‘human predicament’ that absorbs Meera.

Meera Mukherjee occupies a curious, critical place in the movements of postcolonial modernity in Indian art: she deftly and consciously assimilated the rural and the tribal which dominated art in the 1950s-1960s with the vibrantly active, dynamic urban awareness of the 1970s. Mukherjee’s sense of discovering a national tradition, or forging the ‘organic’, also echoes the left-wing cultural movement that began in late-colonial India in the late-1930s, promising to bring art ‘to the people’. As artists and intellectuals travelled into rural and tribal hinterlands to visualise and integrate a non-urban imagery in modernist terms, India’s mid-twentieth-century primitivistic cultural project became entangled with a socialist political project in which the rural/tribal everyday became a resource for modernist art and radical politics alike.

In Meera, we see a return to this primitivistic cultural project of ruralism and tribalism in Indian modern art. This echoes, in a postcolonial context, the retreat of an artist such as Jamini Roy, who left colonial Calcutta in the 1920s to return to his native village to find a new formal simplicity in art inspired by rural forms and idioms. In Meera, folk and modernist form and subject engaged once again, as the post-colonial artist’s identity was reframed as artisan. This symbiosis was unique in postcolonial times; it combined an urbane humanism with a formalist as well as social consciousness of folk methodologies: what critic and theorist Geeta Kapur has called Meera’s art of ‘radically revised ethnography as well as from within the imaginative universe, by using the sympathetic sensors of art language itself.’

Despite her self-imposed isolation, Meera also joined artist collectives that sought to explore this connection of the social and the formal. Her work in the 1970s also represents a return to the monumental, while the trend was towards more concentrated formal experiments in small formats. Although geometrical works in wood and metal dominated, particularly in works of the new generation of sculptors in the 1960s, such as Pilloo Pochhkanawala (1923-1986) and A. Davierwalla (1922-1975) in Bombay, and the Baroda sculptors trained by Sankho Chaudhuri, Meera Mukherjee worked in a radically different idiom in metal, standing both with and outside peers such as Sarbari Roy Chowdhuri in Calcutta and Janakiram in the South, who employed iconic and totemic metal constructions on their own terms.

Patronage and installation itself were questions Meera battled with in the early decades of her career, coupled with the phenomenal material and labour costs involved in her massive projects. For example, it was only after it had lingered in her courtyard for many years that Ashoka at Kalinga was finally bought by the ITC Maurya Sheraton luxury hotel group in 1977, highlighting the uncertainty of patronage for non-naturalistic public sculpture in post-colonial India. While public commissions continued to focus on naturalistic works in the heroic mode in the 1950s and 60s, monumental structures such as Meera’s suffered long and awkward neglect before finding a place in the expanding art market of the 1980s.

Undulations

Meera received the friendship and patronage of many iconic figures in the intellectual and cultural scene of postcolonial Calcutta, including art historian Prithwish Neogy and Nirmal Sengupta; Humanysun Kabir, poet and pedagogue and Minister of Education in 1947; linguist Sunil Kumar Chattopadhay; artists Rathin Maitra and Gopal Ghose. Her diaries reveal her awareness of the covert cultural politics of the Cold War: in an entry dated January 1970, for instance, she noted that the Americans were buying the souls of artists they liked by occupying their sub-conscious, and India’s intellectuals were selling their souls to the Americans without being aware...
even where or when.22 The publication of her essay report ‘Gharuas: A Metal Artisan Group and the Craft,’ in both Man in India and Lotus: Afro-Asian Writings – organ of the Afro-Asian Writers and Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Association, reveals the many worlds she inhabited.

Yet her own diaries reveal a melancholy, a merging of personal and creative struggles – in a desire to perfect and reconstruct India’s indigenous (folk) tradition. When steeped in the labour of an artisan, she wrote, an artist must work harder: ‘The problems he will face will not be resolved by given stereotypes or formulae learnt by heart. The solutions he will have to find by his own struggle with ideas, materials, and tools. For the artist it will be a ceaseless, life-long struggle.’24 The ebb and flow of her art/creativity (rain, fire, shifting temperature of heating metal, viscosity, pores, casting process) seem to record an undulation of memory, pain, hope as much as of metal, wax, fire. It is hardly accidental that selections from her diaries were published under the title Chhanch-er Gabhir Theke (From the depths of the cast, diary of 1970) and Prabahita Jibon-er Bhashkarjya (Sculpture of undulating lives, diary of 1974).

When something grows, Meera observed in one of her diary entries, it grows with its own momentum, the labour of creation must match the momentum of the material.25 This undulation of (casting) life, is her signature idiom: ‘But nothing stays still,’ she wrote, ‘everything moves – whether one is willing or not one is chained to time which flows on.’26

Sanjukta Sunderason is a historian of twentieth-century aesthetics and intellectual histories of art and decolonisation. Her forthcoming monograph, Partisan Aesthetics: Modern Art and India’s Long Decolonization (Stanford University Press, 2020) and new work on post-partition visual art across India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, propose connected art historiographies from the Global South. She is based in the Netherlands where she is Assistant Professor of Modern South Asian Studies at Leiden University.

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NOTES
1 Mukherjee 1974, p. 288.
4 Mukherjee 1974a, p. 290.
5 Mukherjee 1974a, p. 287.
7 See e.g. Sen 1979; Chattopadhyay 1982; Guha 1996; Sen 1996; Sen & Ghosh 2019.
8 Mukherjee 1974b, p. 56. I have translated ‘prabahita’ as ‘undulation’ rather than the more literal ‘flow’, to capture the artist’s own sense of shifting momentum of her works and of metal itself.
9 Mukherjee 1974b, p. 58.
10 Moore 1966, p. 70.
13 Mukherjee 1970, p. 54.
14 Mukherjee 1974b, p. 81.
18 As quoted in The Margi and the Desi, exh. cat. 2004, p. 44.
19 Sen 1979, p. 5.
21 Kapur 2000, p. 368.
23 Mukherjee 1975, pp. 8-16.

AN IVORY ‘LOTUS’ TRAY
18TH/19TH CENTURY

Carved in the form of a lotus leaf, the interior with flowering and podding lotus flowers, lotus buds and leaves growing from bundled stems
L. 21,8 cm

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