

(COVER)

SUNOJ D

Between Land and Sky

Back Page
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(Details)

Contents

Emotional Geographies, Transforming Landscapes

I begin by quoting two instances of economic wisdom that relate to the issues that Sunoj Damodaran grapples with in his work.

I. The 2009 World Development Report 'Reshaping Economic Geography' published by the World Bank, argues that transformations along three dimensions - density, distance and division - are essential for development and should be encouraged. This is because places do well when they promote transformations along the dimensions of economic geography: higher densities as cities grow; shorter distances as workers and businesses migrate closer to density; and fewer divisions as nations lower their economic borders and enter world markets to take advantage of scale and trade in specialized products. The Report claims that the most effective policies for promoting long-term growth are those that advocate transformations along the dimensions of economic geography and economic integration, i.e. narrowing the gaps between producer and consumer, work and worker, urban and rural settlements and thus between resources and services and customers.

The conclusion is controversial. Slum-dwellers now number a billion, but the rush to cities continues. The main thrust of the argument, that access to global markets and services is essential for widespread development, is understandable but to co-opt the rural within the urban model of development is to deny the value of the rural space and give undue credit to the urban. There are many living in cities who are as poorly serviced and remote from globalizations' benefits as those living hundreds of kilometers away from basic services such as health and education. Territorial development is a misunderstood concept which tends to singularly imply transformation of villages and rural townships into urban settlements.

II. In an interview with Tehelka magazine last year (31 May 2008) Finance Minister P. Chidambaram articulated the view that India's development is closely linked with rapid urbanization. He said, "My vision of a poverty free India will be an India where a vast majority, something like 85 per cent, will eventually live in cities." As the current demographic stands this would mean reducing the current 70% rural dwellers to 15% and increasing the urban population from 30% to 85%, a 55% increase! Mr. Chidambaram's justifies this by arguing that, "In an urban environment it is easier and more efficient to provide water, electricity, education, roads...security rather than in 600,000 villages." Who will cultivate the land to feed our fast growing urban population? Mr. Chidambaram envisions an efficient and mechanized system, which will increase output in short term. What he didn't address were some of the other problems such relocation will cause, problems for instance of housing and employment.

Cities are growing; their borders are overtaking the farmlands that surround them. In *Between Land and Sky* tracks of lush green land are placed in trolleys to be carted away. In the background bulldozers are digging the ground in preparation for highrise buildings, like the one standing proud in the left hand corner of the canvas. This painting sets the tone – Sunoj’s paintings are situated in the battlefields where differences between urban and rural land use confront each other.

Land is an economic and emotional matter. The problems stem from the inherent difference in the way land is viewed and utilized in rural and urban zones. While for the former, land is productive and alive, for the latter it is a blank base on which to build houses, offices, shops, roads – concrete settlements. *Above Ground Level* is a painting in which multi-colored multi-shaped buildings are placed at the edge of land. The artist has cut away a piece of the metropolis, exposing a cross-section of the city and the land it is built on. On the roofs of the buildings are paddy fields. Sunoj seems to be pointing to an inevitable fact – if all the land is built over, then the roofs become the ground and thus the new harvest plots. At the centre of this settlement is a concrete water tank. Civilizations have grown around water bodies, rivers and lakes, for these provided water for cultivation. Modern day water reservoirs are man-made and perched on stilts.

It would seem that there is a new urban agenda for the world. *The Promise of the Metropolis* creates the lure of the big shiny city, a lure that every rural dweller is encouraged to feel and thus, in Sunoj’s words, “lose his farmerness”. A farmer is encouraged to trade in his fertile lands, open spaces, active and productive life, along with the debt, social hierarchy and inherited prejudices and move to urban dwellings - faceless housing in multiples of sameness, with no sign of humanity apart from the lights blazing through windows.

Thus with ferocity the urban module is applied to pastoral lands, without respecting or giving due credit to the lifestyles of farmers and rural dwellers. Can the city cope? The city promises modern services and facilities. No one speaks of the drawbacks of bursting cities – limited resources and jobs, rocketing prices, increasing waste, urban crime on the rise, road rage – but perhaps most importantly the loss of livelihoods of the farmers whose processes will get mechanized and they will not be qualified in cities to work in anything other than menial, low paying, low status jobs. That is not to say that farmers should not have the benefits of modern amenities but surely these can be provided without large-scale resettlements?

Chronicles of Movement of Paddy: The Deliberate Agrarian

Sunoj initiated the *Urban Farmland Project* in 2008. Motivated by the attempt to bring together the agrarian and urban, outside and inside, the decorative and the sustainable Sunoj has experimented with growing paddy on his roof top in discarded 2 liter mineral water and soft drink plastic bottles. In the course of this project the artist periodically brings the containers indoors where they function temporarily as ornamentation. The photographs on view record these moments, when rice becomes equivalent to a houseplant. It is an experiment in forging a relationship with crop and its harvest in the absence of open land.

In the past Sunoj has used self-portraits to focus on the meaning and symbols of identity, situating himself firmly in the centre of his work. Sunoj ancestors were farmers in Kerala. And while we may allow for the possibility of this work being a search to connect with his ancestry; this project is an exercise in looking ahead, not back. The processes of cultivation have grown into a tremendous industry but, at least in India, the individual farmer or small family holdings continue to be a large part of the sector. Will our generation witness the unraveling of a once-strong culture of family and community that is so common in the farmland of India? The project poses the question, if the future bodes ill for small holdings, then what will the thousands of displaced people do instead? If farming is what they know how to do, where will they farm in their concrete jungles?

Talking About Trees

City planning includes demarcated green zones. And much has been expounded on the need for trees in cities to combat pollution, heat and global warming. In his six painting series *We Proudly Plant Trees* Sunoj examines, with some irony, the motivation behind the act of tree-plantation. Each painting has a bracketed title explaining the purpose of the tree. For instance in *We Proudly Plant Trees (to learn)* school children are sitting under a large shady tree on blocks of brown land attending classes. In *We Proudly Plant Trees (to own)* a bonsai style tree in a pot is placed in a niche in a wall. And in *We Proudly Plant Trees (to die)* a man is hanging by a rope of a branch of a leafless, dead tree. Other reasons according to Sunoj, why tree plantation is undertaken is to commemorate and protest. In Kerala, protest banners and communist propaganda (for until this year the Communist Party formed the government of the state) are hung from the highest branches of the tallest trees and once claimed, no other banners can be hung on that particular tree! The usefulness of trees raises tree planting to an almost zealous activity and thus we have the urban jungle where trees stand alongside vertical apartment blocks.

Sunoj's preoccupation in this exhibition is two-fold: firstly, the visible loss of farmland to urban development and with it an implicit loss of man's relationship with harvest and cultivation. Yet the loss of a particular relationship with land may give rise to a new methodology, an urban language and in some ways a more intimate version of the man-land-cultivation triangulation. Acreage may be lost but the urge to grow and to be surrounded by greenery continues and finds new

manifestations in the cityscape. And in this urban landscape begins the second aspect of the exhibition, what kinds of relationships can we have with nature that is an uprooted but perhaps still workable agrarian model. And thus the man and nature association will get reconfigured in the new century.

Deeksha Nath, June 2009



(flip open page) "The promise of the metropolis" 71" x 143"

Acrylic on Linen



"Between Land and Sky" 72" x 95" Acrylic on Linen



(need a flip out page for this one/or double spread)

"Above the ground Level"

71" x 143"

Acrylic on Linen

We proudly plant trees



"We proudly plant trees" (to learn) 30" x 30" Silksceen and Acrylic on Linen



"We proudly plant trees" (and still plant trees)
48" x 36"
Silksceen and Acrylic on Linen



"We proudly plant trees" (to die)
38" x 38"
Silksceen and Acrylic on Linen



"We proudly plant trees" (to commemorate)
30" x 30"
Silksceen and Acrylic on Linen

Close up of faces



"We proudly plant trees" (to protest)
24" x 24"
Silkscreen and Acrylic on Linen



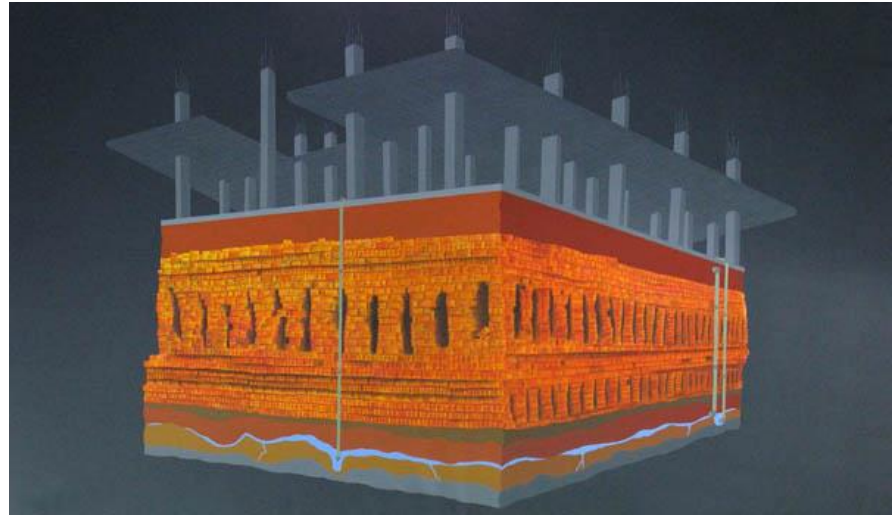
"Fountain"
60" x 46"
Acrylic on Linen

Urban Farmlands Project 2008- 2009



Urban Farmlands Project (drawing) 2008

Acrylic, Colour Pencils and Pen on Acid Free paper,
215.9 x 134.6 cm (85 x 53 in)



Untitled, 2008
Acrylic and colour pencils on Linen
193 x 109.2 cm (76 x 43 in)



"Urban Farmland Project"

30" x 22"

Inkjet prints on Hahnemuhle photo rag.



"Urban Farmland Project"
30" x 22"
Inkjet prints on Hahnemuhle photo rag.



"Urban Farmland Project"
30" x 22"
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End Credits