Time on a Canvas

by Janice Pariat

What is the essence of the director's work? We could define it as sculpting in time. Just as a sculptor takes a lump of marble, and, inwardly conscious of the features of his finished piece, removes everything that is not a part of it – so the film-maker, from a 'lump of time' made up of an enormous, solid cluster of living facts, cuts off and discards whatever he does not need, leaving only what is to be an element of the finished film, what will prove to be integral to the cinematic image.

~ *Andrei Tarkovsky,* Sculpting in Time (1987)

For the Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, the importance of visual imagery lay in its capacity to capture the flow of time through individual shots. He believed it allowed the viewer to truly absorb and experience the scene, to be lost in rapt observation. In his movies, the cinematic moment is transformed into one that is 'real' and unhurried, unconcerned with the plot-driven preoccupation of what would happen next. For Tarkovsky, the conflation of 'real' and cinematic time was achieved through poetic reflection and dreamy, haiku-like compositions. Ramakrishna Behera's works offer a startling exploration of these ideas through paint on canvas.

Born in Mayurbhanj, Orissa in 1977, Behera is an artist with the most scientific of occupations. Since graduating from the Indian Institute of Technology in Roorkee in 2000, he has lived in Bihar and worked as a chemical engineer with the Indian Oil Corporation. It is a background, he says, that "has helped him understand the cosmos through Relativity and Quantum Mechanics." And the cosmos clearly plays an important role in his work. Despite the lack of any formal training in the Fine Arts, he has had a talent for drawing since his childhood and has been painting seriously since 2003. Behera seems haunted by places and those are the ones he paints: "When impacted by a place I start a drawing and/or take pictures. Then they stay in my memory and when I become restless with their visions I start a painting. The time from the point of impact by a place to the start of a canvas takes at least months and sometimes years. When I start a canvas I draw, then redraw (like walking in the dark). Then images are added with the help of photographs for details." Behera is inspired by a multitude of artists: "Piero della Francesca for perspective. Tintoretto and Caravaggio for light. Van Gogh for mood and spontaneity. Cezanne for mixing perspectives and 'time.' Picasso for elaborating on Cezanne and going beyond anyone else. Matisse for form. Duchamp for purity of art to anti-art. Mondrian for plasticity. Giacometti for perseverance. Francis Bacon for flesh. Pollock for trance. Willem de Kooning for abstract movement. Rothko for balance. Barnett Newman for minimalism." It is this eclectic interest in many things – cinema, Western classical and modern art, physics – that has given rise to an utterly unique and invigorating style that the artist can arguably call his own. For almost a decade now, Behera's work has featured in exhibitions across the country and the world,

beginning with a group show, “Home Bound We,” at the Orissa Lalit Kala Akademy, Bhubaneswar in 2003 to a recent solo at Bose Pacia Gallery, New York in 2010.

His paintings have been described as “psychological maps” and “hallucinatory visions” or, as one reviewer has said, “a state of flickering consciousness when the world’s myriad bits and pieces struggle to cohere in your senses.” What strikes a viewer at first sight is the dizzying content of the works, the gallery seems to have sprung cosmic leaks and black holes emerge on the walls threatening to draw everything into their dark, murky depths. It takes a moment or two to figure what they portray, to piece together the multiple layers at which the painting functions, to adjust your sense of perspective.

The Way We See

One of the greatest landmarks within art history was the ‘discovery’ of perspective. The first known picture to make use of linear perspective was drawn by Florentine architect Filippo Brunelleschi, who depicted the Baptistery in Florence. This was a way to draw a viewer into the artist’s world and share his or her vision. It was the ability to approximately represent on a flat surface such as paper or canvas a three-dimensional image as seen by the eye. To use, as the Italian Renaissance artists did so well, the convergence of lines on the horizon to compose scenes of meticulous geometric precision. Perspective is the realist painter’s greatest claim to capturing or imitating the ‘real,’ it is what makes a painting a framed window through which we can look out of or into another world. It offers a way in which the scientific method of viewing the world could be hidden within the folds of clothing and flesh, behind structures of breathtaking scale and beauty. For Behara, however, perspective is something to be played with, manipulated and juggled, much like a magician or a conjurer. We are not speaking here of the Cubist’s ploy to abandon perspective altogether, or the Abstractionist’s aim to disconnect with reality. At times, Behera has been likened to Victor Vasarely, Bridget Riley, and Joseph Albers, practitioners of Op Art, a visual style that employs optical trickery to provide viewers with the illusion of movement on a static two-dimensional surface. While his paintings capture fluidity and motion, Behera lacks the devotion that Op Art artists show to repetitions of pattern and line, often in high contrasts of black and white. Instead, he distorts the plane of his paintings: in the work entitled “Two Books and a Pillow” a room is pulled like plasticine, as flexible and pliable as clay; in “Yellow Flowers in Mr. Jangid’s Garden” we are given an aerial view of a garden hemmed-in by streets, billowing in a fish-eye shot, narrowing at the edges. The buildings and trees are curved, following the lines of a distortive lens. The world is not represented as we see it, it is cinematically transformed or, in Tarkovsky’s words, it is “sculpted,” in this case quite literally via a brush that could almost be a camera.

The Layering of Time

In the late nineteenth century, a young French philosopher named Henri Bergson wrote a doctoral thesis called *Time and Free Will*, in which he introduced an idea opposed to linear time. Bergson distinguished between time as we actually experience it, lived time – which he called 'real duration' (*durée réelle*) – and the mechanistic time of science. According to him, real time cannot be analyzed empirically. To measure time through clocks and watches is to create a break or disruption in time. Real duration can only be experienced by intuition. It was a theory that greatly influenced a number of modernist thinkers and writers. In her novel *Orlando* Virginia Woolf wrote, "An hour, once it lodges in the queer elements of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented by the timepiece of the mind by one second." In *Mrs Dalloway* she explores a certain complex layering of time – personal and historical – where the character inhabits many different periods in her life in her mind while walking through London on a particular day in June in the year 1926. A moment, as we know, cannot be measured by the ticking of a clock.

In Behera's paintings, many different "times" conflate and meld into one another, they are visual extrapolations of Bergson's ideas and connect time with timelessness. As the artist says: "There is more than one notion of time in my works. Sometimes they are not just a spread of space and landscape but also of time itself. Through my space/void depictions I connect many 'times/spaces' at event horizons." Described as a theoretical boundary around a black hole beyond which no light or other radiation can escape, an event horizon (or the point of no return) marks a threshold, the thinnest line between the known and unknown. In Behera's paintings, landscapes pivot around black holes as though they are being drawn into the void. In "Tehri Dam Composition," for example, the landscape is pulled toward an off-centre point, in the process it fragments, exposing the starry void behind it. In "Cup of Coffee" a mundane object such as this forms the black hole into which the surrounding café (which could possible be in a shopping mall) is either disappearing into or emerging out of. Behera's painting manages to capture motion and stasis all at once. "Soccer Ball and a Blanket" shows the objects in a room (a television airing a football game, a steel cabinet, a bed) folding into themselves, spiralling toward the spherical object in the centre. From visuals that convey a sense of rippling motion, the artist can move to ones of startling delicacy. "Wild Rose" is a drifting portrait of a garden and apartment houses that dissolves into a single perfectly formed blossom. Painted against a void studded with stars and planets, the flower epitomises everything that is beautiful and mysterious about the universe. In "Abandoned Well" a well in a forest clearing becomes, quite literally, the black hole into which the trees, fields and sky are disappearing. The well extends into a dark cosmos. The composition of this painting is particularly fine, complimented by the use of bold, vibrant colours.

In Behera's hands, time stops being something mathematically measured, it is no longer linear, restricted and formal. Through the layering of the cosmos, a

particular landscape and the viewer's eye Behera spreads and braids time. He plays with it in childlike delight. It is fluid. He reminds us that we are creatures that live in multiple instances: the past, the present, and the time inside our minds. In certain paintings he picks a particular historical landmark and juxtaposes it against the cosmos, using the viewer as a reference point for the present moment. In "Ajanta Arc" the series of rock-cut cave monuments dating from around the second century BCE swirls against a background of stars, planets and, in the bottom corner, a galaxy with a sparkling sun. Similarly, in "Yogini Temples at Hiraput (Orissa)" fragments of the landscape around these medieval monuments drift through space, while a star is born in a cloud of dust and dark matter. Behera seems struck by particular historically important places including St Augustine's Church in Goa (a monument that he visually shreds), Likir Gompa in Leh (which is dwarfed by the surrounding mountains, which in turn are overshadowed by the cosmos), and the temple remains at Dwarahat (which blossoms like flower petals). Behera's paintings enhance the mystical air surrounding these places: "Dungeshwari Cave, Bodhgaya," for example, is a fantastical composition of stone, dark space, barren landscape, the shadowy depths of the cave and a purple- and red-hued cosmic dust cloud, each element placed side by side, carved into spherical wholes.

The Expansion of Space

In his book *Being and Time* (1927), the German philosopher Martin Heidegger outlines the idea of *dasein* – the German word for 'being-there' – and how it is bound by our temporality. Our sense of space and of the world is restricted and also shaped by the fact that we have a fleeting existence. Hence, where we are, and where we choose to be, are integral parts of our being, they are our spatial reference points in an intimate relationship with our surroundings, our homes, our rooms, our villages or cities, and ultimately with the world. In Behera's paintings his landscapes, (literally) bound by cosmic time, also resonate with the artist's personal presence. As he says: "My works always represent real places. Places I visit or my surroundings. My places are always impacted by voids and cosmic spaces, where it's mostly a void. That is how I impact a space to bring it out, to make it speak, to personalize it. My paintings are like 'Portraits of Places.' Actually those voids or galactic spaces are always there. We just don't feel them." Behera, however, visualises them.

The painting entitled "Shirts Hanging on a Wall" appears to be, at first, an uncomplicated painting of clothes, yet on a closer look, what seem to be ties are in reality trails of galactic space. "Book Open on Bed-table" quite literally has a universe spilling out of its pages, unrestrained by the text and paper. An ordinary waste basket in "Paper Bin" seems to be the beating heart that connects two lung-shaped interior spaces. A mundane domestic yard in "Banana Trees in Kitchen Garden" drifts through cosmic darkness, while in the diptych "Green Fields" open meadows expand and fold into each other like leaves. In "Fallen Leaves Cluster" Behera bends and sculpts a building, its garden and the surrounding trees into a marvellously complex composition that spirals, swarms and swims on the canvas. It's as though the very fibre of

our perception is disturbed. Perhaps the painting that best captures this fissure is “Rearranging Space – About a Meteorite” that shows an ordinary room filled with ordinary domestic things squirming on the canvas while a coal-red meteorite, shaped like a crescent moon, hurls through space. What is startling is the ambitious juxtaposition of scale between the small and commonplace and the cosmic.

Behera also takes the traditional form of landscape painting and transforms it, pushing its boundaries beyond physical forms and shapes. If he admires Stephen Hawking “for the amazing mental journey he makes through space and time,” Behera also offers his viewers a similar visual experience. “Matera,” for instance, could have simply been an image of a small town in southern Italy, perched atop a dusty canyon. Yet the artist sculpts the land, making it seem as fluid as a stream. “Pines at Pelling” captures a forest as though reflected delicately in water drops that have fallen on leaves. The road, snowy mountains and dark green trees are scattered around the canvas yet are not in disarray. The paintings “Along Spiti River” and “Along Chandra River” are convoluted compositions that mirror winding rivers, with the darkness of the cosmos also running through them. In a tricky play of perception, “Bolzano” shows a narrow road in this town in northern Italy with the central square separated into the sphere of a water drop, as though it’s being looked at through a microscope.

In this way Behera imbibes the deep ethos of William Blake; he echoes similar notions and prophecies about the universe. In his poem *Auguries of Innocence*, Blake writes:

To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

Similarly, when asked about where his interest in the cosmos springs from, Behara says simply that he has always been interested in these subjects: “I feel every grain has a cosmos inside of it. Or rather any tiny particle can engulf the entire universe.” It is also a characteristic that permeates the work of some of Behera’s favourite filmmakers. He feels he has a “metaphysical sense” similar to the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky, who is known for his poetic, dreamy cinematographic style that explores conflicts of the human spirit, of being and existence. In his painting “Reflections of Tarkovsky” Behera creates an empty room in brush strokes that are heavier and bolder than in other paintings, the mood is sombre, emphasised by the use of dark browns, maroon and black. Running along the floor of the room is a gaping fissure that threatens to rip the space apart. One can almost imagine a long cinematic take, coupled with silence. In “Remembering Tarkovsky” an empty corridor is twisted and ripped by a line of cosmic darkness. Unlike the others, this space is empty, with no stars or planets. The jagged line is threatening and sharp, cutting across the canvas like a knife.

The artist is also inspired by French film director Robert Bresson, whose works Behera calls subtle and 'earthy.' Known for his contribution to French New Wave cinema, Bresson often explored issues of salvation and redemption in a stark, subtle style. The characters in his movies represented humanity's larger struggle against a largely indifferent universe. In *A Man Escaped* (1956), for example, the protagonist (a prisoner of war) is positioned against a much larger concept of the divine. If, as Behera says of these filmmakers, "Their cinematography is nothing but their attitude" then we see similar, albeit more literal, juxtapositions between the mundane and the cosmic in Behera's paintings.

Dance of the Stars

The most profound effect these directors might have had on Behera's creative language, however, is the notion of the fluidity of time and space. Just as a camera manipulates these elements, a paint brush can also shape them on a canvas. Behera's images are far from static, they spin and twist, like a coffee cup swirled. Their movements invoke the space scenes in Tarkovsky's film *Solaris* (1972), and even more so Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), in which there are beautifully choreographed scenes of satellites, stars and planets moving through space in sync to classical orchestral music. More recently, these swirling cosmic movements can also be seen in Terrence Malick's breathtaking homage to spirituality *The Tree of Life* (2011). Behera's paintings aren't depictions of lifeless, inanimate things and spaces. As he says, "They are breathing. They expand and contract." They allow your eyes to wander across the canvas, searching for ways to weave the images together, deciphering perspectives, fitting the sky, galaxy and earth into place. Beyond the vibrant green of forests, the aching blue of the sky, the snowy white of mountain tops, the dusty, yellow-brown of parched soil, there are patches of profound and immense darkness, best explained perhaps by Behera's idea of his own artistic quest: "I am not searching for light. It's the dive into darkness that thrills me."

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