Squaring the Circle: Recent Works by Antonio Puri

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The local requires new meaning in a global world. In the end art becomes a local idea.

Hans Belting

Can a grid of squares and a set of circles embody emotions, experiences and states of mind? Are they stripped of cultural references and speak a universal language of contemporary experience? At the heart of recent works by Antonio Puri lies this central paradox- the geometry of human emotions!

While in western aesthetics, objectivity of emotions has been highly contested since the Enlightenment when the term aesthetics in its modern usage was coined. From Kant to Bullough, debates have been raging in the west about the subjectivity and the objectivity of emotions until modernists developed their own take on representation of mental states. The very rise of abstraction was hailed by early modernists like Clive Bell and Roger Fry as a new aesthetic democracy when the basic formal components like line, shape and color were believed to constitute human experience, accessible to all. No special cultural learning but a pair of eyes was all that the spectator needed to enter into this modern aesthetic experience. Today, after the cultural studies turn in social sciences, the plurality of cultures and their differences have been valorized and celebrated for over a decade. Now with the rise of neuro-aesthetics and inter-culturalism in the study of art theory, the pendulum appears to be swinging towards a new universalism that seeks commonalities across cultural differences.

Puri's abstractions can be located within the emergence of this resurgence of universal globally. They hardly fall within the strict purview of modernist abstraction. His style, in a sense, telescopes a wide range of legacy from classical abstractionists, the gestural of the abstract expressionists and contemporary neo-abstractionist. It has none of the pristine placement of forms in a neat grid or the anarchic brushstrokes of the tachists but the rectangles and squares float in this interstitial space between lucidity and chaos.

It was in idyllic island of Mauritius that I met Puri at an international workshop of Indian diaspora artists a few years ago. As a resident critic from India, I was struck by the vital energy that his style of working exuded and his intense absorption of this new, exotic locale. As if every branch of the new flora and the rocks in the campus could be charged with new semantics and brought within the arena of his canvas -literally and metaphorically. Of all the other participating artists from Guyana, Sri Lanka and South Africa, Puri's canvases posed a problem in classification. No

visible sign of the common symptom of diaspora nostalgia that compelled most artists of Indian origin to fixate their attention on Indian rites and rituals, mythology through which they explored their roots. Puri's canvases apparently distanced themselves from revealing such obvious marks of his Indian identity. Far from a denial of his roots, it is the apprehension of being put in a slot that lies behind the caution. After all, identity is not something to be staged via a predictable symbols and iconography recognizable as 'Indian' but impels imagination at a deeper level.

Perhaps the Indian imaginary lurks where you least expect it- not just in the evocative titles like *Himalaya* or *Healing* through familiar geography or the long civilizational history of esoteric mysticism that India is globally known for, nor in the Tantric geometry of circular *mandalas*- the traditional psychic diagrams used as aid in meditation. It is present as an epiphany in the linguistic register- in the way the commonplace vocabulary of squares and circles are troped and shifted off centre to arrive at a hidden asymmetry- what one of the renowned linguist-philosopher of 10th century, Kuntaka, termed as *vakrokti*- the art of troping that creates the poetic meaning.

Despite proliferation of geometric shapes on Puri's canvases, they pulsate with energy that lies beneath, and again and again, pick up seemingly random lines, squiggles or even graffiti like marks that lie strewn around. Moments of chance encounter with intentional planning and meticulous orchestration of pictorial effects.

If grid was the defining structure of early 20th century modernism in the west that blocked any easy entry of the narrative, in Puri's hands, it loosens and develops cracks that reveal the organic - even readable elements and textures from the real world, just as colours from one square 'leak' or 'drip' into the other. Just as the painted hands in *Destined* start with fingers poised in *abhaya mudra* or the gesture of benevolence (which almost parallels the gesture of benediction in Byzantine iconography) and then slowly the fingers splay to fan out in all directions breaking out into a wild dance! Hence this grid is not about containment but excess!

So the story does not unfold laterally as in a classic story telling mode but vertically layer by layer where the concentric circle suck your attention into its depth as if induced by heavy slumber. The squares float across the thick medium of paint brushing across bits of the real-strings, x-ray images, and tangible shadows. In this slow process of dissolution, the forms fold in upon themselves in *Orphan* and leave behind the chromatic world. In this alternation between the monochromatic and the colorful, unfolds an abstraction of expressionism- an abstraction that invokes the visceral world of wounds, pain, and the feeble pangs of rationality. If we return to the emotive aesthetics of the *rasa* theory, the pain represented belongs not to a specific individual but a generalized state experienced by humanity at large. If emotions can be re-imagined as 'ownerless' and dissociated from ego, Puri captures it via the universal language of line, shape, color and forms in our "post-ethnic world".

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