

I wish my hair was as long as yours

Madi Acharya-Baskerville



'Somewhere Else' — an essay by Stephanie Straine
Curator of Exhibitions and Projects, Modern Art Oxford

Madi Acharya-Baskerville

Solo Exhibition

Magdalen Art Space
Magdalen Road Studios
Magdalen Road
Oxford
OX4 1RE

Preview

Thurs 10 Oct 2019
6.00—8.30pm

Exhibition

Thurs 10 — Sun 13 Oct 2019
2.00—6.00pm

Closing event with artist's talk
Sun 13 Oct 2019
3.30—5.00pm

Acknowledgements

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Exhibition Text
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Project Space

Front and back cover **Kicked the Bucket** (2019)
W75 H72 D35 cm
Found wood, found plastic, beadwork, textiles, hair extensions

‘Somewhere Else’

Stephanie Straine

Curator of Exhibitions and Projects, Modern Art Oxford

Longing seems an appropriate word to begin with. A desire to be someone or somewhere else. A slightly confused craving that issues from a place of mixed emotions feasibly including condescension, uncertainty, perhaps even repulsion. *I wish my hair was as long as yours* (2019) is a sculptural installation by Oxford-based artist Madi Acharya-Baskerville that gives her exhibition its title, and that manifests longing as a physical entity. Composed of multiple separate elements that hang from the ceiling, it synthesises potency on both a material and narrative level. Hair is, of course, a symbol of power (let's not forget Samson), but also too often its association is with the subjugation of women trying to live up to patriarchal society's impossible standards of beauty. The politics of hair and hair envy are knotty and convoluted, much like these sculptures we find ourselves confronted with.

In proximity, the initial impression that this work may be comprised of human hair or synthetic weaves recedes. Instead, we realise that we are faced with nets and fishermen's ropes, bound, knotted and woven in parts with textile additions; an intervention that is not immediately apparent when looking at the installation as a whole. The artist collected these washed-up nets from specific beaches on the Dorset coast with a history of shipwrecks.

I wish my hair was as long as yours is inspired by an Indian miniature painting which portrays the story of Lord Krishna stealing the clothes of young women who are bathing. They return from the water to discover their saris missing. Krishna has draped them over tree branches – these hanging forms implying both the presence and absence of a body. He hides in the tree waiting for the women to approach, exposed. In her work Acharya-Baskerville conjures this story's associative threads of disembodied presence, desire and envy, as well as the undercurrent of impending danger. The associations with hair prompted by these entangled fishermen's nets cannot be shaken off. They kept returning, unbidden, again and again. The artist even notes a personal dimension, comparing their surface textures and undulations to 'my hair when it hasn't been washed for a while'.¹

On closer inspection we might notice a formal tension: that the black nets are more or less unknotted, while the green ropes and nets are more or less intact. There is not much of the found textiles that dart their way in and out of this nautical support system: they are mainly offcuts of silk fabrics used for saris, given to the artist by her mother (often reluctantly). The work's form – in its partial unravelling approaching formlessness – is fully determined by the materials themselves. They lead the work, and the artist, to where they need to go.

Suspended in the centre of the room, the artist invites visitors to move between the hanging tendrils, to interact with the work and touch the briny, sand-encrusted textures. You need to get inside this installation, to understand its opposing energies of attraction and revulsion; captivation and disgust. The knots reach down to head or chest level for most people. The need to anthropomorphise is irresistible. This is not a static, immobile piece of sculpture. It moves, breathes – changes each time it is installed, changes with the air currents and responds to the movement of bodies that enter its space, flowing much like the tides that washed its constituent parts onto that beach. In many ways this sinuousness works against the static grid of its suspended ceiling structure. In this underlying duality we might recognise correspondences with various post-minimal sculptures, including those by Eva Hesse and Sheela Gowda, who often utilises actual human hair in her vast knot-based installations.

¹ This and all subsequent direct quotations from the artist are taken from the author's interview at her studio, 17 August 2019

Many more of the artist's found objects are gathered from the same stretches of Dorset coastline (Church Ope Cove, Portland and Chesil Beach, to be precise). It has become a place of pilgrimage for her. She returns to the same site, again and again, never sure what she will find. Always left in the hands of fate. Acharya-Baskerville's interest in the coastline stems from its status as a place that connects us to other cultures, as do the fabrics and beads that she collects. Her object components and fragments all come from somewhere else (whatever that might mean today).

Kicked the Bucket (2019) is part of a series of small works collectively called 'The Human Factor' (nodding to the 2014 Hayward Gallery group exhibition of the same title). Of course, we recognise the term 'kicked the bucket' as a rather blunt metaphor for death, but this artwork title is also completely unmetaphorical. During their post-utility half-life, these deteriorating objects get squashed or squeezed in certain ways that crumple or compress them to look like parts of the body. The latent energy of such applications of physical force crackles under the surface of what we see.

We could say that Acharya-Baskerville's primary interest is in materials that have a capacity to exist in the same place for a long time – things that don't decay very easily. Their origins may be as household or industrial goods that have been discarded, but the sea brings them back, returning them to our attention as an unwanted incursion in the coastal landscape. They remind us of ourselves, and they are a reminder that not much of what we produce is truly disposable. As an assemblage artist, she's fascinated by how things break down, how they react to their environment and take on the patina of events, journeys and time itself. There is a tenderness in this process of retrieval from the environment, of resituating an object as part of a new articulation and configuration. She slowly begins a procedure of assembly that starts with simply standing, looking and feeling. As Acharya-Baskerville comments: 'I like when something holds its own form, without me doing anything. There's a nice movement when something comes together.'

This almost mesmeric juxtaposition of materials produces an uncanny effect whereby entirely separate found elements appear naturally contiguous with each other: as if the artist sourced them in this already hybrid state. The plastic arm of a baby doll is a spontaneous growth emerging from a preserved piece of yew wood in *Burning Desire* (2019). This embrace of chance and the resultant serendipity of forms is all a matter of serious play: the ability to let things come together and fall apart throughout the course of making work in the studio. This process of play in the studio is not necessarily linear; the artist readily admits that often things happen organically, without a plan in mind. Through this gradual method of layering and suturing her found objects, the materiality of these emergent sculptural works mirrors the layering of the stories held within them: those religious, historical, mythological, social and environmental narratives that underpin the objects both separately and together.

As a core aspect of her practice, Acharya-Baskerville feels very strongly about not adding something new to the world. She does not purchase new materials, nor does she believe that she is making something new. Her work requires that she make use of what is already freely available and in circulation: cast-off, discarded, and unwanted. This logic is the basis for everything else that follows. She considers that her work is a collaboration with the materials. One of the first tasks after collecting materials is to sort them into classificatory categories, slowing accruing large containers of stones, textiles, rubber, dolls, plastic toys, etc. The artist routinely keeps materials in her studio for long periods of time before she works out how she wants to use them. In this sorting and storing procedure (not dissimilar to the logistics of a recycling plant or charity donations warehouse), there is a sedimentation of time, both before and after collection.

As the materials are her collaborators so too occasionally are moths: a partially moth-eaten Kashmiri shawl becomes the basis for a feather pattern within one new hybrid small sculpture in a bird-like shape, *Here to Stay* (2019). This relates to Acharya-Baskerville's avoidance of artistically induced destruction: she only cuts up a fabric once it has been eaten, so that partial absence is already present. With such textile incorporations the forms are contoured with paper, Polyfilla and mediums, and combined with areas of painting that mimic the missing textile patterns. The artist likes the idea that at first sight the viewer is uncertain what is collaged textile and what is painted pattern. *Here to Stay* brings forth another duality in its title: an apt description for the utterly non-biodegradable plastics she collects, as well as referencing the post-Windrush communities and cultures that are 'here to stay' in post-Brexit UK. The uncertainty and the matching affirmation linger in the mind.

From the tiny to the monumental, Acharya-Baskerville often produces works at very different scales simultaneously in her studio. She values the preciousness of being able to carry something with you: the jewel-like concentration of time and energy afforded to a delicate and intricate small-scale sculpture. The importance of painting to her practice is perhaps surprising, given her devotion to found object collaboration and synthesis. However, it is in the practice of painting that the artist sees an equivalency: the long time required to make a painting parallels the duration needed to achieve the patina of these objects in the sea. 'It's like slowing down time, and I think about my practice as honouring this elapsed time,' she observes. This reconciliation between lived time and the time of making is what fortifies her work's sensation of mutual hybridity and cohesion. These sculptures stand both together and apart, offered up by the artist as a reflection of their complicated histories, and ours.



I wish my hair was as long as yours (detail) (ongoing)
Found fishing nets, vintage silk, textiles



I wish my hair was as long as yours (detail) (ongoing)
Found fishing nets, vintage silk, textiles



Burning Desire (2019)
W25 H60 D25 cm
Found wood, pyrography, acrylic paint, jewellery



Here to stay (2019)
W22 H22 D13 cm
Found plastic, textiles, acrylic paint



Fake it till you make it (2018)
W83 H78 D27 cm
Found wood, found objects, textiles, beadwork, acrylic paint

Madi Acharya-Baskerville was born in India and spent her early childhood there often returning there since moving to the UK. She graduated with an MA in Fine Art at University of Wales Institute, Cardiff. She lives and works in Oxford, often travelling to the Dorset coast and surrounding forests for inspiration and sourcing of materials and objects.

Exhibitions include 'by the way' Lewisham Arthouse, London, (2019), 'Dancing with the Corporeal', No Format Gallery, London (2018), 'and the value of nothing', Studio 1:1 gallery, London (2018), 'Object', hARTslane Gallery, London (2018), 'The Cellar' Angus Hughes Gallery (2017), Material World, SJE Arts, Oxford (2017), Absent Beach, (Solo exhibition), Vinyl Deptford, London (2017), 'Sanctuary, part 2', Brunei Gallery, London (2013), 'Sanctuary, part 1', National Museum of Kenya, Naibori, Kenya (2011), Umfeld<->Inwelt, Fraunmuseum, Germany (2007).

Curatorial projects include 'Objection' Angus Hughes Gallery, London (2018) and Jam: Cultural Congestions in Contemporary Asian Art, South Hill Park, Bracknell (2010)

Open submissions and awards include, ArtCan Open, Trinity Art Gallery, London (2019), Fe/Male, AIR Gallery, Manchester (2018), Summer Exhibition, Royal Academy of Arts, London (2016), Wells Art Contemporary (2012) and Grants for Arts Award, Arts Council England for an international residency and exhibition in France (2008).

www.madiacharya-baskerville.org

Reading List

Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Duke University Press, 2010)

Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (Penguin, 1976)

Sigmund Freud, *Essay 'The Uncanny'*, In *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Vintage, originally published 1919)

Susan Hiller, *Myth of Primitivism* (Routledge, 1991)

Andrew Topsfield, *Indian paintings from Oxford collections* (Ashmolean Museum, 1994)

