

Presenting the Absent

Representation of Maternal Memory, Embodiment, and Motherhood in My Art

My paper discusses my drawings, paintings, and installations from the first decade of the 2000s, which have grown out of my experience of motherhood as a daughter, being pregnant, and mothering in the postnatal phase. The paper focuses on representation of these experiences in my art making, with specific reference to the nonfigurative expression of my works—that is to say, maternal-mothered bodies, including mine, my mother’s, as well as my daughter’s, are absent in my emotive expression.

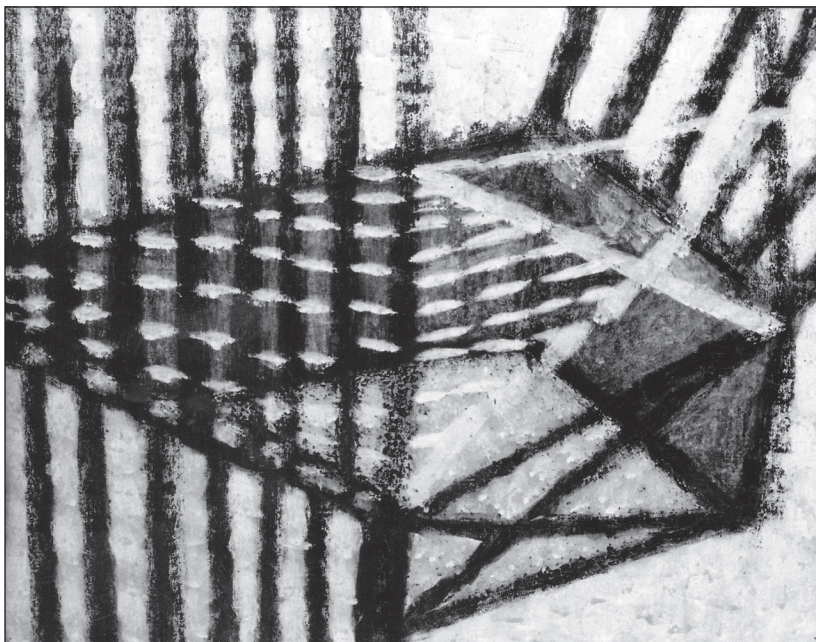
My works of art from the first decade of the 2000s encompass my three art projects—*Yesterday, Once More* (2002), *Transit Spaces* (2007) and *Home In/Out* (2010)—and are connected in ways, which are both contextual as well as visual. The maternal as an experience within and through the body and its nonfigurative representation constitute the core of these projects.

At the level of the concept lies an interest in expressing my relationships within the maternal hemisphere, which include those ones biologically created, both as a daughter and a mother, between my mother, my daughter, and me. *Yesterday, Once More* is my cathartic response to my moment of difference between my mother and me; *Transit Spaces* deals with my experience of maternal embodiment of my daughter Meher, and *Home In/Out* is the extended experiences of motherhood after childbirth. The experiences stemming out of these relationships have shaped the different contextual approaches to the projects as well as the stages and variations within the project itself. The works bring in both the biological and physiological dimensions of the relationships, as well as the interpersonal ones, which further chart the course of the temperament or mood of the works.

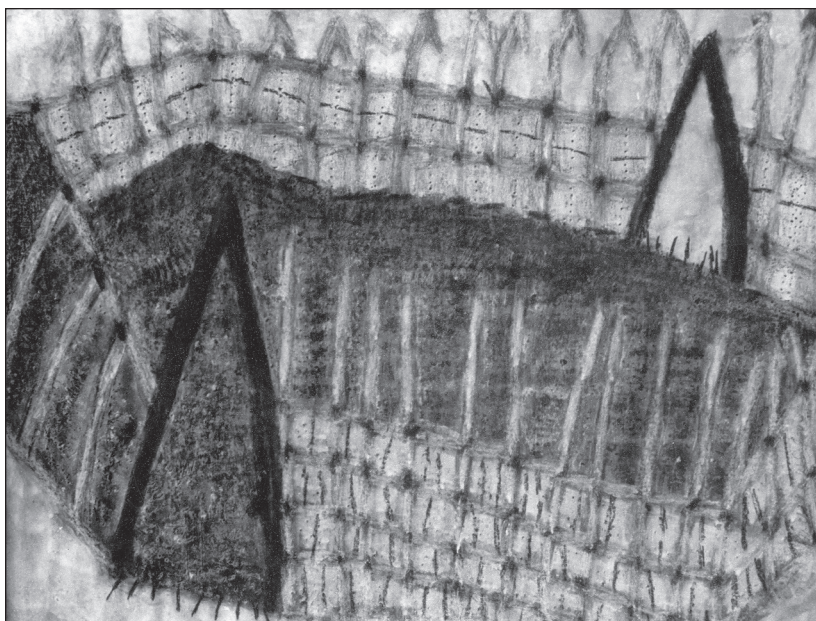
The nonfigurative representation or the absence of the maternal-mothered bodies brings forth a pertinent aspect of my art making. This non-apparentness of the physicality of the mother or daughter in visual form defines the manner in which I subconsciously chose to express the emotional, biological, and psychological currents of the maternal. The physical absence of the bodies did not occur as a conscious choice. Rather, it was the result of an inclination for finding meaning in the relationships between forms, objects, sites, and spaces associated with the maternal-mothered bodies in their life, of which the bodies were actors in real life. On another note, it was also the scope of the metaphorical and metonymical meaning in the forms and objects, owing to their inherent characteristics, that could be affiliated with the maternal, which I realized could help me in expressing the same.

The absence of the maternal-mothered bodies made way for a presence of human life differently. It brought in the scope to express and experience the maternal-mothered bodies through a sense of their presence rather than through the recognition of their physicality. As an mother and an artist, I found exploring the maternal world through such a visual detour natural. For me, the process was intuitive, both at the level of making the choice of absenting the bodies as well as presenting the presence of the absent through their objects and sites. But the extended realization stemming out of such a visual expression was that it could possibly cause the viewer to either sense disengage with the works on account of the maternal or provide ground for an orientation toward a metaphorical and metonymical deciphering of maternal forms. This is a possibility which I chose to undertake and often encountered responses to it during exhibits. But charting a new course of maternal dialogues was in sync with my own maternal emotions as an artist.

The first of the projects, *Yesterday, Once More*, is a series of drawings on paper and paintings in acrylic on canvas. The body of works is a cathartic response to the tensions between my mother and me. Our intergenerational differences and opinions on socially constructed paradigms of social behaviour formed a major part of our different opinions, which are presented in the claustrophobic architectural constructions. Created largely in monochromatic black and white, these works held both the anxieties of the past as well as the anticipations of the future in an Indian society. However, no human bodies, neither mine nor that of my mother, are a part of the works. Nor are there any signs of cultural affiliations present. Instead, fences, gates, grills, monolith buildings, and barriers picked up from different places recreate the mood. These forms were clubbed together to create imaginary spaces for maternal-mothered bodies to “have been in” or to “be in.” With a sense of controlled spaces, cautiously drawn areas, restricted movement, boundaries and socially appropriated placing of gendering (in forms such as *stapu* or “hopscotch”). Within the choice of



Ruchika Wason Singh, "Spaces of the Past-II" (Project Yesterday, Once More), 2000, conte, oil pastel, acrylic and Sumi-e ink on paper, 30 cms. x 41 cms.



Ruchika Wason Singh, "Spaces of the Past" (Project Yesterday, Once More), 2000, conte, oil pastel, acrylic and Sumi-e ink on paper, 30 cms. x 41 cms.

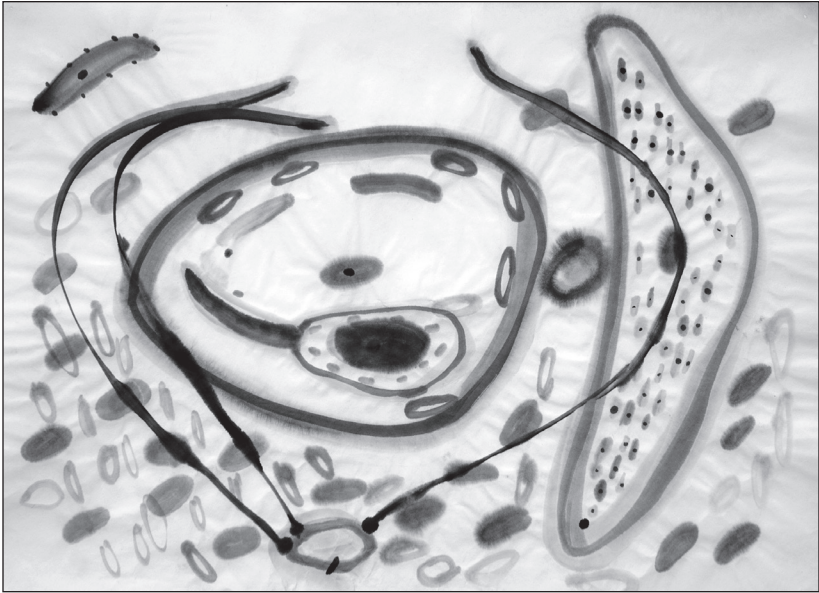
absenting the bodies, I imagined the movement of the maternal bodies within these spaces through these forms. The metaphorical forms, through the structure of constructed spaces they create, suggest the pattern of movement of the maternal-mothered bodies. The emotional cathartic purging lies in the sense of resemblance of the mood that these spaces create. Drawing and redrawing them in charcoal and black conté is a physical act, but it brings into their fold feelings that confront and challenge them.

In *Transit Spaces*, the botanical world created the route for expressing both my transition as an artist-mother as well as a new range of forms to voice maternal embodiment, as I conceived my daughter Meher in 2002. The shift in my identity within the maternal sphere was now my very emotional vocation in expression. Created mostly on paper as drawings as well as on Japanese *shikishi* and *washi*, the works started almost parallel to my pregnancy.

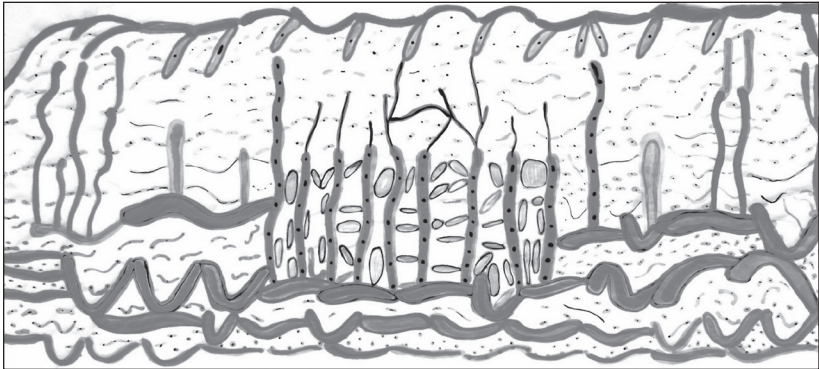
During this period, I became sensitive toward my own body as it was undergoing several changes. I became interested in the processes of growth and germination, of birth and reproduction, of flourishing and nurturing. These processes were also found in nature—in plants, trees, and microorganisms. The shift in my body reflected in the shift in my sense of self. I began to relate to and engage myself in activities, such as gardening, watering plants, and planting new ones. It shaped my emotional response to my own parallel bodily experience of conception. It began to surface in my art.



Ruchika Wason Singh, "Womb Bloom" (Project Transit Spaces), 2004, pencil on Indian handmade paper, 69.9 cms. x 105.4 cms.



*Ruchika Wason Singh, "Ephemeral Spaces I" (Project Transit Spaces), 2005,
Sumi-e ink on Washi, 26.67 cms. x 38.1 cms.*



*Ruchika Wason Singh, "Transit Spaces III" (Project Transit Spaces), 2002,
watercolour on Washi, 36.83 cms. x 74.93 cms.*

My focus was not on the depiction of pregnancy but the process and the emotions connected with it. The plant bodies and amoebic forms replaced the maternal bodies. Roots, shoots, and saplings replaced parts of human body. An interest in pollen—as in forms coming together or longing to come together to realize life—could be seen. Between this space-time duration field of the pollen coming together lay the experiencing of the anticipatory joy and anxiety of birth. Hence, drawings often began with simple dots or marks with pencil or charcoal on paper, which suggest the emergence of life.



Ruchika Wason Singh, "Anticipatory Celebration" (Project Transit Spaces), 2006, conte and charcoal on paper, 22.86 cms. x 30.48 cms.

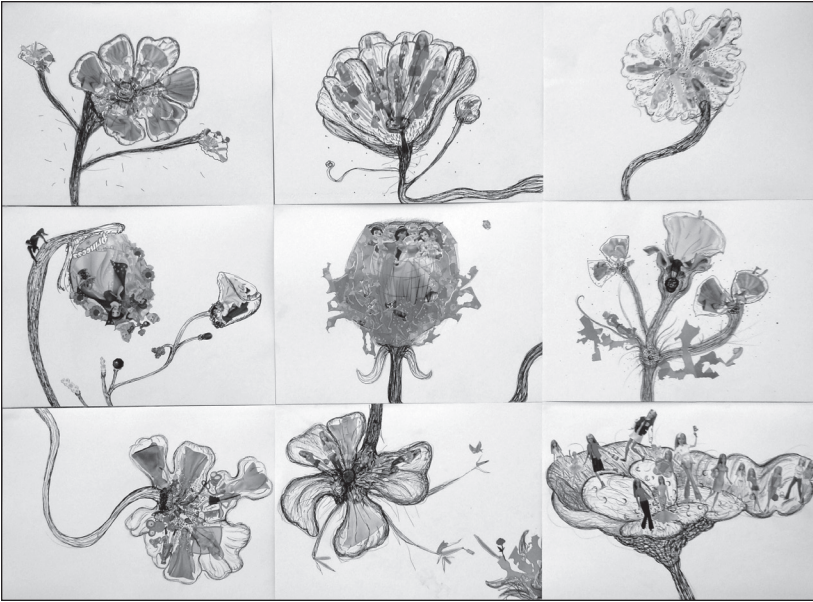
"Making marks" has a different connotation here, as it is suggestive of the signs of birth. In experiencing such a process, the focus shifted from depiction or recognition of the actors to the love between them and the emotions that they share or are about to share. The energy created by several small forms sprouting out with life gave me a sense of coalescence with my own inner self and connected me with my yet to be born child. The drawings and paintings gradually evolved into a hybrid form of a womblike tree or a treelike womb in which the commonality of germination came to become a visual form.

The womb-tree-womb evolved as a singular potent form, which continued well until the end of my pregnancy.

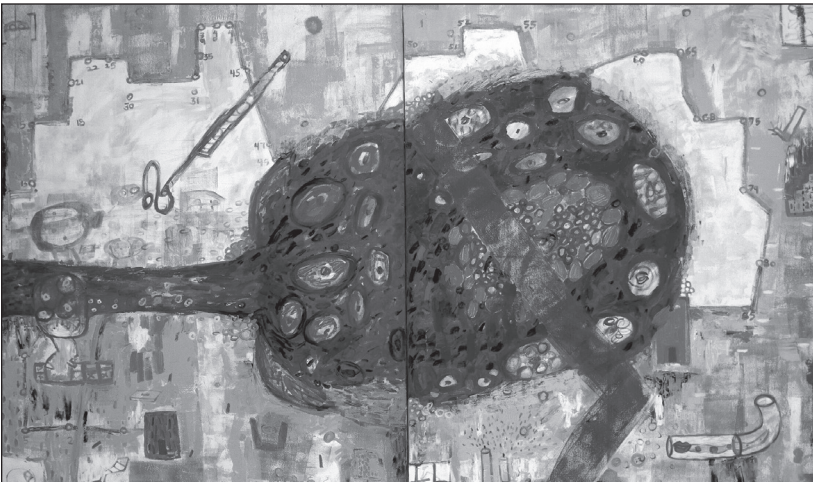
In *Home In/Out*, the womb-tree-womb opened up space to create a new world of maternal joy of postnatal life. The domestic space also became the new home for maternal care outside of my body. My relationship with my daughter Meher within this new space is where growth, nurturing, feeding, and caregiving became the focus in both my everyday life and art. The baby's crib became space of security and comfort. Other forms—such as the found cooking spoons and the cartoon stickers from my daughter's "girly" world—also emerged. These metonymies became my source of expressing my maternal experiences routed through them, which included the anxieties of motherhood and the joys of the kindergarten life. The crib as a space of nurturing drawn in charcoal on paper also became a sign of the anxieties surrounding the baby's health and wellbeing. In its empty space, I saw both hope for the future as well as the dangers of the outside world. This space within the crib became like a fill-in-the-blank for me, which if I left empty would make me sit at the fringe of my thoughts of both present and future. The cooking spoons were used to create an installation along with my daughter's toys and notes for me, which I



Ruchika Wason Singh, "Homegrown Spaces-I (A Transitional Dialogue)" (Project Home In/Out), 2008, conte, pencil, and charcoal on paper, 50.8 cms. x 66.04 cms.



Ruchika Wason Singh, "Global Garden-II" (Project Home In/Out), 2008, pen, pencil, and laser stickers on paper, 83.82 cms. x 114.3 cms.



Ruchika Wason Singh, "Wishful Spaces" (Project Transit Spaces), 2006, oil on canvas, 193.04 cms. x 254 cms.

had collected over a period of time. The objects were those used between Meher and me for a silent dialogue in the everyday. Cooking for me is an expression of providing care. Serving food, thus, became a dialogue of love, of which the

cooking spoons were a symbol. My daughter's notes for me were her requests and comments on my mothering. These objects were reflections on the warmth of our relationship in which I saw us. I also created a new botanical world with the stickers with cartoon characters, such as Barbie and Cinderella. The characters merged with plant life to create an imaginary botanical garden in which I sensed her presence.

In both *Transit Spaces* and *Home In /Out*, Meher and I are absent. But the transitions and temporalities of our relationship—from biological to emotional and from imaginary to real—are evident through the visual symbols. My creative process has been focused on presenting the nature and mood of the maternal relationships rather than on making the actors in the relationship physically present. In making them conspicuous by their absence, I have tried to present maternal memory as an embodied experience of maternal life and motherhood, as one would feel it before seeing it.