



Literary efforts: (From left) Persian Mirrors (ballpoint and hand-cut text collage on deacidified reclaimed book pages); Woman in Love (incense burns on hand-cut text collage on deacidified reclaimed book pages); and The Code of Love (acrylic on hand-cut text collage, on deacidified reclaimed book pages) ■ COURTESY TARQ AND ASHISH CHANDRA

Words are not futile devices

Youdhisthir Maharjan’s debut solo show plays with the fluidity of language to create whimsically repetitive artworks

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In the lyrics of one of Sufjan Stevens’ songs written as an ode to a lover, is the phrase “...words are futile devices.” Stevens’ words don’t quite apply to artist Youdhisthir Maharjan, as the existence of 26 letters has served as fodder for his solo show that explores the materiality of text. Titled *An Unquiet Mind*, his work is a collection of artworks made unconsciously, by using reclaimed text and meditatively obliterating alphabets and words through numerous techniques.

Pages from books have taken a new shape on the gallery walls. These are sculptures of sorts with their own unique personalities. By doodling on some, colouring with ink, cutting, pasting and burning the words in a second-hand book, the artist has separated the original meaning of the text from its title, and created his own interpretation. “Alphabets could be converted into whimsical shapes that were universally accepted rising above the limitations of a language,” writes Amit Kumar Jain about Mahajan’s works in the catalogue essay.

It’s apparent what the artist is trying to convey right from the first few artworks that you set your eyes upon. Like in ‘Letters from Kathmandu’, the pattern created using the existing words, forms a sketch of a skyline. Or in ‘The Last Song’, the joining of the letter “O,” creates an illustration of musical notes. And while all of these drawings are significant to their book title in one way or another, Maharajan insists he doesn’t know the visual outcome of a page when he begins his process. “After a visit to numerous thrift stores, and sifting through a number of books, I pick them according to their title. That inspires the pattern, design, illustration, and the aesthetics. Then some pages speak to me, and some don’t,” he explains.

On repeat

The repetitive patterns zig-zagging from across letters, was something that the artist began experimenting with during his undergraduate degree in creative and experimental writing. Maharjan’s deep interest in literature took on a visual form after he was first introduced to Samuel Beckett’s famous two-act play *Waiting for Godot*.

Unlike other pieces of writing that had a traditional beginning, middle, and end, Beckett’s play had both acts almost identical to one another. Making the narrative cyclical without any real conclusion. “You could have a 100 acts in the play, and they would all be exactly the same!” exclaims the artist. His Buddhist and Hindu beliefs that encouraged the idea of reincarnation, made Maharajan realise that he wanted to work with “the act of futile repetition,” as Jain puts it.

Past inspirations

Even though the artist has now settled in the United States, his disciplined, and meditative artistic process is the result of years in military school in Nepal, and an unstable political environment. Having grown up in Kathmandu, and struggling with family discontent when they learnt Maharajan wanted to pursue art, has played an impact in his art. The fact that he’s a self-taught artist, with a degree in art history, helped him understand art, rather than merely making it. “I think it’s important to know why you’re making something, the true reason behind it. That’s how I got interest-

ed in the conceptual form of art making,” Maharajan shares.

What’s interesting to see is the way the artworks have a sense of connectedness even though the patterns may seem scattered. With glistening indentations made with scribbles of ballpoint pens like in ‘Persian Mirrors’, or folds of paper to create the ebb and flow of water in ‘Of Murmuring Streams’, Maharajan uses the tactility of the page as much as he uses its space. The burning desire that comes with the passion of love, is displayed in his artwork ‘Woman in love’, where a circle envelops the centre of the page, filled with burnt words. While the circle itself is symbolic of femininity, Maharajan is trying to recreate the feeling of love, and not its definition. “I’m looking past the prescribed meaning of language, How I would experience love, not what I’m

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YOUTHISTHIR MAHARJAN’ Artist

told love is,” he says.

Maharajan also plays with light and shadow to experiment with the way the viewer perceives the text. In one of his larger artworks, ‘We’ll Meet Again’, the placement of the pages, and the shadows of the missing letters being projected on the wall, constantly come into view and disappear depending on where you’re standing. “I’m trying to encourage the viewer to shift their perspectives, and therefore shift the meaning of the text,” explains Maharajan. He also delves into how the artwork is made using two parallel lines, with the intention of touching upon how parallel lines never meet. “We’ll meet again. They’re trying to meet, but it’s a futile attempt. The parallel lines are fighting to get to one another despite all obstacles,” says the artist contemplatively.

Collector of books

Through his journey of furiously scavenging for the perfect book that can take the form of his muse, Maharajan has also had a few glimpses of serendipity. Since he’s collected over 300 books, he often loses track of the one’s he has already picked up. To think that this

happened with a novel titled *Look Again*, of which he unknowingly collected three copies, seems like a lucky coincidence. Maharajan decided to arrange the same pages of each of the three copies next to one another, and created a design that’s as identical to one another as possible. “It’s hard though because even though you’re repeating the same simple algorithm, you’re bound to get a different pattern,” he explains.

Even though Maharajan has a library of books collected over the years, he hasn’t read even one of them. He believes that by reading the text, he will become preoccupied by the original message of the author, “and then the work tends to be what the author wanted it to be.” The artist treats the book as readymade material, where the author name, text, story, and information are all irrelevant. “This gives me a sense of freedom of what I want to do with the words,” Maharajan elucidates. He is also sure of working specifically with English texts, as he’s trying to take something familiar to most audiences and turn it into something unfamiliar. “I want to create a new language that’s alien and eligible,” says the artist. “If I work in Devanagari or Arabic, it’s already foreign to me and the viewers.”

Work in process

The artist is most comfortable working out of his studio in Boston, but is not strictly bound to creating there. All he needs are a few books, his knives, pens, and a table with a lamp, to make a workstation. The show in itself took 18 months to create, with the peeling worded artworks being the most time consuming, but also therapeutic. Maharajan mostly worked at night with the accompaniment of soft music, and the occasional comedy show playing in the background. “Like it is with anything, the hardest part is to begin the work. But once you start, you don’t want to stop,” he says laughing.

While the show is called *An Unquiet Mind* a lot of the works hold a meditative quality. But the artist explains that they’re quite the opposite, “it’s what goes on in your mind in those moments of quietness. You realise how loud silence can be.” The multiple circles that dot the eponymous artwork of the show, are representative of the feeling of eternity, of an inescapable journey, where the mind is in a constant state of flux between the external and internal voices. The constant repetition in his works tries to emulate that. When asked if it ever gets frustrating to recreate the same patterns multiple times Maharajan says, “it never gets frustrating, but it can get tiring.”

An Unquiet Mind, is ongoing at Tarq, Colaba until March 8