

## From the Roots

Chris Clarke, 2022

I'm not going to pretend that I know much about braiding, its deep historical and cultural roots in religion, fashion, ritual, social status, adornment, as a marker of identity or mode of communication. From within a Western context, at least, it seems a fairly gendered activity, replete with connotations of femininity and care, but, perhaps also, can be considered as a way of containing unruliness, of imposing order, even beauty, on a mass of irregular, wayward strands. From this loose premise, *Braid* allows one to unravel some of the threads that tie together these artists - John MacMonagle, Samir Mahmood, Edith O'Regan, and Amna Walayat.

Despite their various backgrounds, practices, and approaches, it was their proximity to one another, in the shared premises of Sample Studios, that initiated this exhibition. Casual chats, studio visits, planning sessions, and, during the extended pandemic lockdown, email exchanges, zoom meetings, texts and phone calls: these interactions gradually pull an exhibition, an idea, into shape, as shared interests begin to converge, and difference finds a common ground. Distinct experiences become interwoven, into a singular body that, nevertheless, retains its individual character and idiosyncrasies.

The events of COVID are, of course, one unifying experience. And one strand amongst the many. Edith O'Regan's work here is perhaps most explicit in addressing this, as might be expected from her background as a community medical doctor. But it is grief that informs each of her pieces. *Final Breaths (a requiem)* captures the quietly insidious, unyielding and implacable encroachment of the pandemic, through a delicate arrangement of small glass spheres, each holding the carbon dioxide expressed in a single breath. A curl of gold filament, precisely 0.2 milligrams, marks the amount found in the human body. 22 orbs represent the number of health care workers who died of COVID. The quantification of the body, of the death toll, is itself a mode of abstraction, distilling the individual experience of each victim into a number, a measurement, and there is a tension, between hard data and visceral reality, that pervades O'Regan's work. The fragile lines of silk thread that (appear to) bend into curved arcs, or the strung threads that gently narrow into a peaked arch, hovering against a mottled disc of shimmering gold. An array of separate, solitary elements are combined and directed towards an undivided mass.

This latter work, entitled *On a day when the wind is perfect*, is also an homage of sorts, with its component parts referring to the practices of her collaborators and co-exhibitors. Amna Walayat similarly imbues her works here with gestures of solidarity. Three self-portraits, delicately rendered in watercolour and employing the techniques of Indo-Persian miniature painting, convey symbols and signifiers relating to others in the exhibition. A filament of golden wire runs between the central figure's fingers and teeth, ensnaring the body, interweaving with a bridal veil: the work's subtitle *building a home with thread* evokes the complexities in establishing a new life, away and out of place, from these multiple loose fibres. A glass jar, placed underneath the painting, suspends a single gold string in water, like a vessel for preserving a sacred relic. In another,

adjacent work, the artist is portrayed holding a padlock and a ribbon, a bare glimpse of the Irish landscape through a window, while, just out of frame, a faint outline of stacked suitcases refers both to the bridal dowry that Walayat brought with her to Europe and to the recurring motif of John MacMonagle's nearby works. Dialogue always comprises an intermingling of the known and the new, the external with the familiar.

Baggage, and its contents, informs the series of works by MacMonagle. There is, again, a personal connection. The artist's mother passed away after a period of convalescence in a nursing home, with his sister called on to clear away her belongings. These items all fit into three black bags, 'three bags full,' the sum total of a life contained. In his selection of works, the motif of black bin bags recurs - as paintings and as a sculpture of three sacks dangling from the stems of a tree (albeit one constructed from a broken desk lamp). For MacMonagle, there is an absurdist, Beckett-like, bleakness to the scenario, but one might also find a form of catharsis in refinement and repetition. The reduction of an individual life to its sparsest residual effects is countered by the profusion of different versions, as if persistently adding more belongings, more objects. In *That's All There Is*, a triptych of acrylic on paper works, the swirling, hectic brushstrokes imply movement within, a pulsing force enveloped in black plastic, pushing against the material. The confinement of unseen objects belies the irrepressible desire to accumulate, assemble and itemise, to permanently memorialise the ephemeral.

One might draw a line here to Samir Mahmood's work, like the tubular conduit that breathes from one mouth into another in *Agonism / Antagonism*. This process of resuscitation isn't entirely reciprocal though: another portrait of the artist looks on, outraged and excluded. The sense of otherness is aligned throughout with notions of enclosure, immersion, a collapsing of the body into an amorphous, abject form. The artist's background in embryology seems pertinent here, particularly in his pairing of digitally-collaged mutant-like configurations, of pink thighs and stubby fingers pressed into flesh, hair and skin. But it is his position as a queer, Pakistani migrant that challenges preconceived ideas of bodily integrity: the body is a sensory interface between the external environment and inner fluctuations, a container that finds itself permeated by the conditions of one's surroundings. The sacred is made profane - vessels used to purify the body before praying are affixed to the buttocks of a figure, scenes from traditional Mughal and Raj-era paintings are overlaid with distorted and deformed limbs - and, in the process, the iconography of one culture transitions into a new one.

The braiding of these practices thus becomes a mode of syncretism, the merging of different cultures and contexts into a newly unified whole. Yet these strands are never wholly absorbed, their essential character doesn't disappear. Rather, they remain visible, discernible, knotted within a tangled mass but ever present. One simply needs to take hold of a loose strand and follow it back to its source.