

AVANTIKA BAWA

MATHESIS: DUB, DUB, DUB



AVANTIKA BAWA,
Mathesis: Dub, Dub, Dub, 2009, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable.

Photo by David DeSouza. Courtesy Gallery Maskara, Mumbai.

Whitewashed house bricks, dozens of stacked slate-gray rectangular forms and a discreet video projection were neatly arranged on the floor of a softly lit, shadowy room in Avantika Bawa's first solo show in Mumbai. An eye-catching line of iridescent orange paint sloped diagonally across the white wall facing this architectural accumulation of objects. In the background, one could hear an oddly beguiling cacophony, as the strains of Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Étude* (1952) were interspersed with static and loud hammering. The seminal work of musique concrète—a midcentury music genre based in part on the principle that the origins of the sounds heard be unclear—was combined with noises definitively born in the space: Bawa made audio recordings of the show's installation and added them to the soundtrack.

With every juxtaposition, the 37-year-old installation artist hoped to facilitate an embrace of contrasts. The two-sided title, "Mathesis: dub, dub, dub," combines the ancient Greek word for "learning" and the incoherent babbling of a child who has yet to receive formal education. The coolly neutral crates clashed with the hot orange dash of paint: in formal terms, "Mathesis" pitted compositional rigor against the unbalanced chaos of spontaneous instinct. The artist also balanced movement and stasis. The white bricks stood in a snaking line, leading the viewer toward the immovable, piled-high mass of wooden and cardboard boxes, ladders and sheets of metal. A video projection animated the accumulation of objects with a single black line, which hovered on and around the hulking edifice, outlining its contours. Boundaries were constantly in flux.

To appreciate this installation as more than a sustained exercise about opposition, some context is required. Bawa's father worked in the navy, and the artist grew up in Navy Nagar, a section of South Mumbai, near Gallery Maskara, that houses military staff. The storage cartons and tools in the central assemblage were reminders of her childhood

there as well as a nod to the gallery's own past: its high-ceilinged spaces were once used to store cotton. The installation was about local and personal memory, but it was about displacement too, for the installation's components had multiple pasts and uncertain futures. The boxes, crates and ladders were on loan from neighboring galleries, while the sheets of corrugated iron—scrap metal often used as roofing in Mumbai's shantytowns—were gleaned from the street. After the show, the borrowed tools were returned to their various owners, and Bawa professes to be unsure of their fate. Thus, the wholeness of "Mathesis" was temporary. Perhaps its underlying impermanence symbolized Bawa's own existence as a so-called diaspora artist. She is an Indian living between Atlanta, in the American south, and New Delhi.

Tellingly, her interweaving of ideas of transit with transitoriness—transport boxes fixed firmly in place and an artist whose "place" is the last location in which she has found herself—evokes the spirit of the paragon of the contemporary diaspora artist: London-based Indian sculptor Anish Kapoor. "Mathesis," in fact, shared traits with Kapoor's *Svayambh* (2007), a massive 30-ton block of red wax installed at Kapoor's retrospective at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in October 2009. As *Svayambh* shoved its viscous bulk between the museum's rooms along a motorized platform, splattering gilded archways with coagulating matter, it literally pushed the boundaries between places and states, which is exactly what "Mathesis" attempted to achieve. The comparison, though, shows that the younger artist has much to learn.

Bawa's own representation of an in-between state relied too heavily on viewers' awareness of her sentimental attachment to Navy Nagar as well as the history of the various materials she accumulated, for the blue-gray cuboids manufactured little drama by themselves. While the show gestured thematically toward instability, it seldom compelled the viewer to actually experience it—save for one element. The slanting orange line painted on the wall was satisfyingly disorientating: thicker at one end than the other, it carried the kinetic impact of Op Art, appearing to swoop and shudder, forcing the viewer to feel a sinking sensation as they gazed at it. In an otherwise sincere but fundamentally flat-footed presentation, the diving orange line physically conjured that combination of fear and anticipation that follows those who live in constant motion. It is the feeling experienced by a passenger in an airplane taxiing unsteadily toward an unfamiliar destination, when the past and the future connect themselves. Bawa, with her tightly controlled, prescriptive methodology, would do well to give herself over to the mystery and powerlessness of such a moment. ●

ZEHRA JUMABHOY