Essay: Means and Meaning

Helen Scalway, 2009

The Moving Patterns exhibition at the Royal Geographical Society in London was without any one overarching or monolithic narrative. It was a display of traces of various trains of thought, some still in the process of becoming, pursued through acts of drawing, concerned with the ‘textile shop’ and the ‘museum’ textile collection. ‘Drawing’ was engaged in an expanded sense in this attempt to explore one aspect of cultural exchange, ornament, within the larger political and geographic relation between Britain and South Asia in colonial and post-colonial times.

The result was an installation set up to hold, if only for a short time, an unstable abundance, a gathering of multiple shifting narratives. In the fashioning of diaspora space there is neither wholeness nor stillness, nor can there be. The installation sought to enact some ways of narrating, whether through collage, diorama, diagram, collection, ‘archive’; with an awareness of being located, in the Society’s building, in a very specific context: in the heart of the South Kensington knowledge-base, close to the Natural History and Science Museums, to Imperial College, the Royal College of Art and the Albert Memorial.

The installation invited viewers to make connections and above all to look from different viewpoints. I invited various artists, who can each claim connections both to Britain and South Asia, to contribute, in order to create a vital element of visual dialogue amongst a variety of approaches and ways of seeing other than my own. I am indebted to the artists concerned, Nilesh Mistry, Samar Abbas, Sumi Perera, Anjana Patel, Nagat Al-Mahi, and the Banganis, Punam and Jagmohan, for their generous participation.

Meanings only ever come from the means used. But for many artists, a ‘methodology’ is discovered only in the event or looking back retrospectively at processes which first seemed to appear inexplicably. I was no exception; my means seemed to emerge of themselves from the material. At first I walked and looked and conversed and gathered in the form of numerous photos; and read and thought and walked some more. This produced a magpie accumulation, a trawl: photos, posters, receipts, carrier bags, magazines, newspapers, etc. Then, caught amidst numerous possibilities, some moves seemed to become first possible, then inevitable. I spread masses of visual material out all over the floor, at first confusedly, just trying to see what was in the trawl. Gradually some connections became clearer; then it became clearer still that this superabundance was unstable. Items could be arranged in an endless number of ways, evidencing this or that connection, trail, story, point of view. Anything might be picked up and differently placed, or suddenly seem to dematerialise from one position only to re-materialise in another. All could move in a potentially overwhelming, proliferating, labyrinthine network in which acts of ‘archiving’ seemed increasingly contentious. I had the sense of there being no fixed points of orientation for the material or the viewer, but rather, a vertiginous spinning in space; that how we see, whether near, large, small, far, depends on what we bring to our looking through the telescope, where and when and through which end: who we are in all our multiplicity.
‘Meanings come only from the means used’. What does this mean here? To explore the sites and the exchanges involved I employed at various points (and the list is not exhaustive): photography, freehand drawing, digital drawing, diagram drawing, copying, frottage (or rubbing, as in ‘brass rubbing’) and collage.

To consider briefly the age-old practice of copying samples of ornament: the process may be (and often has been) plain old piracy but may also be closely linked to processes of appropriation and interpretation. And some insights can arrive through the process of attentive copying, though the benefit may be for the person copying rather than the viewer of the work produced. One such interesting moment arrived when, intent on making a copy from a photograph just beside me, a thought came at a moment when I was looking at the lines in my copy rather than the photo: ‘this design needs a row of black dots just here’ – and looking at the photograph, I saw just such a row exactly where I had thought they should be; some nineteenth-century South Asian designer having already placed them there. It was an odd instant of inhabiting the same drawing moment, the same design decision that someone else had made far away and long ago. If I hadn’t been copying, it never would have happened.

Another ‘means’, collage, serves to suggest how means produces meaning. I used the medium of collage repeatedly because it seemed most apt for work which was concerned to bring together different times and different worlds. So there were numerous examples in this exhibition, produced not least as acts of ‘framing’. Frames make suggestions as to how we are to see; in one instance here, cartouches drawn from South Asian carpets frame photographic images of the familiar flowery foliage which adorns the doorways and windows of small nineteenth-century terrace houses in Newham, E7, and thousands of others in British cities. These modest, often battered architectural ornaments act as suggestions in stucco that nineteenth-century industrial British city dwellers fashioned their houses and perhaps themselves as ‘belonging’ to a half-remembered pastoral English landscape. By reframing them, using collage as a means, I wanted to complicate the way we see these ornaments.

There are other examples: the collection entitled ‘Some of Albert’s Beasts’ frames a selection of John Forbes Watson’s Victorian textile samples, now held in the V&A, within the familiar heraldic forms of various imperial lions adorning the museum building, with the intention of gently disturbing the creatures. The ‘Butterfly Collection’ in the exhibition also started in response to Forbes Watson’s cutting up of textiles in order to create his sample books. There seemed an imaginative link between the nineteenth-century stilling, collecting, and displaying of organisms, whether plants, insects, etc, and the collecting, cutting up, and rearrangement of textiles as tiny samples in order to create a ‘mobile museum’, as Forbes Watson did. In this exhibition certain of his textile samples, copied, have become ‘butterflies’ pinned down in display boxes.

One effect of decontextualising textile fragments in order to create sample books such as Forbes Watson’s, was to render ornament more accessible to industrial-scale reproduction and to the commodification of that which had often started as artisanal. And so the Forbes Watson ‘butterflies’ here find themselves in a new habitat: the factory, where the butterflies proliferate in hybrid forms by means of the digital manipulation which enables endless reproduction and reinterpretation of motifs in contemporary textile design.
There are other examples, too many to mention, for the Fashioning Diaspora Space project constituted an engagement with the complexity of a mass of material. This was reflected in the form of this exhibition, a giant sketchbook with re-arrangeable components. Shift something and new relationships, new connections, became visible in an endless proliferation. Like all sketchbooks it also constituted an unruly archive, too unruly to settle as an archive, and the unruliness was the point. For the entropic, collapsing archive may throw some light on the entropic tendencies in any archive; and in a confusion of narratives may be glimpsed the selective ways in which master narratives are and have been constructed.