



INSOMNIA

Piyali Ghosh (India)

Insomnia 2015

First, I must say I sleep. Propped against a wall; in beds lumpy, firm or spongy; in the midst of pandemonium; and in utter silence. Insomnia is a strange affliction that I can only puzzle over. I've known my fair share of insomniacs, and heard stories of their provocative pieces born of deprivation and delusion. It seems that the arts are littered with deified genius-types that never slept. I'm sceptical, however, of a casual celebration of what must be a brutal and debilitating condition. Whenever I think of insomnia, two very different works are conjured up: Salman Rushdie's Saleem Sinai — that infamous wide-blue-eyed baby that didn't know how to blink or sleep until his mother reached down and pressed his eyes closed with her fingers; and the massive collection of dead-of-night drawings by insomniac Louise Bourgeois. The Bourgeois drawings are manifold, and it is in the networks, meshes, and webs that Bourgeois and Piyali Ghosh begin to correspond.

Ghosh's *Insomnia* series traces delicate cellular networks on scrims and sheets and screens with an elegiac tone. It is difficult to overstate the mournful quality of trees laid down to rest or the intense disorientation associated with grasping a thought or a movement briefly before it is lost in wakeful delirium. The shredded and prone trees signal an odd and arresting tension between standing up and lying down and the insomniac's ambivalence—lie there or get up. The vertical and the horizontal, the landscape and the portrait, the figure and the ground—these frictions are subtly manifested in the behaviours of sleeping and the behaviours of waking. Ghosh's works occupy an uncertain space, and although she has described it as a space of death and rebirth, it seems more apt to describe it as a space of fleeting revelation and loss. The marks exist for a moment as imprints, frottage or photograms and then sink again into the indeterminate space of drawing. Reproductions of drawings often sacrifice the essential qualities of the incisions, fibres and surface textures (tooth) for greater contrast and clarity. In this case, it is fundamental to inspect the work closely and experience the subtle dimensions of the surface. For the insomniac, it is the tactility of dragging and pressing that anchors a consciousness unmoored by malfunctioning sleep patterns (presumably, this accounts for Bourgeois' manic concentric motifs). Piyali Ghosh's work differs, however, in its assertion of metaphor—the coconut tree, the branch and the root impose an order on the chthonic space read through the *rasa* of *Adbhuta*, or wonder. The arboreal forms substitute their creeping reticula for the creeping dread that accompanies insomnia.

Insomnia is an installation of drawings, sculptural drawings and videos that doesn't elicit in the viewer a sympathetic experience of sleeplessness or distress, although it is a disconcerting collection of work. The series posits a theory of insomnia—one in which the consciousness of the insomniac can be understood in terms of an enactment of *rasa rekha*, a combination of wonder (*adbhuta*) and line (*rekha*). At once it threatens seduction with the ornamental line and master craft of its making, but it also quickly absorbs the viewer into the symbolic order of root, stump and knot.

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Woolloongabba Art Gallery
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Piyali Ghosh (piiya@rediffmail.com) is an international artist-in-residence and guest of Woolloongabba Art Gallery.

This is the first part of the *Insomnia* series; the second part to be exhibited in 2016.

Image © Piyali Ghosh

