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DARK MATERIAL AND THE INDEXICAL IN THE DRAWINGS OF PRABHAKAR PACHPUTE

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In the following essay, I propose to write about charcoal as it is employed by contemporary Indian artist Prabhakar Pachpute in his drawing. In his charcoal drawings, he depicts the daily life of the workers in the coal-mining town of Sasti, India. As a material, charcoal has layers of meaning deserving of theorisation and analysis. There is an existing debate in art history and theory on how to analyze the material aspect of an art object (Ingold 2007; Elkins 2008). In this article, I have contextualised Pachpute's charcoal drawings against the sociologically and politically charged charcoal works of William Kentridge and Kara Walker in order to bring out the similarities and differences between these three artists' drawings. I have shown that in Pachpute's work charcoal as a material has a direct and causal relation to the subject matter of his drawing. This connection is explored further in light of philosophy of indexicality (Peirce 1982; Leja 2000; Iversen 2012). Pachpute's drawings depicting miners and mining towns are drawn using charcoal, which is burnt wood and, sometimes, powdered coal bound in adhesive. In India, coal mining operations are one of the most important causes of deforestation and pollution. Furthermore, the fact that Pachpute's family comes from the coal-mining towns of Sasti and that he was born and brought up there adds to the poignancy of his drawings. His hand drawn works that capture his bodily presence make the lived experience of working-class people more visceral and direct.

Introduction: Matter and materiality of drawing

Drawing practice can encompass many materials but, when it comes to theorising drawing, the unique sensory aspects of these materials take a back seat. This is true of most academic disciplines related to art and visual culture. Tim Ingold, in his article 'Materials against Materiality', critiques the current trend in fields related to material culture that posits the idea of the materiality of objects as an abstraction. This is done at the expense of looking at the uniqueness of each material. An anxiety exists among scholars about theorising the sensory properties of materials. They would rather theorise the idea of materiality as another concept that exists to exemplify the flip side of the world of immaterial ideas. The same binary mode of thinking around materiality exists in contemporary art discourses. When it comes to drawing, materiality occupies an interesting place. As drawings are diagrammatic, they can oscillate between the realm of sensuous materiality and the conceptual void. Literature on drawing theorises different types of drawings (encompassing conceptual, virtual, and mathematical drawing) demonstrating its capacity to occupy spaces linking the real and imaginary. In this context, it is interesting to look at how, sometimes, the specific material used to draw can become integral to its meaning.

Prabhakar Pachpute's charcoal drawings and the lived experience of class in India

Drawing has laid at the heart of many artists' practices throughout the ages. However, some contemporary artists have made large-scale drawings central to their practice. The same trend can be seen in the works by contemporary Indian artists. Modern and contemporary art in India is as diverse as its population. Indian artists whose practice incorporates drawings take inspiration from elements as diverse as indigenous scrolls to geometric lines of modernist architectures. Examples of this pluralism include the geometric minimalist lines of Nasreen Mohamedi (1937–1990), the delicate miniature paintings and Urdu calligraphy inspired drawings of Zarina Hasmi (1937–), and the expressive drawings of performance artist Nikhil Chopra (1974–), which are also performance residue. Many young artists in India continue to break new ground in their drawing practice through their experiments with innovative material. Drawing can be one of the simplest acts of art-making that needs almost no technology (for example, it can be the marks and traces of the artist's moving body), thereby becoming one of the most intimate and idiosyncratic artistic practices. Gestural and performative drawings and mark-making are embodied because they carry the trace of artist's bodily gesture. The gesture inherent and visible in hand drawn patterns can carry a unique presence. Subtle deviations of overwhelming complexity can be carried out in handmade patterns. As drawing is a unique site of embodiment, it reveals lived experience in a way that few other mediums can achieve. In the young artist Prabhakar Pachupte's (1986) drawing, aspects, such as intimacy and idiosyncrasy, come together in his use of charcoal. Pachupte currently lives and works in Pune, India. He grew up in a small coal-mining village named Sasti in the Chandrapur district in Maharashtra, India. He comes from a family of coal miners but left his hometown to do his BFA, in Khairaharh University, and then MFA in Baroda. He has subsequently gained wide recognition for his portrayal of the bleak lives and extreme struggles of the miners from his hometown. Curators from India and beyond have been captivated by the emotive quality of his work. For example, critic Uma Nair writes that Pachupte's work grapples with 'suffering and the poetics of catastrophe, and calamity in coal mines anywhere in the world' (Nair 2017). Pachupte has achieved a reasonable level of success. He is the youngest artist to hold a solo show in the National Museum of Modern Art, Mumbai.

He does not stop at depicting the oppressive environment that miners have to work in, as his charcoal drawings are a commentary on both the region and India's ecology and political scenario. Densely populated and fast developing, India heavily relies on coal for its energy needs. Two hundred and forty-six coal-fired power plants account for sixty percent of the electricity generated in India. However, most of these power plants fail to comply with the emission standards set by the authorities. Currently, India is the most polluted country in the world, and the poor infrastructure of the coal mines is one of the major causes for this pollution (Bernard and Kazmin 2018.) Many coal mines in India use outdated technology, which results in high emissions of dangerous particulate matter—sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxide—which directly affect the local population. An article in *The Economic Times: India Times*, titled 'India's coal power plants "unhealthiest" in world: Study (2019)', corroborates this claim by quoting researchers from ETH Zurich.

All over India, the rapid industrialization and expansion of coal mines have started to encroach on nearby farms and forests, sometimes illegally. The most recent story of such a conflict is that the big industrial group, Adani, was granted approval from the Center to mine in India's most ancient and dense forest: the Hasdeo Arand forest, which is situated in the Chattishgarh region. It has been claimed that a huge chunk of the forest has been completely cleared to make way for a coal mine. This could potentially cause an ecological disaster and wipe out indigenous tribes who have inhabited the land for tens of thousands of years (Halarnkar 2019).

Sasti is a small mining town in a different part of India but it has the distinction of producing a promising young visual artist who has made the miners' everyday struggles more visible through his art. Pollution generated from coal mines threatens everyone living in and around Sasti, including miners, whose lives are perpetually at risk. Negligent mining authorities and political elites have not done much to improve their working conditions in the last few decades. Pachpute's work encompasses resin sculptures and installations, but his striking and innovative charcoal drawings will be the focus of this article. His use of charcoal deserves special attention. His works are a testimony to the fact that the simple gesture of drawing can sometimes make multi-layered and nuanced statements. His drawings are conventionally representational through their depictions of surrealist landscapes and men. The inhabitants of his landscapes appear as faceless men: half-human; half-machine. Pachppte depicts the miners going about their daily pursuits, the mining landscape, and the small settlements surrounding the mines. His works are sometimes surrealist, which is perhaps a defensive response to the dismal conditions of daily life in his hometown. It seems that only someone who is brought up within that community could respond to this hardship through detached unsentimental satire. Any empathetic outside observer coming from a more privileged background would respond with shock and pity when witnessing the miners' lives. However, for Pachpute, this is the reality that he grew up with and this experience has shaped his artistic approach. Like others in his town, he feels desperation and pain but shows no excess of emotion.



FIGURE 1: P. PACHPUTE *EARTHWORK OF HADSATI* (2013), CHARCOAL ON PAPER (DRAWING FROM STOP-MOTION ANIMATION):
© COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND EXPERIMENTER

The materiality and politics of charcoal

As a medium, charcoal captures the primal nature of drawing. Charcoal drawing involves a process that is reflexive: an exposition of the traces of a person's momentary gestures laid bare on a surface. As Emma Dexter states, drawing is one of the 'earliest and most immediate' forms of image making, and charcoal is one of its earliest materials (Dexter 2005). Dexter proposes that drawing has a vernacular characteristic (Dexter 2005: 7). She offers examples of different mark-making practices that exist outside of art-institutions, such as drawings on a cave wall, children's drawings, and drawings by people from cultures that have not been exposed to western draughtsmanship. Words, such as primitive and vernacular, are often used to describe the process of drawing. Nothing captures this immediacy more than the roughness of drawings executed with charcoal. Charcoal's history stretches back thousands of years: our ancestors drew on cave walls using charcoal. It is one of the oldest known, versatile, and persistent materials used to make art. The visceral and primal nature of charcoal drawing makes a strong statement that can be political, social, or economical. In recent art history, charcoal has often been used to indicate social and political conflicts. For example, we can look at both William Kentridge and Kara Walker's use of charcoal. It is not a coincidence that William Kentridge's charcoal drawings are messy, dirty, immediate, visceral, and depict stories of conflict. For Kentridge, drawing is a compulsion. In an interview with Dale Berning, he recounts his need to make marks on paper by manipulating charcoal to draw: 'I have a need to be making marks on paper. Drawing isn't a decision, it is a need' (Kentridge 2009).

Images of visceral immediateness characterize Kara Walker's charcoal drawings, troubling the representation of black experience and the signifiers of animality, irrationality, and darkness. Critics mention that her charcoal drawing resembles the shadows of history (Newman 2017). Walker's drawing style is a statement as, through representation, she subverts social and political symbols. When reviewing Walker's art, Murray Whyte (2016) uses the term 'incendiary'. Art historian and critic, Vania

Géré states that Walker's use of charcoal is a commentary on the fact that for a long period of history minority artists did not have access to more sophisticated materials (Géré 2016). Walker's charcoal drawings are used in a blatant gesture that is fitting to the troubling issue of race relations. Kentridge's charcoal drawings deal with the equally thorny problem of post-apartheid in South-Africa. However, he sometimes makes use of more contemporary technology. His charcoal drawings are often transferred to animation and projected onto the screen. Film and photography, coupled with his drawing process, become an altogether nuanced practice and serve as a commentary on the multifaceted political, social, and economic problems of apartheid. Rosalind Krauss states that the 'smudges, smears, and erasures' of Kentridge's charcoal drawing turned into stop-motion films, such as *History of the Main Complaint* (1996), is a manifestation of the tension between formal and sociological poles (Krauss 2000). Both Walker and Kentridge's works are formal drawings and social commentary enveloped together.

Pachpute's drawings share many similarities with both Kentridge and Walker's work. They are subversive social messages conveyed through the marks and strokes of charcoal. There is common ground and there is uniqueness. Walker's work is deliberately provocative, as she exaggerates negroid features as a social satire and depicts scenes of extreme violence; her drawing gestures match this frenzied tone.

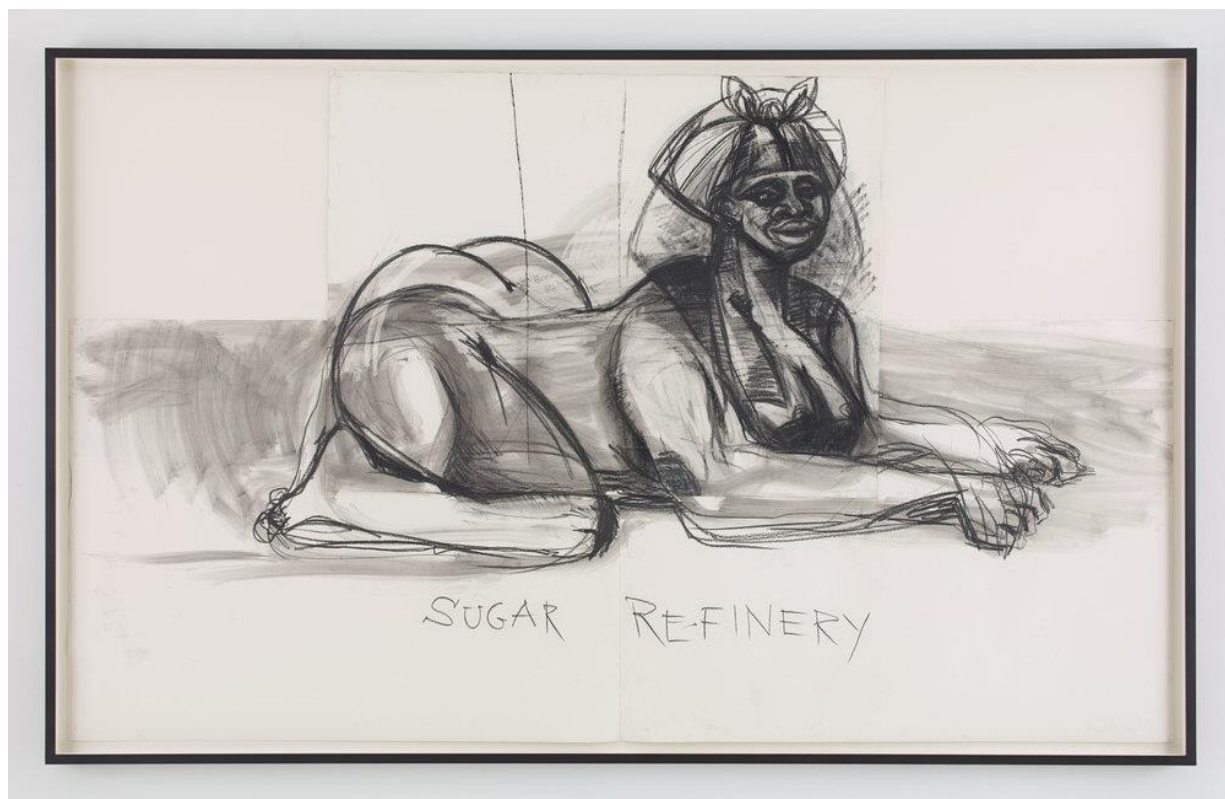


FIGURE 2: K. WALKER. *UNTITLED* (2013–14), CHARCOAL ON PAPER ©KARA WALKER, COURTESY OF SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO., NEW YORK.

These drawings are aimed to confront viewers with the historical injustices of slavery and make them feel uncomfortable. Human facial and body gestures also dominate Kentridge's charcoal drawings. Tragedy, either personal or political, inspires his drawing and, for him, drawing is an act of compassion. (see the video, *History of the Main Complaint* (1996) as described in Art21's web portal or the depiction of a riot in Johannesburg in the *Other Faces* (2011)).



FIGURE 3: W. KENTRIDGE *DRAWING FOR OTHER FACES* (2011) (PROTESTORS CLOSE UP), CHARCOAL AND COLOURED PENCIL ON PAPER 62 X 121 CM. COURTESY OF WILLIAM KENTRIDGE AND THE GOODMAN GALLERY.

These drawings depict conflict and throb with an emotive quality, which asks for compassion from the viewers. Pachpute's drawing gesture is restrained; they are comprised of strokes of dry charcoal subtly rubbed on paper or the smooth white wall of a gallery. They are melancholic and sombre, unlike the confrontational nature of Walker's depictions of slavery or the pitiful character in Kentridge's work on race relations. For example, the following image is from a series of drawings called *Canary in a Coalmine*.



FIGURE 4: P. PACHPUTE IMAGE FROM THE SERIES, *CANARY IN A COALMINE* (2012), DETAIL, CHARCOAL ON PAPER © COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND CLARK HOUSE, BOMBAY, INDIA.

This particular drawing is representational but there are many symbolic aspects of the miner's life and experience that are portrayed by the artist. For example, the depiction of electrical plugs in place of their

head indicates their status as mere tools or machinery. His interpretation is reminiscent of Michel de Certeau's proposition in his landmark book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). This is what the powerful ruling class does to 'ordinary men', as it takes away their individuality and shapes them into a homogenous mass that can be moulded within their ideological frameworks. Historically, the ruling class is also the culture producing class. Pachpute, who comes from the 'ordinary men' class, subverts the narrative by creating works of art based on the ruling class' mistreatment of the common people. His works are testimony to the creative spirit of the oppressed. He has the opportunity to present his art to the world. Ironically, his phenomenal success has set him apart from the miners and he has been celebrated by the ruling class. These contradictions exist in the art world, and a satisfactory conclusion cannot be reached in this article. However, we can at least see one artist's work speaking out against the dehumanising mechanisation of the working classes. Hopefully more visual artists and working-class performers will come to reinterpret their lived experience and find sympathetic audiences. Pachpute's men are faceless and docile as they go about their duties apparently passively accepting their fate. While Kentridge's drawing of cities are embodied and indicate human presence, Pachpute's mining towns resemble lunar landscapes seemingly hostile to human life. In Pachpute's drawing, viewers are unable to see the workers' facial expressions, and their suffering and desperation are not apparent in their posture. In these unsentimental drawings, charcoal traces ultimately become the bodies of the miners and the environment in which they live. When looking at the drawings, one can smell the dust of the close spaces inside the earth's cavity. The darkness depicted in the landscape reflects the psychological stress of working in the dark-belly of the earth; the half-machine and half-human miners are metaphorical of the dehumanising conditions of their workplace.



FIGURE 3: P. PACHPUTE *CANARY IN A COALMINE* (2012), DETAIL, CHARCOAL ON PAPER © COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND CLARK HOUSE, BOMBAY, INDIA.

This drawing satirises the common perception of home as a place of comfort. At the end of a working day, miners are supposed to be able to get away from the daily grind and rest. However, the reality of the village of Sasti is that they are never fully away from the claustrophobia of the mines' treacherous tunnels.

Pachpute's drawings are skilfully conventional. They appear in galleries as works in progress, retaining the dusty presence of dry charcoal and thus capturing the atmospheric quality of the coal mine. Pachpute mentions that he grew up with a 'lot of darkness' (Saldanha 2017). Indeed, darkness envelops his charcoal drawing. There are many other materials and pigments available to depict darkness. Also, other mediums can be employed to bring attention to the fate of a small mining town on the verge of ecological and economic disaster, such as photography, film, and journalism; Pachpute chose charcoal drawing. His material and process capitalise on the primal nature of both drawing and charcoal because, while any medium can be used to express darkness, charcoal embodies its referent.

Charcoal and artistic labour

Pachpute's work is simultaneously comprised of formal drawings and social commentary. His drawing makes a commentary on labour: the labour of the underpaid coalminers and his own artistic labour. Most curatorial writings on his works theorise the miners' labour as it is represented in his drawing. For example, media coverage of his recent exhibition, *Rumination on Labour*, in the Experimenter Art Gallery mainly focused on the economic and social context of the laborers depicted in Pachpute's work (Ghosh 2018). It is easy to forget that his artistic expression is also the result of intensive physical labour by the artist. The materiality of an art-object can be an embodiment and manifestation of artistic labour. This aspect is clearly captured by noted art historian, James Elkins. When writing about the painter's labour in minute detail, he states that an artist's studio is perceived either as a space of sombre underpaid work or a space where magical self-expression happens: depending on the success of the artist (Elkins 1999). Artists who are engaged in material exploration do have long and tedious and periods of making and unmaking. However, the unique nature of artistic labour in the studio has not received much scholarly attention. Instead, case studies often reflect the social and economic condition of artistic labour as it exists in the context of an artist's communities, residencies, and curatorial and museum work. Within this network, an artist's labour is sometimes commoditised and sometimes it is utilised in social transformation (see, for example, Pierre Bal-Blanc 2010; Alberto López Cuenca 2012).

Pachpute's artistic labour of manipulating charcoal is not similar to that of the miners. But, nonetheless, his toils commemorate theirs in an empathetic homage. Coal has a special status in the Indian economy and is called black gold. Pachpute has turned his charcoal drawing of coal mines into metaphorical gold. The economic aspect of Pachpute's work opens up new vistas of analysis. But, in this article, I want to focus on Pachpute's labour as he perfected his expression through the medium of charcoal. Traces of dusty, granular charcoal, by virtue of being applied in strokes and lines become the phenomenon or reality of a dark existence. The laborious processes of skilled drawing fully utilise the sensuous properties of charcoal. The sensuous relationship between artists and their materials has been highly problematic for the writing of art's histories. Elkins acknowledges this problem in his essay, 'On some limits of materiality in art history' (2008: 25–30) where he proposes that art historical writing which concentrates on describing the sensory nature of the material detached from its historical context can become problematic. Elkins claims that, if the historian comes too close to the sensual texture of the art-object, it is sometimes difficult to contextualise it according to historical timeline or genre. He also mentions the

fact that historians and theorists tend not to dwell on the slow-paced process of material exploration that goes on inside the studio. For Elkins, materiality is 'meaning the sense of matter and substance experienced by artists' (Elkins 2008: 30). It seems that Elkins is following the trend of turning away from the uniqueness of each material used in the art object. The same trend has been critiqued by Ingold. In the same essay, Elkin admits that the fear of material might be just an outcome of art historians and theorists' art training; he also argues that theorising material sensuality is better left to philosophers. The black colour of charcoal, as well as its dry and rough texture, as it has been experienced and exploited by Pachpute, would not come under any specific art-historical theorisation. However, the concepts emerging from the philosophy of indexicality could provide meaning to the sensuous materiality of his drawing.

The material and indexical in Pachpute's charcoal works

This essay borrows ideas from philosophy to add to the historical and social context of Pachpute's drawing practice. In his drawings, traces of charcoal can also be conceptualised as an indexical trace. Since Pachpute is using charcoal to depict a coalmine and its miners, the materiality of the drawing is locked in an indexical relation. An indexical allusion to labour is revealed in the causal connection made between charcoal and the coal mine. Technically, charcoal is chemically dissimilar to coal as it is found in mines. The former is slow-burnt wood and the latter is a mineral resulting from millions of years of geological processes. Coal and charcoal are quite similar in texture and both are carbon-based elements that are by-products of the chemical transformation of plants. Coal is rougher in texture and definitely cheaper. In India, the compressed or powdered charcoal used in large quantities for drawing is seldom pure wood-burnt charcoal. Powdered coal, which is cheaper, is frequently used in compressed charcoal blocks. However, the indexical relation goes deeper than this. Currently, in India, the expansion of the coal mines and rapid industrialization continues to cause havoc in the environment, with the destruction of forests being one of the most immediate results. Therefore, the material of the wood-burnt charcoal is causally linked to the condition of mining and rapid industrialization.

The concept of the index is borrowed from American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce's system of signs. As philosopher Clive Cazeaux points out, 'In the case of indexical drawing, interest lies not in the pliability of the material in the service of representation but in its capacity to have an effect on the materials or conditions that surround it, where the effect is any mark or form or display left as the trace of the causal interaction between materials' (2017: 139). When it comes to representation, Peirce proposed there are three categories of visual signs: the icon, the symbol, and the index. In short, an icon represents through resemblance, a symbol through convention, and an index through causality. Charcoal is a conventional media frequently used to achieve representational drawing. Pachpute's drawings are conventionally symbolic as they represent landscapes and human figures through charcoal but they are also uniquely indexical in their material meaning. Traces of coal and burnt wood indexically point to the coal mines' grim environment and the dire destruction of the forest as a result of rapid industrialisation. Art historian, Michael Leja in 'Peirce, Visuality, and Art' (2000) writes that Peirce's system of visual signs has attracted huge appeal within scholars of art and visual culture. Indeed, it is easy to see why the icon and the index are useful tools to analyse images. Peirce's original system is heavily dependent on visual and diagrammatic cues (Leja 2000: 97). Peirce developed his system in the early part of the twentieth century, but the concept of indexicality gained popularity amongst visual art scholars during the 1960s. Krauss in her essay, 'Notes on an Index' (1977), drew attention to the fact that the index replaces the

conventional resemblance of form or mimicry with the physical presence of something causally related to the object represented. The execution of resemblance follows art historical and aesthetic convention; in contrast, indexical traces can signify complicated concepts and occurrence through minimalist forms. For example, layers of dust on an object can act as an index of time. Leja states that Krauss's interpretation of an indexical sign served the anti-form, literalist, and minimalist art of the 1970s. Leja goes on to propose that Krauss's analysis attempted to separate fine art from aesthetics and art-historical convention. Minimalist representations of causality through indexical traces hardly require conventional artistic skills, such as depicting resemblance and manipulating materials towards a formal aim. Pachpute's work is neither minimalist nor anti-form: they look like conventional aesthetic representational drawings. For example, had Pachpute taken chunks of coal that bear the slash marks of the miners' axes directly out of the mine and put them in a gallery, it would have been an indexical sign in its literal sense. However, Pachpute used charcoal sticks and chunks and layered them on paper or a wall to make marks. Rough granules of charcoal are blended in a delicate but deliberate modulation. It is hard to ignore the fact that these marks carry his hand gesture. Pachpute's hand gestures, which are evident in his drawings, showcase the much celebrated and embodied nature of drawing whereas, in Krauss's writing, indexicality and mimetic art practices seem to have an antagonistic relation.

Drawing is an intimate process not only because it is ancient and familiar, but also because hand drawn marks carry some traces of the artist's hands and are therefore indexical of the artist's gesture. Thus, Pachpute's drawing (like most other hand drawn drawings) carries some indexical trace of his hand movement and the contextual detail that he comes from a mining community makes the traces of his hand gesture doubly poignant. His wistful and imaginative transformation of the images of industrial workers through meticulous charcoal strokes displays the similarity between an artist's labour and the labourers in an industrial setting. But the traces of his gesture are not the only evocative feature of his work: the causal indexicality of depicting a coal mine and miners with charcoal ultimately creates a unity of meaning and form in his drawing. As Leja points out, indexical traces can co-exist with conventional art forms to give it greater complexity. Causal indexicality is subtly layered in Pachpute's formalist drawings. Patches of charcoal that give shape to delicate representational drawing are indexical traces: they are conceptual signs as well as poignant expressions. These drawings are conceptual because of the connections they make and they are expressive because viewers experience the phenomenon or the reality of the coal mine through the sensory perception of the colour and texture of charcoal. Margaret Iversen, in her paper 'Index, Diagram, Graphic Trace' (2012), writes that even when utilised within different frameworks of meaning and convention, an indexical sign has a visceral impact on the viewer and that it is used extensively by contemporary artists. The emotive effect of these drawings persists because 'the index has a close, causal or tactile connection with the object it signifies' (Iversen 2012: 1). If we follow Peirce's interpretation, the indexical sign is said to carry a shock value. It points directly towards an aspect of reality, thereby bringing it into focus. Indexical connections can be unexpected and revelatory. An index that takes the form of a trace has a very intimate relation with the referent, since the referent has come into direct physical or causal connection to its reference. The 'shock value' indicated by Peirce can be observed in the sensory nature of Pachpute's drawings. Coal mining and the destruction of trees are causally linked, and so is the subject matter and the material (burnt wood and coal dust) basis of his work. The loose grey granules of charcoal that cover his dark landscape are very close to the lived reality of the coal miners and the inhabitants of the mining town, where the dark and polluting air, which is heavy with noxious particles, chokes them on a daily basis.

Pachpute's more recent work has expanded to consider farmers and laborers from other industries in India. For example, his project in Kochi Muziris Biennale, India, 2018, was an exhibit named 'Resilient Bodies in the Era of Resistance.' It was set up in an abandoned industrial warehouse to represent the farmers' protests against mining corporations. His works still incorporate charcoal marks. Since his charcoal drawings incorporate a tactile and sensuous connection to the grim reality of the mining towns depicted (dusty air, smoke, and the destruction of forests), Pachpute's drawing gestures do not need to convey any heightened theatricality. His stokes are restrained; they exude a melancholic aura and portray the narrative in an impactful way. The material used in Pachpute's drawings has layers of meaning: economic, political, art-historical, and philosophical. And the sensuous quality of the material (charcoal: pure and impure) used in his work keeps the visceral connection with his subject matter alive. The works he has created in the last ten years bear a tender testament to the fact that creative art can challenge and seek respite from the brutality of technocratic society. Ultimately, these multiple layers of meaning make his work relevant to our contemporary art-world, thereby adding a dimension of timelessness.

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