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MAPPING IMAGES

SWAPNA TAMHANE IN CONVERSATION WITH JARET VADERA, WHO IS A MULTIDISCIPLINARY ARTIST AND A CULTURAL PRODUCER BASED IN NEW YORK.

ST: Firstly, I want to talk about how you might define 'image'. And in that process of definition, how have you been creating your idea/identity of the image.

JV: I think of an image as a kind of map. A constellation of data that is held in place by its ability to remind us of something else that we've already seen. We only call an image an "image" if it somehow manages to synch well with our memory of an 'other' thing. Otherwise it's just something random, it's just noise.

I've thought about the image as a trace of a process. Filtered, translated and full of residues and biases. And completely influenced by the technology, time and the culture that it is produced in.

ST: So you think of the image as a kind of palimpsest?

JV: Absolutely. But it's often not apparent. Especially within one's own time. It's often hidden in plain sight. Embedded, camouflaged within the cognitive process of reading itself.

ST: Can you talk about how you think through the process of "imaging"?

JV: Let me see if I can do it justice. First, there is a thing. Some thing, some cluster of data or phenomena that exists outside of our perception of it. Which is then observed,

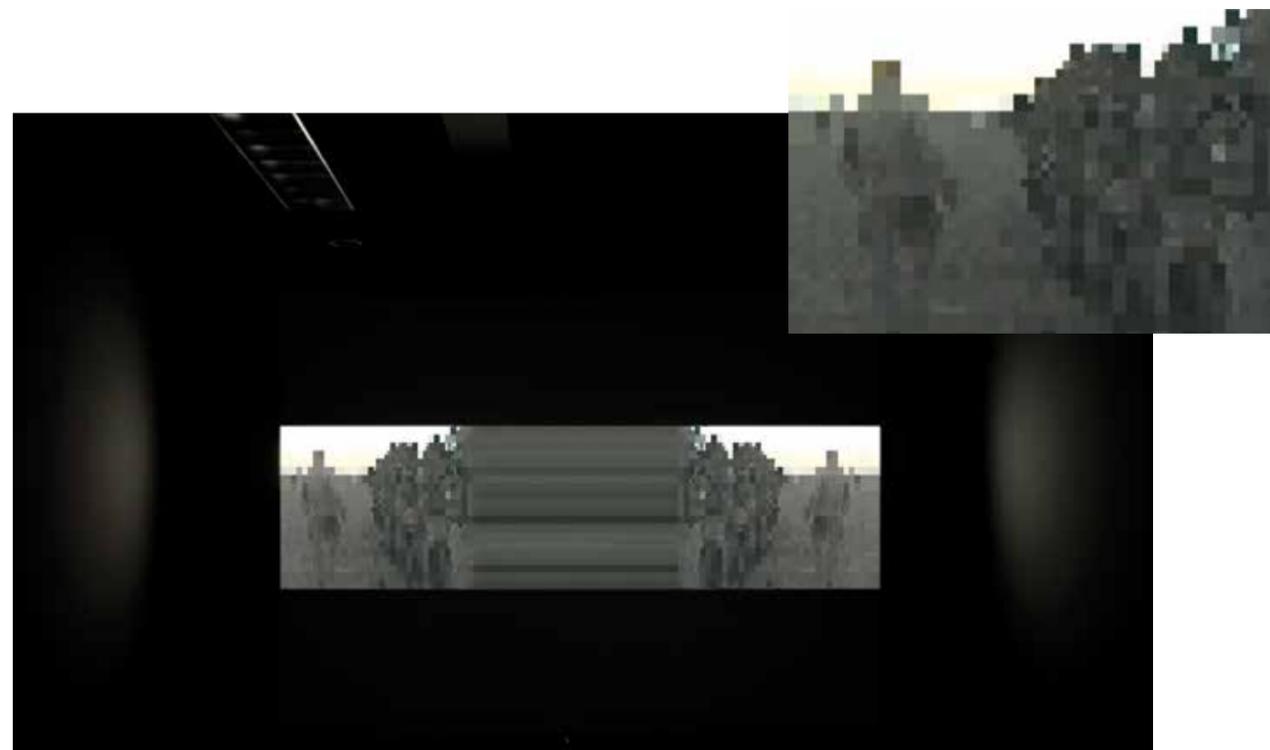
by someone. Digested and translated through the process of interpretation. Then there is a choice that is made. To capture or represent the phenomena in words, in a photograph, a video or through some other technological process.

The initial observer, through their choice and framing ends up embedding their own sense of value into whatever they are trying to image. The new constructed image is configured using the codes and signifiers of the day and fused with the logic of the technology used.

The new image then exists as a new phenomenon that now occupies its own space. Which is inevitably seen by another viewer as a new constellation of data. Traveling through light, space, then the eyes. And then forming a mental image, tentatively in the mind. In the meat and blood and neuronal networks of consciousness.

I believe the process generates meaning. And the image is just the remainder. Or sometimes it's the accumulated monster of the total. I am interested in revealing that every image is unfixed. And inseparable from the politics of representation and the digestive process of interpretation.

ST: Do you develop a work with this idea in mind? That



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we all carry images and bring them forward, when for example, encountering your work?

JV: For me it's a given that we are all constantly processing what we see. The mind is always working. Always interpreting. Reading. Filling in blanks. Contextualizing. Trying to "make sense."

And it's also a given for me that all visual representations are carriers of bias, belief, culture, time, technology, and memory. But not in a static way. Meaning – cultural and subjective – is never fixed. All images are remnants of and part of an ongoing set of translations. This is probably why I am so attracted to video. Video is experienced over time. Images can shift, mutate, and evidence their own construction, while still seductively bringing you somewhere else. Video has the unique potential for a kind of experiential critique.

My critique – which I do keep in mind – is focused on contemporary aesthetics in visual culture used as proof, or considered to be authoritative or rational, like X-rays, infographics, and maps. As they seem to be clearly biased visual tautologies that often reveal larger structures of belief and power. In my work I'm often interested in creating glitches, or loops, or processes that short circuit passive image consumption. So I often end up creating

ambivalent or multivalent images. I feel they are more sincere. And hopefully they function in some way like a poetic Rorschach test. With the potential to reveal some of the layered processes through which they come into being, and through which we “make sense.”

ST: Yes, at one point, in one of our many conversations, you mentioned that you are interested in showing how we are a certain technology. You want to expose that by showing the ‘glitches’ as you call them. Your video, *I tell the truth, even when I lie* (2009) is a good example of the glitch, as well as it reveals the dark space of media and war in a still but moving image. Here the process of nuanced editing found footage alters the receptions entirely. Can you talk about this piece?

JV: Yes, I do see the body as a complex set of interrelated technologies. The eyes, the ears, all of our senses, and of course the brain. Also by extension, we can also perceive through extra bodily technologies, photography, video, Skype etc. Which can be magical. But can also have darker implications as well.

For example, MARPAT or digital camouflage used in military uniforms uses pixelization to hide within the static of digital sighting technologies. In effect, hiding in the glitch. MARPAT uses pixels to mirror the structure through which it is being seen, the digital matrix. The human mind, sees the pixelized camouflage as static, as noise and so we don't focus on it. The camouflage hides within our perceptual / technological / cognitive blindspots. The video *I tell the truth, even when I tell a lie* came out of an experience I had when I was watching a documentary about the US marines in Afghanistan. The documentary infuriated me on a number of levels. I felt a tremendous sense of anxiety and helplessness. And used this work to understand how I was processing, digesting this footage. I was trying to make sense of my position to a war which I have only had a mediated experience of. I cut, fragmented, filtered, slowed down, and reversed, the original footage. And introduced pixelized video static / digital camouflage of a captain barking orders at his troops. The video was installed in a blackened-out room, projected at a huge scale, with very loud sound.



It's a hard piece to watch at certain points. I was trying to re-territorialize the layers of violence and the distance in an experiential way for the viewer. Trying to represent the monster. The layers of mutation. And the new mediated experience that is created out of the accumulation and abstractions that happen through the multiple layers of processing, encoding, and manipulation that occur as data travels between an overseas event, and my experience of the documentation of it.

ST: When did you make the decision to move away from directly translating an image (ie. Portrait or what have you) to making it, as you say, malleable? Or moving between photography and video?

JV: Well, I started off drawing. And then moved into painting, *décollage*, photography, and then into video. I was very uptight when I was drawing. I was a little over exacting. I can be a bit of a perfectionist. Abstract painting really freed me up. To let the paint drip, and pool, mix and dry was fascinating and calming at the same time, like watching clouds form and fall apart. Painting became a way to be in the present, well, while I was painting at least. And then the painting would dry and the experience would come to an end.

Around the same time I became intrigued by how people would project different things onto my abstract paintings. I was pushing paint, scraping paint, building up and breaking down. Entropy, rust, eroded billboards. But I still would get comments like “Hey that's a man” or “that's a landscape” or that's a...whatever. It was curious to me that people almost instinctively saw “things”.

I was also very interested in memory around that time. In the ways in which memories influence our perceptions and perceptions form our memories. So I was reading a lot of cognitive science, Neuronal Darwinism, computational model of the brain, Rorschach test type stuff and everything just kind of clicked. I became obsessed with that moment when someone who is far away and out of focus takes one more step, and becomes someone you know. That in-between space. That fine line between abstraction and representation. When a form is at its most malleable. When it's full of potential energy.

ST: Even though you break apart or refracture an image (or series of moving images, or develop new images through samples of several images), it seems that the painterly concern is still very much present. With *Ascent* (2009), for example, the construction of vertical bands that rapidly appear and disappear is very much a moving, immersive painting. There is also something very mystical about this work whether you intended it or not. The image itself is abstracted even though you have sourced imagery from water reflecting light. What we might associate with that type of image, or transport ourselves through that type of image (beauty, peace, a holiday, being at a cottage) is never given through the video only through the description.

JV: I like the idea of a video being an immersive moving painting. I've often considered my videos as growing directly out of my interests as a painter. Painting taught me how to see. Or maybe it just made me more aware of the world around me. It taught me how to use a material process as a means to be in the moment. So, I do see my work as closer to moving paintings than I do to conventional narrative film or television. *Ascent* is from a series of experimental videos I worked on of light reflecting off water. I have always been drawn to watching light reflect off of water. I find it can be quite meditative.

The reflections on the water are ever-shifting. And you almost have to unfocus to get the total effect. I think this general feeling carries through to the new translation in the video. So the subject carries through for me. Light on water, is also an old metaphor for consciousness and I'm fascinated by the ways through which we image consciousness.

ST: But you use technological means to demonstrate this “consciousness”. Could you speak about the actual process of editing to make the image? Here I am interested to understand your process of developing a narrative through editorial means, not through a story development for example – so that video is used not to replicate film or a cinematic experience, but to question the medium?

JV: The medium shapes the message and I am interested in revealing the internal structure of the medium. The often imperceptible grid / matrix behind every digital image, the structure that holds the digital image together can also extend out as a metaphor for all frameworks that shape the way we see. In *Ascent* I was interested in shifting the overall structure very slightly to see what would happen. So I removed one of the axis' of the grid. It was really an intuitive process actually. I generally like to set up a process and see how it unfolds or breaks down. And then I search for those moments. That space, that's not too

much, and not too little. I like to experiment, and react. An understanding and articulation of my own process normally only reveals itself to me over time.

ST: What happens in that process of the desire to build an association with the image, and the inaccessibility? Is this process of abstraction the same as a painterly abstraction?

JV: I am interested precisely in that desire. To build an association. The desire to “make sense.” Arguably a desire that is common to all of us. And a neuronal / biological imperative necessary for survival. About inaccessibility or illegibility, I think there are two types of inaccessibility at play. One is about distance. And distance is part of the subject. The paradoxical distance embedded within all visual representations. The second is strategic. It is more of a Rorschach test kind of distance. Which ideally charges the work with potential energy. Activates desire, and illuminates the processes through which we make sense.

I would say that painterly abstraction, at least how I was taught it was a highly ethnocentric coding system. And its most widely eulogized examples in North American history Abstract Expressionists can be seen more as purists. I'm more interested in the something more impure, messy, left over, filtered, and mutated.

ST: In the video, *Untitled (Over the Void)*, 2012, there is only a black screen with text. Here the viewer is left to totally develop their own imagery. Now, there is no editorial tech-process, it's up to the viewer.

JV: The subtitles create a strange tension in the piece, especially because of the absence of images or sound. The experience is probably more akin to reading a book. Which makes sense since the main axis of the video is the writing. The video came out of a collaboration with writer James McGirk during my Transparent Studio Residency at Bose Pacia in Brooklyn. We decided that we would do a dialogical writing piece and agreed on two things. It would be set in the future – around 2050; and we would write as two characters meeting in a waiting area. We developed our own characters without telling each other and let the story unfold through the dialogue within the story itself.

ST: You are currently on a residency in Goa. What are you working on or developing before you go back to Brooklyn?

JV: I just started The Balcão Residency run by artist Tejal Shah. I am excited to have the time to experiment, follow the process, collaborate, and see what unfolds.