

NEHA CHOKSI



Neha Choksi from stills of her live performance *In Leaf (Primary Time)* as part of "Neha Choksi: Minds to Lose" at Hayward Gallery Project Space, London, 2015. Photo by Hugo Glendinning. Courtesy the artist.

NEHA CHOKSI, *Iceboat*, 2012–13, still from HD color video with sound: 13 min 17 sec. Courtesy the artist and Project 88, Mumbai.

The Pursuit of Nothingness

BY JYOTI DHAR

In Buddhist discourse, the *Heart Sutra* (*Prajnaparamita Hrdaya*) suggests that form can be emptiness and emptiness can also be form. In the Zen school of Buddhism, this approach to emptiness is combined with the Taoist notion of nothingness, to suggest (somewhat paradoxically) that it is possible to be completely engaged with and wholly unattached from the world at the same time. Though we think of these concepts as associated with ancient Asian beliefs, modern European philosophers such as Martin Heidegger proposed that a being only comes into presence by withdrawing into absence. In her works, the Mumbai- and Los Angeles-based Neha Choksi seeks to unpack such diverse and complex metaphysical concepts through a variety of material, sculptural and corporeal interventions. Born in the United States and raised in India until the age of 13, Choksi draws upon a range of philosophical references in her diverse practice—alongside Latin and Sanskrit literature, modern semiotics and linguistic theory, and contemporary poetry and theater—to explore the relationship between absence and form in all of its diverse manifestations.

As an undergraduate student in the 1990s at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where she studied fine art, followed by classical Greek, Choksi became interested in dealing with materials that had been impacted, or imprinted in some way, by time. While deciphering and interpreting ancient texts—which often have missing parts—she began to ponder notions of elimination and residue in a more abstract way. In one of her earliest, formative works, *Paint on Plant* (*Variiegated Ficus*) (1995), Choksi took a fig tree and painted it over, taking care to cover the entire plant, pot and soil with colors that replicated their natural coloring underneath, while allowing for their original textural elements to permeate through. “I think this was an act of erasure, of addition, of material intervention—of sculpture, painting and performance,” she explained to me when we met in December.

After Choksi graduated from UCLA, she traveled to India for a year and spent an intensive period journeying across the western state of Gujarat with Jainist *saddhvis* (nomadic mendicant nuns). The artist recalled how during this immersive experience she witnessed the nuns becoming unwittingly attached to the communities in which they spent a prolonged amount

of time, despite their disavowals of worldly ties and possessions. Choksi realized that in every practice of detachment and renunciation, a degree of psychological and emotional attachment remains—and it is the balance between these forces of abstinence and substance that she tries to replicate in her performative practice.

In 1998, after she returned to the US to pursue further studies—this time receiving a master’s degree in Classics, with a focus on poetry, from Columbia University—Choksi experimented with different modes of participation in performance art, and spent time thinking about various forms of material detachment and “lessness,” in both Asian and European philosophical contexts.

All of these key academic and personal experiences culminated a decade later in Choksi’s three video works, collectively titled *Trilogy on Absenting*, looking at ideas of erasure: *Leaf Fall* (2007–08), *Petting Zoo/Minds to Lose* (2008–11) and *Iceboat* (2012–13). In the 14-minute, single-channel video *Leaf Fall*, a group of Indian TV and stage actors from different villages whistle, sing and perform semi-scripted lines while plucking the leaves of a fully grown fig tree, until only one small branch with leaves remains. Shot over a single day, the film closes with the image of local children swarming in at dusk to collect the foliage that the actors had dropped on the ground, before focusing in on the tree’s one remaining sprig. “To attend to each leaf is an act that is meditative as well as impossible . . . The absence of all of the other leaves is needed for the presence of one leaf to be fully acknowledged,” explains the artist.

While editing *Leaf Fall*, Choksi performed a work that looked beyond the idea of removing physical presence—whether that of a body or a tree—and explored how, or if, it was possible to also remove the presence of the mind. In *Petting Zoo/Minds to Lose*, we see a four-way, and sometimes six-way, split-screen video. Each frame respectively shows goats, a donkey, a sheep and the artist—in various states of alertness and drowsiness and in different settings—appearing and disappearing at momentary intervals. The 12-minute film depicts, in a nonlinear fashion, the individual processes and conditions of being anesthetized. Scenes of the livestock—falling, trying to stand up again and feeding on grass fields—are juxtaposed with interior shots of a clinic, where an anesthetist is seen

working on the artist-patient. Other scenes that offer partial glimpses of the human and animal figures—such as their limbs and faces, with nostrils flaring and tongues protruding—are interspersed with various lines of text, ranging from “Bodies are absurd” and “Bodies are tragic” to “Is unconsciousness a body part?” Her action, which draws upon histories of body art and incorporates the ethical frameworks of participatory art through an existentialist, humanist lens, seems to pose the following questions: Is it possible to delete presence without dying? To what extent does unconsciousness equal nothingness?

The last of the three works is arguably Choksi’s most poetic. Conceived prior to the other two performances, *Iceboat* harnesses a number of the artist’s ongoing preoccupations and explorations—of abstinence and excess, of heaviness and lightness, of being and non-being. The performance, in which the artist, sporting a shaven head and flowing white costume, is rowing a transparent boat across an empty expanse until it submerges into the lake, evokes ascetic and renunciative overtones. “I was thinking about how wonderful it would be to dissolve into that nothingness,” she says of conceptualizing the experience.

As Choksi’s practice seems to be part intuitive, part cerebral, it makes sense that her latest performance, shown in conjunction with *Trilogy on Absenting*, was a reworking of her earlier work *Paint on Plant* (*Variiegated Ficus*). Enacted live in April at London’s Hayward Gallery Project Space as part of her solo exhibition “Minds to Lose,” *In Leaf* (*Primary Time*) (2015) saw her layer three fig trees with red, blue and yellow paint, respectively. It is in part an homage to Dutch conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader’s *Primary Time* (1974), a video in which he rearranges red, blue and yellow flowers. The piece, which she saw as a type of “endurance painting,” brought Choksi’s oeuvre full circle, as it merged forms of sculpture and painting with performance and theater. *In Leaf* (*Primary Time*), a work that she had envisaged ever since her days on Columbia University’s tree-lined campus, explored how her interpretation of “excess” love or protection ultimately led to the three trees’ defoliation. During the course of the show, as the leaves started to wither, decay and fall, visitors were challenged to contemplate, once again, the ephemeral nature of absence and its residual presence through form.