

Prema Murthy: Organizing Energy

By Reena Jana

One look at Prema Murthy's latest body of work—three dimensional lines “drawn” with black yarn that intersect like the weave of a spider's web; black-and-white compositions on paper made up of grid-like shapes and forms -- and viewers might first believe them to be ultra-minimalist, utterly spare. But beneath the elegant simplicity of Murthy's lines, in either two or three dimensions, is a complex system of references, histories, mysteries, and ideas.

Where to begin? On the surface. Yes, Murthy's installation at Tamarind looks like a hand-made, giant net. (It echoes an earlier installation at the artist's solo show at PS 1, a contemporary art space that is an affiliate of New York's Museum of Modern Art.) It is perhaps a surprising sight for followers of Murthy's work through the years, as she received her first recognition by critics and curators for her new-media pieces in the 1990s. One of her best-known pieces, after all, is *Bindi Girl* (1999) a Website she created to explore issues of identity and its (mis)perceptions. In *Bindi Girl*, the artist represents herself as an Indian pin-up girl as a way to critique both the objectification of women in the global online pornography industry and the Orientalism that is specific to Asian porn.

In another well-known new-media piece entitled, *Mythic Hybrid* (2000), Murthy explores the relationship between women, work and globalization. For this project, she traveled to Bangalore, India. There she gathered stories from women who worked in a microelectronics factory, piecing together motherboards. *Mythic Hybrid* was created from the resulting video footage.

Murthy also received attention for her work with Fakeshop, an art collective whose members included Murthy, Jeff Gompertz, and Eugene Thacker. Formed in the mid-1990s, Fakeshop was known for its thought-provoking performances and installations. They created environments that addressed the simultaneity of community and isolation within a landscape increasingly mediated by new technologies, the biotech industry and urban planning. The group used media tools such as the Web and video conferencing, which during the 1990s and early 2000s were considered cutting-edge communication technologies and avant-garde art mediums. Fakeshop was included in the 2000 Whitney Biennial.

Yet Murthy's latest installation, *Organizing Energy*, seems to be the antithesis of “new media art,” the opposite of the digital—at least on the surface. Yes, the installation was made by hand, and in the very basic, very physical medium of yarn.

As the critic Swapna Vora describes Murthy's yarn-based installations, the work can conjure many different interpretations, depending on the viewer's own points of reference:

“Delicate it is like a spider's web, this sketch of the worldwide web of our collective thoughts. Skinny skeins of black wool stretch into space, a cat's cradle. Black wool is knotted simply at intervals forming a playful, simple structure which reminds one of outer space, the interior of a crystal with many squares,

triangles perhaps representing the wires which connect our lives to ourselves, to others, to space itself. They pierce the wall and spill outside the delineated room.”

Although the art work seems extremely low-tech, Murthy based the compositions on digitally rendered shapes she created with sophisticated software programs (Illustrator, 3DStudio Max, Poser, After Effects) usually used to model realistic imagery for commercial films and video games. Programmers use these computer applications to render bodies and objects that appear round and soft, or flat and hard, or angular and sharp, when viewed on a screen. When programmers and designers are creating these believable images, they first model the shapes in grids made up of lines, and then fill them in with colors and textures.

Murthy, herself an experienced programmer who spent three years as an apprentice to an inventor of computer algorithms for digital imaging, exposes the grids in her new work. She reveals the system of lines, generated by software code, that it takes to create a digital skeleton or frame that will eventually be turned into a representation of a palpable thing, so believable that it might cause a willing suspension of disbelief in the viewer. By illustrating these lines in yarn, she reminds us that even the slickest digital animation in, say, the latest Pixar movie or the newest Grand Theft Auto video game, was made by a human hand. Murthy attempts to pull back the curtain and expose the true nature of the “magic” of digital imagery, just as Dorothy did for the Wizard of Oz. It’s not magic. It’s just a bunch of lines after all—a composition by an artist, the visual manifestation of a vision, an idea. “Drawing has actually always been a part of my art practice,” says Murthy, a classically trained artist who received her Master of Fine Arts degree from Goldsmiths College in London. “I am just using the mouse instead of a pencil.”

Her work is much more than just lovely lines that are aesthetically pleasing, though. In another recent body of work related to the pieces on view at Tamarind, Murthy created similar, gridded images based on numerical data from a variety of sources, from patterns of immigration to statistics on consumer spending. She took these raw numbers and then plotted them according to their fluctuations over time onto points on digital renderings of human bodies and animated them using the same three-dimensional modeling software she used to compose the works in *Organizing Energy*. The fluctuations in the data, such as increases or decreases in immigration to the United States, or low and high points in American shopping patterns, are reflected in the ways the digital bodies move on screen. In other words, Murthy created beautiful visions of undulating physiques whose rhythmic and mysterious movements are reflections of real-world numbers and figures.

Although this aspect of animation is not featured in the show at Tamarind, keeping in mind the works in which Murthy takes this approach can offer insight into how the artist thinks. Hers is a mind that sees profound connections between the numerical and the aesthetic. It is the mind of a computer programmer, who can turn binary code into imagery. It is also the mind of an artist.

Accompanying the large installation of *Organizing Energy* at Tamarind are a number of prints, created by making limited-edition digital print-outs using pigmented inks on Hahnemuhle paper, of gridded lines that echo the three-dimensional piece. Also nearby are a series of paintings—which Murthy prefers to consider as “drawings” because they are so

line-based--in oil-based paint markers and acrylic on canvas. By adding these elements, which feature similar gridded, netlike forms and compositions that echo those of the yarn piece, to the overall installation at Tamarind (in an arrangement that echoes the show at PS 1), Murthy creates an art-historical context for her sculptural piece that serves as an effective nudge for viewers. It's as if she wants to encourage moments of association. One recognizes the yarn as the artist's line when seen near the prints, makes the connection. We see the physical piece as aligned in an art-historical way. This is a simplistic reading of the work, though. The power of this work is its many levels of interpretation and deep layers of meaning hidden by a veneer of what appears to be painfully straightforward.

“With this new work, I was thinking about how there seems to be an underlying structure or logic in things that at first glance feel random or happen by chance,” she explains. “Kind of like when you meet someone that might be a stranger but then you realize that you are connected somehow, they know someone you know and so on...like the six degrees of separation theory.” The webs she spins in her new, minimalist imagery are like diagrams of complicated relationships between people or places or ideas.

The web-like nets that Murthy's images suggest can also be seen as a metaphor for the Net, or the Web, proper nouns. Once called “cyberspace” a decade ago, at a time when Murthy was first gaining traction as an artist experimenting with how to use the Internet and the World Wide Web as a medium for creative expression, the tangled online universe is a place where Murthy is comfortable. She is a Generation X artist, one who grew up during the dawn of the personal computer in the 1980s.

“Growing up in the suburbs, I spent a lot of time reading sci fi, listening to 80s synth pop music and playing video games - nerdy stuff,” she recalls. This was the era when popular culture included movies such as Tron and War Games, kids played Pac Man and Centipede and Asteroids in arcades and on early game consoles. Apple introduced the first personal computer with an ominous, Orwellian Super Bowl commercial in 1984 which not so subtly signaled the beginning of what would become the digital era in which we live today.

But not only is she a person who would come of age in the 1980s and become an adult and a professional artist during the decade of the dot-com's dawn in the 1990s; Murthy is also a person of mixed heritage whose life reflects a truly global identity. She has a complicated, international family tree --she is half Indian and half Filipina, born in Seattle but raised outside Houston, Texas. This could be represented by the intersecting lines created by the yarn that marks the distance between far corners and walls of the gallery, if she had to physically describe the world-crossing path that her parents and she, herself had to make to define their family. While growing up in Texas, she and her family would travel back and forth to India and the Philippines to keep in touch with their kin.

But her travels were not only for family visits. And her identity as an artist was formed not only by her own identity as an American of mixed-ethnicities. As a student and a young adult, for example, she spent extensive time visiting Europe, where she -- like so many budding artists before and after her -- steeped herself in Continental art history and would encounter and become inspired by the dramatic forms and figures in both Baroque sculpture and architecture (namely Bernini and Tiepolo) and dark Spanish painting (El Greco, Velazquez). Later, in her 20s and an MFA student in London, she would participate in 1990s

rave culture, characterized by masses of youths dancing, entranced by the blips, beeps, and beats of electronic music. While Murthy's European experiences might seem disparate, they share one thread in common: each of these contributed to her interest, as an artist, in spectacular representations of the human body, a recurring theme throughout her budding oeuvre. From her commentary on the treatment of women in *Bindi Girl* and *Mythic Hybrid* to the swirling digital bodies in her more recent, gridded data visualizations, Murthy is clearly compelled by intriguingly theatrical ways in which the body is depicted – and finds new ways of doing so in fresh new media forms.

Murthy's understanding of the body was not only shaped by her knowledge of classic, 17th century European art or hip, late 20th-century underground culture. The artist also turns to her South Asian roots for inspiration, to ancient Indian art history, citing the elegant cave paintings of courtly characters at Ellora, created circa the 7th and 8th centuries AD, and the intricate, erotic sculptures at the Khajuraho temples, built from about 950-1050 AD. What these sites share in common are images of the body that reflect gorgeous anatomical proportions based on what could be described as a mathematics of beauty. The female figures' idealized, voluptuous breasts and hips and the male figures' iconic broad shoulders and slim waists all display geometries that reflect a distinctively Indian sense of bodily golden means or formulae for pulchritude. Looking at Murthy's Indian influences in this way, we can understand the connection between her interest in software code that turns numbers into both two-dimensional and three-dimensional human figures.

Murthy's Indian influences do not stop at the well-known temples that are so often sought out by tourists and written about by art historians. Ever the explorer of broader culture that extends beyond the textbook and the museum, Murthy says that two other South Asian references to her vision as an artist include the perhaps surprising Astronomy Gardens at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi dating back to the 18th century. The site, built by the Maharaja Jai Singh II, translates as the 'temple of instruments' and consists of astronomical apparatus built at the scale of architectural structures and which are used to follow the movements and track the positions of the sun, moon, stars, and planets as observed from earth. The Maharaja would use such observations to engage in what today are understood as astrological predictions. Some maps of the heavens represented in grids echo the forms in Murthy's *Organizing Energy* installation.

To the contemporary visitor to Jantar Mantar, the site looks like a sculpture park; the instruments might bring to mind Richard Serra sculptures. It is easy to see why the intriguing site, which elegantly bridges the mathematical and the magical, the possibly scientific (data on the solar system) and the purely aesthetic (the curvy shapes of the structures) left such a strong mark in the mind of Murthy, whose own artistic sensibility reflects that of the eye and mind of a 19th century Indian who was curious about the relationships between the numerical and the lyrical and how to organize the energy of the heavens in a way to make sense of life on earth.

Yet Murthy's on-going relationship to Indian culture as both an artist and a person partially of Indian descent extends beyond the historical. In 2000, when her career as a new-media artist was at its peak, she traveled to the Indian state of Kerala to practice an age-old form of martial arts known as *kalaripayattu*, traditionally practiced by warriors from that area. While it might seem odd to mention her fitness regimen in relation to a contemporary art

installation, the association between Murthy's quest to better understand the control of the body achieved via martial arts is relevant when considering her deep interest in physicality and how the corporeal is represented in art. Her journey to India to learn more about kalaripayattu also ties in to her on-going interest in exploring how to bridge the ancient and the contemporary to find connections between the two points in time.

In her work, Murthy weaves in and out from the physical to the digital. Murthy presents us with dichotomies that are relevant when considering contemporary India's both particular and universal identities in the age of globalization: the handmade and the digital, the traditional and the hi-tech, the local and the international.

Yet ask her who her more contemporary artistic influences are, and she'll cite a trio of women artists with very different backgrounds and styles, yet when considered in the context of Murthy's own vision make sense: Yayoi Kusama, Eva Hesse, and Amrita Shergil. Clearly, Kusama's obsessive treatment of patterns, Hesse's interest in the impermanent and appropriating the industrial into art-making, and Shergil's mix of Eastern and Western styles, all come into play in Murthy's work, especially in *Organizing Energy*. It's as if Murthy had called upon creative energies of these three important female artists and organized them into a new, up-to-the-minute vision that is both reverential to their work and distinctively Murthy's own.

As an artist with a multifaceted personal history who has been steadily building a body of work with layer upon layer of meaning and historical and aesthetic references that span the world and various eras and areas of culture, she creates compelling imagery that never fails to provoke thought in the mind of the viewer as well as dialogue among audiences – both in the here and now and, most likely, for years and decades to come.

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