

SALOME TANUVASA

In a Midnight Hour

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A private language intimates intensity and remove. Whether aural or visual, it points candidly to circumscribed conditions. It may be emphatically diaristic, a personal code of sounds or strokes that convey precise meaning to the speaker or writer, not necessarily translatable to others; a manifestation (or not) of interior monologue or the process of thought and experience felt within. Its privacy beckons with the sense of a secret to be revealed, withholds or retreats from a capacity for shared understanding, reminding us of our distinctness, our separation one from another.

The intimacy of personal expression or individuated visual apprehension aligns with the idea of a private language as something discrete. Movements toward or away from, across or around works of art, for example, simultaneously suggest spaces of inquiry and connection (experiences that seem to speak to or touch the participants in an exchange) as well as spaces of distance or refusal (a baffling encounter where a desire for disclosure or shared meaning is withheld).

'Intimate discretion' here is in the sense both of containment and of something not for public disclosure. One's own relationship with a person or thing is, in essence, sufficient. Not in the manner of declarative ego but with regard to a necessary introspection that, while it doesn't admit surrounding clamour, does not deny the world about. This is enough; it is enough; you

are enough; I am, for the moment, enough. This form of sufficiency arises from a quiet interior turn; a moment for the self in which one may gather up something discovered and set aside that which is no longer required.

Privacy, intimacy and introspection coalesce in the notion and experience of quietude. Quietude: a sort of hovering stillness; an in-between state of calm or repose; a moment of renewed or recalibrated alertness; a space of reflection; a period of concentration; an opportunity for particular activity. *A midnight hour*, you might say. A midnight hour in which a warm, full darkness allows for thoughts, feelings, actions, considerations or possibilities that might otherwise shrink away from our capacity to experience them. A midnight hour in which we discover some part of ourselves more fully while simultaneously recognising that the self of another time is only partial, never entire.

It is an hour that serves as both a partial metaphor of Salome Tanuvasa's practice and an almost literal expression of when (and maybe how) she practises. She does work predominantly at night and often late at night. The spaces of that work are contained but exist within her home. Her materials reveal restraint and reflect the conditions in which she works; they are predominantly domestic in scale, they lack for extravagance or expense and they seem ready to hand. The physical and temporal concentration of her practice and art are in line with an assertive quietude: steady, determined, focussed.

Gestures in her practice hold strength in their modesty. As markers of movement, they seem contained – not locked-down or withholding but confident and sufficient. The size and shape of each gesture flows from the purposeful movement of her body, its composition in relation to each other confirms that sense of purposefulness. While the drawings harbour a directness that suggests intuition, they do not infer a letting-go, nor an emergence of subconscious or unconsciousness. They are more mindful than the trope of unfettered interior personal expression. They remain made, both as works and marks, in consideration of the circumstances of their making.

What I think I mean here is that they carry with them the domestic space and quiet time of their realisation, even when presented in a public arena. Part of their demand lies in their constraint. Even those drawings featuring high-keyed coloured grounds steer clear of disclosure or confession. The palette and gestures retain a formal resolve that prevents the works from being mistaken for something unmediated. The economy of means they employ may derive from the particularities of Tanuvasa's process (small, decisive gestures drawn on pieces of coloured card at the kitchen table after her children are in bed, for example) but they concentrate rather than limit the artistic position presented. They confirm the procedural limitations of their making (at night, on her own, in otherwise shared space) and carry those circumstances with them into the gallery, - likewise, a concentrated event in a public environment.

Tanuvasa's formal considerations and interrogations are readily apparent. Across a range of media including film, installation and drawing she considers and re-considers the material language of the art object and its relationship to composition and reception. Draped calico, for example, signals different ways of considering the marks made. Punctuating eyelets in the calico are simultaneously compositional elements and hanging devices – potentially quite contrary functions that disclose a possibility for gesture alternate to the conveyance of meaning. Likewise, by flipping some of her drawings on paper 180 degrees she undermines the possibility that her gestures are linguistic or iconographic, tied to specific meaning.

It is not unhelpful to recall Paul Klee's famous aphorism that drawing is taking a line for a walk.ⁱ Nevertheless, and despite its refusal of specific meanings, Tanuvasa's practice is not as free-form as Klee's pedagogical model. Her gestures do carry suggestions of shape (curves of bodies, trees, crescent moons) and, on occasion, one may respond to them as being implicitly representational (waves, shorelines, trajectories). They also imply handwriting and, beyond that, word systems – particularly from the point of view of her education as a New Zealand born Pasifika woman. What does this imply given it is neither a gestural practice without goal, as Klee would have it, nor tied to signification as a semiotician might require?

Rather than define or determine gestures or, indeed, gesture itself within a semiological field, Tanuvasa resolutely inhabits a much more propositional domain. Her drawings are, if you like, very lightly tethered to language. Or not tethered but aware of it. As if language were an aural or visual memory; known but turned away from, in much the same way as the echoes of domestic kitchen activities are dialled down when she comes to the table to work at night.

There's a correlation of the importance of personal, feminist space in a remark of the Black American artist Adrian Piper. Speaking in 1996 she registered the critical importance of private time and private space:

When I am alone in the solitude of my study or studio ... [it's] the only time I feel completely free to be who I am. So I will go to almost any lengths to protect my privacy. If I lose that, I lose everything.ⁱⁱ

Unexpectedly, perhaps, this observation around privacy does not necessarily relate to Tanuvasa's practice. She doesn't enjoy the privilege of a room of her own – be it study or studio. The spaces of her practice are spaces of shared or mixed activity: the kitchen table; her bedroom. There's a different form of privileging at work, though, one that signals the particularity of her work's relationship to personal privacy and domestic connection. It is not separated from the other rhythms of her life, the other people in her life. It occurs within the place of living and coexists with the duration of that living.

This connects with intimacy or introspection as distinct from isolation; implies a stilling of time and space rather than a sequestering or removal from it. Which is not to say Tanuvasa doesn't enjoy a matrilineal artistic genealogy that includes Piper. And counter to the importance that Virginia Woolf placed on physical space in *A Room of One's Own*,ⁱⁱⁱ it suggests that Tanuvasa's is a conceptual space. Indeed, she utilises active visualisation in her practice, seeing herself at work as part of her preparation to work; creating the mental environment as well as the physical. Similarly, she finds ways to obtain privacy that are not predicated on the sustained solitude of the studio environment. Privacy for her is a relative condition, one that she values but not one in which she wholly relinquishes the presence of others.

This experience, of course, is particular to many creative women and the kitchen table is, perhaps, the site most historically redolent of its complexities. Indeed, being tied to a domestic environment motivates Woolf's call for creative, intellectual, social and political independence for women (though she was of a class that employed servants). It is certainly true that this very place of making effects Tanuvasa's practice. Physically it sets a perimeter around the scale of works; temporally it circumscribes the duration of their making. A studio, a room of her own, would necessarily impact on the particular quality of her work. She is curious about that possibility but not anxious at its unavailability.

Without overstating, I want to suggest that a concentration on the things to which she does not have access misaligns with who she is. A studio/room of her own, in this context, is not so

much a marker of liberation as it is of a distinct, alien privilege. It may seem tantalising as a prospect but what might it do to her practice? Tanuvasa doesn't assume it would improve it; she is more pragmatic than that. Moreover, the mode of working inferred by a studio is, itself, culturally determined. Who is to say that the normative environment of palagi artistic production would be a good thing as far as Tanuvasa is concerned?

(I should say that I am uneasy about this. Two women in my life were artists and I have seen up close the effort it takes to be in employment, to maintain a household and to bring up children while pursuing a practice. In one case, certainly, it seemed a case of ambition thwarted and opportunity denied. Nevertheless, their experience is not Tanuvasa's experience. Nor is Woolf's; nor is Piper's.)

This is not merely positivism on my part, much less Tanuvasa's. The circumstances and procedures of her art-making are critical and cogent elements of her practice. Her discipline, intuition, intelligence and sensitivity to the demands of that practice are intimately entwined with her work. And it is this binding together that indicates, in part, where the strength of her practice lies. Its quiet assuredness arises in direct relation to the parameters within which she works – the contraction of the specific site, the expansion of the familial surroundings.

In this regard, the private space of Tanuvasa's making is never wholly at a remove, never truly private in the sense of resolute isolation. Her work therefore asserts fresh demands in the public space of exhibition because it carries that reminder of an environment of domestic intimacy. Duration, scale, material, gesture, method are all inflected by that environment. The concentration in her practice is integral to the degree of attention the works require in the gallery. That they do so in such a modest frame is all the more compelling.

Quietude is an experience of these drawings shared between artist and audience. They momentarily still the swirl of world around us and invite a momentary shift in the time and space we inhabit. They promote a sense of privacy and intimacy and invite a rare moment of introspection concentrated and shared between viewer and work. The quieting, stilling and concentration of a midnight hour.

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ⁱ Refer, Paul Klee, *Pedagogical Sketchbook* (1925), Faber & Faber, London, 1953.

ⁱⁱ Adrian Piper, "On Wearing Three Hats," presentation at "Who Is She? Conversations with Multi-Talented Women", Third Annual Tillie K. Lubin Symposium, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, USA, March 17, 1996; quoted by Christophe Cherix, "Who Calls the Tune? In and Out of the Humming Room", *Adrian Piper: A Synthesis of Intuitions 1965-2016*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2018, pp. 12-29, p. 13.

ⁱⁱⁱ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, Hogarth Press, London, 1929.