

## ***A Choreography in Deep Green* | Smitha M. Babu**

Amid arboreal thickets of moss and pistachio green, pale skies swirl. The clouds, part amoeboid, part spectral, flatten into shapes resembling water bodies as much as sky. Woven into the landscape are groups of mostly sari-clad women holding hands and dancing, while the occasional man donning a *mundu* passes by, carrying fish, tools, or even balloons. Their choreographies are light-footed and ecstatic, as self-consciousness dissolves into a spirited connection between body, landscape and a transcendent passage of time. A first encounter with paintings by Kerala-based contemporary artist Smitha M. Babu reveals borderless, irregularly shaped frames that mimic the fluidity between land and sea. Within them, narrative patterns unfold through movement and rhythm, visually drawing on mythical traditions to articulate a collective memory under threat of transformation. Babu invokes a vision of womanhood and community within Kerala's unbounded pastoral landscapes, where matriarchal lineages, women-led labour and ecological connection inform the complex inheritance of local culture. Her paintings are composed in a shallow perspective that remains curiously distant no matter how close one gets, as if greater proximity might disturb what is unfolding within the scene.

Hailing from the Kollam District in Kerala, Babu grew up in the sublime backwaters of Ashtamudi Lake, known for its unique ecological systems and eight-prong arms resembling a palm tree. The nearby seafaring towns nestled along the shoreline rely on fishing and labour-intensive cottage industries like coir, now facing a decline because of the rapid mechanization of production across competing regional industries. Babu's childhood memories become a counterpoint to this capitalistic turn that threatens the lifestyles and livelihoods of several traditional communities. Through them, she recalls a communion with nature in which a sustaining relationship between people, land and water once structured generational cycles of labour and life. Now, with modern intervention, a once-celebrated equilibrium is disrupted and Babu's retrospection, tinged with longing and hopefulness, becomes a quiet act of resistance against cultural erasure. This relationship to memory and place is the core of Babu's multi-disciplinary practice.

A painter, performing artist and theatre practitioner, Babu works across multiple mediums. She paints primarily in watercolour, whose soft luminosity and low opacity depend on the fluid behaviour of water to achieve the atmospheric washes that define her work on paper. Against the earthy tones of verdant green leaves and muted soil browns, she renders human presence in soft pastels, often captured in pristine white and hints of accent colors. She

begins with a single image and expands outwards, building the narrative like a storyteller who imbues texture and layers meaning into the composition. When seen together, the paintings begin to take on a meditative quality borne of movement and recurrence. The groups of women who dominate her narratives belong to a cultural theatre group called Prakash Kalakendra of which Babu has been a member for over twenty years. Here, women of all ages come together to perform a variety of plays in their village. Babu shapes the landscape through their collective bodies that resist individual portraiture, foregrounding instead a theatre of community formed through acts of rehearsal and ritual. In doing so, she represents landscape not as a backdrop but as something constituted through collective presence, where community itself becomes an ecological force. A sense of strangeness and psychological dissonance further overrides specific identities, which can be read as a metaphor for working-class life and social cohesion. At times Babu draws attention to her deceased grandmother's house, where at one time nearly twenty people lived together. Masked characters also often appear, asserting the mimetic nature of performance and the human tendency to visualize different realities.

Babu's choreographies are both deeply regional and fantastical, speaking to lived memories that endure despite their fragility, yet through repeated acts of remembering, begin to shift and fall out of time. Such memories start to belong to imagined worlds. In Babu's work, the idea of a deep ecological connection during the Anthropocene era, riddled with excessive human dominance, appears less as loss and more as dream-like persistence. The nimbleness of land and sky, achieved by fusing together ambiguous forms, develops recognizable shapes, patterns and even faces in an effect of pareidolia the longer you look at Babu's paintings. Meanwhile, there is no directional above and below, only interconnectedness, as ordinary life coalesces with its more expansive possibilities, where memory, performance and landscape remain inseparable modes of being.

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