

The Ground that Travels.

On Monali Meher's Walking Root Route.

A Root is often treated as evidence. It is taken to prove origin, inheritance, belonging, and claim. It is imagined as something buried, stable, and obedient to the ground. A route on the other hand belongs to a more unsettled order. It implies departure, exposure, risk, and the knowledge that one may not return with the same body, the same language, or for that matter the sense of place. Monali Meher's Walking Root Route begins in this co-implication¹ of anchoring and departure. In her work, the route does not destroy the root; it alters it. The root, learns to travel.

Her work does not function around any easy idea of migration, nor of nostalgia arranged through objects. Meher's work is too rigorous in its handling of substances for arm chair intellectual gratification. What travels in her practice, travels under duress: red wool around a knife, gold leaf cracking on skin, spice released into cold air, glass disciplined by fire, a shard holding the memory of landscape, a root printed onto fabric and made to hang... Here, belonging emerges as the formidable capacity to carry relations, especially after the ground of a place has shifted.

This capacity is first tested at the body. Meher's performances are inseparable from her photographs, glass works, drawings, textiles, installations, and neon work. Her performances are the grammar beneath them. The body walks, wraps, breathes, touches, waits, fasts, carries and measures. The body here is the syntax. In *Bound/Unbound* from 2017, the figure moves while tied into a dense assembly of utensils, basket, vessels, mask, and thread. The title here refuses resolution. The body, while bound is not entirely immobilised... while unbound is never entirely free. Freedom is negotiated through attachment and movement reorganises that very attachment. Rather than releasing the figure from place, it redistributes place across body, object, and red thread.

The red thread that holds the body in *Bound/Unbound* returns marks in mixed-media drawings of 2024 as stitch, wound, repair, protest line, route, root. One sees the red thread cuts across photographic surfaces of shops, garlands, temples, protests, shelves, toys, festival objects, and civic signs. These drawings behave like stitched public skins. They are built from photographic grounds, painted forms, embroidery, translucent surfaces and metal grommets. They carry the memory of banners, tarpaulins, shopfronts, festival clothes, and temporary urban architecture.

In works such as *Makan Dukan*, *Mandup*, *Temple*, *Zandu Garlands*, *Diwali*, *Protest Stories*, *Never Again*, *Sea Sail Sell*, *Together*, *Spirit House* and *Where Is The Soul?*, Meher turns the street into a layered surface of belief, commerce, festivity and anxiety. The sacred and the commercial are not arranged as opposites. They occupy the same visual air. Garlands, toys, devotional images, bottles, shelves, lamps, doors, shutters, slogans and decorative fragments are all pulled into a charged visual density. Black painted forms obstruct and organise the image. Gold dots carry the charge of offering, value, ornament and excess. Red thread marks the surface with the insistence of a wound that also knows how to bind.

These drawings understand the Indian street not as a picturesque subject, but as a site of

¹ I use "co-implication" here not in its technical logical sense, but to indicate a mutual involvement of terms, where root and route alter one another rather than stand as opposites. This relational understanding of place, movement and identity may be read alongside Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE, 2005); Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); and Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

accumulation. Everything touches everything. Ritual becomes commerce, commerce becomes display, display becomes political surface, and public speech enters the field of ornament. In *Never Again*, the blue door becomes a civic threshold under pressure. The stitched red marks and urgent written fragments turn the work into a surface of refusal. In *Where is The Soul?*, the question appears inside a world of bottles, shelves, and goods. The soul is not asked about in a sacred void. It is searched for inside the commodity shelf. This is Meher's strength: she does not separate metaphysical questions from the clutter of everyday life. She does so by engaging with *time*. These works reveal a principle that remains active in *Walking Root Route*: form is not a fixed appearance. It is what remains after time as acted on substance.

Marina Abramović's *Cleaning the House* workshop², which Meher attended in Spain in 2004, sharpened this principle. Its significance is not one of stylistic influence. It lies in discipline. Silence, fasting, white cotton clothes, plain water, herbal tea, walking through forest, sitting with trees, looking at soil, leaves, stones and branches: these were exercises in attention rather than withdrawal. Meher recalls the smell becoming nourishment, the air of trees and wind entering the body almost as food. Hunger did not empty perception. It made perception severe.

Such discipline returns in the work as pressure, not quotation. At the close of the workshop, the fast was broken by crushing almonds, mixing them with honey, covering them with edible gold leaf and eating them. This detail changes how one reads *Gilded*. Gold is not simply wealth, sanctity, ornament or spectacle. It has passed through hunger. It has touched the mouth. It belongs to austerity and nourishment before it appears as surface. In the photographs, gold clings to the face, hand and forearm. It breaks at the joints, wrinkles with skin, loosens at the edges. It makes the body shine, but it does not make it triumphant. It makes vulnerability visible.

The hand is the centre of these images. It reaches towards moss. It enters charcoal. It holds shell. It supports branch. It carries charred wood. Meher's hand is not expressive in the familiar sense; it is investigative. It learns through contact. Gold-covered skin meets bark, ash, shell, floorboard, cloth, wood, moss. The body does not stand apart from what it touches. It is drawn into the residues of the world, and those residues press back.

The sequence may be read beside histories of body-based performance, especially the work of Ana Mendieta, where body, earth, ritual and disappearance enter one another. Yet Meher's body does not primarily leave an imprint upon the earth. It becomes a receiver and carrier of matter. Eva Hesse's fragile material intelligence is also useful here, not as a visual comparison, but as a way to understand vulnerability as form. Louise Bourgeois enters through the psychic force of enclosure, burden and bodily extension. In an Indian context, Sheela Gowda remains an important reference for the way every day and ritual substances carry social memory. Meher, however, brings these materials into a more overtly performative relationship with her own body. She does not only choose substances; she submits to their pressure.

If *Gilded* is governed by contact, *Spiced Auroras* is governed by release. Before a cold field of mountain, water and pale sky, Meher blows turmeric from a flat piece of wood held close to her mouth. Breath, usually invisible, becomes briefly legible as weather. Spice carries heat, kitchen, trade, taste, domestic knowledge and the memory of elsewhere into an austere landscape. The gesture is small against the scale of mountain and sea. That smallness is important. The landscape is not claimed. It is not

² Marina Abramovic Institute, 'Cleaning the House Workshops,'. The MAI describes the workshop as involving abstention from eating and speaking, with durational exercises for focus, stamina and concentration.

conquered. It is touched for a moment by exhalation. Breath becomes the most fragile route the body can make. The gesture belongs closer to feminist performance practices where the body acts as an instrument of making. Janine Antoni may be invoked here for the way bodily actions such as licking, biting, touching or balancing become procedures of form.³ Meher's action is breath. It is neither spectacle nor metaphor alone. It is an act of transfer.

Between these two series lies a precise movement: gold adheres, spice disperses. One substance clings to skin; the other leaves the mouth and enters air. Both actions depend on focus. Both turn the body into a passage. What remains is not spectacle, but evidence: cracked surface, coloured cloud, contact, release.

The red thread is the most persistent line in Meher's practice. Its force becomes clear through *Breathing*, the video work in which she wraps a sharp kitchen knife with red wool. The object is not destroyed or disguised. The knife remains a knife. Its outline is preserved, yet its threat is altered. Wool gives steel another skin. Softness does not abolish violence; it changes the conditions under which violence is held. Meher has described becoming aware of every breath while wrapping, until breath itself seemed caught inside the action.

This is one of the deepest structures in her work: transformation without erasure. The original form remains, but it is held under a changed condition. From the knife, the red thread travels to personal belongings, public interiors, chandeliers, library shelves, staircases, bodies, drawings, jute and landscape. It is never one thing. It may be auspicious, votive, bloody, protective, restrictive, tender, alarming. It recalls threads tied in temples with hope, but also wounds held closed, objects packed for departure, histories one cannot put down. A thread is almost nothing until it continues.⁴ Then it becomes duration.

Glass brings another register of transformation. Meher's glass works are among the most materially complex works in this body. Glass is sand altered by fire and breath. It belongs to geology, craft, heat, fragility and air. In the suspended hand-blown forms, glass hangs like pod, organ, seed, vessel or hardened breath. Pigment settles within it. Jute binds it from above. The rope matters. It roughens the glass, tying it back to fibre, labour, earth and touch⁵.

In the kiln-fired and fused works, vessels lose their domestic confidence. Cups and container-like forms slump, merge, soften, collapse. Rims and openings remain, but function has been unsettled. The vessel survives as a memory of use after use has failed. Other glass works lie among grass, gravel, brick, turmeric, blue pigment and small clay forms. They return transparency to the ground without pretending to be natural again. Glass, in Meher's hands, is geology after heat, breath after cooling, usefulness after collapse.

The neon sentence *In The Shard, The Landscape Remembers Itself* gives this condition its most exact articulation. A shard is not only evidence of breakage. It is a fragment in which relation persists. Landscape, in Meher's work, is not a view held at a distance. It survives through altered substances: glass, soil, root, spice, twig, brick, pigment. In *Melted Sand In Wilderness*, painted lines move across

³ Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*; Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance*; Janine Antoni, *Gnaw*, 1992, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Antoni is invoked as a comparison for bodily procedures of making, not as a direct formal source

⁴ Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History*. Ingold's distinction between threads and traces is especially useful for reading Meher's red thread as a moving line, a stitched surface and a duration.

⁵ Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013);. This reference support the essay's emphasis on making as a process of transformation rather than the imposition of form upon passive matter.

photographic surfaces like root, nerve, crack or invasive growth. The image becomes a ground the hand has entered again. In *Unknown Landscape*, soil, brick, glass, twig, bucket, sieve, turmeric and pigment gather into a corner terrain. There is no horizon. Landscape has been compressed into its working substances.⁶

This refusal of scenic landscape is crucial. Meher does not give us nature as consolation. She gives ground after displacement, ground after use, ground after fire, ground after handling. The landscape is no longer a place one looks at. It is something carried in fragments, rebuilt through contact, remembered by matter after rupture. The textiles extend this condition into skin, threshold and passage. *Entangled*, made of jute and thread, hangs like a membrane that has lost the comfort of protection. It is porous, fibrous, wounded, open to air.

Paradijs Vogels, made across 2021 to 2026, brings printed image, recycled fleece, cotton, gauze, organza, net, wool, threads and textile paint into two hanging panels. The title is significant. “Paradijs” carries a Dutch register, while “Vogels” brings birds into the field of migration and elsewhere. The work does not depict birds as stable figures. It treats them as passages through fabric, memory and place. Its surfaces are translucent, patched and repaired. Images do not sit on fabric; they try to become fabric.

In *Rooted*, the root becomes monumental without becoming fixed. Printed images of mature trees, aerial roots and shaded trunks are brought into relation with painted botanical forms, translucent cloth, handwritten notations and red stitching. The work does not simply picture roots. It makes rooting into a process of attention. The named and aged trees appear as living archives, while the stitched red thread moves across them as route, pulse, repair and continuity. Cloth allows the image to hang, fold, breathe and shift; it turns the tree from a distant subject into a surface of contact. Rootedness here is not stillness. It is a practice of making relation visible.

The neon work *Ghadamodi* adds another language of instability. The Devanagari word glows in blue against an intense black field. Its register suggests change, disturbance, development, unfolding. Language becomes not explanation, but event. In *In The Shard, The Landscape Remembers Itself*, the cursive white light is more elegiac. The visible cables keep the sentence materially grounded. Words in Meher’s work do not hover as thought alone. They acquire power.

Meher’s practice may be placed within a broad lineage of performance, feminist materiality, post-minimal fragility, ecological thinking and South Asian public culture. But its specificity lies in the way she refuses clean categories. Performance becomes photograph. Photograph becomes stitched surface. Glass becomes landscape. Textile becomes skin. Language becomes light. Landscape becomes shard. The work keeps changing state, as matter itself does.

To carry, in Meher’s work, is not to preserve intact. It is to transform without abandoning. That is the force of *Walking Root Route*. The root walks because staying, in any simple sense, is no longer available. The route matters because attachment has not ended. What survives in these works survives under pressure, in altered form, with the marks of contact still visible.

- Satyajit Dave
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⁶ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*; Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). These works help frame landscape as an active field of relations rather than as a distant scene.

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