

Bodymind as Daily Practice

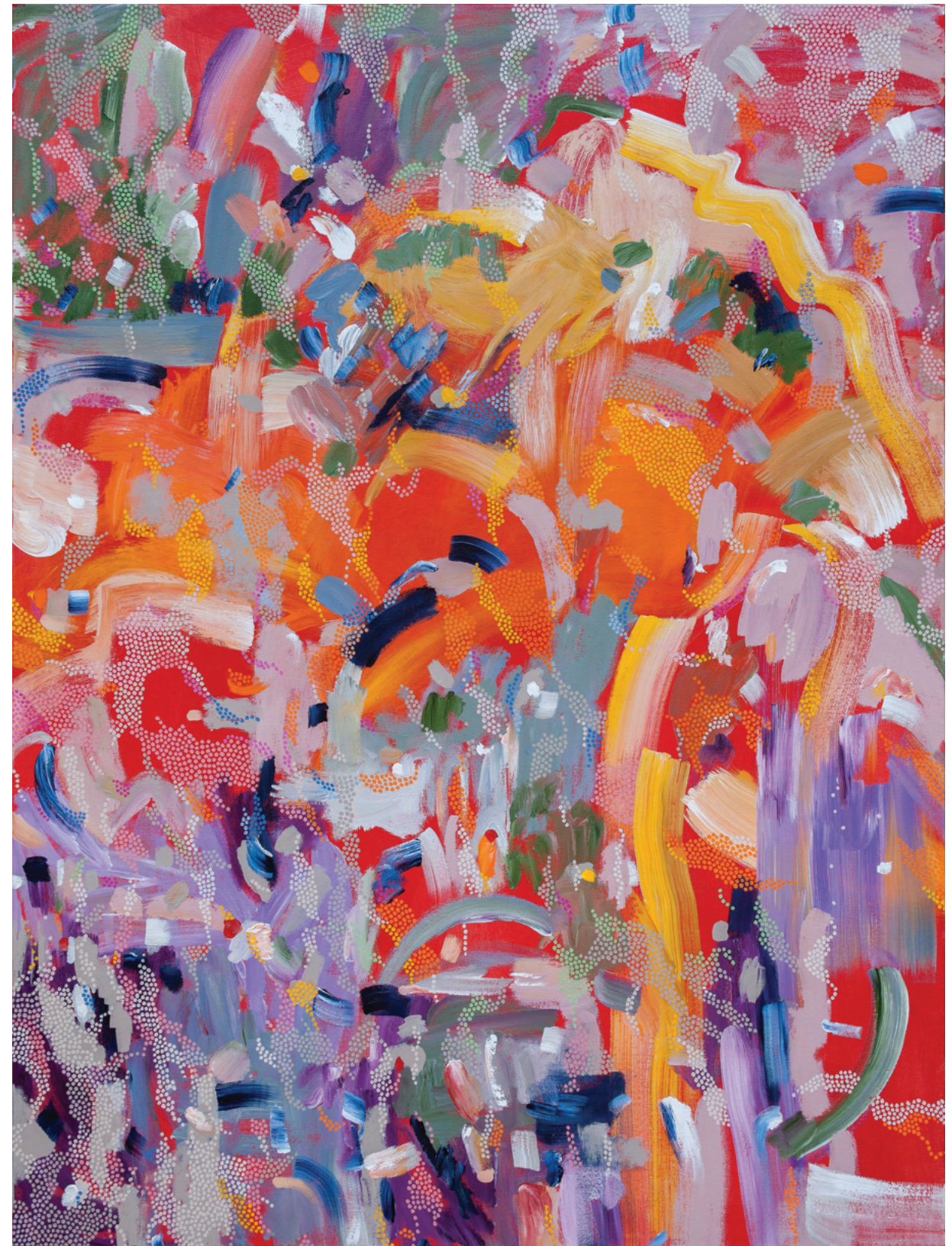
Megha Ralapati

Pooja Pittie's day begins with at least two cups of Assam tea. She lingers over the brisk, malty flavor and turns inward: is today going to be energetic or more restful? If the resources are full, she pulls out a fresh canvas and begins a painting. Her days are molded by a progressive form of muscular dystrophy which limits her movements and dictates her energy level. However, she still works large: 40 x 50 inches, often larger. She prepares her acrylics and captures as many of the sweeping strokes of color she needs to create the foundational first layers of her vibrant canvases. Sometimes the strokes veer one way or another, as in *The End of the Present* (p. 16), building motion inside the painting, other times she pulls them straight up and down, a deluge of rain washing the work, as in *A Night with No Memory* (p. 10). These large gestures are applied intuitively, without planning, emerging from deep within her body. "My conscience, my subconscious feels very clear when I'm making work," she explains.¹ There's a direct link between body, mind, brush and surface.

If it's a morning with fewer reserves, Pooja, who works on multiple paintings at once, often returns to a canvas in process and views it with fresh eyes. Her earlier paintings were covered with countless tiny dots, arranged in tightly moving clusters and reminiscent of Australian aboriginal dot paintings or European Pointillism such as *These Dreams are Already Spoken For*, 2019 (opposite, private collection). The dots provided depth and contour, which complemented flatter strokes of color and served to smooth painted areas beneath, which were deemed too rough or unfinished. The dots, which became a recognizable element of her work, required both mental and physical control to apply, whereas painted drips were less controlled and unpredictable. While she has moved away from the labor-intensive process of dotting surfaces, she continues to drip paint across the canvas. Drips are thicker and less uniform, they feel active and bodily. A combination of restraint and release increasingly guides her process, which is evident in the results — the paintings look wild and more intense.

Pooja's day alternates between bursts of energy and periods of rest. Sometimes the body demands a break, and the mind must recalibrate. Unpredictability requires responsiveness, and she is constantly seeking consistency and rigor amidst the uncertain flows of stamina.

Recently, she craved a return to drawing, which had been a constant in her childhood. She can't remember existing without drawing. As a child, she used to copy the work of Indian illustrator Mario Miranda whose legendary cartoons depicted the color and culture of life across India, including bustling Mumbai, where she grew up. Like Pooja, Miranda was a self-taught artist who reveled in crowded, chaotic scenes chock-full of detail. She copied his cartoons or made her own drawings, taking inspiration from the view out of her window. While drawing was a favorite childhood pastime, it was a particular interest in color, coupled with an innate ability to experiment and marry colors rapidly that eventually drew her to painting. After dabbling in oils and watercolor, Pooja discovered acrylic paint was the easiest and most efficient for her to use, and abstraction was her language.



These Dreams are Already Spoken For, 48 x 36 inches, acrylic on canvas, 2019, Private Collection

It's not surprising that Pooja's early painting influences included Pollock and the other Abstract Expressionists, as well as color masters of Impressionism like Van Gogh and Matisse. But what most accurately characterizes her work is not a movement, but a process. *Gestural abstraction* is used to describe an approach to painting that focuses less on *what* is painted, and more on *how* and *why* the artist created it. For Pooja, the precise content or meaning of any individual painting is linked to the rest of the work in the series. The nine paintings in her current exhibition, *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, at the McCormick Gallery, are a perfect example of this. Taken together, they form a snapshot of the painter as an artist, in this moment. And, this snapshot is essential because her work, like the work of any artist, is in a perpetual state of evolution, of transformation. In her case, however, the rate of change is accelerated by a her muscular disability, which progressively depletes her body's muscle mass. This means the ways in which her body physically produces a painting is in an ongoing state of flux, and her broader practice is in regular dialogue with the flux, constantly adapting itself in response.

The current body of work feels freer, more connected to an emotional center. Yet, the paintings themselves are more commanding. A standout work, *I wanted to Be Elsewhere but Saw No Way to Get There* (p. 14), invites the viewer into a dance of blue, coral and white. Pittie suggests faster motion, perhaps moving toward the high-speed paintings of artist Yoon Lee. At the same time, there's masterful application of color, as she plays with saturation and opacity, creating an effortless gradation of blues reminiscent of Helen Frankenthaler's soak stains. In *Daydream Believer* (p. 13), we encounter a frenetic, dense arrangement of color and stroke. Here we see traces of Miranda's cartoons, and we can draw a line to Tanya Goel's pixelated surfaces and even figurative master Arpita Singh's psychologically complex tableaux.

Pooja's aren't whimsical brushstrokes; they've matured and gained confidence. Paradoxically, it takes mastery to develop a more open, painterly style. Where she has mastered precision is not in the tightness of the composition, but in the discipline of a daily practice. She has become an expert gauge of her energy resources and how to deploy them most efficiently. Her daily practice is a meditation on movement and motion and seeks an economy of both.

The onset of the pandemic invited a shift in the practice. As she found herself seeking a return to drawing, she started working small-scale, using colored pencils on Japanese handmade paper she had collected from her travels (pp. 18-21). Then, like in her painting, she added layers, this time using colored yarns and thread to stitch over the drawings. Several of these color studies using paper or fiber, which she refers collectively to as "drawings," are included in the exhibition and provide a new dimension and depth to the work. Delicate and intimate, these works on paper seem to transcend their study-like nature to resemble printmaking master Zarina's small works or Talha Rathore's gouache works on paper. For Pooja, this is an exciting experiment in material that allows her to blend drawing, embroidery and textile, and has become a practice unto itself. The exertion of mornings spent painting demands afternoons of rest. She usually works on drawings seated, in a more comfortable position, to maximize the remaining reserves of energy she has for the day.

The artist's days are now characterized by intention and internal reflection. This marks a departure from how she used to work — when she thought that painting helped her bridge the gap between body and mind, believing hers were somehow *misaligned*. She wondered if the mind could make up for what the body wasn't always able to do. To this end, she sometimes sought to paint like an able-bodied artist, flipping canvases upside down, ensuring painted detail could extend to all corners, or heavily supporting her body to work and re-work a portion until she felt a particular degree of resolution.

Researching the work of Margaret Price who, along with other scholars, used the term *bodymind* to articulate the interdependence of body and mind, proved revelatory. Price believed these two entities, understood as distinct according to Western philosophical tradition, don't simply affect each other but actually act as one; they are inseparable.² Because of dualism's predominance in Western thought, creating the term *bodymind* is important to reassert the fundamental connection between body and mind, which is central to many non-Western cultural traditions.

For Pooja, realizing her *bodymind* involves deeper listening to understand and accept where the body doesn't want to go. She has described her practice as exploring the evolving dynamic between a slow-moving body and an active mind.³ Formally, this means she is creating different definitions of *resolution* inside her paintings. The paintings in this exhibition demonstrate an exercise in restraint, which has produced dynamic results. The canvases are joyous and forlorn, free-wheeling and stormy, ambitiously expansive and quietly intimate.

Pooja Pittie's paintings are less about a static and universal notion of the physical act of painting (painting about painting), than they are about the unique evolution and transformation of her own physicality in a dialectic relationship with painting. This sometimes makes the work tricky to pin down. It's ever-changing, shape-shifting. But she seems to understand this well. She took Robert Frost's poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay" as the title of the exhibition, which reminds us that nothing in this world is constant. So, it's up to each of us to accept and move with the change.



1 Pittie, Pooja. Personal Interview. 2 August 2021.

2 Price, Margaret. "The Possibilities of Pain." *The Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, vol 30, issue 1, November 2014, pp. 268-284.

3 "Fearless Conversations about Race and Disability Leadership." *The Path Forward*. Host LeeAnn Trotter. NBC 5 Chicago. 2021. Television. This interview took place in connection with the Disability Culture Leadership Initiative, a program of 3Arts in Chicago.