Artist: Sai Bhatawadekar

Titles:
My Body is Your Shrine: Poem by Sai Bhatawadekar
Aayat - Sacred Sign: Dance cover choreographed and performed by Sai Bhatawadekar

Artwork Description
During a year marked by great loss, Bhatawadekar performs a graceful and intimate dance in the Mughal Gallery, a choreography exploring the place where we hold the memories of people we hold dear.

Artist Statement
This piece is a moment in my meditation on longing and loss, on those who have left us this year - loved ones, family, friends, artists, teachers. How do we remember them? Or, specifically for the theme of this exhibition, where do we carry their memory, legacy, and love? As a philosopher by profession and a dancer, I have been striving to locate and experience the seat of consciousness, knowledge, and tradition in the body. In my rhythmic step, twisting wrist, winding spine, twirling skirt, I carry the lessons of my teachers, the gestures of my culture. I am literally painfully aware that I have stored years of trauma and grief in the left side of my body, a dash left of and along the spine, threading down to the foot. At the same time, I am joyously grateful that it has been dance that has healed and lifted me from the dark depths of depression and distress, where rational thought was unable to reach. This piece opens with my poem - My body is your shrine - which is dedicated to my loved ones and once loved, for whom my body has become the sacred space that aligns the past with the present, earthly with the divine:

My body is your shrine;
these feet, wrists, and winding spine,
the twirling threads, their hemline
move per your form and design,
as I ponder, praise, and pine
for the once earthly, now divine.
"I have learned you by heart like a sacred sign."

The last line of my poem is a quote: it is the first line of the song Aayat to which I dance.

आयत -
तुझे याद कर लिया है आयत की तरह
क़ायम तू हो गई है रिवायत की तरह
मरने तलक रहेगी तू आदत की तरह

Aayat -
I have learned you by heart like a sacred sign
You are constant, as legends and the present align
Till death, you will inhabit me and mine
A.M. Turaz (my translation)

Choreographing this piece prompted me to translate the first lines of the song from Urdu to English. In Urdu all three opening lines have the same rhyme, which I wanted to preserve in my translation. The "sign-align-mine" rhyme further inspired me to write my own poem with the same monorhyme, as my (re)interpretation and prelude to Aayat.

The choice of Aayat - for the singer and language teacher in me - is also situated in the performance space - the Mughal Room at Shangri La. The song contains hints and elements of Qawwali and Sufi poetry, and it is written in Hindi-Urdu, with vocabulary that comes from Farsi and Arabic. Aayat itself means a sacred sign or verse of the Quran. The song is set in the Mughal Period, in the early 1700s, and while it is written for the legend of love between Bajirao and Mastani, its poetic proclamations - bringing together the beloved and God, love and worship - transcend the boundaries of time and traditions.

Credits:
Aayat dance cover from Hindi film Bajirao Mastani (2015),
lyrics by A. M. Turaz, music by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, sung by Arijit Singh.
Skirt designed by Maile Speetjens, Assistant Professor of Costume Design at University of Hawaii, Manoa.

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