

Aestheticism in Uttam Nepali's Abstract Works

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore aesthetic beauty in abstract paintings of Uttam Nepali. The available researches had only found out that he was an abstract painter and painted his feelings and emotions. This article argues that forms and colors he created are for the sake of their beauty. The art forms provide aesthetic pleasure to the viewers. The abstract paintings are analyzed and interpreted in qualitative method. The article focuses that Nepali created the structure of colors and lines by proper arrangements which increases the aesthetic qualities of abstract works and has no any utility purpose. It concludes that the value of Uttam Nepali's abstract art in the development of Nepali contemporary art is only because of his individual aesthetic form.

Keywords: Aestheticism, Abstract art, Art for art's sake, rhythm, pleasure, beauty

Introduction

Uttam Nepali's paintings have the qualities of aestheticism. His abstract works are based on the idea that art exists for the sake of its beauty alone. He covered a blank surface with many patterns of colors which describe themselves. They do not narrate any story. His arts are far from imitation. They are non-representative, and are symbolic representation of the mood of an artist. His paintings have the structure and combination of line, color, texture, light and shade which activate energy in purely visual manner. He was able to take observer into a completely different world of sensation and emotion. He remarkably organized flat areas of light and dark on the pictorial surface and is able to create three-dimensions. His rhythmic brushstrokes relate to the viewer's aesthetic sensibility. His joyous mood helps him to balance a dynamic feeling of symmetry. His soft forms are transparent and fluid. Before interpreting his works, it would be worth introducing the artist briefly.

Uttam Prasad Karmacharya known as Uttam Nepali (30 April 1937 – 21 July 2021), was a Nepali visual artist, writer, and actor. "He was one of the pioneers of abstract art in Nepal" (Singh, 1976, p.140). "He created abstractionist, expressionist and surrealist during the 1960s and 70s which were exhibited throughout Asia. In 1959, after completing his studies from Lucknow, Nepali returned to Kathmandu where he conducted an exhibition at the Tri-Chandra College" (Kathmandu Post, 2022, July 28). After the exhibition, King Mahendra of Nepal bought many of his paintings. Biwas (2021) points out that in the beginning, Nepali used to paint about Hindu gods like Ganesha; later he moved towards modern art. Sometimes, Nepali used to write poem in his paintings, especially, written by poets Bhupi Sherchan, and BhimNidhi Tiwari (Biwas, 2021).

Throughout the 1960s and 70s, he produced paintings employing modernist forms like expressionism, abstractionism, abstract-expressionism and surrealism and incorporating traditional Nepali themes, paper and color. Nepali was influenced by Expressionism, it was the movement famous in western art during 1905-30, in which artist distorted, exaggerated forms and colors for emotional impact. Abstractionism was the movement which had great impact on Nepali's creativity. It is nonrepresentational art, which became famous in western art from 1910. In abstract art artist paints geometrical objects or organic object in which they have no any

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objective purpose, no any content. These forms and colors exist for themselves. So, the famous doctrine “Art for art’s sake” was popular. In which artist does not fulfill any didactic and pragmatic value. Sometimes, he did experiment in Abstract Expressionism also in which the artist uses unconscious mind and phyco-motor energy during creating his action painting. Gharti (2015) claims that “Nepali was amongst the few artists who had the fortune of experiencing art of faraway nations like Japan, Delhi, Bangladesh, Moscow etc. which in subtle way had some impact in his artwork” (Gharti, 2015). Nepali’s abstract art forms give extreme beauty and pleasure. They do not fulfill any socio–political function. In his exhibition catalogue, Nepali (1999, p.2) states:

As food and shelter is necessary for existence of life, similarly to lead a blissful life beauty is extremely important. Wherever life exists, nature as well as perception of beauty is there. Art makes life beautiful and progressive. Throughout the world there have been a lot of development in the field of art. Due to the variety of expressions in art, various beliefs and values have been established. In the present modern age, without a presence of science and art, the further development of the society is not possible. The scientists have taken up the duty of invention and advancement of science, likewise the artist has taken up the effort for the creation and innovation of art and beauty. The artistic perception is not only in the artist but has also been perceived in different forms by the members of the society. I am conscious about the fact that unless and until the art does not become the intimate part of the society, the society as such will be incomplete.

According to his thought, we can claim that art and its innovation has purposiveness without purpose as its beauty makes human life being blissful. Thus, it has same importance as food and shelter. Mall (2019) points out the features of Nepali’s abstract works: "They are simplified, round, curved, bended lines moves towards here and there to find a way. They are trying to resolve all the pain, struggle and problems to come in the way of life. His sensual and conscious line moves on the surface of painting to reach the spectators soul” (p 55). As Kandinsky mentioned that color can "cause vibrations in the soul and can communicate the artist’s intention" (qtd. in *The Great Artist part 80: Kandinsky*, 1995 p.2538). Nepali’s abstract painting's colors have both physical and spiritual quality. Bajracharya (2016) states:

Uttam Nepali painted from the mind. Once, he mentioned to me that emotions need to be intellectualized before being articulated. This process is even more important to artists, as emotions fuel and intellect motivates them. His abstract canvas appears like a fluid which constantly seems changing its appearance. (p.97)

As mentioned above, Nepali painted his abstract forms spontaneously from mind and are non-objective, so they are for their own sake. Nepali (1993) himself explains that “art is nothing for those who have no faith in human sentiment and emotional values, they cannot maintain harmony with God and creativity” (Expressions’ 93). Uttam Nepali and his artworks have been introduced briefly. Now, the concept of aestheticism will be clarified before interpreting the paintings.

Aestheticism

Aestheticism was the movement which was popular in late nineteenth century which centered in the doctrine that art exists for the sake of its beauty alone and it does not have any political, didactic or any other purpose. Fargis (1998) points out that Aestheticism (also the Aesthetic Movement) was an art movement in the late 19th century which privileged the aesthetic value of literature, music and the arts over their socio-political functions). This movement believes that it is not important for the artist to paint for the utility purpose of society. Burdett (2014) states that Aestheticism gives focus on beauty and pleasure. Art should be produced to be beautiful,

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rather than to serve a moral, allegorical or other didactic purpose. The sentiment was exemplified by the slogan "art for art's sake." Aestheticism originated in 1860s England with a radical group of artists and designers, including William Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Aestheticism challenged the values of mainstream Victorian culture as many Victorians believed that literature and art fulfilled important ethical roles).

Walter Pater has written many articles on Aestheticism. Walter Pater remarks that art exists for the sake of beauty and there is no any reason behind its being. Willette (2010) discussed about Kantian philosophy. He states: "In the 18th century, Immanuel Kant set art free from content, subject matter, the client's wishes, the community's desires and the needs of religion. The idea of art being given wholly over to aesthetic pleasure and delight was the ultimate freedom of art to exist on its own merits and to be the center of its own world"(Willette, 2010). Hence, above statement claims that there is no any boundary for the artist on the process of artistic creation.

Whistler is another artist who was a leading theoretician of the Art for Art's Sake doctrine. Strickland (1995) describes that artist Whistler also believes in the theory of Aestheticism. "The painter James McNeill Whistler was a leading theoretician of the Art for Art's sake doctrine" (Strickland, 1945, p. 87). Before a painting is anything else for him, painting is, first and foremost, a blank surface covered with colors in varying patterns. Art is the automatic expression of human mind in which artist uses form, color, line and texture for their own sake which provide aesthetic pleasure to both, the maker himself while creating and the observer while perceiving. In other word, beauty of art connects both artist and viewers. The forthcoming section of this article discusses that Nepali's abstract paintings have Aestheticism. The organic unity created by him through the arrangement of colors, lines and shapes on flat opaque area are the source of pleasure and delight. His works are based on the idea that art exists for the sake of its beauty alone and has no any utility purpose. He developed his own individual style in abstract painting. Nepali's works are interpreted in terms of aestheticism along with their significance.

Research Methodology

The research area of this paper is Uttam Nepali's abstract art which has been explored from the perspective of Aestheticism. Nepali painted in many styles but only his nine abstract paintings are used as sample because they are enough to support the thesis statement of the article. These nine paintings proved that he explored abstract form which has aestheticism. Forms and colors of these paintings are nonrepresentational. These paintings' forms and colors are only expressing beauty, so they are interpreted to prove that there is aestheticism in Nepali's abstract paintings. This research uses qualitative method for analysis and interpretation. Works of art are primary sources that have been analyzed and interpreted.

Analysis and interpretation of Nepali's abstract paintings

Uttam Nepali's abstract paintings have the qualities of aestheticism. His abstract works give joy and pleasure to the viewers. They are based on the idea that arts exist for the sake of their beauty alone. To support this statement, his paintings are discussed, analyzed and interpreted. In these paintings, he uses the forms which are full of life and yet curiously balanced and ordered. His shapes are organic and created by rhythmic brush strokes. These forms do not suggest any natural world; they have their own value. They exist for their own sake. His works are the expression of his personality. Those forms do not suggest any didactic value. His forms are transparent, revealing their structures and therefore, have a more fluid and dynamic relationship with the space. We can say that his works have purposiveness without purpose. They are valuable, as they serve a function of enhancing experience and thought through their effects on the audience.

He employs and assembles forms to give the effect of music, which would affect directly to the observer's senses. They are successful to arouse similar emotions inside them. Kandinsky states that "the symbolic patches of different colors have different emotional associations" (The Great Artist, Kandinsky, 80, 1985, p. 2538). Similarly, Nepali's paintings create harmony through cool colors and he uses some warm strokes opposite to them to have animated effect.

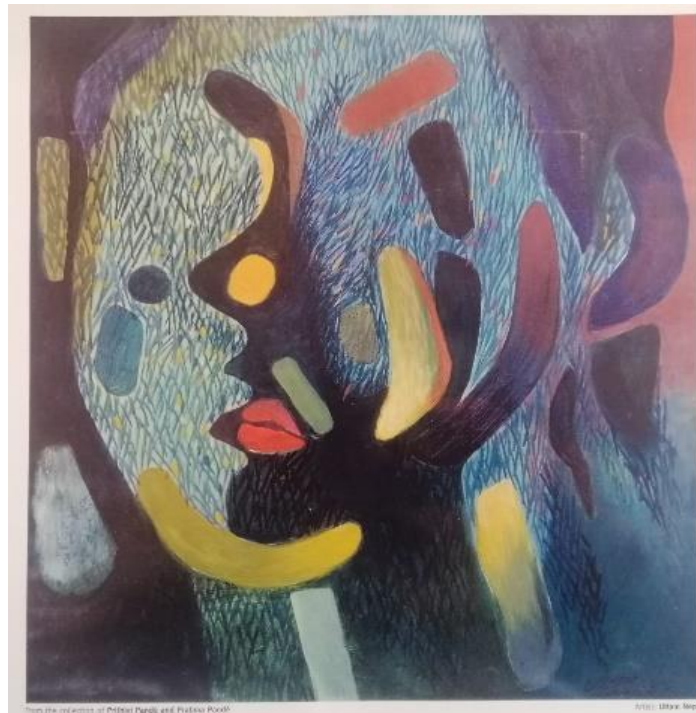


Fig.1 Uttam Nepali. *Untitled*, 2003, oil on canvas, collected by Prithvi Pandey, Kathmandu

The artwork *Untitled* (Fig.1), painted in oil have features of aestheticism as the form looks abstract and beautiful. When we penetrate into it, the viewer can find out that there is distorted male head inside which female head can be identified. Yellow and red warm patches are applied against blue shades. The thin crosshatching by blue color lines given in the face of male Fig. works as the effect of texture opposite to the flat black silhouette of female face. This texture gives tactile effect and intensifies the observers' feeling. This face was focused by the yellow circle. The texture of crosshatching becomes secondary as the flat yellow organic form creates rhythm. Red lips like form enhances our mood as it becomes more luminous when it is applied on black. It seems that artist is trying to depict that inside every man, there exist a female or may be Hindu Ardha Nariswar archetypal form (half male and half female form of Hindu divinities) hidden unconsciously in his mind that comes automatically during process of artistic creation. Hence the structure created in proper order or arrangements of colors and lines increases the aesthetic qualities of works.



Fig. 2 Uttam Nepali. *Meditation*, Poster Color, 74 x 58 cm, MoNA Collection

The painting *Meditation* (Fig. 2) arouses the tranquil feeling as Nepali uses cool green and blue colors. Thin red patches come against his cool palate. The mature knowledge of complementary colors developed inside the unconscious mind of an artist can be measured through this painting. One can find the feeling of meditation by observing it. It works like the armchair for the viewer to relax after the hard work. Sometimes, it looks like the distorted form of face with closed eyes. Yellow is representing eyes then immediately the form changes into the form of tree or jungle in front of our eyes. The big area of lemon yellow on the top most part of the painting is balanced by the small form of yellow given in the lower part against flat black planes. This pictorial language proves that there is no need of representation of objective world to communicate joyous feelings.



Fig. 3 Expression [Source: Uttam Nepali, 1993, Acrylic on canvas]

In the painting *Expressions* (Fig.3) Nepali experimented with colorful painting. The haphazard juxtaposition of red, blue, yellow and green induce turbulent rhythm in his viewers. He is playing with the crazy use of clashing colors. The textural effect moving upward is stopped by the flat tint of white. As once Kandinsky points out that “the spectator had to look actively at his works to experience the pulsation of the painting”(The Great Artist: Kandinsky 80, 1985, p. 2549). We have to enjoy Nepali’s work actively. Unimaginable and unnamed world is converted to palpable reality in his expressions.



Fig.4 Uttam Nepali. *Untitled*, 1998, *Acrylic on canvas*

Nepali’s another painting *Untitled* (Fig.4) is bright and cheerful. This abstract painting did not rely on motifs drawn from the natural world. The beautiful patches of brilliant red and black float freely on light color. He wanted the contrast of the bright free-flowing colors and the scratchy lines to stir the viewer’s emotion directly. Here the colors came through chance which the artist normally attempted to control in his previous painting. In his exhibition catalogue, Nepali (1997) himself states that “where there is the state of moral creativeness, there is the creation of pleasurable mental environment”. Hence he is able to create pleasurable environment.



Fig. 5 *Untitled* [Source: Uttam Nepali, 2000, *Acrylic on canvas*]

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This *Untitled*(fig.5) painting has beauty without any objective representation of natural world. It is painted in yellow, red and olive green color. The yellow circular patches show the warmth and happiness. The circular surface is disrupted by many whimsical lines. These lines show the intense force which overwhelmed the artist while making this painting. His lines are corresponding to the circular shape created by yellow and green transparent patches. This correspondence has their own existence in the pictorial language to create beauty.



Fig. 6 Uttam Nepali. *The Vision*, 2003, Acrylic on canvas

In the painting *The vision* (Fig.6), we find the twinkling illuminated beam of light against flexible flat field of planes painted in monochrome oil color. Although the monochrome dull palette of olive green is used, it gives the unexpected pleasure created by rhythmic form. The dullness is broken by the clever use of orange against shades of sap green. The circular repetition of patterns of color creates broad circular movement. The depth constructed by circular curve shape created by inventors release us from all the doctrines and ideological burden of art. The observers' eyes go towards the depth which creates the illusion of perspective. Hence the painting proves that beauty can be created through the balance of colors without having any ethical or materialistic value in painting.

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Fig.7 Uttam Nepali *Untitled.* , 2003, *Acrylic on Handmade Paper ,24''x30''*

In this painting *Untitled* (Fig.7), artist gives the patches of blue on yellow ochre. The shapes are made without any materialistic aspects. The texture of *lokta* paper used as the surface is helping to create vibration in purely visual manner. This earthly color shows his dull mood. Gharti (2015) points out: “He has set his hands on all sorts of art forms, from realistic to complete abstract. However, he found solace in abstract painting” (p.29). The dynamic leaf like forms are amusing and they provide the feeling of dance.



Fig.8 Uttam Nepali. *Gift of sight*, 2004, *Acrylic on canvas, Tilganga Eye Hospital*

Gift of the Sight (Fig.8) is the painting having central composition. He tried to capture the spiritual quality through the expansion of circular forms like the forms of *Sunya* (the primordial cosmic point) or the egg. This circular form which is expanding looks like a source of energy, source of life and the feeling of infinity. The color tone becomes lighter towards upper side of the composition. The title itself suggests observers can find the feelings of eye. Nepali possessed highly experienced hands which even when unguided, inevitably form certain recognizable shapes like eye. He creates beauty by breaking flatness of opaque color through rhythmic thin burnt umber lines.

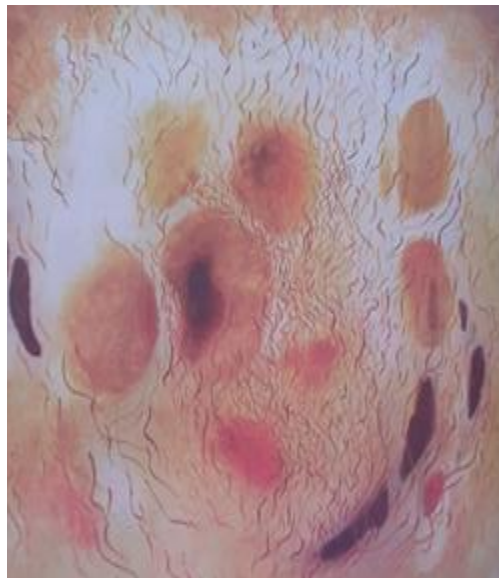


Fig.9 Uttam Nepali. *Untitled*, 2007, *Acrylic on canvas*

We can find the play of imagination in this painting(Fig.9).Gharti (2015) defines that “this untamed imagination reveals the power of artist's dedication to his works.” He uses a sacred color orange which represents fire and therefore purity in many Eastern religions. Impurities are burned in fire. It looks as if in his old age like *sanyasi*, he is trying to burn all his desires and duties in fire and shows his belief in God. The thin lines which are his trademark look like tiny microbes floating in the water. These lines have a wonderful sense of freedom totally joyful, and contain nothing that indicates a fear of impending death. Despite the plural and imaginary significances, the focus is on aesthetic beauty and pleasure. His compositions are the expression of joy and pleasure having tactile intensity. They are full of rhythm and beauty.

Conclusion

Uttam Nepali's abstract paintings convey the feeling of joy and beauty. This article argues that forms and colors he created are for the sake of beauty. His discoveries about the expressive potentialities of line and colors are pleasing and provide unique experience to the viewers as well. He is the master in balancing the contrast of texture upon flatness; cool color upon warm background and warm color upon cool background. His colorful forms like patches float freely on the surface of canvas. The aesthetic forms are more important than referential contents. He perfectly manages focal point on his canvas to gain the gaze of the viewer. He induced the same kind of feeling which the artist felt during the process of artistic creation. We can believe that his abstract works have the features of Aestheticism and exist for their own sake. They are beautiful and have no utility purpose or do not serve any kinds of moral value.

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