

THE DIVIDING LINE: ACADEMIC FORMS AND EXPERIMENTATIONS

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Abstract

The perception of 'Art' has had changed phenomenally since the earliest appearance of art like Painting or Sculpture on the surface of earth. The numerous shifts to new forms and manifestations since then are attributed to the basic human instincts - like desire for continual change and explore for new. But all the changes are always being determined by the motives of the involved artists.

Like elsewhere, Nepali Art too has had witnessed multiple forms and phases as time moved on. In the recent times, Art here too, is defined as experimental - an end result of creative experiments. And an argument that today is an age of unlimited freedom - to imagine and to create. But lately, it is found there have been frequent instances of abusing this creative freedom.

To correct such tendencies in time, the concerned authorities have designed the related curriculum of Higher Education in Fine Arts - so that the exercise to experiment in 'Art' is made only after a designated stage of academic learning - not earlier. Obviously, the point is to lay the due emphasis on learning of academic forms first before exercising creative freedom - called 'Experimental Art'.

A most likely image one would expect or conjure-up while visiting an exhibition today would be of an array of art forms - unconventional in shapes and styles. And most often, the art is described as modern. In fact today, to expect so is common and is taken as natural. For, only such art forms represent the present day trend of the global art.

Earlier, the art used to be defined with the preconceived imageries. Now this notion has given space to new - primarily a thought or a message or even a mission based representation: and is often dominated by stylized shapes and forms. The depictions or the renderings even if are based on the

objects found in nature are stylized and found different from a real. Often it may remain beyond a layman's comprehension; or the imageries may have come totally out of an artist's imagination. Earlier conventional images are usually described as old fashioned or things of the past.

Also unlike in the past, Art today is essentially a free expression. Not until the recent past, an art used to be a revelation of collective beliefs: are called religious Art. And the artists to create it, needed to work within a guided frame of instructions. Or as part of earlier tradition, they were even subject to work physically in a guild - guided



Painting of a Bison, c.15,000 BCE from the **Altamira Cave complex**, home to some of the earliest art of prehistory, Spain.

by collective beliefs or the needs. Individuality or an individual choice thus, always remained low and mattered least in such an exercise. An art thus, remained subject to several restrictions. Yet it continued to be described as a work of Art. Ancient works from cave art at Altamira to centuries old tradition of religious paintings in Nepal and elsewhere illustrate the point.

Art Today

Times have changed. As said earlier, Art today as an act of free expression continues to explode with new ideas and forms by every passing day or a moment. This is beyond any imagination to people with earlier mindset. Over the years, since the centuries ago when a rudimentary form of art – a painting, a drawing or a crude clay model or terracotta may had first appeared, art has evolved into innumerable forms and manifestations. The annals of art history are replete with narratives of multiple layers of evolution in art all over the world. There should be no

exception to this universal pattern of change.

In simplistic terms, one may like to attribute this global shift as a natural result of changing times and to the changing taste of human beings. Partly it is true. But to evolve it into the present state of global art, it has had taken centuries. Even today, the change or the evolution continues to move on. So if one is to ponder or dig deeper on the issue how and why it occurred in a broader perspective – it would become clear that there are only two main reasons behind this great shift. Both have to do with the basic human instincts. The first one is man's universal thirst for curiosity to learn more: and the second is an innate and a never ending human desire for a continual change – it includes every sphere and aspect of human activity.

And these unique qualities of human behavior have been the primary reasons behind the continual changes taking place in the World civilization in general – and also the phenomenal evolution in the World Art in particular. And in particular, the basic human trait to experiment continually for a constant change: and to explore again and again to observe the subsequent results of his or her explorations should be essentially attributed for all the endless panorama of new thoughts and new presentations. And undoubtedly, the present new era of modern forms and styles found in the modern artistic expressions vividly testify the argument.

An art today thus, is only the end-result of two stages – explorations

within the confines of chosen thoughts and then, a realized visual form. It is preceded by a process called to evolve own ways of expressions. Let's describe it as seeking an appropriate style. Writers like to describe such 'a chosen style' as a creative idiom of an individual artist. Or in a more traditional definition, is also known as 'Signature Style'. For only when all these process ends a visual form emerges - it becomes an art.

Motives Determine the Forms and Styles

But again, to create an Art there remains a very important element left out - it is the motives of an artist. And it is the motive that determines the ultimate physical shape and a style of an artist. As stated in earlier lines, even during the earlier times an art was created with a set of motives albeit limited essentially as

a revelation of a collective chosen faith. Art then thus, either was created as an instrument of worship, or a physical diagram to concentrate or meditate. Or at the best, Art appeared as a documentation of a religious or a ritual event. However, motives did exist and remained of primary importance. Although then the scope were too limited as needed to follow the sanctioned diktats. Still, changes in a slow moving process did occur and appeared as an unmistakable expression of human instincts.

Fast forward to the modern times, as the collective socio-cultural outlooks keep on moving to diverse directions, the earlier motives too continue to change. As is natural, earlier motives are being displaced by an unlimited spectrum of motives. A modern artist today, has an amazing luxury of optional choices of motives - to make a free creative expression. An artist is no longer obliged to reveal any collective faiths nor has to cater to their beliefs. To an artist now 'the sky is the limit' in determining a motive: and is entirely dictated by the inner desire of the artist. It explains the presence of unlimited panorama of art with unlimited motives.

The list of motives is endless. If at one end of spectrum there's the presence of an art to purely to satisfy the self, or to admire because the forms may be familiar to a viewer. Or a composition regardless of any forms merely provides visual pleasure e.g. an abstract painting. Similarly, an artist may have a motive to express his or her reaction or anger on certain issues, happenings or on certain thoughts. But to achieve it all, it is



Krishna Man Chitrakar, *Arya Tara*, 1901.



Shashi Shah, *Kalki Avataar*, 2002. Acrylic on canvas.

obvious an artist needs appropriate tools or elements to convey the chosen message. Here appears the importance of the choice of shapes, forms, colors and also the creative language. It all including the idiom depend upon the chosen motives of an artist.

For sure, forms and styles merely serve as tools to express. And let's stress again, the artist may need to explore again and again in finding right forms and styles - so as to make the expression more meaningful, powerful and effective. This particular phase is defined as crossing the invisible line - a very critical phase - to transcend from academic to creative exercise. Little doubt that to reach this important stage of art journey, an aspiring artist is expected to undergo years of dedication and preparedness so that he or she is well familiarized and equipped with an ability to imagine and the desired skills to realize the imagined imageries. Then the work is turned into a matured creative - modern

expression - either a painting or a sculpture or is expressed in any modern form of fusion.

A Line Between Academic Forms and Experimentations

So now, a critical question arises when and how an aspiring artist indulges in a creative exercise or is given creative freedom; or is allowed to cross this invisible but dividing line between the academic forms and experimentations. That is to be more specific, when an artist is termed as able and is qualified to ignore the established fundamentals of art. The answer lies and depends on the level of definite understanding of the basic tenets of art - acquired either by self-efforts or by undergoing academic drillings. Regardless of the paths chosen however, what matters and important



Anup Jyoti Chitrakar, *Nava Durga Mandal*, 2005.



Krishna Manandhar, *Rocks*, 1980. Oil on canvas.

is the state of mental preparedness or physical accomplishments one has made to reach the stage – and an unmistakable ability to display it all in the works.

If one is to take a look on many of the important stages and examples made by Great Masters of Modern Art, it becomes obvious that the changes or the various phases – called as ‘isms’, did not come out of the blues. With little exception, each of the artists involved in the annals of Art history, had had a long creative trail behind them – revealing great and profound understanding of the fundamentals. They explored and experimentations only then when they were found fed-up or wished to react strongly on the prevailing situations. More so, it appeared as a spontaneous result of basic human instincts – a continual yearning for change and longings for curiosity.

Untimely Experiments Lead to Mediocre Art

In short; it means understanding of academic learning is a must

prior to enter into the stage of experimentations and explorations. Or otherwise experimental efforts would for sure, only lead to or result into mediocre forms. Learning of the academic contents is the basic step and is to equip an artist to enable to create forms first and then to incorporate it or experiment it in future. Only then, an aspiring artist will be in a position to mull upon the further options available.

Here, a nearest parable would be like to be able make right choice of ingredients before really start cooking a desired dish. Here a well cooked dish is compared with a successful work of art – with proper thoughts and skills: and of course with well timed explorations. Like when a dish is cooked with wrong timings and wrong ingredients would result in a failed dish, in absence of needed academic strength an art is bound to result into a sure and definite mediocre work.

Multitudes of mediocre works found today in the local or international exhibitions offer glaring examples. This usually happens when artist is weak academically, but seeks to experiment in art –or cross the ‘Line’ before he or she is ready to do it. Here, they are guided more by wish to gain cheap popularity rather than a genuine desire to dwell in art. To be sure, they are only hiding their weaknesses in the guise of ‘Experimental’ works. But usually such works are prone to ugly exposures – regardless of how one argues or describe in its defense.

That is to say, anyone those who



Madan Chitrakar, *The Untold*, 2007. Acrylic on canvas.

wish to create modern experimental art cannot afford to ignore the stage of 'Academic Learning' to an artist - before really crossing into 'Explorations and Experimentations'. To be familiar and understand the fundamentals of learning in Art is the primary requisite - the basic skills to emulate to natural shapes and forms. Here it's worth remembering a proverbial phrase that to break a rule one needs to know the rules first.

For, here are three important tenets to remember in any modern exercise - to eliminate, exaggerate or add in the normal or natural forms. To be able to do it obviously, an artist first, is in verse with the understanding of real objects. It only underlines the obvious importance of learning of academic skills.

In Nepali Context

Nepali Art too has remained no exception to this global trend. The art of Painting and Sculpture both is seen following this global phenomenon as dictated by time. The plethora of myriad forms and shapes found today in Nepali Art vividly explains the growing popularity of the trend to go modern and for experimentations. The volume and the spectrum of diversity also highlight the stages of time and the artists' growing desire to experiment and to explore.

Many of the modern forms and expressions do indicate the artists did remain sincere and are seen crossing the 'Line' in earnest - only after the needed understanding of the academic norms. The resultant scenario of the Nepali Art therefore, has had remained fairly satisfactory: and to great extent, has proven is able to mingle the global stream. But at the same time however, taking full advantage of free expressions, there have been instances of uglier side too. Mediocre experimental works also continued to appear occasionally - leading many ambitious but opportunistic aspiring artists, made reasonable inroads in experimental art practices and also in art writings.

There have been frequent instances when such charlatans did manage to hoodwink the public - by proffering amateurish experiments as serious works modern expressions - thus leaving the public perplexed. Indeed it offered a very wrong message about the very essence of experiments and explorations in art. No wonder

people are found confounded with diminishing respect for this new creative philosophy. It is natural that such situations ask for an immediate need to address such ugly tendencies as early the possible. Or Nepali Art will suffer unintentionally for long. Moreover, if encouraged more, projection of unpleasant image of Nepali Art bound to occur.

Academic Forms

Authorities responsible for Higher Education in Fine Arts, have had evidently remained cognizant of the challenges. The curriculum set for the higher learning in Art – Bachelors in Fine Arts and the Master’s program, seek to answer it systematically. In a broader view, it envisions that an academically qualified person – an artist, not only remains familiar with the latest trends but also a globally acceptable creative persona. And it is expected to be able to meet challenges in his or her chosen genre as the changing time would demand. The curriculums are designed and tailored accordingly.

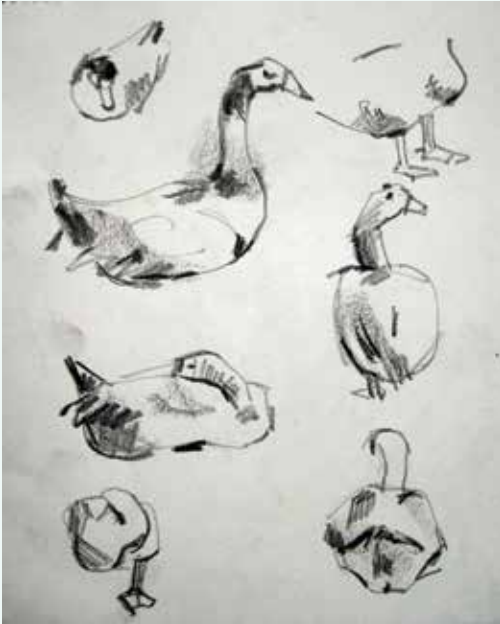
In the specific terms, the BFA course which has duration of four years is designed like a pyramid in structure – the First year as the flat broad base. And it is followed by the next three years systematically following the elements of knowledge and skills introduced in the base - tapering up to the fourth or the final year as the apex of the pyramid. Here, the essence of dissemination is divided into two broad categories – first the skills – the technicalities of how to draw and later paint. And the second is to observe and follow things as seen by naked



Chiranjivi Shrestha (BFA 3rd Year),
A study from a 3D object, 2017. Charcoal on paper.

eyes; then to transfer it in the chosen visual form in drawing, painting or a sculpture.

The modalities include to present or let expose the students with the basic geometric forms to gradually non-moving objects to living things from nature. A typical example is learning how to draw a human form. It begins with a mannequin model to follow in pencil – followed by lessons to paint a human head in full natural colors by observing a live human model. The paper is described as ‘Head Study’. As he or she progresses in the following years, now in a much larger space to paint, the subject is expanded to the study of a full human figure in the Final years. Similarly, begun with making rapid sketches from moving objects in the first year, in



Bijaya Maharjan, *A study of a duck*, 2005. Graphite on paper.

the final year of the course, a student is expected to memorize and then create composite human forms in full colors – now to create a certain situation – a scene from a daily life or a festival!. And this is described as ‘Composition’. In fact this exercise is only a precursor to a new next stage in future where the student will have to systematically play with multiple elements including human forms – so as to convey or express a pictorial chosen message.

As is evident from the above lines, a Bachelor’s student is not given overly-stress to explore or experiment. In practical terms, the course is generally guided by the mentor – so that the students do not leave the guided space. For independent explorations, he or she can wait. But it is assumed that he or she is now ready to explore independently.



Hariram Adhikari (BFA 4th Year), *A life study*, 2017. Resin, 177 cm x 54 cm x 43 cm.



A life study class, BFA 4th Year at Sirjana College of Fine Arts, 2017.

Now the next stage is set to allow the student to cross the sacred line. And here the curriculum of the Master's Program is also designed accordingly. Here, a student is practically left for oneself – in an independent stage to explore with no limits. This stage is called Studio-based class and is run with a minimal guidance of a teacher – described as a mere supervisor. But the supervisor ensures that the student follow all the set norms – so that regardless of the freedom to choose a theme or subject, needed contents and an evolution of individual style to explore, the completed work must reveal or reflect the academic strength behind the student-artist been through the earlier days. In other words, the revelation of accomplished workmanship is a must and remains an important factor.

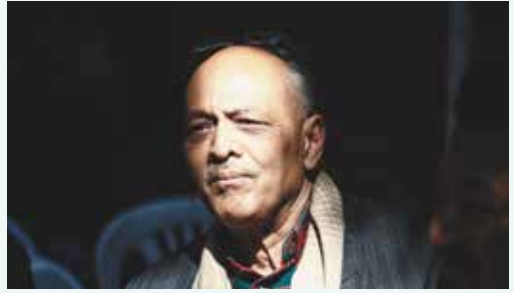
And at the same time, The Master's program in Fine Arts also aims to provide alternative course to specialize – it is in the art of 'Portraiture'. Unlike the Studio-based exploration to creative composition, a student is expected fine tune to accomplish in human portrayal – thus remaining full in more academic drilling. Also it entails a considerable amount of mentor's supervision. The longer vision or philosophy behind this provision is that the country also needs painters – academically sound and well accomplished in portrayal of human forms – in addition to independent creative artists.

Yet another example of creative freedom is provided in the Master's program is the provision of 'New Media' as part of the set course.

Let it be known that this option, philosophically an extension of Post-modernist thoughts, is heavily dependent to the latest innovations in Science and Technology - as for example digital expressions to videograph. As Nepal is yet to gain desired level of experience in this regard, there are numerous instances of abusing the course with mediocre presentations.

But unlike the curriculum designed by Tribhuvan University - visibly more rigid and more specific in both - BFA program as well as the MFA program, Kathmandu University for sure, is more liberal in this regard. Again unlike the TU program, Studio-based class room scenario is well provided in the final stages of academic program in BFA studies itself here. And it allows ample freedom to choose forms, medium and ways to explore during this period. No wonder that it describes the works as 2D or 3D works rather than describing as Painting or a Sculpture.

But regardless of all the visible differences in the scope and the descriptions however, the deciding factor in any education model always remains the amount of dedication the students have as well as of the faculty: and of course the availability of the right physical ambience. Only then the crossing of the holy line between Academic Forms and Experimentations will prove to be meaningful and bear fruits in the long run.



Madan Chitrakar

Madan Chitrakar is a senior artist and an art writer based in Kathmandu. As a leading art writer of the country, on many occasions he has taken Nepali art beyond the borders - through his writings in many prestigious publications abroad - notably Japan, India and Bangladesh.

*Three well acclaimed books "**Tej Bahadur Chitrakar - Icon of Transition**" (2004), "**Nepali Art - Issues Miscellany**" (2012) and "**Nepali Painting - Through the Ages**" (2017) remain to his credit, in addition to the numerous writings on Art and Culture in English and Nepali.*

Presently, he is associated with Tribhuvan University, Central Department of Fine Arts and Kathmandu University, Center for Art & Design as a member of the respective Subject Committee. He is a visiting faculty of Sirjana College of Fine Arts.