



Shashi Shah, 2012, Pen and ink on handmade paper, 71 cm x 52 cm. © Artist

Phenomenology in Nepali Paintings

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Abstract

I make an attempt to investigate the select eight paintings by Nepali artists through phenomenology. Nepali artists paint through their living experiences and convert forms into various metaphors in their artworks. Their creations connect with people of different professions in society and make them enter into a new consciousness. I further attempt to explore the relationship of Nepali art with the phenomena of the lives of Nepali artists. The select eight paintings by eight artists are explored here. The artworks are analyzed and interpreted in the qualitative method. In earlier times, Nepali paintings were not interpreted through phenomenological aspects. I argue that the form and colour they invented express their life experiences consciously. I conclude that the value of the living experiences of Nepali artists in the creative process helps in the development of Nepali contemporary art.

Keywords: *Phenomenology, living experience, intentionality, epoch, time, Nepali painting*

Introduction

Generally, artists paint through their experiences and we can find phenomenology in their works. In phenomenology, we understand every object of this world through the knowledge we gather from our experiences. Artists use their experiences, which are always guided by their perception. In the mechanism of artistic creation, every artist's cultural

background, childhood memories, and phenomena of their life play an important role. These memories always remain in their unconscious mind as a memory image. Layers and layers of memory images float in the mind like fish in an aquarium. These memory images are stored in their mind and become their experiences. These experiences are their knowledge to understand this world. Again, it is enriched by the regular perception of the outer world.

This perception also helps the artists to develop their level of aesthetics. This level of aesthetics is enriched by the regular practice of composition through color and form. According to *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2003), “Whether the phenomena come from the external world, a memory or a dream; this meeting between the phenomena and consciousness is what Husserl calls intentionality – it’s the interplay between the content of consciousness and the structures of consciousness. These structures are called intentionality.”

Contemporary Nepali artists also combine their experiences with consciousness or intellect. They convert the form into many metaphors through their conscious experiences. Through these metaphors, they try to communicate their thoughts and feelings. These thoughts help the viewer to experience a different kind of world. Moustakas (1994:85) states that Husserl introduced the concept of consciously setting aside current thoughts, beliefs, and judgments which lend themselves to bias with the use of the Greek word “epoch” – meaning to stay away from or abstain. Moustakas noted that epoch is a conscious process of allowing things, events, and people to enter a new consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time.

When artists communicate their thoughts and ideas through their works, the viewers observe the artwork, and experience what they have not gone through in their life. They try to penetrate the pictorial world and try to interpret

or perceive, based on their familiar experienced events or ideas and enjoy the painting. This is a brief introduction to phenomenology and its relation to Nepali paintings. Now, the concept of phenomenology will be clarified before interpreting the paintings.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a school of philosophy that originated in the late nineteenth century in France and spread to Germany in the early twentieth century. We find the seed of phenomenology first in Immanuel Kant's eighteenth century works, and Kant described the distinction between phenomena and noumena. He states that phenomena mean knowing objects and the world through our sensuous experience and perception, whereas noumena is an intelligible existence that is cogitated by the intellect alone. In the early nineteenth century, Hegel talks about the phenomenology of mind in his book, *Philosophy of mind*, which discusses the emergence and development of the self-consciousness of mind or spirit and equates phenomena with an “element of immediate positive existence”. He states that phenomenology is the study of consciousness. It was Edmund Husserl who made radical developments in western philosophy by exploring phenomenology at an advanced level. The word phenomenology comes from the Greek word “phenomenon”, which means “that which appears”. The school of phenomenology is dedicated to understanding consciousness in its raw form, taking firsthand subjective

experience as its starting point rather than starting with the objective world of nature. We find many developments in phenomenology, like Martin Heidegger, explores it in his writings *Being and Time* in the twentieth century. Critchley (2009) states:

That said, the basic idea of *Being and Time* is extremely simple: being is time. That is, what it means for a human being to be is to exist temporally in the stretch between birth and death. Being is time and time is finite, it comes to an end with our death. Therefore, if we want to understand what it means to be an authentic human being, then it is essential that we constantly project our lives onto the horizon of our death, what Heidegger calls “being towards death”.

Heidegger explains phenomenology as a human has its existence between his time of life and death. Both Heidegger and Sartre give contributions to phenomenology by writing about existentialist philosophy. Heidegger's contribution was to turn the phenomenological method toward the existential, or lived experience, rather than toward mere objects of consciousness. Thus, existential phenomenology seeks to get at the meaning of lived experience through the careful and systematic analysis of lived experience itself (American Psychological Association).

It says that phenomenology is not only about consciousness written by Husserl

but describes the world as the sum total of objects that can be known through experience. So, it is an experientialist rather than a rationalist philosophy. The starting point for knowledge in phenomenology is experiencing itself, which means the ‘lived experience’ of the human consciousness. Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes about phenomenology and describes that every experience is guided by perception. Whether the knowledge is empirical or rational, depends upon our perception only. Scott (2002: para 2) states:

In his investigation of the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Maurice Merleau-Ponty defines phenomenology as the study of essences, including the essence of perception and of consciousness. He also says, however, that phenomenology is a method of describing the nature of our perceptual contact with the world. Phenomenology is concerned with providing a direct description of human experience.

Perception is the background of experience that guides every conscious action. The world is a field for perception, and human consciousness assigns meaning to the world. We cannot separate ourselves from our perceptions of the world.

Merleau-Ponty argues that both traditional Empiricism and Rationalism are inadequate to describe the phenomenology of perception. Empiricism maintains

that experience is the primary source of knowledge and that knowledge is derived from sensory perceptions. Rationalism maintains that reason is the primary source of knowledge and that knowledge does not depend on sensory perceptions. Merleau-Ponty says that traditional Empiricism does not explain how the nature of consciousness determines our perceptions, while Rationalism does not explain how the nature of our perceptions determines consciousness.

Hence, we find that Merleau-Ponty argues phenomenology is related to conscious human experience, which is affected by the knowledge gained by human perception only. Langdrige (2007) clarifies that phenomenology as a qualitative method focuses on human experience as a topic in its own right. It concerns with meaning and the way in which meaning arises in experience (Kafle 2011:182). The forthcoming part of this article attempts to trace phenomenology in Nepali paintings along with their significance.

Methodology

I look at the paintings by some of the noted Nepali artists so as to explore them from the perspective of phenomenology. According to phenomenology, an artist creates art through the experience of life. He is able to connect viewers with his emotions but they can be interpreted by observers in different ways, as they are also guided by their life experiences. Here, books and articles have been used as secondary sources to create a

background for the study. Works of Nepali artists are primary sources that have been analyzed and interpreted. I adopt the qualitative method as the interpretation of artworks that can be plural and multiple.

Interpretation

Phenomenology can be described as the science of pure phenomena. Thus, we can say the main goal of phenomenology is to describe the meaning of one's experience and what and how the experience happened. Nepali artists have been practicing this technique in their artworks for a long time. I have tried to interpret some artworks that fall under the periphery of phenomenology. The selected artists and their works for interpretation and analysis are the following:

Manik Man Chitrakar

Manik Man Chitrakar was a renowned painter of the 1930s. He created some mythological paintings in a western academic style. Among many, one of his paintings is *Bratabandha of Siddhartha Gautam* (Image I). In this painting, he recreated the story of Siddhartha Gautam in the modern-day interpretation of the *Bratabandha* ritual; here a Newar male child goes through a rite of passage by entering the tutelary temple that houses the deities of the *guthi*. By showing his respect and devotion, the boy engages in a coming-of-age ceremony that defines him as a part of that particular *guthi*. Siddhartha Gautam visited the temple where the Hindu gods are greeting him. Here, his father is shown



Image I: **Manik Man Chitrakar**, *Bratabandha of Siddhartha Gautam*, 1942, Mineral pigment on canvas, 45 cm x 40 cm. © The Museum of Nepali Art, Kathmandu.

as the Rana prime minister, and in the background, there is a palace in the western style. During the Rana period, Nepali architecture was influenced by European architectural styles. In this painting, the artist depicts the scene in the environment of the Rana period, even though he does not belong to that period. He depicts the religious myth as the artist envisions himself. He painted a series of the Buddha's life in mineral colors and imagined a scenario in the Newar culture that was prevalent during his lifetime. The attire and houses do not reflect the

time of the Buddha. He painted such an environment as if he was 'living' during that time. Like existentialists, he depicts the personal notion of 'truth'. We can say that the process of his painting is just like the process of phenomenology and existentialism.

Uttam Nepali

Uttam Nepali painted this painting *Untitled* (Image II) from his imagination. Bajracharya (2016: 97) states, "Once he mentioned that emotions need to be intellectualized before being articulated.



Image II: **Uttam Nepali**, *Untitled*, 2000, Acrylics on canvas. © Mandira Karmacharya, Kathmandu

This process is even more important to artists, as emotions fuel and the intellect motivate them. His abstract canvas appears like a fluid which constantly seems to change its appearance.” Like phenomenologist Husserl states that the writer, through his life experience, assembles words to create a sentence

and gives meaning to it, Uttam Nepali also assembles black dynamic patches in the translucent background and adds a rhythmic line in beautiful colors to create joy. This balanced organic unity came into his painting unconsciously; it is not planned. But it is his lifelong experience. He himself explained, “My works,

displayed in this exhibition, are pure expressions of a human mind, manifested through lines, shapes, and colors, blended with my experience of spiritualism and philosophy of life and nature” (Sharma 2014: 93). His intuitions and thoughts come automatically because of his aesthetic understanding. Every time, they appear differently on a different canvas. The process of his painting and the process of phenomenological text are the same, as both react to the structure of experience through paintings or text.

Shashi Shah

Shashi Shah depicts galloping horses in his paintings where horses are a symbolic representation of the mythical character *Kalki Avatāra*, the tenth incarnation of Vishnu (Image III). The writer of this article is trying to clarify why he uses a chessboard as a metaphor. He uses the chessboard as a symbolic representation of the political mind. This scenario appears in his painting as he used to observe the late singer Narayan Gopal playing a chess in the Sirjana Art Gallery at Jamal. Rajbhandari (2018: 97) writes:

The famous singer Narayan Gopal used to come to the gallery every day and enjoy playing a chess. He used to play a chess with artists Krishna Manandhar, Praveen Shrestha, and Shyam Ghimire till late evening. Meanwhile, Sashi Shah painted his famous *Chess Series*, and Narayan Gopal was the main character in his paintings.

He understands these experiences and



Image III: **Shashi Shah**, *The Kalki Avatāra*, 1993, Acrylics on canvas. Private collection, Kathmandu.

tries to reconstruct them in his own view and makes sense out of them. Like phenomenologist Blum (2012: 1032) described epoch as “the suspension of his natural attitude”, “allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time” (p.85). Here, we can say that according to the phenomenological concept, the artist uses the real events of his life and intentionally converts them in a different way and gives his reaction to society through his painting.



Image IV: **Shashi Kala Tiwari**, *Merging with Nature*, 2012, Oil on canvas, 119 cm x 119 cm.

Shashi Kala Tiwari

Shashi Kala Tiwari's *Merging with Nature* (Image IV), *Meera* (Image V) and *Solitude* (Image VI) are the reflections of her loneliness. We find Shashi Kala Tiwari's early painting entitled *Solitude* as the expression of a young, lonely life living in isolation where she depicts herself viewing her painting of the Himalayas. Furthermore, in *Merging with Nature*, she shows herself growing

old. She emphasizes the white colour and feminine emotion through the figure buffeted by the powerful gusts of strong wind, blissfully ecstatic in the experience. While in *Meera Series*, it looks as if she is trying to show herself as an old *sannyasin*, and she is trying to burn all her desires and duties and wants to live a life in renunciation like Meera and devote her life to the god. Moustakas (1994:16) finds phenomenology an appropriate tool for exploring and



Image V: **Shashi Kala Tiwari**, *Meera Series*, 2012, Oil on canvas, 119 cm x 119 cm.

describing shared experiences related to phenomena, whether the phenomena come from the external world, a memory, or a dream. This meeting between the phenomenon and consciousness is what Husserl calls intentionality; it is the interplay between the content of consciousness and the structures of consciousness. These structures are called intentionality.

The artist narrates her own autobiography by combining living reality with her fantasy. This meeting of phenomena and her consciousness on the surface of the painting gives a unique experience to the viewers.

Krishna Manandhar

Krishna Manandhar's painting entitled *Land and Rocks of Nepal III* (Image VII) is a distorted representation of the Himal, which is the continued perception of his

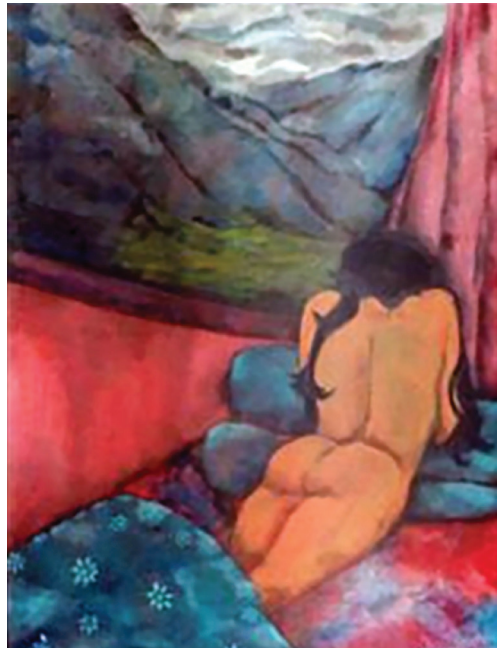


Image VI: **Shashi Kala Tiwari**, *Solitude*, Oil on canvas.

homeland, the land of the Himalayas. He combines translucent and opaque colors, in which the textural form of rocks tries to come out from flatness. He finds colour as an important aspect of his painting. He states, "I have realized that my overriding interest is in color. In my paintings, color is both the subject and means, the form and content, the image and meaning." Although the artist creates a boundary by giving it a title, Sharma (2014: 113) interprets Manandhar's paintings as abstract and states that they have a musical rhythm:

Krishna Manandhar creates music and rhythm within the images of nature, exploiting abstractionist and abstract expressionist techniques. Rather

than the content, form dominates his canvas. He does not use colors to represent objects and events, but to create music and rhythm. He depicts the feelings and emotions associated with objects rather than the objects themselves. He presents a vibrant combination of colors and forms that is exciting, disturbing, and filled with emotion.

I believe that Krishna Manandhar, as a young man, was exposed to the land of mountains. Thus, his painting is a distortion of the Himalaya as he passionately wanted to depict his perspective of nature. Furthermore, his previous paintings of the Himalaya show the lofty Himalayas and mountains from an aerial view through an aero plane or helicopter.



Image VII: **Krishna Manandhar**, *Land and Rocks of Nepal III*, 2018, Acrylics on canvas, 40 cm x 44 cm.

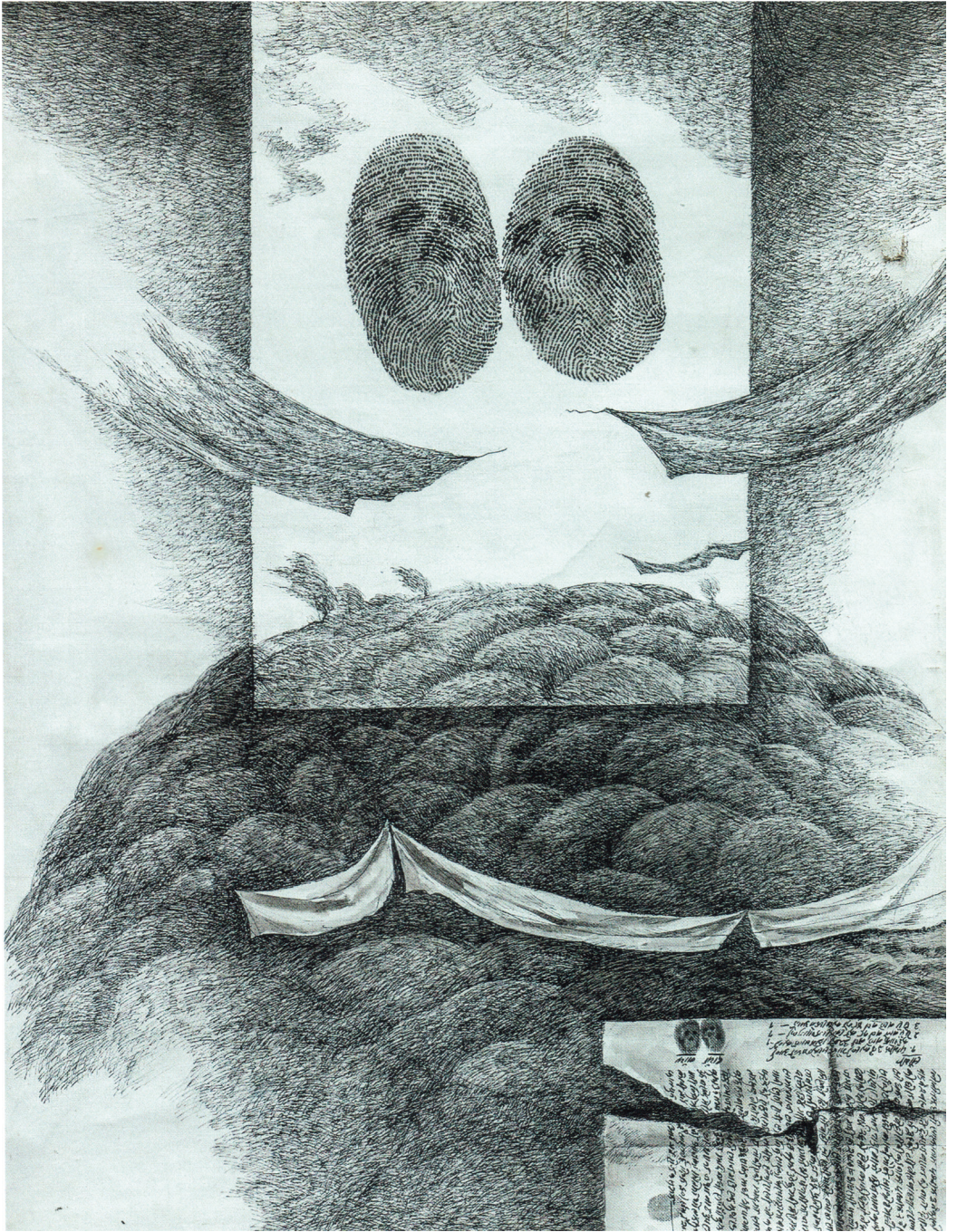


Image VIII: **Durga Baral**, *Choka Ra Tamasuka*, 1983, Pen and ink on canvas, 106 cm x 80 cm. © Artist

While the viewers from Korea who visited his exhibition perceived the images in his painting as the rocks around the sea. He splashes his thought process on the canvas and allows viewers to have second thoughts about the images on the canvas in a systematic process.

Durga Baral

Durga Baral painted *Choka Ra Tamsuka* (Image VIII) series suggesting a tragedy in the Nepali society. There are some societies in rural areas where the illiterate villagers are cheated by landlords or moneylenders. They lend money to poor villagers on the high interest so they cannot return the loan. In the long run the moneylenders take their properties on the basis of the contract documents with their thumbprints. The artist uses this experience and pain in society by using fingerprint images in his artwork. This represents the pain of the common people in the village. This metamorphosis of the fingerprint into the human face can be called “Epoch”. Sharma (2014: 187-188) explains Durga Baral’s *Choka Ra Tamasuka* as a powerful expression of the socio-economic condition of impoverished villagers in Nepal. He states:

The artist represents the effect of Tamasuk with the thumbprints of the borrowers on the canvas, exploiting surrealist and expressionist techniques. The images of these two thumbprints are plural, playful, and ambiguous because on close viewing they appear to be the heads

of human figures. The depiction of the thumbprints in unusually big shapes and the transformation of one image (thumbprint) into another (human head) are the surrealist features of the painting. As the fingerprints appear as heads, they do not appear like realistic images but are expressionistic in nature. The colours of both the background and the images in the foreground are also altered in the sense that they are painted in black, which creates distance from the real images. The artist creates unusual images and colours to express the inner feelings of the characters. This is the expressionist feature of the painting.

Hence, in terms of phenomenology, we can interpret his painting that it is only his thought that leads him to convert thumbprints into common suffering people, creating two related things in one form and adding his thought to the subject of his painting.

Conclusion

Nepali contemporary artists mostly express their thoughts, experienced feelings, and beliefs in their artworks. It is the result of continuous phenomena in their lives. They always try to give meaning to life through forms that they have lived and observed. Through their creation, they connect with people in society, making them enter into a new consciousness and look and see them again as if for the first time. For many years, they have continuously tried to make the ordinary into the extraordinary,

make the unknown into a familiar space, and suggest names for experiences and entities that have no names, with the help of different kinds of individual emotions. The form that captures the expression of the artist's experiences is the artist's inner truths. Individuality in art is developed because of the expression of an artist. Hence, we can abundantly find phenomenology in Nepali art.

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