

ART & DEAL

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[interview]



Shambhavi Singh. *A Local Stage*. Acrylic and charcoal on canvas. (Triptych) 2006.

Shambhavi Singh's journey as an artist from Patna to Delhi and then across the globe, particularly to Amsterdam and South Africa has been eventful. Her oeuvre which has expanded from painting to sculptures and video installations is equally fascinating. Here she is in conversation with writer and curator Minhazz Majumdar about her life and art.

Minhazz Majumdar: Your journey as an artist – where and how did it begin? What role did your family play in your quest to become an artist?

Shambhavi Singh: I grew up in Patna, a cultured urban center. However, I often visited my grandparents in the village. It was fascinating –the inky blackness of the night that enveloped everything in the absence of electricity, the sound of silence, the sense of space and isolation. There were no roads – just clay *pagdandis* (footpaths) crisscrossing the wet fields as if someone had drawn lines across the land.....men and women singing in chorus as they toiled in the fields...I do think my journey of art began from there. My art work is a reminder of the strength of the land- the darkness of my work is the banner of my homeland.

My father is a major inspiration in my life and taught me the value of nature. My family has always understood my passion to interact with people in the countryside whose lives are simple but very difficult.

MM: What are some of the significant turning points in your artistic career?

SS: A major turning point was when I landed in Amsterdam. I felt the height of the globe. I met people from Surinam singing songs from Bollywood and Bihar. I was greeted in my mother tongue by an African man in punk gear. I had not expected such encounters in Amsterdam. From my art historian friend Jeditha De Groot, I learnt how the Indian migrants fought for a cremation ground which was not allowed. In her writings, she created a triangle on the map of the world – India-Surinam-Holland. India's caste system is particularly well entrenched in Bihar -it is grounded as a cactus in the land. Those migrating as indentured labour were counted in numbers – no faces, no individuality. Very often, they had no idea where they were heading. The number of the boat was their identity. This journey into the unknown had no return – generations have not come back to their homeland. With my Surinamese friends in Holland, I shared a meal. The taste of the food made me nostalgic. My perception of people and the world underwent a radical transformation and I became very interested in issues of migration.

My travel to South Africa at the turn of the century was another significant experience. From November 2000 to January 2001, I undertook a residency in Cape Town. This was both my geographic and introspective journey. I created a work in remembrance of Gandhi called *Midnight Song on Twelve Pages*, a reference to India's independence. Metaphors for physical and ideological movement, ideas, cultural continuity across time and space and autobiographical instances - these visual renderings embody an understanding of myself and my historical context.

MM: Your artistic journey over the last two decades has moved from paintings to sculpture. How did this evolution happen?

SS: The 90s was a decade of travel for me. Yet, I was deeply connected to my background. My youthful inspiration, the country side was there as was the notion of the world. I was painting the earth, as womb..... as void. Violence, explosion and implosion. A vibrant colourful, seductive landscape which was embraced by

soothing darkness at the end of the day. Slowly, I found my thoughts turning back to the peasant labourers of my home land - the land with a tradition of migration for many positive and negative reasons.



Shambhavi Singh. *Ghatak V.* Charcoal, Oil and Acrylic on Canvas. 2007.

The beginning of the second decade was momentous. I was in South Africa at that point of time. One day, from Cape Point, I saw the magnificent sight of the confluence of the Indian Ocean and Atlantic Ocean. I wondered about the boat-loads of migrants, over centuries, from different parts of the world that crossed oceans to get somewhere. At that moment, the world seemed peaceful and free. The earth in my art works was transformed into an earthenware pot which was carrying the whole world in it. South Africa was the last country to be free from colonialism. I began creating my first sculptural work – *Khadan*, in bronze engraved with the maps of India and South Africa inspired by Gandhiji's footwear. Tools used for farming, Gandhiji, trains, boats, labourers, feet, letters, envelopes, shoes and stamps – objects



Shambhavi Singh. *Braille*. Iron, Blackboard Paint and Charcoal. 2007-08

as metaphors became my inspiration in Cape Town and I found myself drawn to three-dimensional work.

Slowly, I am now processing a line of continuity between my paintings and sculptures— a metaphorical connection. River, water, earth are common to both. The earthenware pot in the *Ghatak* series is one of first three dimensional objects to appear in my paintings, as a symbol of the transformation of earth. My sculpture in iron of the palm leaf fan from the *Lullaby* series is ironical— in reality, the palm frond fan is a light object but for villagers and people who survive in the streets with no electricity, it is part of their 'heavy' life.

MM: The darkness in your paintings- where does all that darkness come from and what does it mean?

SS: I begin with a white surface, fill it with bright colours which then smoothly get covered with transparent black. My paintings are known as dark works and often remind

viewers of Rothko because the transparent darkness of his work is like mine. Darkness to me is the darkness of most of the villages in India, of the infinite universe regarding which tremendous scientific research is taking place... which we 'think' is leading us into the future. The darkness in my work derives from the depth of *kajal* (collyrium), which women wear in their eyes for beauty and children wear to be safe from the Evil Eye - it does not work for men unless they dance and perform.

Darkness with blinking lights as experienced in Varanasi. Sitting by the riverside at dusk, I saw many small boats sail by, full of men and women in colourful, bright clothes singing songs about the holy river. So many boats, sailing close together – the surface of the river glistened in the sunlight with an extra-ordinary energy. Soon, the soothing indigo of darkness began to fade and the movement of the moment began to be embraced by the darkness. Slowly all

the forms got protected inside of the womb of darkness. Yet one could continue hearing the song and the sound of the oars. My eyes were dancing on the surface of the river. It was an absolutely unexpected, spontaneous audio visual experience - something to capture in my work.

MM: Your works tend to be monumental in size. Can you elaborate?

SS: My encounters with abstract artist Barnett Newmann's monumental work in Stedelijk Museum *Who is afraid of Red, Blue and Yellow?* and Anselm Kiefer's gigantic installations of fighter aircrafts in lead were inspiring. The scale of the works embraces the presence of the viewer. I think that the work needs to be monumental, when dealing with a history that is difficult, with a background is tough. The work should speak out loud even when it silent.

For me, my roots are very important. Bihar where I was born is plagued by poor law and order, chaos, violence, illiteracy, poverty, and casteism. My work *Migrant Laborers* is a large painting with scores of tiny feet, some golden and luminescent referring to the many thousands of nameless and faceless people forced to leave home. *Braille* is a massive 8 feet diameter work modelled on the sieve which separates husk from the grains. The shadow of the object is as important as the real three dimensional form. The minor but very precise little holes of the sieve create very organized dots on the ground resembling literally Braille. Also, the work comes from the dark land to the cities.

MM: The titles of your works are always interesting. How do you arrive at titles?

SS: I usually give a blanket title to my works. It's a connecting thought process. The title is not simply the meaning of the word but it is meant to set off a chain of thoughts. My title of my new series of works *Landscape of the Crown* derives from the fact that when you are drawing a map of India, Kashmir is like the crown. I am creating a sculpture titled *Flood relief* in response to the news that there was an acute shortage of boats for relief work after the recent floods in Bihar. The work comprises of ten small boats surrounded by five hundred *dhibris* (handmade lamps) as after the floods, there is no electricity.

MM: What are you working on currently?

SS: I have just completed a nine panel (each 6^{1/2} x 8 feet) series titled *Landscape of the Crown*, inspired by my installation at the Khoj international artists' workshop in Kashmir. It took me two years to complete this work which is covered in *neel* (indigo powder), smoke powder and chemoflash drawing floating all over the surface. I am now creating a series called *A journey of 7x7=49 days*, a seven panel (each 8 x 45 feet) work which I am covering with *neel* to get that dense infinite space and charcoal along with my water-based acrylic. I have begun to apply earth colours as well. I am also working on a couple of very large sculptural installations. At the moment, I am busy with "Soil Bites" a Khoj Bihar international artists' workshop being held in Patna for the first time from October 25 to November 8, 2009. I am excited and looking forward to this event.