

MANTLE OF MINDSCAPE; COCOON FOR CREATIVITY... AN ART STUDIO

SAROJ BAJRACHARYA

Abstract

When we contemplate on one particular motif that artists have depicted the most through the ages in their artworks, human anatomy spontaneously comes to mind. However, there is one component the artists have incorporated in their artworks more than human anatomy and that is the space. Be it abstract, figurative or realistic, without space art cannot exist. Science and technology show that humans have taken a giant leap in terms of their progress and advancements. Earth is getting smaller by the second and the land it provides is never enough. However, we have learnt tricks to multiply it. The horizontal landscapes are getting occupied with vertical houses and skyscrapers. We need more space. And in all this concrete haphazard urbanizations, what does space means for an artist? The internal space which is cultivated from imaginations and memories and the external space that s/he greatly wants to balance with the internal, it all is indeed a gigantic metaphorical continuum. They perhaps need solitude, to reconcile with this idea of the space that has come into being from the unification of the internal and the external. And yet again, through the ages, they have been getting hold of themselves in a very important space which they call their studio. A brief comparative observation here attempts to unfold how art studios down the line has evolved with changing times in the west and more importantly in Nepal.

“Monet, in fact, equipped a house boat to act as a floating studio, from which he painted landscapes and portraits of friend Manet and his wife, Suzanne.” - Ian Wallace

In order to reach Courtyard Studio, one has to cross multiple courtyards in the aloof spaces of Mangal Bazaar, Lalitpur. Walking through to get there is like penetrating into a dream from a dream of a dream. Finally, when you reach the last courtyard, there stand two houses. One of them is the Courtyard Studio, a work station for Bijaya Maharjan who is a young and dynamic artist. Many of his friends

and students visit this studio to learn, share and create their artworks. I am also a frequent visitor there. Bijaya who acquired this studio seven years ago, I believe, has absolutely opened up as an artist. I think that is what a studio does to an artist; it makes one dynamic and fluid.

When we contemplate on one particular motif that artists have depicted the most through the ages in their artworks, human anatomy spontaneously comes to mind. However, I believe there is one component the artists have incorporated in their artworks more



An artist at work in The Courtyard Studio, Patan

than human anatomy and that is the space. Be it abstract, figurative or realistic, without space art cannot exist. Science and technology show that humans have taken a giant leap in terms of their progress and advancements. Earth is getting smaller by the second and the land it provides is never enough. However, we have learnt tricks to multiply it. The horizontal landscapes are getting occupied with vertical houses and skyscrapers. We need more space. And in all this concrete haphazard urbanizations, what does space means for an artist? The internal space which is cultivated from imaginations and memories and the external space that s/he greatly wants to balance with the internal, it all is indeed a gigantic metaphorical continuum. They perhaps need solitude, to reconcile

with this idea of the space that has come into being from the unification of the internal and the external. And yet again, through the ages, they have been getting hold of themselves in a very important space which they call their studio.

The evolution of art studios around the world have their own unique histories that have been affected by the socio-political conditions around them. Undeniably, art functions differently in different parts of the world, allowing the history of art studios also to grow accordingly. A brief comparative observation here attempts to unfold how art studios down the line has evolved with changing times in the west and more importantly in Nepal.

After the pre ancient times, art was formalized, patronized and advanced on by the royals and the states. However, in Nepal since the culture is much influenced by vibrant rituals, religious values and unique spiritual perspective, art was enwrapped in all this traditional covering. Veteran art scholar and painter Madan Chitrakar states that in times of Araniko around 12th century during the reign of the Mallas, artists used to work in a guild. The states used to summon them in order to complete tasks that had social or religious associations. A guild was a common space provided by the state for artists of various genres to accomplish the task they were told to conclude. Later during Jayasthiti Malla's reign, the caste system was strengthened according to which every caste was handed a specific responsibility to fulfill. For instance, the Chitrakars were to paint, the Bajracharyas were priests to carry on with the religious rituals and so on and so forth. Because of the influence of the caste system, strict rules were enforced so that people belonging to a particular caste could not commence task of the other castes. The state then provided a land to the artists where they were strictly summoned by the state to conclude the responsibility they were told to do. Many festivities were introduced and or followed with fervent during the Malla era, such as Gaijatra, Machhindranath jatra and many more. These festivities take place in a particular area even now. But back then, the state used to allocate a piece of land where these festivals used to happen and the artists were called upon to create the props or the necessary materials to

commence the religious rituals. This guild was a workstation for artists. Even though the monarchy does not exist anymore and times have drastically changed, certain dogmatic traditional methods continue till date. One particular example is that of the Machhindranath festival where Chitrakars are invited to a location where they decorate the Chariot for the Machhindranath Deity. It was only much later that one aspect of art became independent from the religious norms here in Nepal, the modern art. And with the dawn of the modern art, the idea of art studio started to take over the art guild.

Now observing the western art sphere around the 15th century, the private patrons were becoming influential in comparison to the churches that used to have their say in art. During the Middle Ages, artists used to work within religious institutions. However, the depiction of gods and goddesses were gradually being replaced by portraiture and figures of human beings. Artists would create commissioned works for individual patrons such as paintings, murals, portraits. The artist's work was carried out in the Bottega which was a workroom as opposed to the studio. Studio is a word that has the sense of a study, a room for contemplation, which would be a separate space. Both were often located in the same building. Aspiring artists used to come in as apprentices to their masters' studio.

Gradually around the 17th century, artists shifted from depicting patrons in their work and began to portray still lifes and self-portraits.

However, patrons were still active in commissioning the artists. The studio during this time became a combination of the workroom and the study where the artists used to contemplate as well as paint rigorously.

Back in Nepal, from the 19th century during the Rana regime, art took a significant turn. The Rana dynasty were autocratic leaders who ruled Nepal from 1846 A.D. until 1951 A.D., reducing the Shah monarch to a figurehead and making the Prime Minister and other government positions hereditary. Before the Ranas, the arts created here were mostly based on religion and were traditional in approach. It was during the reign of the Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana, after his Europe tour in the mid 19th century that western art was exposed to Nepali artists as well as to the community here. Because of the introduction of the western style art, the process to create art also needed new settings.

Madan Chitrakar states that when Chandra Samsher was the Prime Minister, he initiated an institution called Naksa Adda where he would gather artists in order to get the creative tasks done. The inspiration behind initiating this institution came from Tasveer Khana, a room or a club for artists commenced by Akbar, a Mughal emperor. Naksa Adda was located at Singha Durbar and legendary artists such as Tej Bahadur Chitrakar, Chandraman Singh Maskey and Dirghaman were initially assigned, who were later followed by many. Similarly, photography had just begun in Nepal in the early 20th

century, and the royals used to assign the photographers to take pictures of them. Chitrakar further conveys that these spaces which also acted as photo studios further lent to defining art studios in Nepal.

Coming from a traditional background gradually being exposed to the world of art and acquiring a modern complexion surely transformed the general view point of the artists as well as the public. This was how art evolved, not only in Nepal but around the globe. And this concept of studio opened up their mind to incredible creative possibilities. And perhaps it is this room of solitude that has made artists reflect within and bring out their internal spaces to be shared. Legends such as Tej Bahadur Chitrakar, Chandraman Singh Maskey, Amar Chitrakar and Balkrishna Sama all gave way to modern art even before it began. And they had their own room of solitude where they would create and contemplate. Some managed it in corridors or bedrooms, and others had proper studio.

Up until the 19th century, even though art had become liberated from religious and social connotations to a certain extent, the basic format of a studio was the same: a master artist would have apprentices or students who one day would become artists themselves and they in turn would have their own studios. However, this practice was challenged by *École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts* in Paris in early 19th century. They organized exhibitions which were known as salons encouraging critique and analysis of artistic developments.



Artists working collectively at The Courtyard Studio, Patan

Moreover, even this idea was challenged by the impressionists who would rise to popularity during the late 19th century up until the initial phase of the 20th century.

Rajman Maharjan, a painter and publisher of Canvas weekly recalls, "I was very young back then and was passing through Tri Chandra College when on the footpath I saw an old artist sitting with his art materials. Since I was also very interested in art, I went to him and requested if he would allow me to observe while he created his work, to which he nodded his head. This was the early 1980s and the veteran artist was none other than Manoharman Poon." Manoharman Poon was an impressionist and expressionist compiled in one artist and was much more since he floated with his cultural references in his artworks. In the west during the dawn of the impressionist era, artists came out of the studio and went for plein

air painting. They would come out in the open air and directly interact with nature. Now art was not just about reproducing but was also about observing and allowing the external surroundings react within you. And it was liberated from the patrons where artists did not have to rely on commissions anymore. They were out of the four walls of their studios and also from their internal limitations and dogmas. These extended space they visualized in the open nature became their open studio.

After the fall of the Ranas in the 1950s, Nepal opened up for international diplomatic relationships. This was the time when scholarships in various subjects were provided by the neighboring countries. Many artists went abroad for higher art education, especially to India. Upon their return, many established their own studios namely veteran artists such as Ramananda Joshi, Lainsingh Bangdel,

Uttam Nepali and Shashi Shah to name a few. Since these early phases of modern art up until now, the idea of studio has however drastically changed. About a decade ago, I was a constant visitor at Gopal Kalapremi Shrestha's self-sufficient sculpture studio. He had made his entire three storied house a magnificent studio cum gallery. Similarly, Kasthamandap Studio is one of the most prominent studios we have in Kathmandu run by talented artists in the likes of Bhairaj Maharjan, Asha Dongol, Erina Tamrakar, Pramila Bajracharya and Binod Pradhan.

I am taken back a decade ago by my memory. There I am in a room which Rajan Pant had aptly titled Altamira School of Visual Arts. It is an institution for learning art but it is also a studio where many artists meet, interact and evolve. And here I am at the Courtyard Studio, Bijaya's sanctuary where he has piled up his canvases at one side of the room as he works on some commissioned designs on his laptop. His students are also busy helping him out as they share tea and delectable moments of learning. And, in this manner I see an entire generation of artists who have contemplated and evolved, and a younger set who are now passing through this studio, in their own journeys of creative explorations.

Understanding towards the world begins from a room, and then we explore and interpret, eventually coming back to the room again. The only difference is that the room from where we had begun was a room of walls and the room that we arrive at is but made of expanded

imaginings. And this artist's room, the studio, carries pictures of creative evolution of mankind and their perspectives and opinions towards their surroundings and the universe as a whole. This idea of studio gives a sense of belongingness to the artist. It is a mindscape within as much as it is real and out there.

So... a studio, a boat; it takes you somewhere. And the river it floats on is warm and leads you to an ocean of possibilities. I wish I could feel how Monet felt while sailing in his studio boat, or perhaps I do, when I hold my brush, and am sunk into my studio trying to emerge on my canvas.

References

Interview with Madan Chitrakar, Artist / Art Writer.

The Evolution of the Artist's Studio, From Renaissance Bottega to Assembly Line

Wallace, Ian. June 11, 2014.



Saroj Bajracharya

Saroj Bajracharya is an artist, a writer and a curator. He has been active in art for more than two decades. He has been actively involved in many facets of art that include painting, writing, teaching, curating, organizing and coordinating art events and exhibitions.

*various solo exhibitions, group shows and two books titled **Future of History** and **A Concise Introduction to Nepali Modern Sculpture** to his credit.*