

TWILIGHT ZONES OF NEPALI SCULPTURE

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Preview

I wrote this essay as part of a review of stone sculptures executed by artists from Nepal and abroad as mentioned below. As it remained unpublished up until now, I at one point had felt a desire to put these ideas in other forms in Nepali because I wanted this experience of reading, conversations and observations about sculptural works to be read widely. Before writing this I observed the artists working at Harnamadi amidst a kind of celebration, as it were. After that I kept thinking about the final shape of these works until I got a chance to visit the hill little over a year later with English teachers, my erstwhile students, of Makwanpur college. I was very impressed to see these works that were half-drowned in spear grass. But now I guess it has been restored to a good shape.

The other point that I see now is a kind of historicity about stone sculptures. Before writing this, I had never realised that stone works hold such a great place in Nepali artistic imaginaire. Our artists in the past millennia handled this form with great confidence and sense of communication with the world – the universe that included the earth and sky or the mundane and astral planes. They created replica, icons to represent these responses with the human and ecological world. When I met a young sculptor of young generation Om Khatri and found out

about the current and past activities, I felt that I have always been a lover of stone sculptures, though as a critic I had only been writing about paintings. I remember the late Lain Bangdel's observation in one of my many meetings with him that the subtlety of art that a painter feels in the fluidity of paintings can be the same for a stone sculptor who creates fluidity on stone. The late Balakrishna Sama told me a few times, how difficult the work of a stone sculptor would be inasmuch as a single flint if it flies away while working requires the artist to work all over again. He was of course referring to the tools that they used. Today's sculptors who use easy sawing and smoothing machines to create mouldings, and even three-dimensional techniques may not have to experience the same problems. But what Sama and Bangdel said, I realised later, spoke volumes about this genre of art and the sculptors' challenges.

Without much ado, I want to submit this essay for publication here at the advice of sculptor Om Khatri as well as the painter Navindra Rajbhandari, by putting one piece of information which is, sections of this essay are included in my article 'speaking stones' published in The Kathmandu Post (June 1, 2014), which was written as part of disseminating the information. The following essay is a modest attempt to introduce the dynamics of this great genre of art. I would also like to express my deep



The green hill at Harnamadi is now full of the stone sculptures.

seated interest to do more study and write in this area.

Rolling question

A modern Nepali sculptor of the young generation and an erstwhile member of Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, Om Khatri made me pensive with this question – what differences do I see between traditional and modern Nepali sculptures? Though the repertoire of my art reviews is pretty big, I have written little about Nepali sculptures despite my great interest in this genre of art. The meeting was in connection with the review of sculptures executed by Nepali and foreign sculptors; it happened like this. I received an invitation from two sculptors Om Khatri and Laxman Bhujel, and one academic and literary writer and my erstwhile student Dr. Taralal Shrestha, to attend an opening of a sculptural workshop over a non-descript but lovely inner hill of Makawanpur called Harnamadi, on 25 November

2012. I was struck by the sheer energy that these people had gathered over this hill. Laxman Bhujel had worked most relentlessly for this activity. The stone narrative was more exciting than the project itself. Om Khatri told me about their stone odyssey. They had hunted quarries looking for suitable stones for sculpture; and stones, in return, had haunted them, by the failures and frustrations while locating and retrieving them. Sculptors, some of whom are world-renowned, had come to work on these stones for weeks. Very eager to see the finished works, I made it to the hill about a year later and found the greens full of these lovely stone sculptures executed by both the native and foreign sculptors. That hill reminded me of Hakone park in Japan, a hillside full of tangible art works, where I was lost in the sculptural jungle a number of times. No comparison there, but it gave me occasion to wish – if only Nepal had turned one of these hills into sculptural open museums, which is

not an impossible thing to do. But state support is essential for that. As long as those in power do not realise stone sculptural forms can open up international partnership and inspire native sculptors, nothing can be achieved.

Om Khatri who rolled the above question towards me on the flat roof of Sita Bhawan of the Academy, gave me forthwith several brilliant brochures of the workshops he had organised with friends as an apprentice in 2005, and several others as an art academician for four years, and a loosely written glossy book written by others, full of names and history.

Khatri's own introductory notes in the brochures chronicle the modern time sculptural activities. Rich in experience and global connectivity, this young sculptor impressed me one more time. Meeting him and others convinces me, stones are becoming eloquent; they are speaking in modern idioms under the chisels of these sculptors of the young generation. But unlike several areas of cultural studies, it is difficult to create awareness about this genre of art on a wider scale. Sculpture is the most practised but least discussed visual and tangible form of art. A brief description of the character of this genre's history is in order.

Chiselled history of soul

Nepali sculpture can evoke the most exciting discussions in the domain of Nepali art of both the traditional and modern orders. Eastern and Western philosophers see the value of space and sculpture by linking that to human body. Body or the corporeality in various stylistic manifestations has

always been the very motif of Nepali sculpture. Equally powerful was the Nepali sculptors' perception and creation of space in this genre of art done in metal, stone, wood and clay mediums for millennia. I have always liked Nepali sculpture of the last two millennia and have read whatever struck me as important to understand this genre of art. I see, in other words, sculpture as the chiselled history of Nepali soul; it captures spiritual longings, erotic manifestations and the most complex textures of our emotions. It also captures the history of power and projection of ego and domination. Images showing unique blend of power and Eros, religion and egocentric statist projections, lie scattered in the open, in temples, courtyards, palatial buildings of Nepali and occidental styles, private worshipping places, reliquaries, lofts and attics, roofs and struts, water conduits, temples and monastic precincts.

Stone sculpture strikes a chord directly with the ecology, originary and human sense of time and space. The corporeality that dominates the Western stone sculptures, as discussed by writers and philosophers in the West, Nepali stone sculptures too do pose a challenge to onlookers, believers and art lovers by their sheer beauty and the finish, very importantly, by the location where they stand. Stone sculptures in Nepal have been the meeting loci of history, religion and arts. Some of these forms also appear semi-abstract in the artists' bid to put these different strands together.

Questions always come up in art discussions whether the classical forms do represent that combination or not. But as in other forms of art



Now Harnamadi hill has turned into a favourite destination for visitors.

sculptural art too assumed abstract form in the West. The sculptor's question resonates in my mind--where do we stand in modern sculpture especially of stone? I would only like to write about one problematic--the identification of the twilight zones of Nepali sculptures in the context of the shift from the traditional form to the modern one. I would also like to indicate how I see the value and significance of the works of Nepali sculptors and their international partnership. After discussing this briefly, I will evaluate the stone sculptures executed on Harnamadi hill, which is indeed the subject of this essay.

Nepali sculptures: fuzzy borders

Nepali sculpture, the term itself is better known than Nepali paintings or architecture even though the

latter form has become a subject of discussion especially after the 2003 UNESCO definition of intangible and tangible cultural heritage. Attention has shifted from sculpture to the preservation and study of architectural entities, namely houses and temples, courtyards and musical and performative traditions. However, sculpture is the subject of discussion. The most repeated text about Nepali sculpture is about their theft--their dislodgements and disappearances. More is said about the lost sculptural items than about their preservations and their features and power as art forms. Very importantly, tributes are paid by art scholars to these bereft works; calls have been made by artists and scholars for their retrieval. Lain Singh Bangdel writes these words in his very useful and well-documented book, 'We are more

concerned now about the safety of the remaining images in Nepal, in view of the increasing art theft of stone sculptures'. This is the story of stone sculptures, some of which have returned to Nepal ever since, but a large body of them remain unaccounted for. Bangdel's other major work about the stone sculptures of the Kathmandu valley makes a historico-stylistic study of the stone images of the valley. In this book Bangdel traces the history of stone sculpture from the sixth century BC, beginning with the birth site of Shakyamini Buddha at Lumbini. Interested readers can find a detailed and illustrated history of Nepali stone sculptures in this book that divides the style with the historical times. Very importantly, he traces the history of the connectivity of Nepali sculpture with the Indic sculptural traditions. The dynastic, millennial signposts like the Kiranta, Lichchavis, Mallas, Shahs is a heuristic device, if not anything else. However, the dynastic periods saw some modes of promotions and occasions of neglect of the sculptural art.

Bangdel's third major book about the traditional Nepali sculpture covers a visual analytical history of early sculptures beginning from the first century AD up until the second half of the fifth century. The book features sculptural art executed from monastic locations like vihara and stupa to other human locations represented by water-spouts, courtyards, and shrines and roofs that are crumbling. We can find similar treatment of the subject in the study of Pratapaditya Pal. Paying tribute to the sole power of the Newar artists, as far as continuity is concerned, Pal says,

Nevertheless, the Nepali sculptural tradition has remained vital and creative for more than a millennium, and even though it began to decline by the Late Malla period, talented artists continued to produce beautiful bronzes. Certainly the technical dexterity of the Newari craftsman remained undiminished as testified by the impressive bronzes... .

Briefly speaking, the major motifs of the sculptural forms are divine images like Yaksha, Laxmis, power goddesses, naga or serpent deities, mother images, Vaisnava or Bishnu icons, Kubera and other manifestations. But images carved out on struts, attached stone and metal imageries, as well as standing ones, movable figurines filling the antique shops, exquisite images of the Buddhas and Avalokiteswaras, and other manifestations, waiting for the metropolitan visitors in Kathmandu valley towns, also form a major bulk of Nepali sculptural figures.

Though a distinction made by the noted Chinese sculptor and scholar Wu Weisham may not be directly applicable here, I have the temptation to cite him here for one important reason. He states, 'Since ancient China, Chinese sculpture has existed in two most notable forms: indoor Buddha sculptures, and outdoor stone sculptures of human figures and animals in front of mausoleum paths. The former mostly conforms to standards as it is strictly restricted by methods of sculpting and religious fervour, unlike the latter, which is transcendent, bold and free spirited. Perhaps, due to them being placed outdoors, many ancient tomb sculptures would lose the power of competing with nature for space if they were depicted too realistically.'

In Nepal conversely, most of the shrines and sculptural images of deities are stones. The theory of leaving stone sculptural works to face nature, and metal images as canonical indoor forms, somehow does not seem to have guided the makers and worshippers of stone images in Nepal. The inventory of Bangdel's stone sculptural images therefore speaks volumes about the freehand sculptural works of Nepali artists. Therefore, when I was confronted with the question of traditional and modern sculptures of Nepal, I took recourse to some scholarly analyses and histories to find some answer. But the answer did not come by so easily to me.

Some of the outstanding discussions about sculptural works open up a few interesting debates. According to Burnham, the base 'the twilight zone both physically and psychically' that a sculptor creates is indeed a "convention for rooting his art to surrounding reality while permitting it to stand apart."

Western artists and critics see in the decline of the base a phenomenon of the placing of the sculptural figure. The modern sculpture does see the sculptural figure, image, as an important entity that neither stands apart nor mingles in the crowd; it has become a plural theme. One phenomenon of Nepali sculptures of the classical or traditional order is that they were created in the twilight zones of faith and poetry, power and submission and joy and pain. Another factor about them is that the sculptors used classical methods but judging by the nuances, the free play of imagination, the choice of the location of the ground or base that were created for the sculptural works, we

find it difficult sometimes to draw a line between old and new or classical and modern forms of sculpture in Nepal. That the Western modern artists like Braque and Picasso turned to the traditional African sculptural images to develop modern perception could be a good reminder here.

The one problematic I am introducing here in connection with the modern Nepali sculptor's modus operandi is that when we discuss about the modern Nepali sculptures, we need not entirely use the Western modern mode of seeing the forms; we can bring perceptions and techniques from our own traditions as well. But I want to quote Burnham here especially in the context of the unresolved questions about modern sculptural art:

In trying to uncover the foundations of modern sculptural form, several questions have dominated my concerns, namely: What are the intellectual and psychical origins of modern abstraction? What forces precipitate the rapid stylistic changes of modern sculpture? Where have these forces shifted and why? What are the formal foundations of modern sculpture? Does sculpture conform to a pattern which can give us intimations of its future? These questions, among others, have become important in the last few years as sculpture has risen in prominence and painting continues to show signs of failing vitality. Sculpture is, however, far from being a monolithic set of interests. Thus, much of the most contemporary and provocative three-dimensional art is only generically related to the figurative sculpture of the past. Recent modes, particularly Kinetic, Luminous, and Environmental Art, are all stuffed uneasily under the category of sculpture, but as yet they are too problematic to be classified.



A sculptor at work - "Stone Sculpture Symposium-2012"

Interestingly, Burnham sees the continuity of the three-dimensional art as the generic continuation of the figurative sculpture of the past order. Space does not permit me to discuss the subject in detail. But there are some other challenges in modern sculptural art in the context of almost everything passing for modern sculpture, from ecologically meaningful constellations to visual and aural forms and geographical and natural structures. But the main stylistic features like proportion, structure, texture, scale, contexts and colours and shapes remain valid. But one important feature of modern Nepali sculpture is the challenge to make the figures move, to acknowledge the biological configuration of sculptures. Bodily contours, painful positions of sculptures, the serene, suave moods, make up the variety of this versatile genre of art. Nepali sculptures stand on base, rise from under the ground, fly in air, latch on to human body and

phallic forms, and some appear in somewhat vainglorious forms made by western sculptors bestriding what looks like a stallion, stretching bodies, some can be seen half-broken in their exquisite forms sitting in the corners and reliquaries. But in our sculptures the bodies are lost into some kind of ecstatic, cosmogonic moods. That is expressed by extreme ecstasy of sexuality, divine awe, power and theatricality. So if any modern sculptors draw a line between the abstract and the classical in absolute terms in Nepal they may hazard the risk of simplification. The question of base and the location of the sculptural bodies remains as a valid mode of discussion in sculptural genre of art today.

Modernist turn: brief story

Though the history of modern sculpture in Nepal is short, some limited sculptors have made important innovations in this

regard. I want to discuss briefly the history of this modern sculpture before talking about the sculptural works of Harnamadi. I would only like to allude to the story of the apprenticeship of the Nepali artists in the modern school of sculpture. Some names of modern pioneering Indian gurus in modern sculpture are mentioned by the Nepali modern sculptors. Modern Nepali sculptors use the name of Ram Kinkar Baji most prominently. Baji visited Nepal with his student Sankho Chaudhari to execute sculptural figures for Sainik Manch in 1945. Sankho Chaudhari also learnt the traditional method of metal casting from Nepali sculptor Jagman Shakya of Patan. A network of apprenticeship is mentioned by historians. Sankho Chaudhari taught Thakur Prasad Mainali who is considered the first modern sculptor, and another sculptor Pramila Giri was taught by Baji at Shanti Niketan. Baji's students Balbir Sing Katt, Latika Katt and Sankho Chaudhari taught other sculptors of the first phase of modern Nepali sculptural apprenticeship. The modern sculptors of the young generation appreciate Mainali for boldly introducing modern sculptural forms in Nepal. The repertoire of names of the pioneering generation of sculptors who received their education from the above gurus is small. But the great legacy of Nepali sculptors in this land should be viewed from dual perspectives of continuity and change. They have seen different periods of change in their works. Like traditional Nepali painters of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who had to shift their art from the traditional mode to the mode of portrait making, Nepali sculptors too, in later times, were commissioned to create sculptural figures of kings and important

people in society. That certainly did involve some tension caused by the shift, and exposed sculptors to new forms of dialogue between art and power. I would call it another twilight zone of Nepali sculpture. We should not forget these shifts, these 'moulding'--if I may use the sculptors' term--moments while discussing the history of Nepali sculpture. Various periods of shifts have occurred in the millennial history of Nepali sculpture. But the history of modern Nepali sculpture, that works with the distortion of figurality and the dismantling of the solid base, is pretty short. I want to end my discourse of historicity here and write about the Harnamadi experience mentioned earlier.

Harnamadi experience

The sculptural works scattered over the green cover a good range of subjects. A constellation of works executed by native and foreign sculptors of various degrees of experience, training and talent present an interesting exhibition of sculptural arts in this non-descript place. Some traditional sculptors have gone to sculpt modern figures on good stone pieces. All Nepali sculptors, some of whom have executed their first abstract or modern works, appear to have shown a good sense of participation in this exhibition. Each work cannot be called a consummate piece of sculpture. Some are rough and perfunctory. Participation of Purnakaji Shakya, son of the great sculptor of traditional and pre-modern order Ratnakaji Shakya, for example, is an interesting matter. His figure with the back of a bird is significant from the point of view of an idea of shift if not anything else. A similar form is sculpted by

Gangadhar Saru. This is a woman's visage with eyes closed, and twisted head. It is an incomplete work, but expressive. Chandra Shyam's sculpture is a fusion work with the juxtaposition of concave and convex forms. A protrusion of Ganesh figure and the overall shyly executed abstract form is a half-hearted attempt towards the creation of modern sculpture.

A seed image made by Nagendra Rajbhandari, who teaches sculpture in Baroda arts college, is a good but incomplete piece of sculpture. This organic seed, an abstract form, with textured feature, is reminiscent of the fertility of ecology that surrounds the vicinity. Raju Pithakote has sculpted some fine contours on a very fine piece of stone; it is an unfinished endeavour, too. Narendra Prasad Bhandari's shape of a cauldron with bubbles rising quite smoothly is an interesting piece of sculpture. Babulal Waiba's figure wearing a cloak is quite a good work. He has given the semblance of a finished piece of work by creating a dark visage and the rest of the natural surface functioning as cloak, which is a clever device to escape detail work. Similarly, Buddha Chaudhari has created Buddha's serene figurality at one side of the stone leaving the rest as the open space, a natural stony expansion. Prakash Ratna Shakya has created a chair with a hole for shoes. It is a clever but unfinished work. Laxman Bhujel's stone, I guess with a thinner surface, becomes a good piece of sculpture with a hole in the middle, which breaks a barrier of the solidity. I found this sculpture like a theatre where people participate by going through the hole into the open sky. He has devised a subtle way of merging sky, nature, space and solidity in a

dramatic manner. Sudarshan Bikram Rana has created a rhythmic texture by playing with the natural surface. Govinda Chaudhari's basket figurality and Baikunthaman Shrestha's bull are quite tangible figures. These two works of sculptures could do with more works. Bishnu Prasad Shrestha's piece shows minimum sculptural work. The moulding path in the middle of the mass is foregrounded as pattern creating a smooth intervention in the natural shape. Similarly, Om Bhakta Bhandari's piece of sculpture is a simple experiment with tortoise figurality. Textures are created to represent scale. It is a basic attempt. Sharadaman Shrestha's stone is very fine in which he has sculpted elephant tusk and muzzle, showing buffalo head in the middle. This piece is a good attempt but an unfinished work. On the whole, all the above sculptures manifest certain degree of creative experiments. They are half-hearted efforts, except some. I guess they constitute index of new sculptural art and artists in Nepal. I would not call them consummate piece of works, but they manifest a great deal of experimental thrust. I liked that especially in the context of the works that they had done in a limited time. The spirit is important.

Om Khatri's sculpture work is excellent. His delineation of mass, volume, texture, line and plain shows consummation. A bull gives the impression of solidity, and it is not mounted on base. He has created the semblance of the fortes and humped summits of the Makawanpur valley in the bull's humps. The very smooth and finished lines and surface, the finely cut out surface reminiscent of the valley, and the texture acquired in the process of moulding make up a very good combination of skills.



A sculptor at work - "Stone Sculpture Symposium-2012"

This is a very good piece of work. Rajan Kafle's sculptural work is a quite fine piece of art. Layers of rough mandalic circles and triangular shapes contrast with the smooth upper and bottom linear form. It shows a certain biological mobility. A tiny replica adds to its meaning. Consummate are the other works of foreign sculptors. The Korean artist's natural lines, smoothness, the sudden breaks representing clouds and rivers for a geo-space, draw the viewers. The terraced back which comes from the quarry adds to this geo-surface formation. Bettino Francini, president of the International Sculptors' Organisation, has made an excellent mother figure wearing a nose-ring. He has created this with minimum carving works. The stone shape that dominates the view, brings the mother image down to earth with all its naturalness and expressionism. The Japanese Sugimoto Juni-chiro has created the pod of a bean, which is consumed famously in Japan and

Nepal. The pod fat with the mature beans inside comes out so brilliantly. This is an excellent piece of sculpture. Forms, line, rhythm are maintained with the natural shape; and it is very well balanced structure. Chinese sculptor Liu Yang has created a veiled woman. I like the stony transparency of the cloak. The effect is subtle; the frontality is foregrounded in this work. The French sculptor Laetititia de Bazelaire has created a human figure sleeping with year glued to mother earth to hear her sound. She has left the texture of the moulding and has retained what she thinks as the naturalness of the field of action. This is a very moving and lyrical piece of sculptural work.

Conclusion

I have focussed on each work as far as possible. The final word that I want to say about this exhibition and this write up is that, I have used the occasion not only to review



A sculptor at work - "Stone Sculpture Symposium-2012"

the works on Harnamadi greens, but also to review the features of Nepali sculpture. Quite a number of these sculptural pieces have addressed the question raised in modern sculptural art, which is the biophysical phenomenon, the dynamics, and the propensity for movement in sculpture. This new thrust has created some installation works with overt aims, in the world today. But good sculptors put that biophysical dynamism with great subtlety in their works. We see that in the Harmanri sculptural works not only of the foreign artists but also of some native sculptors. The biological

awareness of sculptures' mobility is represented in works that vary in the degree of standard. And the main section of this review is an attempt to answer the question—how do I see the differences between the traditional and modern Nepali sculptures. I have made some attempts towards that. I believe, we can create new energy in artistic creation by promoting this genre of art—the modern sculpture without losing sight of the great tradition and heritage of that in this land, and of the twilight zones of Nepali sculptural art as seen in various modes of transitions.

End notes:

Mukesh Malla and Saroj Bajracharya, *A Concise Introduction to Nepali Modern Sculpture* (Kathmandu: Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, 2014).

Lain S. Bangdel, *Stolen Images of Nepal* (Kathmandu: Royal Nepal Academy, 1989) p 14.

Lain S. Bangdel, *Inventory of Stone Sculptures of the Kathmandu Valley* (Kathmandu: Royal Nepal Academy, 1995). This book with an introduction written by Dina Bangdel, the writer's daughter, now a famous art professor in the US, presents a very useful inventory of stone sculptures.

Lain S. Bangdel, *The Early Sculptures of Nepal* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1982).

Pratapaditya Pal, *The Art of Nepal* (Berkeley, London: Los Angeles County Museum of Art in association with University of California Press, 1985) p 87.

Wu Weishan, *The poetry of sculpture* (London: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd., 2008). p 225.

Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1968, fourth printing 1975) p 19.

Burnham, *ibid*, p 2.

Malla and Bajracharya, *ibid* p 38.



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