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Some Emerging Nepali Abstract Painters of 1980s: Their Creative Trends

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Abstract

Nepali artists of 1980s further developed the subjective, abstract and plural art trends with their individual identity in the paintings. The movement was from objective representation to subjective expression; concrete reality to abstract concept; from external world to the inner experience; and from visible appearance to the invisible existence. Some representative artists of this period are Kiran Manandhar, Sharad Ranjit, Navindra Man Rajbhandari, and Jeevan Rajopadhyay. Mananandhar's paintings emphasize the inner expression through altered art forms. Sharad Ranjit presents the dancing colors suggesting the implied rhythm of the universe. Rajbhandari's artworks present the quest of light in the darkness and rhythmic melody in the silence. Jeevan Rajopadhyay's colorful compositions stand for themselves with the focus on the aesthetic pleasure of the colors and abstract shapes. Creative works of these artists attempt to capture the invisible and intangible aspects of reality in the aesthetic visual form. There is the curiosity to know the unknown – to see the unseen. The visual forms attempt to present this side of the reality through lines, rhythmic curves, unusual shapes, strange colors, and novel images. Since the visual forms are plural and open-ended, there is the possibility of multiple interpretations. Thus, this research is qualitative.

Keywords: Nepali art, abstract, subjective, invisible reality, rhythm, expression, plurality

Sharad Ranjit, *Dancing Colors*, 2022, Oil color on canvas, 152 cm x 76 cm

Introduction

From 1950s, Nepali artists began to create distance from external world and attempted to express inner feeling and emotions in the visual forms (Singh 1976). The figures and images were altered and distorted. Unusual and contrary images were put together with free association. Some artworks were fully disconnected from objective reality (Subedi 1992). The artists like Lain Singh Bangdel, Uttam Nepali, Ramananda Joshi, Gehendra Man Amatya, Shashi Shah, Manuj Babu Mishra, Krishna Manandhar, Pramila Giri, Shashi Kala Tiwari and some others paved the way for the entry of such art trends in 1960s and 70s. In 1980s, other artists like Kiran Manandhar, Sharad Ranjit, Navindra Man Rajbhandari and Jeevan Rajopdhyay shared those early trends and techniques, and further developed the modern Nepali art with their unique individual signature of aesthetic form. Before exploring the contents, forms and techniques of these artists, let me introduce them in brief.

The forms and contents of their artworks are discussed in the next section of this article.

Kiran Manandhar, a renowned Nepali artist, earned his Master in Fine Arts (MFA) in painting from Benaras Hindu University, India (Shah 2021). He has received several awards including the *Birendra Aishwarya Sewa Padak* (2001). As a visual artist, he has participated in the *Fukuoka Triennial*, Japan. Manandhar has more than forty of solo

art exhibitions, and took part in more than two hundred group shows nationally and internationally (Shah 2021). He was the Chancellor of the Nepal Academy of Fine Arts (2011-2014). Kiran Manandhar's intense passion for creation can be traced back to his childhood life, youth, school student and college graduate through his compositions, and books and articles on his artworks. Spontaneity of brushstrokes, diversity in choice of colors and medium and the unique visual signature are the dominant features of his works (Subedi 2022). He has carved his unique space in the domain of Nepali art. In addition to the dedication toward his creative activity, he encourages young artists and students to make innovative art forms.

Sharad Ranjit, a renowned abstract artist of Nepal, was born in 1955. He earned his Bachelor of Fine Arts from Tribhuvan University and Master's Degree in Social Science from Purwanchal University. He has three solo exhibitions and several of group exhibitions during his creative journey of almost four decades. He is also an accomplished illustrator, cartoonist and an expert on visual communication. He was the Chief of Communication for Development in UNICEF Nepal (Sirjanā–2018: A Collective Art Show, p.48). The journey of Sharad Ranjit to abstract paintings began from the observation of the surroundings. His creative thought was much affected by the local areas and their simplistic lifestyles that eventually transformed into abstract depiction on his canvas. Mostly

in warm monochromatic settings, his works seem like a fume of simple things we inherit from our past (Sirjanā–2019: A Collective Art Show, p.28).

Navindra Man Rajbhandari was born in 1960 in Kathmandu. Besides being an eloquent painter, Rajbhandari is equally a gifted designer as well. He writes on art and teaches art history. He is designer of the new coat of arms (*nishānachāpa*) of the Government of Nepal (Sirjanā–2022: A Collective Art Show, p.26).

Rajbhandari incorporates vedic themes like *Pancha Tattva* and *Tamasomā Jyotirgamaya* with the modern representation of mass of colors on his canvas. His prime motive is to express the chosen themes in abstract forms to relish the eyes of the viewers (Sirjanā–2021: A Collective Art Show, p.30).

Rajbhandari is the author of several books like '*Pāschātya Kalā: Sañkchipta Itihās*' (Part-1), published by Nepal Academy of Fine Arts (2013); and '*Pāschātya Kalā: Sañkchipta Itihās*, (Part-2), published by Sirjana College of Fine Arts (2021). He is the Co-author and Editor of *Chitrakalā*, published by Sirjana College of Fine Arts (2018); Co-author of 'Creative Activities through Art and Crafts' published by Sajha Prakashan (2002); '*Sirjanātmaka Kriyākalāpa Kasari?*' (1999), '*Sadhārana Rekha Chitra*' (1995) published by Ministry of Education. He is the Editor of '*Lāvanya*', an annual magazine, published by Sirjana College of Fine Arts.

Jeevan Rajopadhyaya, a renowned Nepali abstract artist, was born in 1960. He earned his BFA degree from Lalitkala Campus, TU. He also worked under the guidance of renowned modern artist – Lain Singh Bangdel (1991-2003). His paintings have been exhibited in more than thirty art exhibitions in national and international art galleries (Shah, 2021). Rajopadhyay has received several awards including First Prize in Poster Competition (1991), organized by Ministry of Housing and Physical Planning; Best Prize in Painting Competition, organized by Nepal Film Development Board (2005); and First Prize in Logo Competition, organized by Nepal Academy of Music and Drama (2011).

Modern Nepali artists like Manandhar, Ranjit, Rajbhandari and Rajopadhyay, who emerged in 1980s, contributed for the development of Nepali painting in terms of its form, composition of colors and expression of inner feelings, emotions and experiences.

Methodology

The research area includes the paintings created by the representative modern Nepali artists emerged in 1980s. The artworks have been explored tracing their creative dimensions and innovative forms and techniques. The paintings are the primary sources that have been interpreted. Books on history of art, research articles and exhibition catalogues are secondary sources. On the process of study, art galleries and artists' studios have been visited to

view the artworks. Artists have been interviewed to find their personal insight. This is a qualitative research, for the thesis statement has been supported by interpreting the artworks, and these artworks may have multiple interpretations.

The quest of creative forms to capture intangible dimensions

Modern Nepali painters break away from earlier objectively representative and referential works, and give space to the subjective contents. Feelings, emotions, experiences and abstract aspects are more dominant in their works.

Kiran Manandhar

Kiran Manandhar recycles the structure of *mandala* paintings and presents the theme of meditation and spirituality in his abstract compositions (Subedi 1992). His compositions are plural and open-ended. Some signs and clues in the form subtly suggest female figures. *Mandala* is the symbolic structure of the universe and human consciousness (Sharma 2018). Female form is connected to nature and creation. The canvas leads our eyes to the depth and underlined structure of the existence (Sharma 2009). The artist attempts to capture the invisible and intangible aspects. He transforms his imaginations into abstract forms and it would be too presumptuous to locate a fixed meaning of the abstract art forms (Shah 2021). The formal features like flat colors, distinct contours and minimum use of shade suggest the simplicity of form.

The visual compositions are the artist's personal responses to the context rather than the naturalistic representations of the objects.

The inspiration from native cultural roots appears in aesthetic visual form. The texture of Nepali rice paper arouses strange tactile sensation. The junks like discarded jute sacks become an integral part of an aesthetic object (Sharma 2014). The structure of simplified *mandala* provides stability to the visual composition. The focus at the center contributes for the organization of the space and shapes.

Manandhar revitalized early art forms with his innovative techniques of creation. The fixity of form is replaced with the plurality expression (Subedi 2021). The personal feeling and emotion are given more importance than the objective representation of the things. The spontaneity and automatism are other characteristics of his works. The creative process itself is the celebration of the carnival. The canvas demands the viewer's participation in the artwork to make a rewarding sense. Free association of images and symbols provide the adventure of viewing. The canvas is ever new in each viewing.

The spontaneous visual movement creates sublime experience. The suggestiveness of the forms gives way to imagination. The consistent female figures suggest the natural inclination of the artist. This provides relief from melancholy and loneliness of the cold world threatened by apocalypse. He



Kiran Manandhar, *Spontaneous Expression*, 2007, Mixed-media on canvas, 183 cm x 183 cm.

enjoys the freedom of expression in the arts that appears unlikely in real life.

The images and figures are unconventional. The images appear and disappear simultaneously, for they avoid clear outline and objective detail (Sharma 2018). However, a sense of inner rhythm is felt as we move across the canvas (Subedi 2017). Avoiding the ordinary,

the artist captures the climactic point and the spots of time of his experience. He does not execute the visual composition with pre-plan but the visuals reveal themselves on the process.

The red patches represent the pulsating dynamic life. After the visual exploration of the canvas, viewers come up with refreshing experience. The visual rhythm

suggests the gesture of brushstrokes. The abstract canvas brings the unusual texture in the foreground. The play of absence and presence of the images and character contributes to the shifting aesthetic sense (Shah 2021).

Subedi (2006) interprets Manandhar's paintings: "To him *mandala* was/is everything-solidity, surface, sky, earth, confluence of mind and universe, a consciousness symbolized by the vulva and the movement of energy to and from it. They have psychological dimension. They create an atmosphere of the mind through brush strokes, distribution of colors not in tonal merger but in terms of the distribution of each over the entire surface, a technique used by Kiran Manandhar in nearly all of his paintings to create linear effects of both the visible and invisible lines" (p.ix). His artworks attempt to explore the ontological theme like the interaction and union of human consciousness and universe.

Coexistence of visual and verbal texts in the same canvas makes his works inter-textual having inter-art relationship. The creative works blur the boundary among art genres. Sometimes the artist makes the collage of poems and paintings (Sharma 2009). He also makes pictures simultaneously with the recitation of poems and performance of plays. His works are interdisciplinary. Subedi (2006) traces the inter-art relationship in his creations: "He creates texts in his paintings and reads colors and brush strokes in poetry. He drew figures for each of my poem in the collection *Chasing Dreams* (1996)

and when a group of young university teachers were performing the long poem *Kathmandu Odyssey* in that collection, Kiran Manandhar participated in the performance with his huge canvas" (p.ix). He gives performative power to his paintings. He works together with poets, painters, musicians and actors.

Sharad Ranjit

Sharad Ranjit's abstract paintings express his feelings in response to contemporary context. The external world affects the artist and he presents the experience with the colorful visuals. The intermingling colors create mysticism in the setting. The mystical atmosphere in the canvas invites the viewers to explore the unknown horizon. The cool and soft colors create meditative mood in the audience. The movement of our eyes comes to stand still due to the altered visuals and provides complete comfort for a moment. The subject is detached from the immediate external context. It is a unique experience of freedom and relief from the mundane material world.

Ranjit divides the linear surface in multiple parts and creates unusual form using visible and invisible lines and strange shapes. He constructs rhythmic grooves in-between the sections. Multiple perspectives create the illusion of three dimensional images. The horizontal shapes suggest the trails for movement. For the variety, one can cross the groove and take another way to explore the imaginary world (Shah 2021). The straight lines, curves, vertical or horizontal shapes present the



Sharad Ranjit, *Dancing Colors*, 2018, Oil color on canvas, 76 cm x 152 cm.

option for reception. The canvas is the microcosm of the universe created with colors.

In the beginning phase, the artist takes clues from nature to comprehend abstraction. When he arrives to this state, abstraction becomes as real as breathing for him (Sirjana–2018: A Collective Art Show, p.48). His journey to abstract paintings began from the observation of the beauty of the nature and folk life. He prefers warm monochromatic settings to suggest the mysticism and primitive life.

Presently he is working on a theme called '*Dancing Colors*'. The artist believes that dance is a universal act in human beings. The movements are triggered from conscious or even unconscious mind which brings enjoyment and fun in human lives. He further believes that various forms of dance have brought together different castes, ethnicities,

cultures and geographical territories constructing a liberal society. The dramatic colors of dance always fascinate the artist, so much so that sometimes he feels visual ecstasy while deeply observing the act of dancing (Sirjana–2018: A Collective Art Show, p.48). The rhythm and composition are the common elements of both painting and dance.

Spontaneous flight and freedom in the use of colors are other aspects of his abstract paintings. The shapes glide in the sky in musical motion toward unknown destination. This is a quest of the essence of life and the world. Sometimes, the strange shapes seem to be expanding and contracting perpetually as if they are breathing like a living organism. We can experience the initiation, exposition, climax and resolution of new narratives. This suggests the cycle of existence. His colors and compositions

are more relevant than the semiotic of the form. The works make us feel cool and meditative to witness the world and people.

The shapes concentrated in the middle of the canvas make the visuals more emphatic. The darkness creates the weight of the image. The attraction to the center is the human passion for power though it is futile in the conclusion. The existence rises from the vast silence projecting up for the identity (Shah 2021). These concepts have been communicated by colors of Sharad Ranjit's compositions. The atmosphere of the compositions creates unusual sensation in the viewers' experience.

The spontaneous brushstrokes determine visual form. The perplexities of life are resolved in aesthetic form. The artist breaks the limits of any kind to create innovative work. The hidden springs drive the imagination of the artist. Discarding earlier tradition, he gives more emphasis to the process of painting. Sometimes, chance effects and rhythmic gestures determine the expression. Unwilling to continue known directions, the artist has turned to the private visions and insights. The painting spoke of harmony, peace and meditation. He handles colors in free manner. Sharad Ranjit considers paint as the storehouse of energy for inner expression. The artist himself is the ultimate source of energy. His canvas is full of tremendous vitality that overwhelms the viewer with interweaving colors and shapes. The images gently blend and blur creating meditative tranquility and contemplation.

Navindra Man Rajbhandari

Navindra Man Rajbhandari's paintings bring out the hidden reality in visual form. The invisible dimension of the world gets illuminated in the rhythmic creations. The artworks reveal the movement from the darkness to the light. He believes that creation of art should please the eyes of its beholder. He feels if his artwork gives some 'optical pleasure' to the spectator, it would satisfy him greatly (<https://sirjanacollege.edu.np/faculty/navindra-man-rajbhandari/>).

Rajbhandari's visual compositions present the pleasant shapes and exquisite combination of colors and rhythmic lines. The invisible and intangible aspects of human imagination and experience are revealed in visual form. The abstract feelings, ideas and concepts appear in the visuals (Bibas 2021).

The colors and the shapes do not stand for the external objects, events and people. Thus, the viewers need not bother about referring things and activities of the past and future. They have presentational immediacy, that is, the colors and shapes appeal our senses directly (<https://eartsnepal.com/artists/nabindra-man-rajbhandari/>). The creative works provide visual comfort and the peace of mind.

Veteran artist and art writer Madan Chitrakar considers Rajbhandari's works near to Minimalism – a painting or sculpture created with as little possible use of elements, details or references in art. He writes: "Navindra Man Rajbhandari, unmistakably also seemed



Navindra Man Rajbhandari, *Pancha Tattva*, 2023, Acrylics on canvas, 152 cm x 152 cm.

well fascinated by the unique application of chosen limited use of colors and the play of juxta-positioning of simple forms. Although it was an idiom of his individual creative impulse, it was unmistakably within the bracket of Minimalism. What has remained more interesting is that his series, thereafter,

regardless of changing themes, found within the thought” (Chitrakar: p.239).

Rajbhandari's abstract images appeal to our imagination. Sometimes, thick colors create complex nexus of tiny curves across the canvas. The colors and unique texture arouse our tactile sensation. This



Navindra Man Rajbhandari, *Tamasomā Jyotirgamaya*, 2022, Acrylics on canvas, 152 cm x 121 cm.

complex network of lines and shapes imply the complexity of life and world, the blend of the self and the world. The creation of multiple tiny curves in coherent manner depicts the artist's dexterity and patience, and the visuals create the artist's own world.

As we follow the movement of the curves, we reach to the new setting and the environment. Again the curves move toward other horizons. In every viewing, the painting remains ever new. However, sometimes, the abstract images may resemble to the images of nature provisionally. No sooner we find similarity, their shape changes into another image. Thus, the works are plural and open-ended. As a result, their significance is contingent and ever-shifting (<https://eartsnepal.com>).



Navindra Man Rajbhandari, *Tamasomā Jyotirgamaya*, 2022, Acrylics on canvas, 152 cm x 121 cm.
© Classic Art Gallery, Lalitpur

Some of his paintings depict floating cubes that emerge from the mystical background. They are significant not because they mean something but their magnetic power spontaneously draws us nearer to them with unusual aesthetic pleasure. The compositions provide us comfort and soothing effect while we are in the state of restlessness (<https://eartsnepal.com/artists/nabindra-man-rajbhandari/>).

Rajbhandari's paintings are intuitive abstract images and forms, for they emerge out of his imagination and meditative mood. The altered shapes and images emerge as some ideas flashes forth in our inner visions. Both the regular and irregular shapes coexist in coherence (Sharma 2014). Some of

them appear in cascade suggesting the following rhythm. The artist plays with colors, shapes and lines until he finds pleasant aesthetic forms. The creative forms are more dominant than the contents and themes. The aesthetic form is its own significance. The strange and innovative shapes appear and disappear in the background. They come forth and vanish. Momentary intangible shapes and invisible moments become visible and tangible through the striking visuals. The flow of the energy or the life force is in the quest of the self and the underlined conditions of the world (Sharma, 2014). The illusion of movement conveys a sense of life and change. Sparkling light, floating figures and luminous masses on the canvas arouse a sense of primordial setting.

In purely visual terms, vibrations of colors create a sense of spirit. The dazzling juxtapositions of colors highlight the visual effect and the perception. The optical mixture creates a sense of wholeness in the composition. Smooth gradation of colors, detailed and well-finished forms create lasting impact on the viewers. The parts are connected to the whole.

Rajbhandari creates free forms of subjectivity giving more lifelike visual interpretation of the self and the world (Subedi, 2022). His paintings present a sense of immediacy and freshness leaving lasting impression. The dazzling brilliance of the shapes and surface sets the space in our experience. Meticulously planned compositions appear to be well organized making them treasured gems.

He exploits color to convey emotion rather than to represent recognizable object. The profound meditation upon images and colors gives way to symbolic form suggesting the ultimate journey to enlightenment. The calmness and serenity in setting suggest the faith of the artist.

The mysterious and primitive images and shapes present the artist's romantic attitude, for he flies to far distance to create relevant sense to the present context. The fascination of exotic abstract form makes his works timeless within time. His profound personal touch carves his unique signature in the artworks. Visual significance of his works is arbitrary, for they have the possibility of multiple interpretations.

Some of his paintings break the linear surface with the use of geometric shapes. The foreground and background have almost equal weight in the compositions. The works present the dramatic freedom from natural representation of an object and linear perspective of the scene. His paintings present the aesthetic possibilities of his unique visual. The artwork is not a mirror of the natural world but the creative response to it.

He penetrates the invisible world by means of the visuals. Primitive and exotic themes are explored to convey dynamic energy and simple rhythm. The artistic form is not the means to convey a fixed meaning related to our world but the form is its own significance. The radiant and vivid values of the colors are enjoyed for their own sake. His abstract

compositions free us from the tyranny of time and space and fury of function. The artworks go beyond the classical concept of artistic imitation. The contemplation of a non-representational painting provides a complete rest to the mind from mundane material world. As we view his works, we suspend all corporeal activity. The viewer and the viewed, the object and the subject are united into a single entity. In this sense, Rajbhandari's abstract paintings are the instrument for meditation. Through the mystical insight, one can tap into the divine.

Jeevan Rajopadhyay

Jeevan Rajopadhyay, in his early days, painted many realistic watercolor landscapes but later gradually shifted to abstract art giving prime importance to composition of colors and shapes. The blend of colors and resultant shapes provide exhilarating effect (Shah, 2021). He handles colors in experimental manner searching for new form. The flowing colors create new textures on the surface. He omitted the recognizable shapes as he focused on inner abstract vision. This is the freedom of color from contents in the creation (Hegewald, 1996). The stability and order of the balanced form create the aesthetic sense out of the creation itself.

The beauty, rapture and the grandness of nature is not referred but suggested by the blurred and dimmed form. Rajopadhyay's melodious abstract compositions in colors provide a sense of visual rhythm. The artist balances one color with the next creating harmony (Shah, 2021). The borders of the shapes

are blurred creating smooth transition from one space to the other. One shape connects the other creating an organic whole.

Jeevan Rajopadhyay creates his own romantic world blending the dream with imagination. The focus is on brighter side of life. The strange visuals take us to sublime state. The warmth of feeling makes the life worth living. The movement of his brush seems to be intuitive and autonomous. He keeps on molding the shapes until they satisfy his vision. The open-ended visual forms pave way for provisional interpretations (Sharma 2019).

The monotony in the margin has been balanced with variety in the middle of the canvas. Some of his fluid forms have cool quality that provides soothing feeling. The play of light and shade creates a sort of inner movement suggesting the transition in materialism and meditation. The colors create the adventurous ride toward the unknown world. The flowing forms provide the relish like melodious music (Sharma, 2019). The focus is on aesthetic abstract form instead of conveying a certain meaning. The painting provides ample space for viewer's imagination. The viewing process may go through initiation, expectation, retrospection and resolution. The frozen music in colors suggests epiphany, the union of the self and the other.

Sparkling colors flow with force as in the volcanic eruption and blend with the setting suggesting coexistence and



Jeevan Rajopadhyay, *Untitled*, 2022, Acrylics on canvas, 121 cm x 182 cm.

harmony. The intensity of colors suggests the intensity of feelings. The assimilation of subject and the object at a point liberates the viewer from the anxiety and worries.

Despite the fact that Jeevan Rajopadhyay's abstract paintings do not directly refer to the objects of external world, the colors, shapes and textures dimly suggest bright sky, rocks, river, mountain, cool breeze, whispering sound, the melody of the birds, blossoms, golden horizon, blue lake, colorful clay, comfortable cottage, company of the friend and the warmth of love (Sharma 2019). In an exhibition catalogue, Bangdel (1994) writes about Jeevan Rajopadhyay's artworks: "Rajopadhyay's works show a distinct trend and technique that reflect a sense of purpose and style. His brushwork with

its bold strokes marks his distinctive style and shows creative handling of the watercolor technique. The shapes seem so fresh as if they have appeared for the first time" (Bangdel, 1996). The solid cubes seem to be sweet bar of chocolate. The artist's creative images are better than the real things themselves.

Rejecting the middle path, Jeevan Rajopadhyay reaches to the extreme of inner expression through non-referential visual form. He goes to the depth of the intangible dimension of human experiences (Sharma 2011). His works are the unique worlds in themselves. He discards the crowd for his individual identity in the colorful visuals. The artworks present his passion for aesthetic creation. He neglects the ordinary and captures the rare moments of the life and



Jeevan Rajopadhyay, *Untitled*, 2022, Acrylics on canvas, 121 cm X 182 cm

the world.

The fluidity of form appears as the lyricism of music that contributes to the mental peace of the viewers. The liberated colors and forms exist for themselves. The bouncing shapes demand prolonged contemplation. The free association of visual images and condensed colors go beyond the logical reasoning and artistic conventions.

Conclusion

Nepali artists, who emerged in 1980s, contributed to further develop the subjective, abstract and non-referential art trends that were initiated in 1950s and 60s. Their artworks are not objective representations of the external world but

subjective response to the contemporary context. Rather than imitation, the artists focused on expression and creation. In some artworks, the visual form is its own content. Since the art forms are open-ended, there is the possibility of multiple interpretations. Nepali artists like Kiran Manandhar, Sharad Ranjit, Navindra Man Rajbhandari and Jeevan Rajopadhyay contributed substantially to strengthen these art trends. Manandhar's compositions renew the concept of mandala, human consciousness and prakriti (the female principle) in his compositions. Ranjit presents the dance of colors in spontaneous rhythm. Rajbhandari's paintings suggest the spiritual concepts like cosmic harmony, peace and the light in the darkness. Rajopadhyay presents colors and aesthetic forms for their own sake. These renowned artists put one more brick in the construction of the history of Nepali art.

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