

The players of contemporary art in Bhutan

Contemporary art emerged in Bhutan in the late eighties but it has really developed with the creation of Voluntary Artist's Studio (VAST), a non-profit organisation, in 1998. VAST was founded to promote contemporary art among youth and art lovers.

Bhutanese art is deeply ingrained in the Buddhist tradition. Its favorite themes are Buddha, the dragon, wind horses that can be seen on prayer flags but also scenes from everyday life and nature. "Contemporary art in our country is pushing boundaries, with artists experimenting with the technical side of art, the treatment of paint and canvas, and by contemplating on what art is", said Zimbiri, the leading female artist in Bhutan. Artists contribute to the deconstruction of traditional iconography, mostly through metaphor, but they also use striking themes like sexuality and alcoholism.

"The taste for Bhutan art of both the local market and the tourists is mainly decorative", explained Kelly Dorji who opened the Terton Gallery six years ago in the capital Thimphu.

"This has had a bearing on the emerging artistic identity in the country, with artists pursuing mostly Buddhist themes and landscapes". Since the foundation of VAST in 1998, 5 galleries have opened in Thimphu, creating emulation and traditional artists are increasingly moving towards contemporary art.

The King of Bhutan greatly supported the development of art in the country, Kelly Dorji added. He also provides opportunities for our artists to show their works abroad, even if it has not been a priority to make Bhutanese artists known globally so far.

In February 2017, an exhibition "Voice of the Thunder Dragon" was organized in New York. It was dedicated to three Bhutanese painters affiliated to VAST, Kama Wangdi, Pema Tshering and Gyempo Wanchuck. The curator of the exhibition was the American film director, art collector and entrepreneur Maxwell S. Joseph. 25 paintings were exhibited.

In 2013, Phurba Namgay was the first Bhutanese artist to exhibit its paintings in New York as part of the exhibition "Anonymous: Contemporary Tibetan Art" at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art in New Paltz, NY. Phurba Namgay "combines Buddhist iconography and mythological creatures, idealized dragons, tigers, snow lions, phalluses, lotuses and demons". Several years ago an American friend gave him a book about NASA and the space program. Namgay sees American rockets as allegorical, rather like the Bhutanese dragons he grew up with. "When I was a child in Bhutan, rockets were a myth like dragons are in the West", he added. So he paints traditional thangkas as well as rockets.

Kama Wangdi, known as Asha Kama, is the most famous Bhutanese artist. He claims to be the torch bearer of contemporary art in Bhutan. Bhutanese issues and Buddhist iconography are his main themes for which he combines modern and traditional techniques. He uses tempera and acrylic. Pema Tshering (Tintin) also works with acrylic. In his Series "Spiritual Beings" he examines the function of monks, deities and warriors in the Bhutanese society. Regarding Gyempo Wanchuk, the death from alcoholism of his father was decisive in his artistic inspiration. The artist shows the harms of alcohol through images of death, illness and suffering.

Bhutanese artists would need more interaction with foreign artists to better know the possibilities of art material and broaden their means of expression. We are at our beginnings in (contemporary) art, Kelly Dorji said.

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