



A Critical Overview of Artist Dhaneshwar Shah's Art

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Abstract

This article explores the style and oeuvre of a young artist Dhaneshwar Shah. He was born in 1979, in New Delhi, India. College of Art, New Delhi is his alma mater from where he has completed his M.F.A. and B.F.A. A recipient of several awards like the award from UNESCO, 'Art Award for Italy' in 2008, 'National award for Painting, India' in 2006, 'M. F. Husain Award', in 2005, and 'AIFACS', in 2005. Dhaneshwar Shah is absorbed in his own world; quiet surely, a creative one. An endowed prodigy, who is brimming with new ideas and is not scared of crossing over the line (experimenting), Shah's works mostly vertical has a graphic quality to them. With a mature rationale he has developed an appealing ocular language, which captures the viewer's gaze.

Keywords: Dhaneshwar Shah, Indian contemporary art, bastar art

Introduction

In the present times most 'modern' contemporary artists are shaping their works with a focus on urban sensibilities. In this context Dhaneshwar stands apart. He is quite different and novel, both in his emotive content and in his representations. He has based these works on the vicinity and life of Bastar which he has an ongoing affair. It seems that the colourful place and its harsh yet vivacious life have etched a deep mark on the artist's psyche. One can sense this intangible vibrancy and pulsation in these creative spaces. The images and motifs which are depicted in his paintings are from the animal world. The horses, dogs, cats, ducks, goats, tigers, deer, peacocks, etc. act as the main protagonists in them (Fig.1).



Fig 1: Deer (Photograph by the author)

Their presence in his creative spaces symbolizes and forces the urban viewer to memorize his/her now forgotten relationship with flora and fauna. This relationship is much cherished and respected by the people from *Bastar*. They consider them (nature) as their 'friends'-an important part of their lives. So the preference given to the animal figures over the human figures can be easily understood with keeping this relationship in the background. Dhaneshwar's recent works on display are created on these lines.

These animals mostly are painted as simple, large, silhouette forms in the main ground, often with unrealistic colour gradations. The gradation given at so-called 'wrong places' (unrealistic areas) infuses a dramatic quality to the work. It also brings a complexity to his otherwise simple silhouettes. These animal forms are placed before a background of linear gradations, almost textural movements of tone, against which the silhouetted animal in its dramatically contrasting colour stands out (Fig.2). This contrast is also conspicuous in the scale of the figures and also with the ideas, based on which these works are painted. Like the large deer is contrasted with the presence of many miniature deer surrounding it in the paintings (Fig.3). Like the wooden toy horse is contrasted by placing these much smaller live horses in the foreground; and the lions are placed in contrast for many goats.



Fig 2: Dogs (Photograph by the author)



Fig 3: Deer (Photograph by the author)

Even though the sizes of the figures vary in the works, but the proportion of these are given its due care and importance. The figures and its parts are realistically proportionate. At times these figures are static and at other times in movement on the canvas.

In Dhaneshwar's works these animals achieve a character of their own, had formed a kinship among them and are often treated as human beings. A goat is holding a *darbar* and savouring hookah, a snobbish arrogant deer, ducks gossiping like middle-aged ladies, and a deer inside a bird's beak; are exemplifying the humane character. Dhaneshwar says that "he feels that in his house, he is living with all these animals."

A small figure inside a much larger figure is another interesting aspect to his works and reminds us of the pre-historic drawings of Lascaux, France and Bhimbhetka, India. According to the artist it symbolizes the subconscious condition of the mind. One's mind is away to some other place away from the physical presence of the body. At another level it also represents the repetition of the figure at two different places doing two different things. These figures are usually painted by the folk artists, particularly in the Madhubani idiom.

One wonders why such a theme representing nature requires the presence of table fans, cars, bicycles, tables, and houses.

The artist feels that these acts as mere fillers in his works and are a part of his mundane day to day life activities. However these tiny icons serve an important purpose. They act as major elements to compose the much larger main figure.

The corners of his paintings are never left empty and are either filled with stairs, planes, houses or a broad strip of colour contrasting the main background colour is painted to direct the gaze of the viewer into the painting (Fig.4).



Fig 4: Elephant (Photograph by the author)

Scrutinizing his works suggests that Dhaneshwar gradually builds his paintings infusing them with figures and colours having expressive features and symbolic meanings. The work speaks at different levels, at one reminding us of the animal studies by Mansur, the Mughal emperor Jahangir's favoured court artist. At another it takes into Bastar, Madhubani and Kalighat folk art. And then with its unreal palette, the giant scale, the silhouette of the animal containing other animals, with staircases upon staircases leading into imagined spaces, one gets transported into a third surrealistic inspiration of the artist.

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