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Being acquainted with the opaque watercolour painting techniques his on-going research work encompasses the Opaque Watercolour painting tradition in post-millennium West-Bengal.



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Beyond the Loop: Contemporary Opaque Watercolour Painting Practice in West Bengal

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Abstract

Since the dawn of the nineteenth century, the Indian art world has witnessed a pluralist mode in art practice while shrinking the perimeters of imported and indigenous. Concurrently, the global network of the international art world has successfully manifested a uniform mechanism of producing a standard for art and its aesthetic value – a loop where similar expressive forms have found repetitive conduits. Fashionable practice of new media, digital and interactive art encompassed fashion, design, technology, consumerism, and global economy, and side-lined the conventional mode of art practices. Beyond this loop, however, a group of studio-based individual young painters in West Bengal has taken up the opaque watercolour as a determined medium – with a new idiom and vision, to continue the conventional mode of painting. By incorporating the close encounters of some of these artists and detailed analysis of the painting techniques, this article would probe how an age-old painting medium found its contextual relevance in the contemporary context.

Key Words: *Contemporary Indian Art, Globalization, New media art, Digital art, Opaque watercolour, West Bengal.*

"Remembrance of things past is not necessarily the remembrance of things as they were."

– Marcel Proust (in *Search of Lost Time*, 1993)

Cultural Assimilation to Cultural Dependency

Foreign influence in the Indian cultural field is not something unprecedented. Since ancient times to the eighteenth century, India was invaded by many extraneous forces, which had later settled in this land and disseminated their culture to the native people while assimilating the pre-existing one. However, the rising political concern of the modern world and the invasion of the British, and especially their subsequent changes implemented in the Indian socio-cultural arena, brought forward a complex situation, which can be perceived as 'cultural dependency.' Umeogu and Ifeoma (2012) define cultural dependency as a scenario where the culture of a given society is "consciously or unconsciously dependent" on another for its source of "cultural beliefs and practices." During the British regime, Indian society adopted the culture, values, and lifestyle of its Western rulers to get adjusted with the changing state of affairs, (Chatterjee, 1997). Mostly Eurocentric in nature, this dependency in the post-independence era, inclined to Marxist ideology at large. The formation of Progressive Groups, their activities, and agendas, reflected this inclination that was mostly borrowed from the cultural arena of the USSR and China (Sherlock, 1998). This influence was later side-lined by the American culture through the means of electronic media and financial capital, which has a steady growth in the history of India.²

² See 'Retrieve Indian culture from American influence: historian', *The Hindu* (<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/retrieve-indian-culture-from-american-influence-historian/article4151511.ece>)

During the grim political situation of post-World War II, the primary goal of U.S. foreign policy was “to contain Soviet power within the geographical boundaries” (Sempa, 2002). The ideological conflict between these two superpowers made U.S. extend their foreign aid to the underdeveloped nations, especially Western Europe, “to withstand communist subversion” (Reddy, 1997). India became a part of this aid during the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower (i.e., 1953–1961). Concurrently, an American philanthropist John D. Rockefeller III (1906–1978), who had fostered his deep interest in Japanese and Asian culture in post-World War II era, founded the Council on Economic and Cultural Affairs (CECA) in 1953 to assist Asian farmers.³ In its initial year, the corporation functioned as a charitable organization to support economic and cultural activities in Asian countries. In 1954 by closely observing the cultural affairs of Nepal, India, and Pakistan, Douglas Ensminger (1910-1989), a sociologist, explained to Rockefeller III that countries like USSR and China are influencing the cultural field of India by “intensifying their cultural activities and support of cultural societies,” and that to “develop mutual understanding and reduce tensions” between India and the U.S. it is much needed that the latter should initiate “mutual cultural contact” (Ithurbide, 2013). His explanation was supported by the formation and concurrent activities of the Progressive groups in India.

Within the next few years, Rockefeller III’s Asian-American Organization and the CECA took up the objective to stimulate and continue various cultural activities that include visits of music, drama, and dance groups from Asia, along with the exchange of

³ See John D. Rockefeller, 3rd, 1906-1978 (<https://rockarch.org/resources/about-the-rockefellers/john-d-rockefeller-3rd/#:~:text=John%20was%20released%20from%20active,Japan%20and%20all%20of%20Asia.>)

art materials and exhibits. More than three hundred cultural events were organized all across India, while art books, art materials, and reproductions of American artworks were disseminated with the aspiration of benefit to the Indian artists. Ithurbide (2013) cites that Indian artists like V. S. Gaitonde, Jyoti Bhatt, Akbar Padamsee, K. G. Subramanyan, Adi Davierwalla, and Tyeb Mehta had received grants from the JDR III Fund between 1963 and 1975 to visit U.S., meet American artists, and study and observe the cultural activities – especially the visual and performing arts – for one year.

Alongside, in the international sphere, the vanguard of the arts was switched from Paris to New York, owing to the political tensions occurred post-World War II. Art historian Joao Florencio (2016) explains that critics like Clement Greenberg advanced the role of art as a cultural weapon during the Cold War regime by criticizing the development of art in Europe as a “progressive flattening of the pictorial space” and an effort to imitate the visible world. Florencio further writes,

Against a USSR perceived as totalitarian and oppressive, with state-sanctioned socialist realism coming across as kitsch and formulaic propaganda. Abstract expressionism, with its variety of individual voices and painterly styles, would eventually become a symbol of the autonomy, liberty and creative freedom allegedly enjoyed by all in the West. These were values that, from then on, become manifest in the generalised perception of the US as the ultimate beacon of Western culture. (2016, para.11)

Such “liberty and creative freedom,” perceived by many scholars as a “global inclusive system” (Velthuis, 2015), were further exemplified during the closing decades of the Cold War when artists of many nations, ethnicities, and cultures (including India) achieved critical and commercial success in the West. Indian

artists, during this period, participated in the international biennales, exhibitions, and art talks, and got the opportunity to rub their shoulders with their contemporaries across the world. However, within India's geographical territory, the scenario was quite interesting. Delhi-based art writer and curator Kishore Singh mentions that artists outside this privileged community were virtually unaware about (and therefore bereaved of) any sort of scopes or grants to achieve such success. This is no surprise as Porter McCray (1908-2000), a long-time official of the Museum of Modern Art, was appointed as the executive director of the JDR III Fund in 1963 to promote artistic and cultural exchanges between the U.S. and Asia. To perform his job McCray had travelled extensively in Asia to meet new artists and find new potential grantees. Welcomed in the U.S., these handpicked grantees, on return to their native land, maintained close connections with the American art world, and many of them sought aids and assistance from JDR III Fund, Charles Brand Manufacturer, Museum of Modern Art, and many such allied agencies, to develop the pedagogy and infrastructures of Indian art institutions, museums, curation, and exhibition design. Furthermore, people associated with these American agencies presided to supervise the activities within these Indian institutions and provided their advice and recommendation on the materials – sometimes through the promising amount of grants (Ithurbide, 2013). Therefore, it is not surprising that the Indian art world would flourish with a new vision taking the American culture as its parameter and consciously or unconsciously would become dependent on the same for its source of cultural beliefs and practices.

Transition and Transformation

Since the nineteen nineties, unprecedented technological advancements in electronic media permeated the Indian social arena from the Western world (especially the U.S.) started transforming Indian cultural identities (Khanwalker, 2014). Such development linked itself to innovative broadcast and private reception modes, and gradually the world-view of a new generation of Indian artists was broadened, owing to the sudden encounters with almost all of the on-going events in the international socio-political and cultural domain (Seid, 2007). Installation art, hyperrealism, new media creations, and digital representations swayed the post-Cold War global and Indian platform almost at the same time, laced with the personal “conceptually coded signs” of the artists (Pijnappel, 2007; Kapur,



Image 1. Sudharshan Shetty, 'Love', Stainless Steel and Fiberglass, 2006 (Source: Google Arts and Culture)

2000). Existing art theories were challenged to understand the “social value” of these new media, and artworks were displayed in the lived and deconstructed gallery spaces (Khanwalker, 2014).

Laced with this idea of creative freedom and technological development, territorial and cultural borders were shrunken in the virtual sphere and brought forward a pluralist mode blurring the perimeters of imported and indigenous (Alexander & Sharma, 2013). In order to contest the conventional notions of style, originality, and materiality, artists like Atul Dodiya, Shibu Natesan, Surendran Nair, Jitish Kallat, T.V. Santhosh, and Subodh Gupta started exploring various mediums and materials, hitherto unconventional in the field of Indian art, including factory-made and found objects, digital representations, installations, videos, and even organic excretions like cow dung, body fluids, artificial limbs, and body parts, along with regular household things, like utensils and the artists' body itself (Image 1, 2).



Image 2. Jitish Kallat, 'Rickshawpolis – 1', Acrylic and Gold Pigment on Canvas, bronze sculpture, 2005 (Source: Nature Morte)

Concurrently, artists within West Bengal like Chhatrapati Dutta, Chitrabhanu Majumdar, Paula Sengupta, Jayashree Chakravarty, Adip Dutta, Bhabatosh Sutar, and Sumantra Mukherjee were not far behind in this endeavour. The artworks of these artists embodied considerations like post-colonial diaspora, environmental crises, gender discrimination, and nostalgia (Image 3-5).



Image 4. Adip Dutta, 'Requiem', Fiberglass, painted acrylic sheets, lights, 2000 (Source: Aicon Gallery)

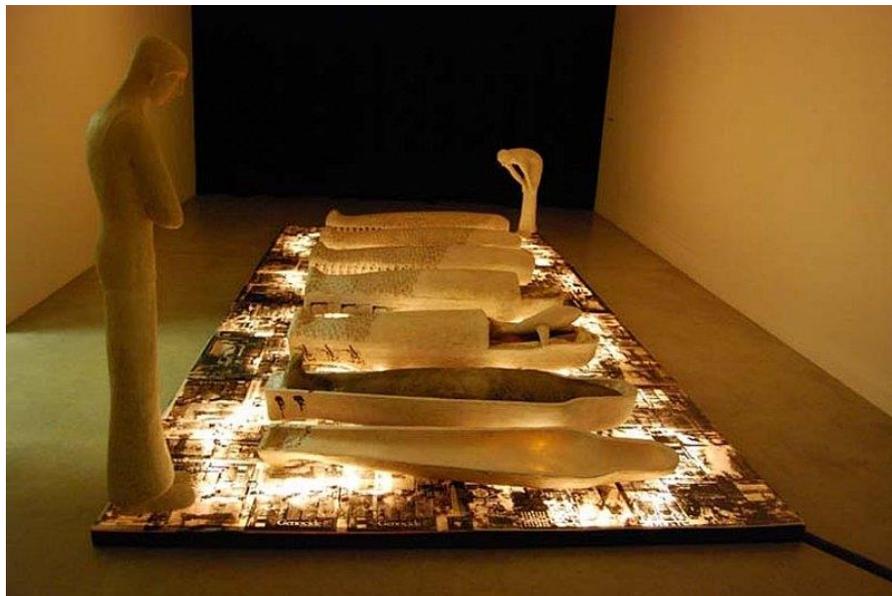


Image 3. Chhatrapati Dutta, 'Monocular-Binocular', Wood, found objects, textiles, iron, glass, serigraphy, video, light & sound, 2008 (Source: Ganges Art)



Image 5. Paula Sengupta, 'Rivers of Blood', Wood and fiberglass almirah, found objects, corn paper lining, 2010 (Source: Critical Collective)

Influenced by these artworks, many young emerging artists developed a fashionable practice, almost without any contextual relevance (Image 6, 7).

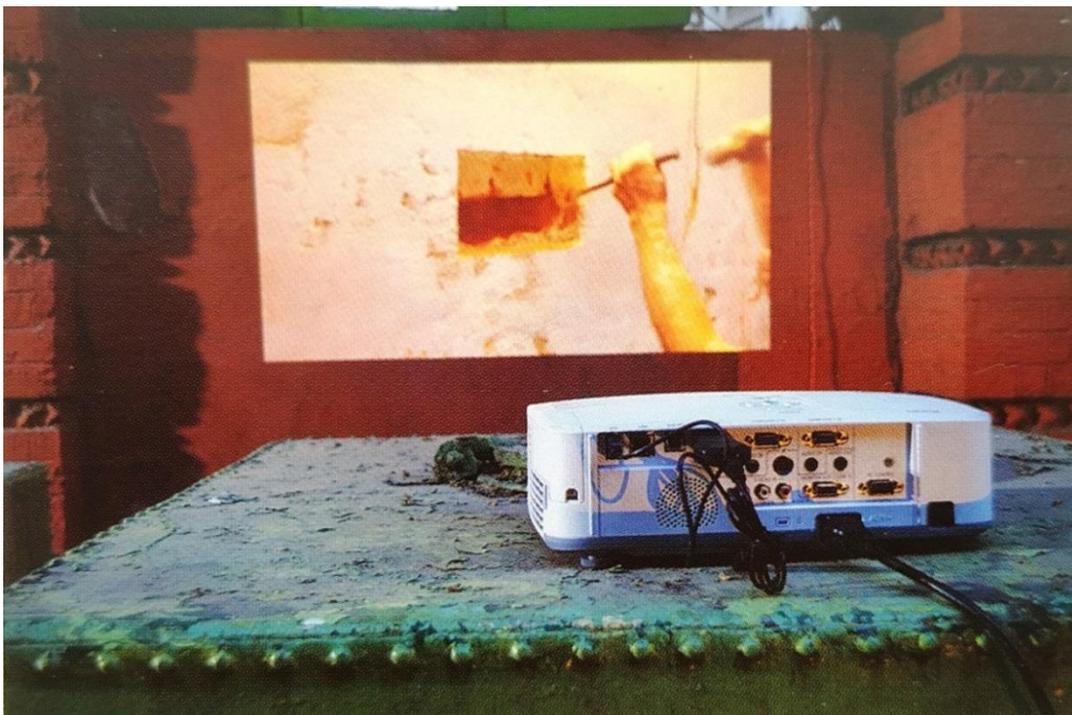


Image 6. Akash Dubey, 'Video Art', 2018 (Artist's collection)

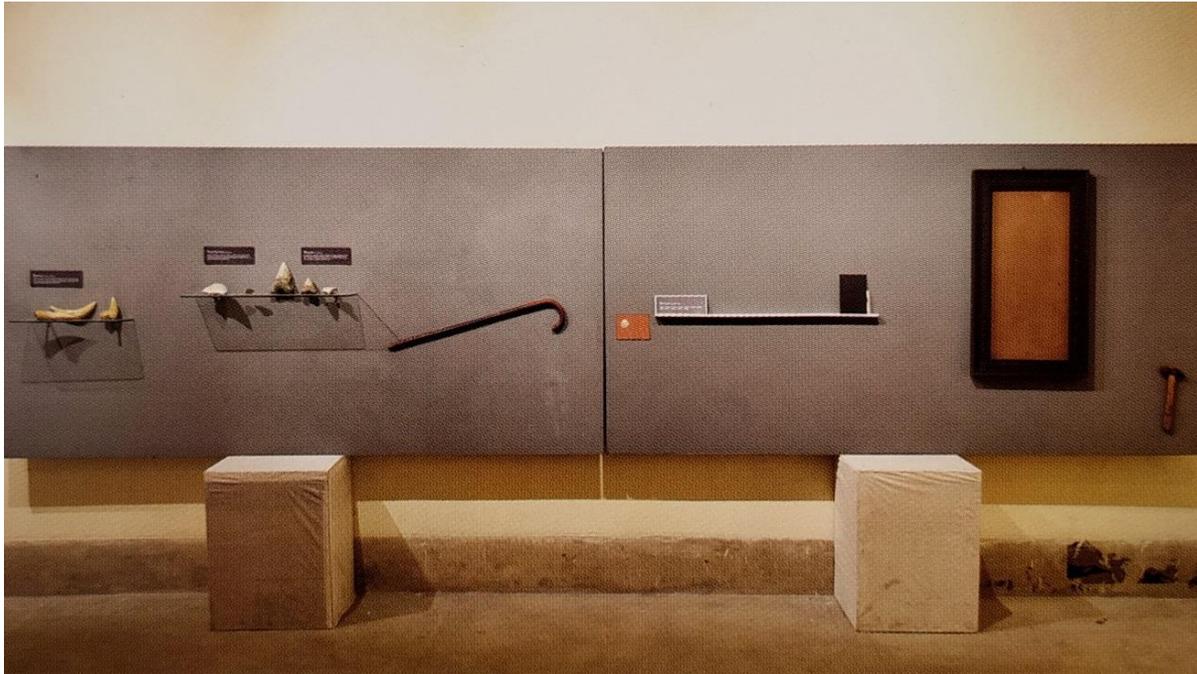


Image 7. Abdul Quadir, 'Installation', 2018 (Artist's collection)

Simultaneously, as soon as the art world expressed itself as a system encompassing fashion, design, technology, consumerism, and global economy, all these pluralist expressions gradually started manifesting a uniform mechanism of art-making (Stallabrass, 2004). It is time to admit that this mechanism is nothing but a 'loop,' where similar formal and technical experimentation keeps recurring and resurfacing. A major impact of this hegemonic scheme has befallen the practice of painting worldwide. In regard to this new hierarchy Susan Hudson (2018) explains that art practices during the nineteen sixties and seventies bore out a new orthodoxy, wherein painting was considered as "retrograde" and conceptual art as "challenging in ideology and means." All at the same, through the "systematic interconnections" between museums, artists' collective, residencies, biennales, and art fares, the "flow of capital" wielded its influence on the contemporary art practice to such an extent that both the global economy and art market were witnessing their dramatic growth proportionately to each other (Shanken, 2016). Stallabrass (2004) emphasizes that apart from "a zone of

purposeless free play," the art field had become "a minor speculative market" to be used for investment, tax avoidance, and money laundering.

Post-millennium contemplations

This was the premise when certain young artists in West Bengal swam against the stream. Despite their exposition to various media and the proclivity of many of their contemporaneous practitioners towards new media, digital art, and unconventional materials, they have emphasized the conventional model. In this regard, they chose the medium of painting as their mode of expression, while an age-old painting medium – opaque watercolour, served as the predominant medium for their practice. Most of these artists are in their mid-thirties and gradually marked their footsteps in the Indian art world with their individuality. This article discusses two of these artists – Avijit Pal and Partha Mondal.

Avijit Pal (b. 1984)

On completing his bachelor's and master's degrees, specializing in Modelling and Sculpture, from the esteemed Govt. College of Art & Craft, Calcutta, Avijit Pal engaged himself in exploring the domain of painting. In his own words,

I always had a predilection for painting, besides executing sculptures. Then, when I completed my masters and passed out of the college, I found it quite difficult to continue with my own set of sculpture or stylization – particularly due to the commissioned works. Doing commissioned work and experiments in the same medium is quite a difficult task. So I was in search of a mode, which is other than sculpture... so that I can explore it, can experiment with the medium

without any hesitation. The domain of painting provided me that freedom. (Personal conversation, 10 April, 2019)

He could have delved into the trajectory of the fashionable practice of site-specific installations, likewise his contemporaneous sculptors. However, in a conversation with the



Image 8. Avijit Pal, 'The Cloud', Iron and marble, 2009 (Artist's collection)



Image 9. Avijit Pal, 'Cloud Messenger', Wood and White Mrble, 2009 (Artist's collection)

researcher, Pal explained that he feels the site-specific installations and new media artworks displayed in contemporary art galleries are either blatantly imitating their Western counterpart or lacking contextual relevance in Indian soil. Furthermore, he believes the medium is crucial while executing an artwork. The bodily experiences attached to the manipulation of art materials are also important. Therefore, he personally did not find himself attuned to ephemeral forms of digital media. On the

other side, he thinks art materials and methods are subjective by nature. So, while executing most of his sculptures, he had used stone as a major medium since they deal with architectural influences, which can be best expressed in a medium closely related to concrete, bricks, and blocks (Image 8, 9). Same goes with his application of opaque watercolour, for his series of paintings, entitled 'Queen Dom' (Image 10, 11). He explains,

Since I'm portraying a domain govern by a Queen, I thought it would be better if I choose the medium of opaque watercolour – as it was used in medieval India. In the

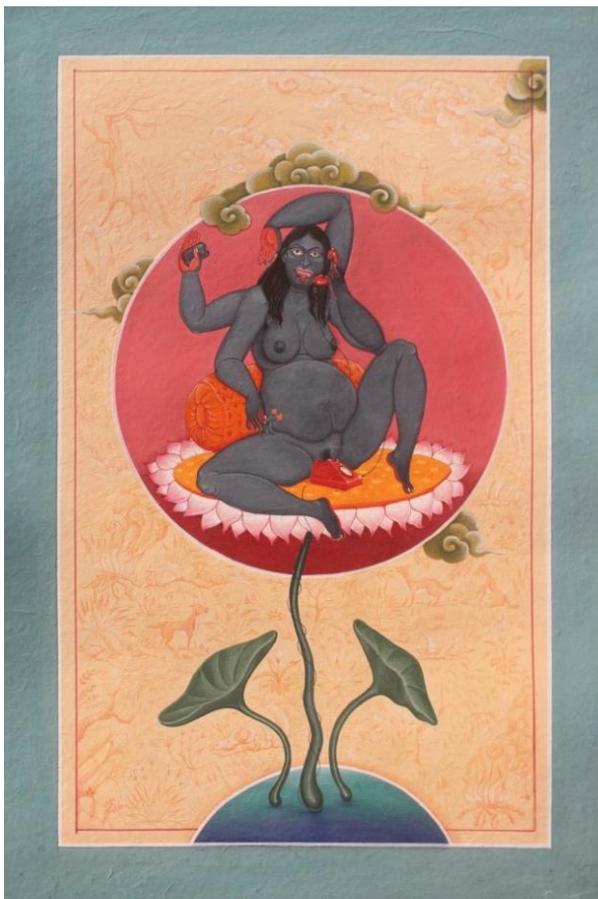


Image 10. Avijit Pal, 'Dirty Conversation', Tempera on Nepali Handmade paper pasted on Board, 2017 (Artist's collection)

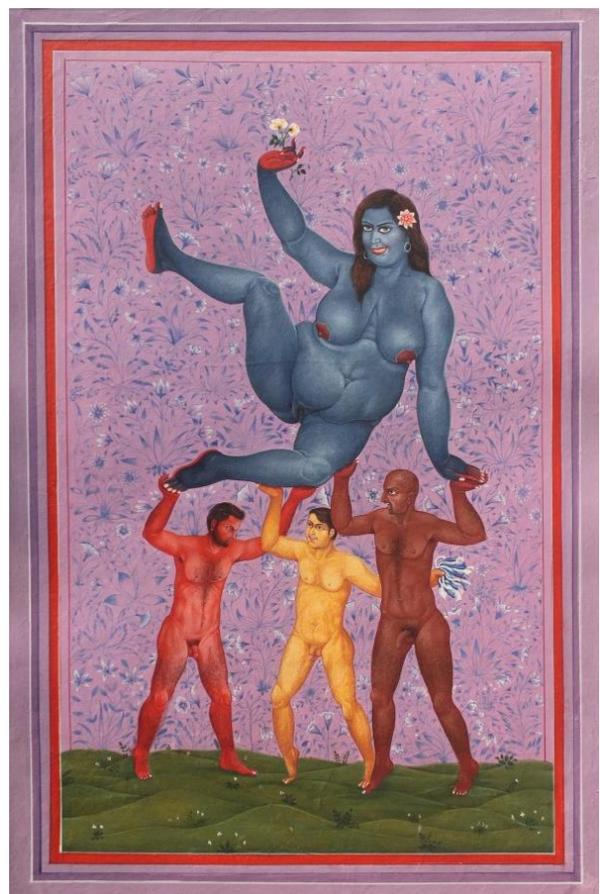


Image 11, Avijit Pal, 'The Cheerleader', Tempera on Nepali Handmade paper pasted on Board, 2018 (Artist's collection)

medieval period the medium was used to execute royal portraits. Besides, the luminosity, intensity, and the radiance

that the paints embody, are unmatched. So, when I decided to portray the land of a Queen, I couldn't but think of any other alternative. There should be a contextual relevance between the subject and the technique. (Personal conversation, 10 April, 2019)

Most of these paintings are executed on Nepali Handmade paper pasted on imperial size cartridge paper. Like traditional painters, he finely grinds the raw earth pigments, mixes them with natural emulsion-based adhesive, and patiently collects rainwater. He uses a thorough process of painting, where each layer is applied with utmost care. After filling up the major colour fields, he finishes off the painting with meticulously employed brush strokes with the help of thin and long tip round sable hair brushes. This technique resembles the treatments of Indian miniature painting, where ornamental designs and minute details were accomplished by laying the thinnest of brush strokes, side by side so that it could optically fuse and appear as a thin veil. Anyone who has observed a miniature with a magnifying glass would notice such detail unmistakably. For Pal, this predilection for opaque watercolour can be traced back to his upbringing in the vicinity of Kumartuli, where potters and clay idol makers have used this medium – however, in another form – for ages. Apart from this, his close inspection of Indian miniature paintings is influenced. All these inspirations culminated inside Pal, only to be expressed in his varied formalistic expression that he posits against the uniformity perceived in the contemporary art world.

Partha Mondal (b. 1986)

Painter Partha Mondal is quite younger than Avijit Pal. Interestingly, like Pal, he too was drawn towards the age-old tradition of clay idol-making of Bengal from an early age. At the

same time, he used to make copies of the popular images of deities from calendars hanging from his house walls. However, his proclivity towards devotional themes is expressed in a different conduit – social criticism. His interest in mythologies and popular culture allowed him to interpret them in his parameter, culminating in his sarcastic artworks (Image 12). Regarding his inclination to popular culture and mythologies, he says,

I do not perceive mythologies as mere anecdotes, narratives or scriptures. They are very much living entities to me, active within our social structure. Since most of our daily lives and practices are shaped by the teachings we find in mythologies, many of the instances happen around us often recur to mythological accounts, mostly through metaphor. (Personal communication, February 14, 2021)

Such perspective is supported by one of his paintings, entitled



Image 12. Partha Mondal, Dance of Democracy, Tempera on Paper, 2016 (Artist's collection)

imagining these characters wearing sherwanis and banarasi sarees adorned with ornaments, which is typical in middle class people in India, since most of them prefer to be photographed well clothed and well posed, instead of a candid snapshot. (Personal conversation, 15 May 2020)

Instead of merely depicting the deities like the typical calendar art, Mondal made them contextually relevant by deliberately placing them against the backdrop of a contemporary context. Concurrently, against the minimalist practice of the contemporary art world, where the physical labour of the artist is brought to a minimum, his constant search was for a mode of expression, which is attuned with his embodied practice of making clay idols that connects him with the grounded culture of Bengal. Therefore, he relied on the practice of painting, where he could attach physically to the act of creating something. To make the subjects more relatable, he chose the traditional practice of opaque watercolour. The other reason to select this medium lies in his experiences of making clay idols and his liking for Indian miniature paintings, which had allowed him to opt for earth pigments. He says,

"I'm very much influenced by the Indian miniature paintings, particularly the Rajput miniatures. The vibrant colour palette of these paintings attracted me. This is a reason why I choose opaque watercolour. Also, there are the influences of Bengal School painters. But, I have always wanted my paintings looked as if they are made out of clay. So I use the same process of applying paint that I do usually when I paint clay idols... I don't feel comfortable in any other medium besides this." (Personal conversation, 15 May 2020)

He usually pastes a smooth-grained cloth or Nepali handmade paper on a paper and applies a few coats of *Khori Mati* (usually recognized as chalk), mixed with natural adhesive as a ground on his support. The glossy effects of synthetic emulsion-based acrylic paints seem unfit to him for his paintings. Thus, he uses adhesives derived from the Neem tree and gum arabic. Although it is a painstaking process to purify the raw lumps of pigment and make paints out of it, he is willing to compromise with this labour in favour of gaining the desired outcome for his paintings.

At the formal and thematic level, Pal and Mondal's paintings coincided with the post-modernist approach. Therefore, issues such as originality, materiality, and stylistic individuality of image-making are often questioned through pastiche, collage, and borrowing images from open sources. In this way, their paintings have become both the hybridization and fusion of past and present, where the medium of opaque watercolour found its relevance in the post-millennium context, with new vigour.

Conclusion

In its short span, the article could but discuss the endeavours of two young painters in post-millennium West Bengal. While abandonment of painting as a medium has virtually become a precondition to the major portion of art practitioners, these young painters are unearthing new possibilities. They are doing so by, firstly, adopting the practice of painting. The extent of their experimentation with the thematic and formalistic aspect of the medium has manifested it as more of an embodied thinking. Secondly, they are doing it by choosing an age-old medium. Since ancient times, the fast-drying, fluid nature of the water-based opaque paint, and its subdued appearance, have drawn the attention of many artists. Added to this, within the span of almost seven centuries, a particular application method – a manner – has

been developed within the territory of the Indian subcontinent. Thin and even layers of opaque paint are applied on top of each other until it forms the desired body. Later, the painting is finished by employing intricate details and designs with thin brush strokes. This particular manner has resurfaced in the practice of these young painters, despite their exposition to various other mediums. Viewed against the stream of a uniform mechanism manifested by the global art system/network, the endeavours of these young artists bore out new possibilities to consider and probe into the conventional art materials and method. By remembering the past practice of opaque watercolour, the artists did not necessarily remember or imitate the same, rather in an urge to connect themselves with the historical past, however imaginatively, they altered the course of the practice and contextualized it in the post-millennium era.

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