

ART PRACTICES IN THE CONTEMPORARY SCENARIO: A CRITIQUE

Jagtej Kaur Grewal

Asstt. Prof., Deptt. of Art History and Visual Arts, Panjab University, Chandigarh

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Abstract:

Indian art in contemporary times has transcended the established formalistic approaches and within the modernist idiom has posed a challenge to established norms of practices. One such example is seen in artists employing installation and performance to present richly layered praxis. Also increasingly art is contextual responding to the socio-political and cultural milieu it belongs to thus, raising issues that reflect the artist's engagement with not just the personal but the global in an art that is both topical and universal. This paper examines one such engagement, with nature and the environment, that raises multifarious concerns from degradation to exploitation to a growing consciousness of reversing the catastrophes man has engendered. The paper examines this through the work of three Indian artists - Sheba Chhachhi, Atul Bhalla and Subodh Kerkar.

Key words: Environmental art, artist-activist, Sheba Chhachhi, Atul Bhalla, Subodh Kerkar..

Contemporary Indian art occupies a realm that is enriched through elisions of praxis leading to art as installation, installation-performance, performance, intervention and collaboration, placing it in the democratized public domain to a degree. Even as some scholars opine that these are Western imports it is also underlined that this in no way takes away from the *raison d'être* of such art, while others are of the opinion that such art “is the very antithesis of current trends in Western art”¹ as it is being created in a context that is the polar opposite of the West. Various terms post-modern or a transitional modernism there is agreement that the adaptation is “relevant to our land and the people at a particular juncture ... results in significant rejuvenating newness”² Since the 1990's such art practices have challenged the formalistic approach and mainstream modernism. Along with this the contextualism of artistic creations articulates socio-cultural-political concerns making them both topical and universal. It is within this context that this paper examines the engagement of artists with nature and contemporary issues of environmental degradation, exploitation and the catastrophes it engenders - studying both practice and subject - briefly in the West as that predates and informs Indian practice and then examining the work of Indian artists Sheba Chhachhi, Atul Bhalla and Subodh Kerkar.

The interface of art and environmental concerns takes myriad forms, one being works that are primarily representational in nature and seek to draw attention to such issues, provoke thinking and may be consequently some change through the awareness that is created. At the other end of the spectrum are artists who, while focussing attention on sites of environmental degradation seek to initiate a process of reclamation of the specific environment. Between the two there have emerged different practices and expressions of the interface of art and environment – of artists creating installation art that focuses attention on that site, to a growing consciousness among the artist community of not altering the environment permanently while working in it, leading to the creation of artworks that emerge from materials in the environment and that (dis)integrate back into that ecosystem.

The historicity of the engagement of art and the environment goes back to the 1960's in the West with the emergence of land art/site art seen in works such as ‘Spiral Jetty’ by Robert Smithson, made at the Great Salt lake of Utah which had been an oil drilling site, and Michael Heizer's ‘Double Negative’ in Nevada.³ This marks the ingress of art into landscape resulting in the creation of works that were essentially sculptures and installations, some of which have been preserved. Interestingly another aspect that results from these art practices is the non-consumable aspect of such art as its ‘canvas’ is not collectable, partly due to its scale, unwieldiness and untransportability. In the West the interface of art and environment has got denser and multi-layered over the decades with the initial art practices being rethought and refined so that no permanent change is affected

Jagtej Kaur Grewal

in nature, resulting in closer harmony with it. An example of such an art practice is seen in the work of the British sculptor Andy Goldsworthy who uses flowers, twigs, leaves, mud and stones as his medium – all existing at the site of creation. The tools employed to give form to his works are his hands, teeth and saliva. One dimension of this harmony with nature is that his works are designed to decay back into nature as he aims to tap into the energies of change, growth and decay in his art, forces that are part of nature.⁴

Another dimension of this interface is the concept of environment that includes urban spaces with artists looking at cities and human activity that renders the urban environment rife with sites of degradation, of exploitation of resources and of toxicity. An example of this is the works of the photographer Chris Jordan who focuses on unsustainable American consumerism presented to evoke inward thinking and a cultural self-inquiry.⁵ Another expression of the interface between art and the environment has been termed ecological art as seen in art practices in which the artist collaborates with experts such as scientists, architects, city planners and the local community while working on remediation of sites of environmental degradation and on reviving ecosystems. One such collaborative reclamation project entitled 'Ghost Nets' was effected near the Gulf of Maine, USA by the artist Aviva Rahmani, where a coastal dump site was reclaimed with a carefully and long worked out sustainable and replicable model that works for both fresh and salt water marshes.⁶ Jordan and Rahmani exemplify two aspects of a growing activism on environmental issues among the artist community.

Contemporary Indian artists too have increasingly engaged with environmental issues through their art. Their work has primarily been representational and didactic, drawing attention to issues that relate overwhelmingly to the environment in the urban context, focussing on the havoc wrought by human actions. Two such artists discussed in this paper are Sheba Chhachhi and Atul Bhalla whose works straddle approaches that are both didactic and activist in nature – seeking to inform, engage, stimulate dialogue and push towards change. Sheba Chhachhi (b. 1958) is one of the most cerebral visual artists working in India. A trained designer she is an activist whose art practices include photography, documentary filmmaking and installation art. In the last one sees an eclectic choice of methods and materials that range from the use of photographic images to light sources to video. Chhachhi has always engaged deeply with her subject, reading and researching before giving form to it and her thematic oeuvre ranges from feminist concerns to violence to the environment, the focus being primarily on our urban environment. A work that exemplifies this is the video installation artwork 'Neelkanth – Poison/Nectar' (2000-02).⁷ It operates at two levels, the contemporary viewed through mythology. The genesis of the work lies in the artist's growing concern and dismay with the toxic air of the city of Delhi.

Drawing from the constant refrain in her mind of it being a poison city she draws a parallel with the myth of Shiva drinking the poison spewed during the churning of the ocean by the gods and demons to obtain the elixir of immortality. Parallels are drawn with the greed of this consumerist society that is making the urban environment toxic. Her concern with hyper urbanization and the spreading poison in the environment has been a constant in her art

In another work entitled 'Locust Time' (2008)⁸ (Figs. 1, 2, 3) the focus is on the hyper urbanization in the Indian metropolis and the resulting headlong dash into a contaminated present with the bleak future of desertification of the land. Taking google/satellite images of the flood plains of the Yamuna river she collapses into the work Delhi and the region extending around this metropolis up to Agra with the Taj Mahal forming the most easily recognisable site on the mapped plains. The map in turn is overlaid with images referring to a comparatively abundant and vibrant past represented by a female singer, women bathing at ponds, filling water at wells that also provide succour to travellers and the serried ranks of cows of Krishna's gokul. The pollution of air, water and land is imaged through seven *nagakanyas*, keepers of water who are shown floating in poison, vultures who appear as ghost birds, mutants and images of cracked earth alluding to the coming drought, which also refers to the desert past of the seven cities of Delhi. This work is scathing in its comment on what hyper urbanization is doing to our environment and on the ecological future of our land, hoping to shock us into awareness and hopefully a change in behaviours.

In the work entitled 'The Black Waters Will Burn' (2011)⁹ (Fig. 4) she centralizes the river Yamuna and her despair at the river having turned into a polluted site. Here again she turns to mythology in order to contrast it with the contemporary situation. Referring to the veneration of the Yamuna as a Goddess and a beautiful sensuous woman in the *Yamunashtaka* the work leads one through the text to a wounded female form, which symbolises the current reality. At dusk an image of the reflection of the river is shown bursting into flames referring to the methane being emitted by the toxic effluent filled river. The work sharpens the dichotomy between the worship of the Yamuna as a river goddess on one hand and today's almost total apathy with the poisonous state of the river on the other. The artist through this project aims to "confront people" turning their mind to the death of the river that for her also symbolises the death of the female. Chhachhi reads in the mythological narratives she appropriates in her works not just cultural memory but also eco-philosophy that she feels is inherent in these tales and can show the way out of the current extreme ecological situation,¹⁰ and through them she aims to initiate and sharpen the environmental debate and action.

Jagtej Kaur Grewal

Water, its scarcity and pollution, have emerged as deep concerns in the country, visible in the current water crisis in different parts and also the almost cyclical promises made and broken to clean the “sacred” rivers. An artist who has over the years engaged with this issue is Atul Bhalla. Trained in the School of Art in Delhi and in the Northern Illinois University, USA, his practices include performance art that is photo-documented, in fact he employs the photograph as a performative document, installation art, video art, painting and sculpture. Over the years Bhalla through his work has exhibited a preoccupation with water, its pollution, commoditization and the politics of its control. In a series of works Bhalla’s focus has been the river Yamuna, its current toxic state and the repeated failures to clean it, with his deep engagement with the river also extending to photographs of “poetic landscapes” of the Yamuna. The artist in the performance art/photographic documentation titled ‘I was not Waving but Drowning’ (2005) (displayed as a series of photographs of the performance by Gurinder Osan) (Fig. 5) immersed himself in the river Yamuna (at a spot that as yet hadn’t been rendered toxic by the effluents from Delhi), with the act alluding to the ritual of purification and by contrast drawing attention to the sullyng/defiling of the river. The tonsuring that he went through before entering the river serves to foreground the ritual of purification and redemptive qualities associated with the river in our cultural memory. Based on the viewer’s awareness of the state of India’s rivers that we as a nation have turned our backs to as we continue to pour effluvia into them, witnessing this act of becoming one with the river forcefully brings the mind to the question of how unsafe and foolhardy is this plunge. Exhibited in the show titled ‘Immersion’ it served to sharpen the concern and questions about our apathy towards nature and natural resources that we as a hyper urbanizing, industrializing society have rendered toxic. While highlighting the present state of the river this act of immersion is also seen as foregrounding “the desire of the artist to surrender himself to the river as a site of history and knowledge”¹¹.

This concern with the current toxicity of the Yamuna, a river that lies at the core of the Indian civilizational narrative, is also concretised in works that are sculptural - employing Yamuna sand, water, glass and cement. Bhalla creates vitrine within transparent vitrine (Fig. 6), the inner ones shaped into varied water receptacles such as cisterns, bottles and jerry cans. Inscribed on the inside form are words such as “ignorance”, “darkness”, “myself” taken from the questions asked by a water sprite and the answers given by Yuddhishtira in the *Mahabharata*.¹² By engaging with the verbal he seeks to take our thoughts towards greater mindfulness of what the Yamuna represented - myth-history and knowledge - underlining the current state of a voiceless lifeless river. Bhalla seeks to shift focus to the earlier pristine life of the Yamuna river underscoring that it was “once the life-blood of the city, connecting ancient centres of civilization and thought”.¹³ Alluding to this almost utopian vision of the river the artist aims to reconnect the people to the river through its history and

help recover the almost mythical powers of its waters to heal and rejuvenate.¹⁴ Bhalla has over the years sought to focus the attention of the citizens of Delhi on water and its commoditization. Through a photographic series entitled 'Recent Works' (2007)¹⁵ he has documented the *piaos* – hand pumps, municipal taps – free dispensers of water in the walled city and their state of neglect, and through their absence evoked the packaged water and market forces that have privatized a natural resource.

Bhalla's art practices have sought to circumvent the forces of the art market by seeking expression through an art that moves out of the 'white cube', the gallery, into the public sphere while continuing to focus on the issues of nature and natural resources. This has been actualized through the format of the workshops conducted on site such as at the Bori village in Partapur in Rajasthan in 2005 entitled 'Pharta Kuan'¹⁶. Locating his art practice in a place that is an oasis in the spreading desertification in urban and rural areas - Bori records a large number of functional wells, ninety-three in number, testament to the high ground water level - Bhalla created receptacles of water, a bucket and a mug that refer to ablution thus referencing cleansing and the sacred. Made out of sand from the village and white cement these objects/sculptures were placed and photographed at the various wells and water bodies in Bori. The artist thus sought to foreground the natural and traditional methods of water harvesting, preservation and use, while questioning the reliance on piped water, which even as it costs at times remains unrealized. The work was presented in the local market and even as the public sphere democratised the practice it also invited interaction and helped reconnect the citizens with their forgotten water inheritance.

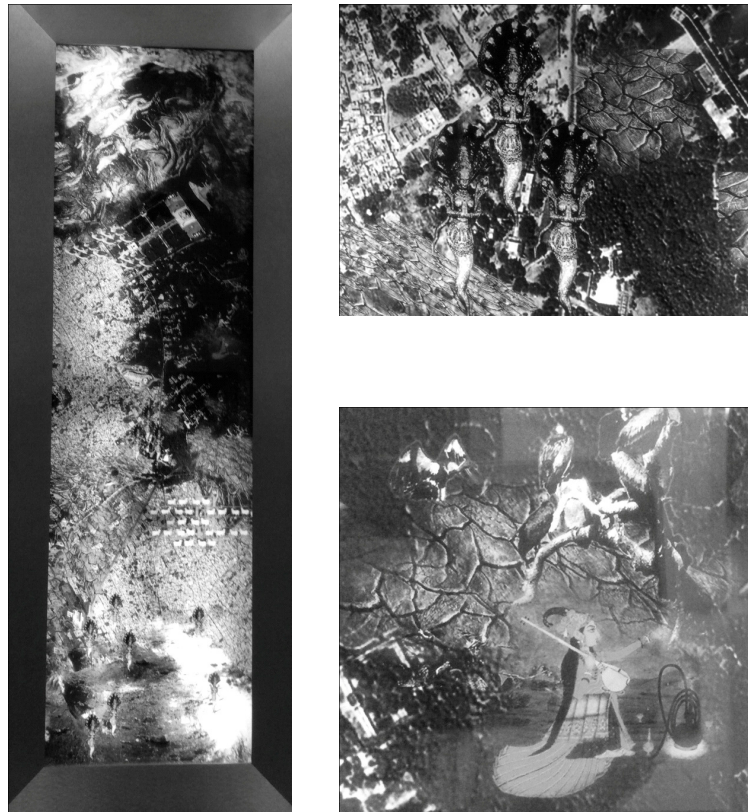
Apart from Sheba Chhachhi and Atul Bhalla who exemplify the artist-activist approach that seeks through art to focus attention on sites of degradation, of environmental catastrophes happening and presaging a bleak future there are other practitioners in the country who too engage with the environment through different environmental art practices. One such artist is Subodh Kerkar, who acknowledges in his art the influence of the American Land Art movement and British artists Richard Long and Andy Goldsworthy, the last two artists who treat nature with a "feather light touch and work on a decidedly antiheroic scale".¹⁷ Though trained as a doctor Kerkar turned to art, going on to emerge as one of the leading land art practitioners of the country. Described as land art interventions his works mostly employ materials available in situ such as petals, leaves, slivers of rocks, palm leaves, sand, mussel shells, bamboo to create works that are transient, ephemeral and also olitical in nature.¹⁸ Kerkar through his art practice seeks to focus attention on nature and the environment along with the human condition, straddling aesthetic, conceptual, material and political spheres.¹⁹ This can be seen in his installations entitled 'Metamorphosis' and 'Celebrations'. Through the former he questions the unchecked consumption of natural resources highlighting rampant deforestation by draping newsprint on trees. In 'Celebrations'

Jagtej Kaur Grewal

the artist sought to draw the attention of authorities to the plight of the largely women migrant labour in Goa employing the saree as a trope strung between rows of trees along the road to Saligao. Kerkar's works while political in nature and interventionist, in the use of elements and their transitory character exhibit a sensitive interplay with the environment.

Summary

This brief overview of the work of artists reveals how increasingly and boldly they have actively engaged with nature and environmental issues. Whatever the expression - traditionally representational or performance art or installation - the aim is to inform, engage and provoke thought that might even initiate corrective behaviour or action. Some artists have taken the activism to a new level by highlighting the issues raised through their art in public talks and lectures on their work, its context and meaning, an effective tool to provoke thinking and consequent change. At times collaborating with experts from different fields these artists have gone on to practically demonstrate healing of nature through projects that combine aesthetics with expertise in science, planning and environment. Such art practices also challenge the status quo at various levels marking a shift to increasingly fluid forms of expression incorporating new media and modes of expression that through their very nature of moving out of the gallery space in to the public domain democratise art practices while opening them up to "different kinds of discourses and polemics".²⁰ Inherent within such practices is also the aim to move beyond the compulsions of art market forces. These artists are important contributors to the voices expressing concern about environmental issues and have successfully brought aesthetics into dialogue with the environmental to create a space where the visual connects more effectively with public consciousness turning opinions and actions to oppose the unprecedented, thoughtless and greed powered exploitation and degradation of the environment.



Figs. 1, 2, 3: Sheba Chhachhi, *Locust Time*, 2008, Moving Image Light Box, Digital



Fig. 4: Sheba Chhachhi, *The Black Waters Will Burn*, 2011, Installation on the Yamuna in Delhi. Image credit: <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/77/ARiverOfMemoriesShebaChhachhi>

Jagtej Kaur Grewal



Fig. 5: Atul Bhalla, *I was not Waving but Drowning*, 2005, Performance at the Yamuna in Delhi, Photographs. Image credit: <http://www.atulbhalla.com/images/thumb/photo works thumb/ drowning/drow.scroll.htm>



Fig. 6: Atul Bhalla, *Untitled*, 2006, Glass, water, Yamuna sand and cement. Image credit: <http://www.atulbhalla.com/images/thumb/sclupthumb/sap1b-06/imm-40-003.htm>

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- ⁴ Mok, Kimberly, "Top 5 Environmental Artists Shaking up the Art World", <http://www.treehugger.com/culture/top-5-environmental-artists-shaking-up-the-art-world.html>, retrieved 1.4.16.
- ⁵ One example of this engagement is his work *Intolerable Beauty: Portraits of America n Mass Consumerism* (2003-05) in which his photographs of waste resulting from the unsustainable American consumerism are presented to visualize numbers and statistics so that they might evoke inward thinking and a cultural self-inquiry. Another work *Plastic Bottles* (2007) that employs the medium of photography and digital tools to image two million plastic beverage bottles used every five minutes in the US, comment on the culture

of excessive consumption and the resulting garbage.

<http://www.chrisjordan.com/gallery/intolerable/#about>, retrieved 21.4.16.

⁶ Termed Trigger Point environmental triage in it traditional aesthetic tools are employed for the analysis of small costal areas of degradation to leverage landscape healing, or what she refers to as “good housekeeping for the earth”.

⁶ She has also extensively lectured on this redemptive eco-art calling it “Trigger Point Theory as Aesthetic Activism”. <http://www.avivarahmani.com/statement>, retrieved 21.4.16.

⁷ Neelkanth (Blue throat) poison/nectar. Installation with flat screen, 240 aluminium towers each with photograph and light, four translite boxes, 5.5 minute video loop, 2002. King, Deidre, “Dead-end narratives or open-ended stories?”, *Art India*, Vol. XII, Issue III, Quarter III, 2007, p. 112.

⁸ Moving Image Light Box, Digital print on dura-trans, two layers. The work is in the collection of the Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh and is accompanied by text by the artist explaining the conceptual and technical aspects.

⁹ This installation art was created at the Yamuna river in Delhi as part of the Yamuna-Elbe Public Art and Outreach Project in 2011.

¹⁰ Dhar, Jyoti, “A River of memories, Sheba Chhachhi”, *Art Asia Pacific Magazine*, March-April 2012, http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/77/ARiverOfMemories_ShebaChhachhi, retrieved 20.4.16.

¹¹ Menezes, Meera, “Body of Water”, *Art India*, Vol. XI, Issue I, Quarter I, 2006, p. 96.

¹² Drawn from the dialogue in Peter Brook’s rendering of the *Mahabharata* the artist seeks to pose the questions to the viewer. “Voice: What can cover the earth?, Yudhishtira : Darkness, Voice: An example of grief, Yudhishtira: Ignorance, Voice: What is your opposite?, Yudhishtira: Myself”. Menezes, Meera, “Checking the Flow”, *Art India*, Vol. XII, Issue I, Quarter I, 2007, p. 65.

¹³ Menezes, Meera, “Checking the Flow”, *Art India*, Vol. XII, Issue I, Quarter I, 2007, p. 65.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Menezes, Meera, “City within the city”, *Art India*, Vol. XI, Issue III, Quarter III, 2006, pp. 15-16.

¹⁶ http://www.atulbhalla.com/images/thumb/instthumb/parthakuan/p_048.htm

¹⁷ Arnason, op. cit., p. 578.

¹⁸ T. P., Sabitha, “Life is a Beach”, *Art India*, Vol. XI, Issue III, Quarter III, 2006, pp. 54-56.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 55.

²⁰ Das Gupta, Anshuman and Shivaji K. Panikkar, op. cit., p. 17.