

SPOTLIGHT | ART

The line that unites two generations of abstract artists



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MAY 04, 2019 16:32 IST

UPDATED: MAY 04, 2019 18:20 IST

A show brings together 11 modern and contemporary artists

As a young boy, Prashant Pandey found himself drawn towards the debris lying around in his family's workshop – bits and pieces of marble chipped off when sculptures were being made.

The Jaipur-born artist belongs to a family of stone carvers, who have, for three generations, sculpted marble temples and deities. This early engagement with scrap would eventually become the distinctive cornerstone of Pandey's practice. He has since worked with some truly unusual material: cobwebs, sweat, tears, urine, and blood slides.

In his most recent work, Pandey has assembled nearly 1,000 glass slides, which he smeared with holy ash from Ujjain's Mahakaleshwar Jyotirlinga temple. The result is a non-representational form of paganism, with a mysterious line-based pattern formed by the glass slides that are inscribed with 3,000 symbols.

Speaking about his work, the 35-year-old artist said, "The artwork takes the form of a manuscript that signifies the rebirth of experiences once lived but now forgotten. We destroy things and discard thoughts and then recollect them through symbols."

Eleven artists

The group show in which Pandey is exhibiting is curated by art critic and author Meera Menezes. Titled 'Shadow Lines: Experiments with Light, Line and Liminality', it shows works by 11 modern and contemporary artists, examining their deep engagement with the form of the 'line' deployed in varied mediums and material.

In a newly independent India, the search for a new vision coincided with artists developing a new visual vocabulary, which gravitated towards a non-representational form of art. Referencing this, the exhibition has works by stalwarts such as Nasreen Mohamedi, Zarina Hashmi and Shobha Broota, the post-independence generation of artists known for their work with abstractions.



Photographs and drawings

A selection of works by a comparatively younger generation of contemporary artists, such as Prashant Pandey, Hemali Bhuta, Parul Gupta, Adip Dutta and Tanya Goel, points to the current momentum around abstract art in India. An interesting addition to the exhibition is a set of abstract photographs and a book of drawings by Bangladeshi artist Ayesha Sultana, who explores new ideas of the sculptural form inspired by the built environment of Dhaka and other cities.

Menezes, who developed an abiding interest in abstract art after encountering works of V.S. Gaitonde and S.H. Raza in the 90s, said, “Eschewing a mimetic representation of an outer reality, the artists strive instead to pare it down to its essential elements or revel in the poetics of space.” The curator, who has authored a book on Gaitonde, added that even though representational forms of art continue to dominate the Indian art scene today, there are pockets of non-representational art too.

Freedom of expression

The curatorial basis of the exhibition is an essay, ‘On Line’, written 100 years ago by an abstract art pioneer, the Russian Wassily Kandinsky, where he refers to the line as a means to achieve ‘complete freedom of expression.’ In this respect, the ‘Shadow Lines’ exhibition shows that artists continue to be fascinated by the line, and each work resonates with the other

in a subtle commonality of theme. For example, the 60s, which was the period that marked Nehru's utopian vision of New [Delhi](#), is the focus of Goel's wall work 'Aluminium/Silver Lead Studies', showing fragments from demolition sites of the city's modernist architecture. In a sense, her work speaks to prominent contemporary artist Manisha Parekh's steel and enamel paint wall work that evokes a scaffolding-like setting in a city, but is actually meant to be a conversation between two entities or bodies. The cartography element in diasporic Indian artist Zarina's woodcut prints called 'Delhi Series' represents territories, borders, identity, exile and personal memories of Partition.

Patna-born artist Shambhavi Singh's acrylics on canvas boards, on the other hand, are a critique of the self-absorbed life in cities. Shaped by her deep sense of rootedness in the countryside, her canvasses show the line meandering through an abstract earthy landscape, foregrounding the alienated rural life, especially that of the farmers.

Reflective work

For an exhibition focusing on the exploration of the line in art, it is only fitting to see two mixed media works by Nasreen Mohamedi, the late Karachi-born artist known for her sustained engagement with geometric forms. In another section of the gallery, Broota explores the form of the line through colourful woven threads and wools on canvas. Her works emanate a natural meditative quality, while reflecting the rainbow-like hues of the Hindustani music she has trained in.

Making a connection between ragas and paintings, the 76-year-old artist explained the approach to her work: "The dot in the centre of my painting, the one I begin the work with, is a sort of pitch or scale of a raga. Just as this pitch is explored with swaras, or notes in music, colours are used to explore this in painting. Rhythm and swaras are the bedrock of music; colour and form are the backbone of painting."

ON SHOW Shadow Lines: Experiments with Light, Line and Liminality, Shrine Empire, New Delhi, till May 18.