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TAKE

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ON ART

## SUSTAINABILITY

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# Review

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## APPARATUS AT PLAY EXPLORES NEPALESE ENTANGLED HISTORY THROUGH A CONTEMPORARY LENS

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↑ Karan Shrestha, *Of warp and weft*, Ink on paper, 22 in x 30 in, 2021. All Images Courtesy: Shrine Empire and the artist.

Much of contemporary art is committed to political causes. Visual art should be viewed as a repository of knowledge. An artist takes several references, often conducts research, and layers all of it with a personal narrative based on their worldview. And while engaging with art, for its viewers it complicates the very understanding of the discursive frameworks within which we negotiate the world. Often the most intriguing works present obscure and juxtaposed imagery that is neither a chronicle nor a fantasy, it is neither comforting and is certainly not conclusive. Karan Shrestha's practice incorporates a wide range of artistic styles and formats. His works such as *Offering* and *daily delivery* speak of the entangled relations of Nepal's recent history steeped in political turmoil. Weaving an archive of the terrain, political heritage, transient memories, and a speculative world that suspends reality, Shrestha probes it all through his art.

A representation of his ongoing concerns, the through-line connecting his solo show was his understanding of how the systems and structures – social, economic, political, or religious – exercise control. This control for Shrestha extends beyond the existence of humans, to other forms of life including soil and water. Violence is ubiquitous. The exhibition, which brought together his works from 2017 to 2023, referenced how history, mythology, reality, and illusions are entangled: everything is connected with everything else. Given Nepal's recent past characterised by a ten-year revolution, dissolution of the monarchy, social and political upheaval, layered with unstable economies, ethnic conflicts, and natural disasters, it may appear that these momentous changes would diminish the archaic character of the state. But this has not been the case in the artist's experience. The show was a response to the precariousness that continues to be concealed under an array of guises.

He admits that for the most part, images in his work emerge intuitively. The references are often his observations and the photographs he makes, but also existing pictures of popular culture through reportage in media, and even iconography in places of worship. His sources vary. Existing material often comes loaded. When he draws, he attempts to detach this load and get to the emotion it evokes for him. Iconography, however, is used with a sense of irreverence. The assigned value is critical to these symbols that inadvertently reinforce hierarchies in the Nepalese region. The expanse in Shrestha's compositions is a result of deep engagement and keen observations over time, weaving them into cohesive thematic and yet leaving room for a multitude of connections to be made by the audience.

Shrestha's artistic language has a strong and often direct relationship with Nepalese culture. These may not translate as intended to those who do not have the context of the history of the country. But this does not bother the artist. He makes works about what concerns him, about things that get 'under his skin' and park themselves there. His aim revolves around why and how to realize the works, giving space to experimentation. There is an inevitable distance between the viewer's perception and the artist's depiction. Perhaps, this lack of

precession of knowledge could widen the viewer's image and eventually deepen sensitivity through counter perspectives. Shrestha believes that owing to colonized past and prevailing social structures, the flow of information and its impact on culture is concentrated with the hegemonic countries and classes. They are pushed outward. He asks, "Should not this shift... for any change to occur?"

One may draw parallels with Shrestha's imagery to the Western art movement of surrealism. But for him, the stories of indigenous people have always been viewed as fantastical. Growing up, his *Ama* (mother) shared stories - folk tales, legends, mythologies, and sometimes even what she dreamt of. Nepalese come from a community with a tradition of oral storytelling, where narratives relay information and values, and dreams often serve as guides to realities. For him, these accounts have a centrifugal tendency, meandering then returning to the central ideas. His characters seem as though gravity or space or proportions never bound them. His art became a way of visualising this unfurling of those stories. Especially, his large-scale works like 'in these folds' allow for an assortment of perspectives that encapsulate the complexities of our times in the context of his home country. It is a mirror to the lives that are determined by the many overlapping and interconnected influences and levers, yet offering a layered interplay.

Shrestha has a unique take on the use of colour, or the lack of it, in many of his significant works. In his early days as an artist, he felt liberated while working with ink. It could be precise and simultaneously blotchy and messy. Taking on different characteristics when mixed with water and working on particular types of paper, subject, and tools. Another aspect for him was accessibility. Forms developed using the limited palette were more accessible to viewers. Further, the marks made could not be undone, erased, or masked. The 'errors' had to become part of the final image. For him, this is close to how he senses the contemporary world. Over the years, with experience, his choice of media is instinctively determined. He incorporates drawings, sculpture, photography, text, film, and video in his work. The use of colour is a recent excursion, he says the modality of which is different from his past explorations.

*Apparatus at play, Solo Show of Karan Shrestha, Shrine Empire Gallery, New Delhi, 7 February - 9 March 2023.*



↑ Karan Shrestha, *The red shift (series)*, acrylic on paper, 15.5 in x 11.5 in, 2023.