

ART OF HIMMAT SHAH: BETWEEN REAL AND SURREAL

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Abstract

Indian art has faced a severe crisis during colonial rule, which ended with the rise of modernism, when the artists started again on their expedition for true art. Himmat Shah is one of them who construct the sensible diffusion of the 'Great' and the 'Little'. His works ultimately opened up to an aesthetically novel and personal individual approach. He was one such talented young artist who participated in the 'Group 1890' delicately and skillfully infused different classical and folk ideals with distinctive forms. His body of work introduces the methodologies of contemporary trends of modernity, materiality, individuality and existential ideas of art. His leading experiments are not restricted to scale; If Himmat engages the remnants of the past with the palpable present, he also encourages and coaxes out other narratives from the accumulation of the earth surface. Himmat's childhood passed in village 'Lothal', a major archeological site of Indus Valley Civilization. So in his work there is a powerful affinity between the tribal icons which have held communities together in our country for centuries. The time period of Shah as an artist is stretched between 1953 to the present day. It is been long but he is an active practitioner of modernism in art. Though his journey started from a village he had explored himself to the global scenario as an artist.

Keyword: Colonial crisis and Modern Indian art, Formalism, Personal individual tradition, World Cultural Politics

1.INTRODUCTION

During the 19th century, Indian art acquired dilemma to develop its own identity. The new conquerors who had acquired the power after the concluding war of Plessey (1757) deconstructed the whole structure of Indian society. It was the time when Indian artisans became

helpless and scared for their existence. The Mughals which migrated from Persia and settle down in India during the 16th century hardly changed the political system but British East India Company had struck the soul of the social system of the Indian villages. They broke down the entire framework of Indian society, without any symptoms of reconstitutions yet appearing. This situation has given chance to consolidate India into a socio-economical-political cord which helped Indian's to realize a dream for freedom. In visual art, at first Bengal School took the initiative to challenge British naturalism. With the help of E B Havel, Abanindranath Tagore tried to develop a pan Indian-Asian cultural practice to encounter British cultural vision and mission. But it was a difficult task to overcome academic naturalism with past old weapons of Indian art. Rabindranath Tagore had understood this situation and taken the initiative to introduce modernity in various ways. Sanjoy Mallick writes in this manner:

One of the most exciting moments for modern art movement in India is the December 1922 exhibition in Calcutta. With the help of Tagore, an International art exhibition was organized where the works of some of the very important Bauhaus artists like Paul Klee, Kandinsky, Johannes Itten and others was put on display. It must have been an overwhelming experience for the Indian artists to get to see the original works of western modern art.¹

1940's witnessed a tremendous development of modern visual art practice with the inspiration of the Western art movements. It was a clear negation of Bengal School idealism and was zeal to incorporate Indian mass feeling behind the art practices. The result of Bengal famine, World War II and Quit India movement has given a way to practice for people. Many progressive elements developed during this period and given also a notion to serve for humanity. In this situation in 1940s Calcutta

Group emerged in Bengal and set an ideal for art practices. R Shiv Kumar says:

The 1940s marked a turning point in the Indian attitude to modernism. This decade saw the emergence of artist groups in Calcutta, Chennai (Madras), and Mumbai (Bombay), who doubted the wisdom of striving for an indigenous modernism that bypassed modern Western art. The Calcutta group, the first among them, was founded in 1943. They held that the position of the preceding generation of nationalist artists was revivalist and declared that they believed in an art that is "international and interdependent."²

Basically, the practice of Himmat Shah incorporated with this ideal; exploring internationalism, the question of individuality and primitive association of art forms. In this paper, the researcher wants to search the way in which modernity constructs in the art of Himmat Shah and reflects via different methods and methodologies. The time span of Shah starts with the golden era of the '60s and continuing till date; so it will also be fascinating to see the development of Shah's practice with the balanced ideal of real and surreal. In a researcher's view, real means- the true indigenous practices towards the people culture and surreal means- a created culture by the ruling class.

2. BETWEEN REAL AND SURREAL

After independence, the mixed economic-political structure tried to connect its association with agrarian traditions. A semi-industrial, semi-feudal cultural politics has developed in India and it shows its radicalism in the front. So the modern Indian art is the mixture of these two state; semi-industrial, semi-feudal. But an undefined pressure pushed Indians to move with western modern art and work for the 'Art sake'. Thomas Mc. Evilly in this concern, she writes that "the 1950s to 70s were dominated by non-figurative art, a global phenomenon. The backdrop to it was the politics of the Cold War; the 'Free world' artists identified with formalism and abstraction; while narrative art was dismissed as being comparable to the Socialist Realism of the USSR."³

Abstract expressionism and Jackson Pollack becomes the key feature for creation. From this, the question of significant form or the aesthetic beauty of significant form becomes the core issue of art. During the 1960s

the brunt paper collage series of Himmat Shah also showed association with American abstraction. He emphasized his experimentation for the favour of formalism. As an artist, he always preferred to associate with the act of unusual forms. He believed in metaphysical characteristics of art forms. The hypothesis substituted the idea of significant form for the concept of beauty in an aesthetic version of Immanuel Kant's transcendental idealism. The apprehension of significant form was based on sensitivities distinct from an analytic way of thinking, and the viewer sought significant form through transcendent inquiry. For the Formalist, the painting created a matrix between empirical and spiritual and between rational and symbolic. So the world cultural politics behind the art is also visible in Shah's practices, 'question of significant form'. 1960's to 70's is the crucial period for Shah's artistry where he was trying to prepare a novel path of his creation. But the dominance of Picasso, Miro, Brancusi, Henry Moore, Giacometti etc. is clearly observable in his works. He went to Paris in 1966 on a scholarship and returned in October 1967 via London. On his return to India, he took two years to work on a major relief-mural in brick and cement in a modernist building of his architect friend, Hasmukh Patel: the Saint Xavier's school in Ahmadabad (fig. 1, 2). Himmat went right on ahead to handle the sculptural vocabulary of geometrical abstraction on a monumental scale. In the mid - 1970's he started to do sculpture in direct plaster which he showed first in 1979.

Thus Himmat confirmed the indigenous/modernist aesthetic favoured in India at the time, an aesthetic against time and history propagated by J. Swaminathan since the inception of the Group 1890. From the mid - 1980s Himmat's work took on the look it bears until today - an array of heads and object-forms in plaster, ceramic and terracotta. In his work J. Swaminathan too favoured the informal; Himmat's exquisite icons are endowed with the artist's sustained love of the material process.⁴

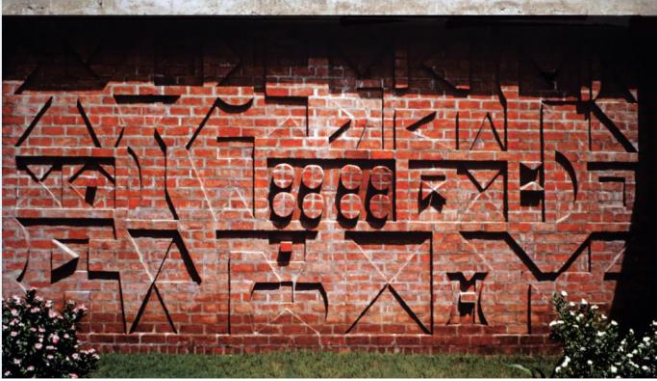


Fig. 1, Shah, H. (1970-74), *Untitled, Bricks Mural*

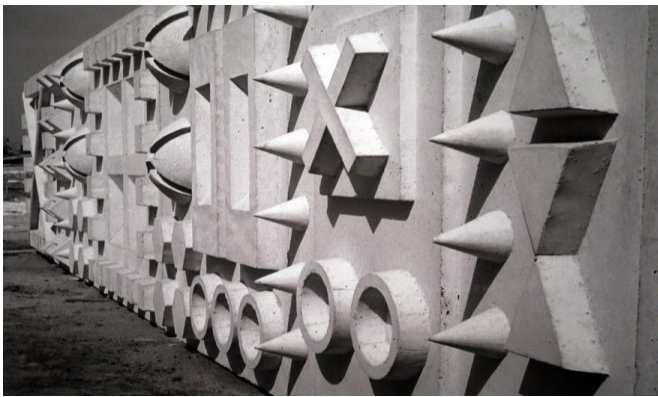


Fig. 2, Shah, H. (1970-74), *Untitled, Cement Mural*

Himmat Shah spent more than thirty years in Garhi Studio, New Delhi. During this period, he meditated his sculpture vocabulary and brings the aspect of timelessness with art as a force of nature. He also introduced a metaphor that art always reflects the subconscious mind and the experience of childhood. In this way, Shah's become capable to emphasize the aspect of primitivism. His childhood is connected with 'Lothal' an important site of Indus Valley Civilization. The ambience/surrounding of this place have a profound force on his creation. In his terracotta sculpture, the formlessness, textures, cracks, hidden spaces, monumentality, semiotics and the use of metaphor to metonym spark the emerging vision towards the East (fig.3). Through these practices, he reverted to his childhood and get inspiration from the basic source. Actually, in a real means, he tried to transform his revelation towards Indian modernity. As a profound source, western modernity also took image and

inspiration from African tribal art. About his childhood connection Geeta Kapoor says:

Himmat sang and danced and relished festivals from childhood- indulged by his grandmother, he compulsively made objects of play in his home and courtyard. One might ask in the case of a 'natural' artist like Himmat. At which point does the universal language of forms gifted by the automatic magic of the primordial hand become an authorial impress, the artist's erasure? The modernist aesthetic revels in the making of something out of nothing, Himmat for his past valorizes what he calls manifest beauty (*'Main Saundarya Ko Keval Abhivyakt Karta Hoon'*). He offers a semi- mystical rendering of the creative act found in oriental aesthetics and referenced by modernist who sees the artist as a force of nature, its free spirit.⁵

'Mein saundarya ko keval abhivyakt karta hoon' the basic idea behind it that Himmat expands the philosophy of formalism in the one hand and the other hand he highly inspires by nature, as the basic source of every creation (fig. 4). Himmat's says that "I observe nature, in its different forms and in its different expressions, and am lost in wonder and its beauty. Have you noticed that when a bird flies and spreads its wings as it picks up speed, it grows in size? And a small bird becomes big. As the bird spreads its wings and glides tilted as various angels, hidden feathers in hues known are exposed, as if the bird had changed its cloth. I watched it and marvelled at the beauty of its changing form, power and grace. And the concept of different angels I applied to the kiln, and angled its fires such that they produced new and mysterious colours which I myself never imagined'. So these two formulas pushed Shah to construct his idiom. But the thing is, we got our independence by struggling with Britishers. So formalist when they struggle for a significant form lost the importance of objectivity. The only aspect of subjectivity may not fulfill the requirement of society. Secondly as a class angle, formalist falls in the section of the elite; creating a futuristic aura- making an ambitious presentation. From this, they make a gap between societies to an individual to ignored representational imagery and always prefer to handle muted imagery. The third thing in the Indian context is very important; a kind of so-called secular execution of modern trends. In researchers view India improvised the concept of

secularism but could not succeed to implement it due to the semi-feudal and semi-industrial socio-economical-political structure. Formalism as a concept not justified the basic structure of human societies. So it easily falls in the so-called secular state.



Fig. 3, Shah, H. (1960-70), *Untitled, Terracotta*



Fig. 4, Shah, H. (1990-2000), *Untitled, Terracotta*

Finally, formalists handle the aesthetic sensibilities of significant form. The significant form is symbolic form. As a concept of the Modern paradigm, the term 'significant form' provided a discursive context for examining the process by which the mind mediates new experience. The subtle apprehension of significant form

was an awareness of the symbol forming process as it encodes experience. But the symbol is the enigmatic source of formal perception. So it's a half-truth of art and society. As a formalist Himmat Shah encounters with above mention context, he fights with his conscious and subconscious self. But he could not adopt any new way to consolidate peoples experience with artist experience. Himmat Shah is searching a significant form and very true about experimentation in clay. He is also a true practitioner of modern art. But the contemporary time and its structure not very simple paradoxically feature of time demand to see the development of art not only from subconscious but also from conscious self.

3.CONCLUSION

The time period of Shah as an artist is stretched from 1953 to till date. Though his journey started from a village he had exposed himself to the global scenario as an artist. This transformation consolidates the different ideas of his journey - fragments of the civilization, the trace of the human hand, cycles of possession and dispossession of objects meant for use and pleasure. He is one of the important formalists who see art as the act of nature. Spontaneity is one of the key features of his artworks. But the development of civilizations and cultures are based on conscious efforts. He used contemporary objects and images and formulate them with Indigenous impression but could not succeed to give them significant meaning as per time. So his practices fall in an enigma and move between real and surreal means.

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