

Out at Sea : Perceptions of Home

Aesthetics for an Ambedkar Age.

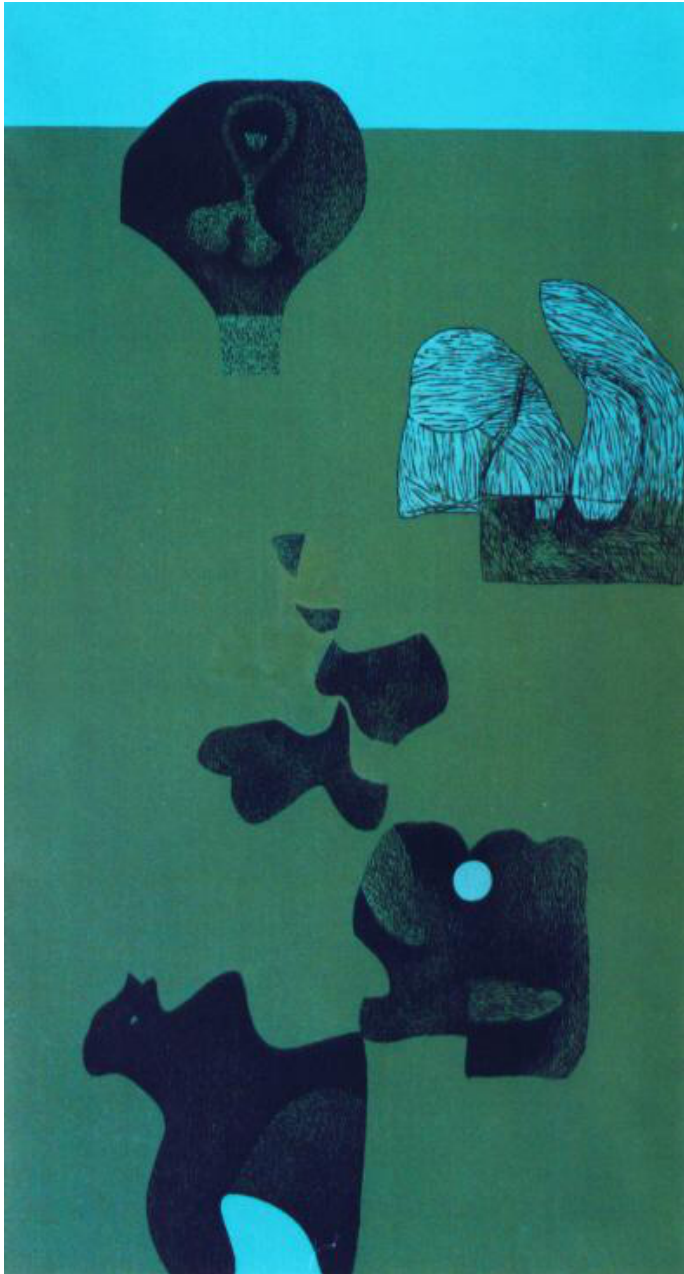
It is common practice to place the works and practice of a painter now preparing for a retrospective at the National Gallery of Modern Art within the nomenclatures of art history. The gallery itself promises the viewer - Modernism. Art history has run through decades defining itself through various counter- revolutionary idioms to define various timelines in art history. Modernism, Postmodernism, Conceptualism, Contemporary, Post-War, Post-Internet, Anthropocene, Digital, Ephemeral, Video, Performance, Vernacular and quite a few more I am unable to list for I lack the knowledge of their existence or have failed to remember. These labels are idioms because they do not define the contents they carry etymologically or the vocabularies defined by them often can be misplaced or claimed by another label. Studies in the post-colonial space that have been rightfully re-defined by definitions that narrate : geography - African, South American, identity - Indigenous Art Practices, economic, caste and racial marginalisation - Subaltern, political camaraderie in literature, philosophy and ideology - Black Arts Movement, Feminism, Global South etc, now advocate decolonisation of the sphere and timelines of art history.

I begin my essay pointing out these parameters within which our art system operates to validate an artist in order to liberate the burden of the parameters of art history and visually expected from them. On the Global Scale through the change of patronage and the internet we see mutants of art movements, trends and a homogenisation of the visual expectation. Design advocated by Instagram and Pinterest, biennale list making, museum survey shows and the global art market expect replication of accepted forms. The burden then promotes dishonest artistic practices. The burden of identity interlaced with expectations turns artists into mimic men of the Colonial Era. V S Naipaul in 'The Mimic Men' 1967, whilst he was on a fellowship at the Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda for a year, self-critiques his own nihilism of other Caribbean men who found themselves lost in recently independent post-colonial societies that were being manipulated by their departing Colonial Power through an umbilical cord of economic assistance, infrastructure and the deceit. That deceit began with the Atlantic Slave trade where millions of humans were shipped across seas to populate islands whose populations had been annihilated by European Colonial Settlers. In a later century Indians brought in as 'coolies' or indentured labourers post the abolition of slavery through deceitful means of contracts that would force them to till the land even after their contractual period came to live aside their brothers from Africa. Caste & Racial prejudice kept them socially distant from their suppressed, exploited and broken equals. The division worked well for colonial rule but upon independence left behind many men who would mimic their suppressors and hold a strange nostalgia for their language, fashion, food and customs.

As we see in this pandemic, Human ingenuity to survive and hold close to what is dear to them is not always a surprise. The Indian immigrants were recent migrants of the 19th century who could bring their gods and goddesses, their cuisine and language,

preserving elements into the 21st century - customs, traditions, songs and etymologies that are now non-existent in the Indian Gangetic Plains. The diaspora from Africa had to suffer slavery, death at sea, families being torn apart after being sold to plantation owners on different islands, various ethnic groups and speakers of varied languages were grouped together based on decisions made by slave traders. But Vodou, Santeria, Batique, Xango, Candombie and other indigenous animist religions remained hidden from the faith of the coloniser and prospered despite evangelism. Syncretic customs and symbolisms arrived when the Africans accepted the beliefs of the indigenous Carib peoples on the islands. The Saramaccan language of Suriname, French Guiana and northern Brazil is a language that is a creole of various West African languages such as Fon and the Ashanti Twe of Ghana. It has one of the longest lists of alphabets when compared to Indo-European languages such as English and also a script that was conceptualised in the jungles of the Amazon. Among them there were artists, as visual art was the only means to preservation.

Rubem Valentim (1922 - 1991) born in 1922, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, studied dentistry, but decided to pursue art in 1948. He was of Afro-Brazilian descent and his practice drew from the symbols of the cosmos of Afro-Brazilian religions. In 2018 his retrospective *Construções afro-atlânticas [Afro-Atlantic Constructions]*, at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP) was a survey show of his practice and a celebration of the perseverance of African esoteric animist traditions in visual forms that had survived the slavery, the journey across the Atlantic and the colonial cultural and religious inquisitions over centuries. Valentim's practice contested Brazilian adherence to European norms of Modernism. Brazil during his time saw economic growth and political stability, emigres from Europe transplanted philosophies, aesthetics and rules of culture onto its cities. Architecture flourished and concrete in Sao Paulo allowed magnificent tributes to Occidental Post-Industrial enlightenment. Valentim was in search of a vocabulary in aesthetics that was reflective of his identity away from Brazilian Modernism. More than two-thirds of Brazil's population has African descent but they go unrepresented and unseen. He moved to Rome in 1957 and began investigating the visual culture of the indigenous peoples of Africa, Asia and the Americas. In 1966 he was invited to participate in Leopold Sedar Senghor's 'The First World Festival of Black Arts or World Festival of Negro Arts' in Dakar, Senegal. Senghor had invited artists from all over Africa and Black Artists from the diaspora. It was a coming together of poets, musicians, philosophers, politicians and artists. Valentim represented Brazil and his presentation in Dakar surprised those who had begun to accept forms of cubism and modern painting by transforming them into an Africanate realm. Perhaps his vision allowed African artists to pursue languages that were indigenous to their own traditions. Senegalese artist Issa Samb aka Joe Ouakam (1945 - 2017) became the first counter-revolutionary to modernism derived from Europe. His portraits were abstracted forms of men and women in the imaginaries of the African traditions, surrealisms derived from the tradition of storytelling and myths of the Sahel, animist dance was married to situationist performances, the studio was Dadaist. From 1973 Samb ran *Laboratoire Agit'Art*, an art collective that moved away from modernist philosophies such as Negritude. Issa Samb was a follower of the polymath thinker Chiekh Anta Diop, who drew civilizational connections between India and Africa.



Folk Revolution 3 | Oil on Canvas | 66" x 36" | 2003

Pramod Babu Ramteke was born in 1944 , Nagpur , British India. India was still under the yoke of colonialism awaiting to be free. Dr. BR Ambedkar constructed a constitution that would provide equity of existence , a right to education and self-determination for Ramteke who was then a child. Born into an Ambedkarite family , Ramteke knew education would be a path out of discrimination and suppression. He pursued art at the Sir JJ School of Art, Bombay whilst being a cadet in the Indian Navy. When we sail out to sea we build a perception of our motherland, it takes longer to part with her at sea than on an aeroplane. A naval cadet who would return to art school had seen visions of his home disappear in the horizon. An education in perspective that allows the lyrical distortions in his paintings. Dr Ambedkar spent years abroad educating himself, he could see the societal distortions at home , the pain of his people and the inequity that was amplified by the distance. His love for India and a polymathic mind nurtured by his education convinced him to contest and reform. We know of his political , pedagogical , cultural , and economic legacy. But we have yet to gather all those visual artistic practices that represent his legacy derived from his thoughts as a philosopher.

Like Issa Samb did with Diop , artists from the Ambedkarite community have been on a quest to enshrine the thoughts and teachings of Ambedkar within their practice. A change of perception of how we see things, our gaze and draw them out is a part of that effort. In 2012 Gary Michael Tartakov in his book 'Dalit Art and Visual Imagery ' investigated that presence of Dalits within India's visual traditions and affirmation of presence in the Independent India through the interplay of depictions of Ambedkar and Buddha in portraits. Navayana Buddhism became a new vehicle of intersection contesting cultural space. In 1991 Tartakov presented Ramteke's works as a part of the 'The Modern Indian Art Seminar, of IOWA STATE University, a Slide show of 30 Paintings' . Tartakov has since then helped define the definitions of Dalit Art and its transformation into an Ambedkarite philosophy on aesthetics. Ramteke studied at the Sir JJ School of Arts , where the western classical tradition of Portrait Painting was refined to a technique that was mastered like the academies of Florence and Brussels . Portraits of Ambedkar and bronze sculptures of him taking lead now dot Maharashtra and across India as a visual presence of his thought and reform. Ambedkarite artists often paint Ambedkar and his life as assertions of solidarity where he is shown for his thoughts and actions. Ramteke is one of India's most important portrait painters having been commissioned by eminent personalities such as Amitabh Bachchan but most importantly he was invited by the Presidential Palace - Rashtrapati Bhavan in 1999 to paint a portrait for the London School of Economics of President KR Narayanan to be installed at the LSE, London.

The year Ramteke joined the JJ School , its long standing dean Shankar Palsikar (1916 - 1984) was to retire. Palsikar had broken from miniature painting and resisted the modernist heavy-lined figurative forms of the Progressive Artist Group. He in fact began incorporating painted forms of human depiction from the Nile Valley Civilization and then discovered Paul Klee. Kandinsky, Klee and Ritual forms of Indian tantra then amalgamated to form experiments in abstraction in Palsikar's paintings that

drew heavily from Devanagari calligraphy and Indian spiritualism. A style he and his students popularised and is the predominant aesthetic philosophy at the JJ School even today. Palsikar's quest was similar to that Valentim had wanted to through his experimentation with forms. But unlike Valentim it soon forgot its decolonial commitment of dialogue and discourse, one which is emancipatory and universalist. VS Gaitonde, (1924 - 2001), also from Nagpur and an adherent of the school visited the United States in 1964 on a Rockefeller Fellowship during the heydays of the American Abstractionist movement and returned to India to practice abstract painting in a space of complete seclusion and interiority, a theme celebrated in his retrospective at the Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, New York in 2014. Prabhakar Barwe, (1936-1995), another celebrated abstractionist who drew from the Neo-Tantric tradition was a mentor to many artists at the JJ School and he published a manifesto on painting in 1989 called 'Kora Canvas' or Blank Canvas. His relationship to abstraction was visual distortion of known forms through which he created a narrative landscape. Gaitonde on the other hand had an interest in scripts and scriptures which he gently distorted to form landscapes of horizons.

Ramteke was aware of these practices and these movements in art. But an Ambedkarite could not adhere to their philosophical quests. Indigenous discourse was essential and in vogue at that moment. Rabindranath Tagore's commune in Santiniketan was an incredible success at looking away from the West and JJ was trying to find its place within an Independent India, it was no longer a school training artisans to decorate the empire. Thus we see Ramteke's distortions are not of spiritual nature, rather studies of fauna, where he creates animal forms we cannot distinguish but they do live in our subconscious vision. He uses the technique of Platography, an inexpensive technique of printmaking, where the forms are drawn onto a plate to make unique editions that are distinct with consequent applications of colour. His later works gather floating images in bright yellows and sky blues with plays of perspective on how he populates the canvas. His Naval background and the distortion of the seashore come into play. If you have ferried out into the sea or when you view the shore after having swum away from land, forms erase and reappear constantly as you are not in inertia. This plays out in his canvases. Ramteke who was later a professor of the arts at the Nagpur School of Art, where he mentored many present successful abstractionists such as Ravi Mandlik, like Ambedkar's father, was in the India Army as a sense of duty and vocation. Ramteke pursued art in the Navy as a passion and continued without recognition after becoming a teacher. He was not placing himself in Art History nor adhering his forms to a label. He rather authored an independent style like Valentim. Valentim was not distorting rather he was formalising a spiritual heritage crushed under the amnesia caused by Colonialism. Gaitonde was deconstructing scripts and he is celebrated, but before the alphabet Humans were decorating narratives using animals and themselves on the walls of caves. Celebrating Ramteke is essential for any South Asian discourse on Subaltern art.

Hamed Abdalla (1917-1985) an Egyptian artist who proposed Lettrism or the 'Creative Word' painted using calligraphy as a form of artistic expression being part of the CoBrA Art Movement which was based in Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam. CoBrA



Walking Animal | Serigraph on Paper | 9" x 9" | 2017

artists used bright colours and semi-abstract forms that contested art history and the 'isms' of forms. They saw the art system post World War II as authoritarian and exclusive. Amongst its members were artists from South Africa and outside the capitals of art. Abdalla was inspired by the art of Huruffiya tradition in Arabic calligraphy that had existed but became prominent in the 20th century as Arab artists in newly independent Arab States of the Levant began moving away from French influence in the arts. They would use calligraphy to make human forms and at times architecture. Though politically active, their expressions could not be drawn to the depiction of their politics or solidarities. Their commitment to a progressive society was not exhibited through depiction rather it sat somewhere in the realm of the philosophies that informed their art practice. Krishna Reddy (1925 - 2018) was a very politically aware and conscious artist who often took part in manifestations and conferences of Afro-Asian solidarity during his years in France and the United States but his work except on two occasions in 1968 and 1971 never took on the subject of depicting political events or scenarios.

Krishna Reddy remained outside the lexicon of Indian Contemporary Art or Modern Art. He was not part of survey shows or books on Indian modernism. Perhaps his diasporic existence outside India was the cause. But I think it was his work, which was a product of a highly complex technique for multi-coloured simultaneous printmaking, that did not fit into the figurative definitions of Indian contemporary art or abstract modernism. Though he shared age with India's modernists and was more experimental than the avant-garde contemporaries, his vocabulary did not fit the scales of definition in vogue in art. The burden of an artist like Pramodbabu Ramteke to depict scenes or subjects that would portray his political adherence to Ambedkarite philosophy and his subaltern identity is unnecessary. Expecting him to adhere would be unfair and would deny his individual role as an artist and thus condescending and discriminatory.

I encountered Pramodbabu Ramteke's work for the first time in 2018 at a conference and exhibition on art organised by the Secular Art Movement and curated by Prabhakar Kamble and Gautamiputra Kamble in Kolhapur. During the conference we discussed Ramteke's reasons to paint and I came across an ochre canvas resembling a terracotta surface we often see on mud homes of rural India. There were slight hints of yellow and red rubbed into the paint that visualised the patterns of plastering homes used in the villages of India. Ramteke in this work had been observing minute details of subaltern indigenous aesthetic and transferring them onto canvases that hold a history that is not spoken about or even spoken for. This was a conceptual breakthrough aesthetically and I could make interconnections with similar attempts seen in practices of artists such as Mohammed Omer Khali,(1936), Sudan, Omraam Tatcheda (1985) Cameroon and Isamila Manga, (1957 -2015), Senegal. Ramteke's environment is unrecorded in history but his art cannot go unrecorded in art history. In 2018 even during Ruben Valentim's retrospective at the museum of modern art in Sao Paulo, he was not a well-known artist or one who defined the canon of Brazilian Art. This was due to an obsession in countries such as Brazil of looking elsewhere across the Atlantic but not to Africa, rather to the art capitals of New York, London and Paris, that mimicry became popular under various labels of art history. In India these labels exclude artists from subaltern

backgrounds because of their lack of access to English, education at universities abroad, unfamiliarity with alien philosophical premises from the west and non-adherence to social norms of the art circuit. Whilst art aims to include social justice within its parameters and engage through dialogue those outside its cultural realm it fails because of its tools of evaluation and expectation.

Pramodbabu Ramteke's retrospective at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai curated by Prabhakar Kamble is an excellent opportunity to celebrate indigenous visual traditions of our times that propose a vocabulary that is lived, pondered and thought out through experimentation and philosophies that have emerged from a people who were once broken. It centres the many untold stories of our people so that we reconcile our futures in common good and equity.

Sumesh Manoj Sharma

Curator
Mumbai
2021.



Untitled | Platograph on Paper | 19" x 23" | 2017