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Govinda ‘Azad’ Sah

The first time I ever met Govinda Sah and saw his work was when I was invited to open his ‘Transcriptions’ exhibition at the October Gallery in London in late January 2011. He did very well on that particular opening night, with four or five of his larger and most dynamic works selling instantly, even as I was expressing my delight in these pieces from the gallery’s podium. Shortly before we had talked briefly over the dinner table together, and I found Govinda to be a charmingly honest man, who was quite modest in his human persona, but highly determined to succeed in his artistic ambitions.

Govinda Sah was born in 1974 in the town of Rajbiraj, which lies close to the Indian border in the low-lying Terai region of southeastern Nepal. As one of six children he enjoyed drawing far more than any of his other school subjects, much to the annoyance of his parents who hoped he would go on to study science or engineering. So they nicknamed him ‘Azad’, meaning ‘freedom’, on account of his fiercely independent spirit. At the age of seventeen Govinda left his family home and moved to Delhi, where he worked as a sign painter for several years, before moving to the industrial suburb of Gurgaon, where he worked in a similar capacity at the Maruti car factory. After four years in India he had managed to save enough money to return to Nepal and enroll in Kathmandu’s College of Fine Art in 1995, holding his first solo exhibition there in 1999. In the millennial year of 2000 Govinda undertook a cycle tour through Nepal during the height of the Maoist insurrection, with the innocent aim to ‘spread the awareness of peace through art for the 21st Century’. He then went on to have solo exhibitions in Mumbai, India, and in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and graduated with a BA in Fine Art from Kathmandu’s Tribhuvan University in 2003, before finally moving to the UK, where he qualified with an MA in Fine Art at Wimbledon Art College in London, the city in which he is now based.

Govinda’s early paintings were mainly figurative, as he began to copy the forms of Hindu deities from the Newar pantheon, and landscapes inspired by the temples, terraced foothills, and snow-capped Himalayan peaks that dominate the now congested environment of the Kathmandu Valley. It was from these otherworldly regions with their ever-changing cloudscapes that Govinda first began to study and depict cloud formations as primal symbols of fertility, creativity and heaven. Some of his abstract cloud compositions appear in this exhibition, which emotively evoke the brooding and stormy violence of water in all its oceanic, vaporous and precipitating forms. These creative elements also appear in his three-dimensional installation, where amorphous clouds hover above the floating geological structure of Mount Meru, with suspended rocks hanging above a nest-like circle of branches and stones.

I have little personal interest or admiration for much that passes as contemporary abstract or conceptual art, or the repetitive and impoverished vocabulary that tends to support its ephemeral value within an elitist circle of celebrity and financial excess. But I can honestly say that I have been enthralled by the raw energy, luminous color intensity, and the sensitive chaos created by a multi-dimensional mass of fragmented and globular textures that explode across the square surface in many of Govinda Sah’s more recent paintings.

On a larger scale these compositions remind me of the colorful psychedelic imagery we used to create in the 60's by dripping enamel paints onto a sheet of wet watercolor paper on a rapidly spinning turntable, which was then abruptly stopped. And on a smaller scale they remind me of the extremely intricate 'Synaesthesia' paintings of my mentor, John F.B. Miles (1944-97), or the spectacular apocalyptic paintings and mezzotints of the English visionary painter, John Martin (1789-1854). But unlike the hallucinogenic fragmentation and prismatic sheens of enamel paint on wet paper, or the minute figurative details that bestow historical or biblical narratives to the colossal edifices and vast perspectives of John Martin's realms of pandemonium and paradise, the celestial realms of Govinda's art possess their own unique luminosity. Some of his paintings emerge from a background of newsprint; others emanate from around an empty hole, or cascade down like monsoon cloudbursts above a churning ocean, while others fit together like spaced tiles to form a mosaic-like composition.

Govinda used the Sanskrit title "Shristi-Chakra", meaning the "Glorious Wheel of Creation", for his recent 2012 show in Delhi, which utilizes the mandala principal of depicting a tantric geometric diagram or 'device' (*yantra*) as the divine source of emanation at the centre, around which a centrifugal mass of nebulous and fractal-like energies swirl. Govinda equates these energies with our ever-increasing philosophical and scientific understanding of both the microcosm and macrocosm: of the non-locality of pure consciousness that 'lights-up' and informs the reductive neural networks of our brains, and the formless existence of dark matter and dark energy that permeates and informs the unfathomable intelligence of the visible universe we perceive.

Thus the apt title that Govinda Sah has chosen for his forthcoming exhibition at Tibet House is "The Universe Within", and although his works have been shown in more than twenty countries, this will be his first solo exhibition in the USA. Govinda recognizes that his artistic roots first germinated from the unique fusion of Hindu and Buddhist Tantric Traditions that are found in Nepal, but his now blossoming personal style of painting increasingly encompasses the visionary realms of intergalactic fields, where stars are born amidst the nebulous ghosts of supernovae in divine acts of cosmic creation. Where life is conceived in the mist, and not in the crystal.