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Master
Painter
of Jammu



The Ass Curse
Stele Tradition
of Ancient
Maharashtra



Mithila
Painting
1949-2014



Khalili
Collection of
Islamic Art



The Blue
Shores
Prison Art
Project



Amritha Mehta



The Clock is Ticking The Blue Shores Prison Art Project

MARGARET MASCARENHAS & SWATEE NAIR



VIDEO ARTIST CHRISTIAN MARCLAY'S 2010 ART INSTALLATION, *THE CLOCK*, plots every minute of a day through a montage of scenes from films ranging in origin and genre, with each scene passing seamlessly to the next. Someone knocks on the door in one frame and another person, from another film, from an utterly different time and place, answers. Or, an alarm goes off in a mid-1950s' bedroom, and someone from the 1970s wakes. The viewer's position and internal responses are thus oriented around time; we recognize that we never quite live in the moment, but rather wait, always in anticipation of whatever might be coming next. Information under these conditions conveys nothing more than the fact of its existence, and things here do not possess the transparency or normalcy given to objects and images through use. And, it is this ambiguity, these potentially different ways of viewing a subject – a process out of which another representational mode might unfold in art – that is the basis of our teaching in the Blue Shores project at Aguada Central Jail.

Why Prison Art?

Bringing prison art into the public eye is important because of the immediacy of its form, the raw energy of its messages and the redemptive nature of its process. Our research has shown that most prison art syllabuses focus on vision and expression,

1 "Darling", by J.D.
Acrylic on paper;
76.2 x 55.9 cm.

2 "You Visited Me in Prison",
by Rajendra. Acrylic on
paper; 55.9 x 76.2 cm.

rather than on the individual artist who is serving a sentence. This seems logical as it is generally accepted, at least in theory, that prison is supposed to be as much about rehabilitation as it is about consequences. In this context, the reason for an inmate's conviction is secondary to what he or she is doing now. But it can still be unsettling for a viewer on the "outside" to be moved by the creative output of someone who is at the very least severely troubled. Reconciling ourselves with prison art, particularly when the artist's crime is deemed heinous, requires an often highly subjective examination of how much, or even whether, an artist's character is relevant to the work. This necessarily involves the consideration of a work's integrity independent of what we know of the human being who created it. As the late art dealer Phyllis Kind told the *Chicago Tribune* in 1994, "nobody ever has proved that genius and niceness go together."¹

The Connection between Art and Life: Its Relevance in a Jail

All works of art, and here we include mythology and literature, are stories of pain, loss, love, desire, hope, anger, obsession, madness – retold again and again. These stories connect us to ourselves and to each other, which is, in our view, the core function of art. When we teach, we use stories as triggers for the creative process. In the introduction of *A Scream Goes Through the House*,² comparative literature professor Arnold Weinstein more or less dismisses postmodernism when he posits that it is not intellect, fact or data that serves as the cathartic trigger, but feeling. Art, according to Weinstein, is about communicating feeling in a way that transports both inwards and outwards, through a process that is transformative for both the artist and the viewer/reader/listener. In that sense, art is not only alchemy, but also medicine. And, therefore, a jail, that most dark and restrictive of spaces, is perhaps one of the best classrooms in which to practise it.

To a great extent, the inherent value of the prison artist's talent lies not only in the ability to pull aesthetic creations out of environmental scarcity, and out of the seed material of the artist's own irrevocably interrupted and compromised life story. There is also the inmate artist's need, common to all humans, to simply express something. So, it is important to view prison art within its sociological context, not only through the lens of the art critic.

From the art-critical point of view, we believe that, irrespective of talent (though we screen applicants to the programme for potential), prison art is relevant because it is produced by individuals with little or no art training, working in an aesthetic vacuum. Though prison art is often considered to be "Outsider Art", it is actually we, the viewers, who are on the outside looking in, not unlike voyeurs. And this voyeuristic aspect would account for a great degree of public curiosity at the time of exhibition. We have found that the public has been pleasantly surprised by the quality, power and sensitivity of the work produced by the inmates participating in the Blue Shores project.

Finally, the therapeutic value of practising art has been long established by those in the field well before us: art has intrinsic redemptive value even without a transcendent quality, or social motivation; it can exist simply as a process by which people channel their energy creatively with no other objective in mind.

Teaching in the Shade of Peacock Blue

The Aguada Central Jail is at the mouth of the Mandovi river where it meets the open sea. It lies at the dead end of the road, below the Aguada fort. During the rain the fort

is covered in green moss, but in summer hard sunlight bounces off it like flint off rock. Here, peacocks have right of way, and one has to wait until they cross.

The Blue Shores Prison Art Project began in September 2009 with an idea: to teach painting and study the creative process in the Aguada jail for a period of one year, culminating in a curated exhibition of the work produced. That idea evolved into a four-year arts syllabus focused on painting, creative writing and performance art. Our pilot group has consisted predominantly of male lifers. We drew a great deal of inspiration for our teaching philosophy from the art programme at the Special Unit at HM Prison Barlinnie in Scotland, established in 1773 to accommodate violent prisoners, potentially violent prisoners and selected long-term prisoners. The Special Unit was set up as a prison within a prison in 1973 along therapeutic lines, with inmates and staff sharing decision-making. Its impressive art programme included novelist, sculptor and gangland murder convict, Jimmy Boyle.³ We also drew inspiration from a story published in the September 7, 2009 edition of *Outlook*⁴ in which a convict at Calcutta's Presidency Jail participated in a production of Tagore's *Balmiki Pratibha*, mentored by Odissi dancer Alokanda Roy, and developed into a performance artist of considerable skill, transforming his life in the process.

We required persuasive evidence of project viability as well as special permissions to gain access to the jail. We found a receptive ear in Mihir Vardhan, the then IG Prisons, to whom we provided documentation on prison art projects around the world, such as the one at Barlinnie, and a few in India, including those at Tihar Jail in Delhi, and at Presidency Jail in Calcutta. We received seed funding for the art ma-

3 "Untitled", by Doppledich.
Watercolour on textured
paper; 27.9 x 38.1 cm.



materials required, as well as exhibition sponsorship, from Sunaparanta Goa Centre for the Arts during the first year. Soon after, with the assistance of the prison authorities, a selection process took place – the main criterion being an inmate's desire to learn and practise art. In January 2010, classes started once a week, increasing to twice or three times a week, with an initial enrolment of 22 inmates. There was some attrition over the first couple of months, which we expected, but once participation stabilized, the project began to take a more concrete form, involving the introduction of further points of reference for the inmates to work with and integrate.

In the second year we received full funding for the project from the Saryu and Vinod Doshi Foundation, with continued exhibition support from Sunaparanta.

Our (Evolving) Philosophy

The Aguada jail is no Evin or Abu Ghraib. Looking at the clear, composed faces before us we have to remind ourselves that this is a “specific group in a specific environment” – a fact we intuitively recognize as the parameter within which we need to work. Nevertheless, the jail inmates cannot physically leave, and this perhaps makes them ideal candidates for an intensive creative process workout. For us the process encompasses the personal, private, conscious and unconscious. To be able to recognize red from green, line from form, portrait from landscape, Paul Klee from Krishen Khanna is to be equipped with the tools of the trade – undoubtedly important, but not as much as to be given the tools to access your intuitions, your imagination. To wrest inspiration from the rivers and trees.

A class of this kind has its own matrix, and to see anyone as the salient rule and as the singular exception would be simplistic. Collectivity and individuality are mutually entangled and supportive – it is the shuttle between that fuels the creative process. The sharing of feelings within a safe space gives the group a communal voice, establishing a connection to others, to society and to the world. We want to evolve an environment that dispenses with unpleasant competition and judgement on one hand, yet where the participants are encouraged to be discerning, and to critique



4 “Dream”, by Santa Marin. Acrylic on paper; 55.9 x 76.2 cm.

5 “Self portrait”, by Mark Ellens. Acrylic on paper; 38.1 x 27.9 cm.



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constructively. Above all, we teach that the creative process offers a form of self-encounter, which in and of itself is restorative.

Incarceration does have a significant and potent effect on the character of each artist's work. Prison reality – boredom, fear, oppression, the desire to escape even if only in the mind – while undesirable, is also clearly enabling. In their painting, performance, and creative expression, the works of the Blue Shores participants range from awkward but striking conceptual attempts to occasional displays of virtuosity, freshness and surprise, illuminating the conditions under which they are forged. In most cases, the styles and techniques taught, learned and employed are not arbitrary choices made by the artists but the result of a process of discovery.



7 “Dancing Peacock”,
by Yash Techno.
Acrylic on paper;
55.9 x 76.2 cm.

In Search of Lost Time: Teaching Method

In our first year we followed a free and informal teaching process, in which we sought to demonstrate to the class that there is always a second or third matrix active or superimposed upon the literal, or what is “real”. The focus was predominantly on drawing and painting. Progressing into the second year, we decided to give equal weight to poetry and performance art, anchoring our syllabus to memory and metaphor.

The class comprises men who are largely unschooled, of diverse backgrounds, who speak different languages. However, despite the need to develop innovative ways to address, for example, Jung’s theories on archetype and the collective unconscious, or contemporary theories of metaphor, our employment of non-didactic pedagogical methods remains largely the same as with any other class. Keeping our approach open-ended and flexible, emphasizing conversation more than academics, ours is a layered, interactive, cross-genre teaching approach. In a relaxed atmosphere, people will connect with even the most inaccessible of things if they are offered a way in. This is the opposite of “dumbing down”; it is the idea of “school” as a condition of learning that we might carry with us wherever we go, whatever we do – this contributes to the socio-imaginary rescue function that the collective associates with the artist.

6 “My Patshala”,
by Santa Marin.
Acrylic on paper;
76.2 x 55.9 cm.

In this “school”, rather than concentrating solely on learning and refining techniques, emphasis is placed on the development of ideas. In their practice and application of theory, we encourage participants to seek inspiration from a variety of sources, including popular culture, current events and routines of everyday life, but above all, we encourage them to seek within themselves. To facilitate this search of self, we might use a poem, a photograph, a story, a painting, a dream or a personal memory as a trigger for personal process, and this in turn has a clear causal effect in the rendering of the work. Frequently, we use poems or ideas generated by the inmates during a class session as starting points for a painting, and vice-versa. The original class members – 14 males with no previous art training – after a few months, repeatedly told us with some excitement that they had begun to turn to their art and journaling work for a sense of self-worth, an opportunity to vent or a way to find peace. Over the past three years, we have seen their worlds expand through their imaginations, beyond the limiting vistas and crowded confines of their prison cells. We have witnessed how artistic expression can emerge even in the most restrictive of environments.

Word Art and Performance Art: Exploring Memory and Process

8 “Colour is Life and Life is Black”, by Ranjit Sarkar. Acrylic on paper; 55.9 x 76.2 cm.

Our greatest challenge was the introduction of poetry and journaling practice. Since our classes included men with varying levels of literacy skills and who speak in different languages, we had to find a way to teach verbal expression, though it was evident from the way they often titled their paintings that they were capable of considerable





9 "Untitled", by
T.K. Ganesh Bhandari.
Acrylic on paper;
55.9 x 76.2 cm.

eloquence. We required real-time translators, and some of the inmates offered to assist. A few inmates functioned as stenographers, writing down what those who could not write said. While painting and performance art have inherent buffers in terms of interpretation between the artist and the viewer/reader/listener, writing does not so easily offer a place to hide. Naturally, at first these men were not comfortable with full disclosure – openly discussing feelings and appearing vulnerable to us or their fellow inmates. Therefore, we initially worked on journaling (diaries which were written and then, if the inmate chose, destroyed), moving into the study of metaphor – how to use words on paper like paint on canvas. We called this class Word Art. Here are some translations of some of the spontaneous word art produced:

"Every year in this place turns into a century. Months it takes to make these years. Thousand-hour days. My eyes light up when colouring the ignorant shapes of despair I make on my canvas." (Manav)

"The depth of a woman's heart and the depth of the sea, no one can measure. Whoever enters either will surely drown." (J.D.)

"When I was a young boy, I used to carry my knife in the forest and carve images in the ground and on trees. Little did I know this impulse would lead me to art. Or that a jail would become my school." (Santosh Kumar)

"By drawing a line on your forehead, you become a sage. The lines of your hand will tell you your future. Past and present, the pandits predict. But what is this present moment? This, no one can see." (Rajendra)

The Blue Shores participants understand that it is not necessary for a painting to have words embedded in it, or even to be titled, in order for it to carry language. Thus, learning about metaphor in poetry translates into a blue dress in a painting as a memory of one's beloved. The story of Valmiki becomes a signifier for one's own journey in a memoir essay. Recalling dreams elicits a world of fantasy and fear. The memory of the destruction of one's village becomes a performance art piece.

Learning how to be aware and conscious of one's body, a stance, gesture, etc., in the performance art class, conducted by our colleague, Crisologo Furtado, evokes somatic memories in recesses of the brain which in turn resurface in unexpected



10 "Untitled",
by Raju Shetri.
Acrylic on paper;
38.1 x 55.9 cm.

ways in writing and painting. As mentors we are constantly borrowing and bouncing off each other to provide triggers and probes aimed at stimulating a dynamic environment rather than the collection and processing of information. Our method has taught us that regardless of the site of excavation, we shall hit at the same primordial water-table that feeds the wellsprings of art.

Memory opens pathways to navigate and explore both self and nature. To introspect, to encounter that which is uncomfortable – feelings of pain, fear, shame – these are, in essence, our “Notes from the Underground”. Transmuting these feelings in painting, writing and performance art, the work becomes a medium, giving the artists access to worlds of the imagination, and us, in turn, access to their worlds. It is a two-way highway of exchange that informs us of who we are as much as it informs us about “the other”.

No Bars: The Way Forward

The Blue Shores pilot is largely a story of improvisation, of finding ways to keep the programme running no matter the obstacle, but it's clear that the most significant improvisations have occurred within those of us who teach at the Aguada jail as part of the Prison Art Project. Prison has required us to think about and articulate why we are doing what we do. In many ways, with no prior experience of teaching in prisons, the work has snapped us up unawares, taking us through hubristic ideological highs to deep questioning of ourselves and our potentially voyeuristic motives. It provides us with an evolving reality that continues to pose difficult questions and challenges.

For ourselves, we can say that as a teaching experience this has been the most fascinating and the most exhausting. We have made it through all the objective and sub-

jective hoops by keeping our heads down, drawing upon research and results of other such programmes around the world, and relying on the intuitive belief that what we are doing is essential. In order to succeed in maintaining our objectivity, we do not go deeply into the record of each individual. We treat each participant as if he were born yesterday. And, our experience has been that whatever the inmates may be outside the class, in the class they have been model students, often making an enormous effort to be present and engaged even when clearly unwell or depressed. An observed result is a breakdown of jail hierarchies between a mixed group of participants, and some degree of bonding. Another observation concerns their ability to be generous in spite of their incarceration: at their first exhibition, the inmates themselves suggested that it be a charity event and that any money from sales be donated to the Caritas home for children with HIV/AIDS in Goa.

Some of our participants have been released and continue to practise their art. Many convicts, at Aguada and elsewhere in India, will be released on parole or at the end of their term, and become part of society. We have our detractors, those who believe incarceration is exclusively about punishment and there should be no benefits to the incarcerated. When questioned, we tell them this: independent of our academic interest in prison art as teachers, or our personal fascination as artists ourselves, we have stored in the backrooms of our minds, as should all members of civil society, the knowledge that at any time we might call some of these ex-cons neighbours, ignorant of their criminal past. Should civil society contribute to the reformation process inside their prison systems of those people the prisons release back into society? Should it seek ways to help the incarcerated find means to channel their thoughts and energies creatively? We believe it should, and our way is through the arts.

Periodic changes in prison authorities have meant that our syllabus years cannot always be contiguous, as we have to go through the same formalities and requests for special permissions each time there is a proverbial change in the guard, involving long delays of months, and sometimes a whole year at a time. This in turn creates problems for continuous funding. Presently we are experiencing yet another hiatus while waiting for special permission to film the performance art of the inmates. But even with this jagged trajectory, we see progress. More importantly, we see commitment to the artistic process on the part of the inmates, and we also see hope.

The works represented here have been selected from the output of the first two years of the Blue Shores Prison Art Project. The project continues to receive support from the Vinod and Saryu Doshi Foundation and Sunaparanta Goa Centre for the Arts.

NOTES

- 1 http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1995-04-23/news/9504230059_1_chairs-phyllis-kind-prison-made/2.
- 2 A. Weinstein, *A Scream Goes Through the House: What Literature Teaches Us About Life*, New York, NY: Random House, 2003.
- 3 *The Special Unit, Barlinnie Prison: Its Evolution Through Its Art*, Glasgow: Third Eye Centre, 1982, p. 5.
- 4 <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?261522>, Once Upon a Bard.